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SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA

Naming Labor, Placing People in the Global Service Economy

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INTRODUCTION

On a Sunday morning in April, while visiting family in Newton, Massachusetts, I joined my parents and others for brunch in the restaurant of the local Marriott hotel. As an ethnographer of Haitian society, I immediately took notice that the men refilling the abundant buffets, cooking omelets, and clearing tables, and Haitian women waiting the tables were Haitian immigrants. The name badges worn by the workers confirmed their Haitian origins. But the badges identified them by a strange and unprecedented form of appellation. They were assigned typically Haitian first names—Frantz, Yves, Marie, Jeanne—but no surnames, that is, they did not have the kinds of surname one would expect to compliment and complete these first names, for example, Pierre, Belizaire, Jean-Baptiste, Saint-Fort. In place of their middle name, rather, was a city or province in Haiti! And where their last name might have been was the nation-state itself. They were ‘Frantz, Cap Haitien, Haiti,’ ‘Yves, Aux Cayes, Haiti,’ ‘Marie-Carmel, Portau-Prince, Haiti,’ and ‘Jeanne, Jacmel, Haiti.’ There were other employees who were ‘of,’ as opposed to simply ‘from,’ the United States. They were white and worked the more visible jobs of hostess and cashier. They weren’t ‘of’ a nation-state but were surnamed for a state in the US. A receptionist at the front desk was Cathy, Newton, Massachusetts.¹

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1. *Simplemente Maria* is the title of a Peruvian telenovela whose main character is a poor seamstress from the countryside who migrates to the city. Panamericana Editora’s production appeared in 1969. The compelling story has been adapted and reproduced on Latin American television and film.

The apposition of a unique person's first name with a concrete locality in a 'real' nation-state made unconscious sense to everyone in my party of four except me. For them, Marriott's 'writing of identity' had taken on a sort of inevitability. If the first name, city, and country were already on the badges, these signifiers must have had status in a real or natural order. But I was struck by the non-sense of putting a first name and a location together, as though there were some inherent linkage between the elements. I was unnerved by the sight of human bodies as props for a new kind of signification.

The hotel restaurant was the set for marketing the diversity of others. They were an amicable United Nations of contingent, local, and locatable labor. For sale was a peek at anonymous child-like persons in tamed, quaint cities inside of equivalent nation-states. The invitation to peek at, say, a Frantz Cap Haitien Haiti, gives the guest a taste of the exotic place at a fraction of the cost of actually vacationing there. Hardly visible in the background of this moving pastiche of pluralism is a non-territorial, nonlocatable, 'worldwide' entity: Marriott International, Inc. This global one has the power to name and 'replace' people.

My suspicion that the name-place tags was not a benign, meaningless act, but rather a signifying disciplinary practice was confirmed by the woman who waited on our table at the Newton Marriott. Her name tag was different: a first name all by itself. I asked her why her name badge was different from the others. She refused to wear her home nation-state's name on her name tag. Her indignation as she answered was the inspiration for the investigation of this peculiar, modern mode of scripted placement.

I conducted ethnographic research on the new uses of naming and placing hotel workers at Marriott hotels as well as other purveyors of luxury lodging and large conventions in the Chicago area.² As an ethnographer, I enjoyed the unusual fortune of conducting research among people who produce and sell 'hospitality',

2. I chose the sites because of their proximity to my home and work. If one accepts Marriott's mission statement that 'consistency in the quality and level of service' is their identity, my choice of particular Marriott hotels for this project should not significantly affect the 'data'.

a most compliant and generous group of interviewees, including the manager of the Chicago Marriott Downtown, the engineer who executes the name tag policy and produces the name tags at the same hotel and hotel employees in such positions as food service, front desk, concierge, bellman and housekeeping at Marriott and other local hotels. To understand the meaning and experience of name tags beyond the hospitality setting, and with the research assistance of Elatia Abate, I approached many workers who have been required to wear name tags for their jobs at corporate-owned chain restaurants, stores, and copy shops. They allowed us to interview them and completed our written questionnaires, and several people contributed more open-ended commentaries about their experiences with name tags.

NATIONALISM, HOSPITALITY AND THE NEW NAME TAGS

In August, 1995, Marriott's corporate office issued a new name tag design for the employees of all of their full-service hotels. The changes were simple. The color was changed from gold to white bordered by gold. The lettering remained black. The plate was slightly enlarged (by 1/16 inch in each direction) to accommodate an additional line of text. The name tags of hourly associates and salaried associates below the executive level have three lines of text. The first has the name. Below it are two lines for 'the origin' of the employee. If the origin is not the U.S., the second line shows the name of a city or state. The third line has the name of a nation-state. If the origin is the U.S., the second line is a U.S. city and the third line is a U.S. state. In the lower right corner is a tiny national flag 'to show the language they speak'. Indeed Marriott's description of the flags confound the two: 'the flags on the badges are for the languages they speak'.

How could a flag be used to represent a language? First is the assumption of a one-to-one correspondence between an individual, a nation, and a standard language. The tags inscribe our 'modern', nation-building myth and, secondly, signify an implicit hierarchy of nation-states and national languages. At the top is the U.S.A. In the same orbit are core European nations. Below—far below—are 'independent' nations of the colonized, the most

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notable among these being, in the Chicago downtown Marriott, Mexico.

This system of 'linguistically flagging' persons operates by the following rules. An American-born worker gets an American flag which supposedly also signifies English competence. The badge for a Mexican-born worker who speaks English gets a Mexican flag but not an American or English flag. The tag leaves their linguistic competence in English ambiguous. But an American-born worker who speaks Spanish gets an additional flag, the flag of Spain, and not that of Mexico, Costa Rica, Philippines, or anywhere else where they might have learned to speak Spanish.

To explain Marriott's reasons for putting a 'language flag' on a worker's name tag, staff from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy who were interviewed reproduced a consistent narrative of the linguistically helpless foreigner-guest, the name tag, and the worker wearing it. The foreigner is (must be) disoriented because they 'don't speak the language' The resident manager commented, for example, 'Many of our customers are international. It is an easy way for them to know that if there is a problem in the middle of the night there is someone who speaks their language'. He further stated that, 'If there is someone from your city, you immediately feel comfortable and welcome'.

The narrative of the linguistically helpless foreigner rests on two assumptions: 1) if the person is from a foreign nation, they must be a stranger to our language (an assumption reinscribed by the language flags on the name badges), and their linguistic loyalties are reflexes of their allegedly uniform patriotisms; and 2) tourists are naive about the linguistic situation of their destination and are ill-prepared to communicate. This conjecture would have to be supported or disproved by actual research, which neither Marriott nor I have yet conducted.

Let us nonetheless accept the story of the linguistically incompetent foreigner, the name-place tag, and the friendly associate. If we explore Marriott's personnel policy in this regard, however, two incongruities immediately arise. First, Marriott does not hire workers for their competence in the foreign tongues spoken by the most frequent guests. A comparison of the languages spoken by the guests with those of the employees demonstrates

the lack of any purposeful coordination of the two on Marriott's part. The guests come from Europe, Asia, and South America. Yet more than 50% of the hourly workers at the Chicago Marriott Downtown speak Spanish. Chicago is a major locus of low-wage Mexican, Central and South American migration. The linkages between their migration and recruitment networks and the Chicago service industry are probably the main reasons for their strong 'representation' in the Chicago Marriott work force.

Second, only 10% of the total guests are foreign, according to the hotel manager. An unknown percentage of these speak English. The redesigned name tag benefited fewer than one out of every ten guests, hardly a justification for overhauling nearly 850 name tags. The narrative does not correspond with the recruitment policy, nor is it economically justified. Thus, the name-place tags must serve another purpose or purposes.

THE PLACE OF THE NAME TAG

The purpose of the new name-place tags is signification, or naming by positioning. The badges put others—capitalism's low-wage, 'multicultural' objects—'in their places' inside a new, *ontological* map. We need to analyze how a person's name, a national place, and the body of a low-wage worker could be seen as having inherent connections, even though they were only placed together on a little rectangle by Marriott. I want to make this signifying process explicit in order to show how it is a chilling metaphor of the power of global capital to exercise its flexibility by defining, fixing, and locating labor.

Analyzing the non-sense of the tags means focusing on the form of signification, on how they were linked or placed, and on how the identification functions as a process of subjection. Judith Williamson (1978:25) cautions that 'the ideology embedded in form is the hardest of all to see. That is why it is important to emphasize process, as it undoes the *fait accompli*'. Undoing the *fait accompli* of the name-place tags will entail a step-by-step analysis of its structure, of how they mean.

A name tag consists of a selection of certain known words, colors and shapes, each of which is a signifier for something else. The tag

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was gold until last year. Gold, signifying wealth, value, and power remains on the new tag, as a border containing or encompassing white, which 'reads' as professional, virtuous, and clean. All Marriott 'associates' are supposed to wear name tags. The uniform format, color, corporate logo, and typeface on the name tags unify all who wear them as belonging to the same community. The words written on them differentiate the members.

The relation between the body and the name tag functions like the relation between people and products inside the frame of a print ad. Things put next to one another share the same meanings; spatial contiguity is equivalent to ontological contiguity. The signs on the name plate automatically 'go with' the person. Until last year, Marriott's hourly associates' name tags said one word: a first name, for example, Jorge or Marie. But the first name, when used alone, does not simply refer to the person wearing it. It is a signifier for something else. I was told by the hotel manager that it connotes 'being on a first name basis, familiarity, and feeling at home'. These nice words apply to the unnamed subject, *the guest, the target consumer of the name tag*, for the worker is never on a first-name basis with the guest.

In addition, the first name is supposed to be a signal to the guest to feel authorized to initiate a conversation with the friendly worker. Although 'the' Marie-Carmel who serves your table or 'the' Jorge who empties the lobby ashtrays is supposed to greet you by using a proper title, they are not to initiate a conversation with you. They are however obligated to respond, as briefly as possible, even to familiar questions, even intrusive, voyeuristic ones, posed by the guest.

The deference signified by the first name articulates with a related meaning. The first name is code for the lowest rank of laborer in the hotel. Anyone familiar with the myth—anyone working in the Marriott or the hotel and service industry generally—automatically 'reads' a first name as a relatively low status within the organization. A name plate completing the person's name (and status), automatically positions the wearer as neither an hourly associate nor someone who defers. The salaried associates—or people with proper names—are further distinguished from one another by the absence or presence of 'title'. The purpose of the title, I am told, is 'so they know who they are talking

to'. By this logic, it is not important to know to whom you are talking when you are initiating a conversation with Jorge or Marie; it is more important to be on a first-name basis with them.

As for the intermediate category of 'salaried associates' or 'managers', they have a right to have their complete name on the name tag—'they are not on a first-name basis with you'. They do not, however, have a claim 'to let others know who they are talking to'—in other words, a title. To insiders, title signifies 'the committee'.

To sum up, the placements of 'Jorge' or 'Rose' on a Marriott name tag do not just point to a man and a woman; they signify the embodiment of deference and lowest rank in the Marriott corporation. The presence of the surname signifies 'adult' status and higher rank. The title signifies top rank within the universe of the Marriott Hotel, but not the corporation. No one on the corporate board wears a name tag.

Let us see how this implicit classification system was transformed by the August 1995 revision, adding names of locations to the name tag. Some, but not all, employee name tags would identify the person with a geo-political entity. Some associates would now be 'named' for a city (or state) and country of origin. At the Chicago Marriott Downtown, these workers were further identified with miniature national flags (this practice is not carried out at all Marriott's). The appearance or absence of where you are from and the flag of your 'language' become additional codes for relative status on the corporate ladder.

Now that the two new signifiers, country name and flag, 'go with' deference and relative inferiority, they can be used to situate the intermediate group, people with real/full names, but no titles. While the managers' claim to a surname on the name plate situates them above the hourly class, their identification with a geo-political location and a flag repositions them in the same class. In other words, the new system more closely identifies the managers with the hourly associates than the old one did. I would suggest that re-locating this middle group is a subtle way of emphasizing their difference from real management (titles). This subtle repositioning is a symbolic mirror of what is actually happening to skilled labor in this phase of late capitalism (Harvey 1990: 177).

In the new name tag ‘system of differences’, only ‘the committee’ are freed of the burden of location. Their name tags still have only a full name and a title. The head of ‘the committee’ told me that the origin is left off because of limited space on the nameplate. But his name plate is larger than the others, which have plenty of space to locate people. In short, the more complete the name, the higher the rank. But the greater the evidence of location and language, the lower your status.

OLD SYSTEM

status	first name	last name	title
hourly	+	-	-
manager	+	+	-
executive	+	+	+

NEW SYSTEM

status	first name	last name	location	language	flag	title
hourly	-	-	+	+	-	-
manager	+	+	+	+	-	-
executive	+	+	-	-	+	+

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES OF WEARING NAME TAGS: SUBVERSION AND COMPLIANCE

A scene in the 1999 feature film, *Life*, depicts the surprised reaction of a worker, who wears a first-name badge on his shirt, to an unfamiliar customer addressing him by his familiar name. Although the film’s representation of name tag use in rural Mississippi in the 1920s is improbable, the scene only underscores how ‘normal’ the awkwardness aroused by name tags has become. In the narrative, Claude Banks (Martin Lawrence) and Ray Gibson (Eddie Murphy), two African-American men from New York, are forced to drive to Mississippi for a bootleg run. Near the end of their exhausting trek, a restaurant advertising fresh-baked pies appears as if it were an oasis in the desert. Entering, the two northerners don’t notice the ‘No Coloreds Allowed’ sign posted over the door. The menacing glares as they stroll toward the counter frighten Banks, but Gibson is oblivious, mesmerized by the aroma of the pies. He approaches a man standing behind the counter and says, ‘Good afternoon, Billy. We’d like some coffee and a couple

slices of pie'. The befuddled worker retorts, 'How come you know my name is Billy?' Gibson and Banks share equally befuddled expressions and Banks explains, 'Well, it says it right there on your shirt'. Suddenly a woman shouts, 'If you guys can read so good, how come you missed that sign on the door over there?' As she pulls out a rifle and points it at them, they run out.

The 'real life' employees I interviewed echoed Billy's experience of surprise whenever a stranger patronizing the store or restaurant where they worked addressed them by their first name. They never could get used to 'being on a first name basis' with new customers. Others voiced how the experiences of wearing a 'naked' first name on their chest symbolically turned them into a reproducible, substitutable object. They compared their prior work experience in positions that did not require wearing their first names on their bodies before entering a job that did. These latter jobs were at the lowest rungs of large corporations serving food and literature.

Lisa Liu worked for many years in her family's restaurant. She later took a job at a chain restaurant, Steak and Cheese. Waitressing all those years in her parents' Chinese eatery did not require that she wear her name, but working at the bottom rung of a 'national' corporate chain restaurant did. Her first day on the job, she received her name badge. But it was the wrong name. It said 'Linda'. 'Just wear it anyway, it doesn't matter' she was told by the supervisor. According to this logic, she could be a Linda, a Lisa, a Leslie—it doesn't matter. What does matter is that guests can simultaneously identify her with and also distinguish her from the others who are just like her. Angie Brehmer, who worked at a supermarket as a cashier, certainly understood this principle when, arriving one day at the job site, and unable to find her name tag, wore one belonging to a guy named Chris. 'I could've fooled people', she said, 'I did that because they told me I had to wear a name tag'.

Forging the name on the badge is a familiar employee practice for creatively resisting the requirement to become an object of the name (tag). Gerald Sullivan was already working as a book-seller when the store was bought out by Crown Books. His job responsibilities were not significantly altered except now he had to

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wear a name tag. He described the experience of wearing the inscription of an identity as an invasion of his soul. It licensed the patron, who might have been spending a paltry sum of money, to get personal with him, to 'dump' on him, to act superior. At the same time, he was denied the opportunity to defend his honor. So he took the name 'Murphy'. Murphy is a stereotype of a working class Irish guy, and he is 'part Irish'. Since wearing the name tag would turn him into an anonymous object, he might as well play naughty with the name.

Eric Smith, who wore a military uniform for 14 years while serving in the U.S. Army, explained how later having to wear a 'naked' first name, as an employee of a fast food chain restaurant, was particularly dehumanizing. Smith's military uniform and decorations was loaded with signifiers. Each soldier's uniform is a detailed narrative of the person's family name, rank, and accomplishments. Significantly, Smith claimed that during his military service he was not bothered by having to wear his rank and identity, including his last name. Since becoming a graduate student, he supports his studies by working part time at a Jack in the Box. At the fast food eatery, he was 'an Eric'. Each time a total stranger addresses him by his first name and asks him for something, he feels dehumanized. It 'pisses me off', he told me. He can't seem to get used to it. Whenever possible at work, he wears his Jack in the Box assistant manager's name tag on his waist where few can see it. 'Murphy' and Elatia Abate admitted to resorting to the same act of passive resistance.

The vulnerability felt by employees who are forced to expose their first names when interacting with 'the public' comes into sharper relief when set against the strange empowerment of workers who are supposed to wear fake name badges. By creatively copying celebrities, workers can exert some control over the process of objectification enabled by name tags. Dorothea Emery described her experience wearing a celebrity's name while waiting tables at T. G. I. Friday's, a chain restaurant that sells the quirky uniqueness of its wait staff, just as Marriott markets the diversity of its workers to guests. Imitating Madonna transformed Emery's shame during her production of service and 'flair' at T.G.I. Friday's. The small degree of protection offered by the fake name badge

underscores the comparative exposure of employees who are forced to be their actual first names.³

MEASURING THE AROUSAL OF EMPLOYEE SELF-AWARENESS

Scholars and experts in the Hospitality Industry have weighed in on the benefits of uniforms and name tags for employees. Their studies appear under such fey titles as 'Attention and Self-Regulation: A Control Theory Approach to Human Behavior' (Carver and Scheier, 1981). A name tag is an 'indicator of compliance' writes one professor of Engineering Management. Moreover, he claims, name tags arouse employee self-awareness and, 'when employee self-awareness is aroused, they are likely to focus on their behavior as employees and to compare this behavior with the standards set by the organization ... and to display greater compliance. He actually measured the relationship between wearing 'an organizational identifier such as a smock or name tag and an employee's self-awareness' and concluded that there is a positive correlation between the display of positive emotions and wearing an organizational smock or name tag (Rafaeli 1989:385).

This study would no doubt find a way to quantify Marriott's claim that the new name tags improve employee morale. (Marriott nonetheless views this benefit as secondary to the goal of customer service). Through the name-place tags, the corporation 'acknowledges the diversity within the work force'. The executive who made this statement to me implied that the workers were less satisfied when the corporation ignored their pluralism. The employees enjoy the opportunity to manifest their diversity. 'Associates like to show off, let others know their background'. They also welcome 'the break from the routine. There will be times when we have to call someone from another department

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3. The restaurant's production and exploitation of employees' wearing of scripted badges is lampooned in Matt Judge's 1999 film, *Office Space*. Joanna (Jennifer Aniston), a server at a restaurant, is disciplined by her supervisor for failing to exceed the required number of signifiers of 'flair'. The tense scene culminates with Joanna quitting. The scripting of place and language on Marriott's workers badges similarly markets workers' surplus production of 'flair'.

to converse with the person. Often the native tongue brings back memories or reminds them of their culture’.

Just how much time may a worker divert to pleasant conversation about their ‘native country?’ How does the worker comply with Marriott’s work quotas and the new requirement to converse nostalgically with guests? And if the worker cuts off an effusive guest to ‘get back to work’, will the guest be offended and lodge a complaint? Neither the executive nor the manager I spoke to admitted the dilemma. I questioned the Marriott executive about how workers are expected to balance demands for efficient productivity and the time wasted in producing deference:

Richman: Is there a point where an employee should limit the conversation? What should they do if the guest wants to really engage the associate?

Davis: We encourage that.

Richman: So it’s work?

Davis: Right; it’s being hospitable.

Richman: And that is their work?

Davis: Yes.

Richman: Isn’t there a fine line for the associate to know how much time to spend talking with the guest?

Davis: They should know how much time.

Richman: And how do they stop the conversation without offending the guest?

Davis: They should say that they have other customers to take care of. But it should be done in a pleasant way.

This contradiction was condemned in a sardonic comment offered by Pierre D’Haïti, a Haitian immigrant who had worked for two years at another hotel (which had not required him to wear his location on his chest).

What are they gaining? If you really think about it, those who like to talk could get into trouble. And what are you supposed to talk about? They are giving you more duties without paying you for it and without proper instruction.

In D’Haïti’s view, the purpose of the name tags is not the fostering of friendly relations between citizens of different nations, but rather what Marx termed the production of surplus value. He characterized the new name tags as a cynical, irresponsible corporate ploy to get more production from workers without

adequately training or compensating them. (In his experience, the firms have expected other workers to do the training in addition to their required work, without compensating them. As a result, the training of new hires is inadequate.) D’Haïti surmised the predicament of ‘a’ Maria Guerrero Mexico if she were really drawn into a lengthy conversation with a guest and, as a result, failed to complete Marriott’s cleaning quota of one room per 27 minutes (Milbank 1996:14). Could she claim that the talk was ‘work’, as the executive had said, and that she should be compensated for it?

CONCLUSION

The name-place tags can be read as an ‘ethnoscape’ of the socio-spatial hierarchy of global capitalism (Appadurai, 1991). For according to the name-place tag logic, low ranking people are locatable. Indeed, place is their most concrete or knowable feature. Otherwise they are just facsimiles of girls or boys to be seen, objectified, known, and dominated. People with power are not locatable; they have position–titles. The status of the people in the middle is slippery; they have real surnames; they have been relieved of the subalternity of truncated first names. But they are also identified with discrete places, a sign of their vulnerability and a measure of their distance from those who have the clout to organize over vast spaces.

In the logic of the name-place tags, then, being local and locatable, or fixed to a place, is the condition of the dis-empowered in a global capitalistic economy. Being fluid, able to organize production over vast spaces while being fixed to no particular place (or nation-state), is the source of power of such corporations as Marriott International, Inc. The nowhereness of capital and the fixity of nation-states and labor are interdependent processes (Harvey, 1990:159). Locating people is both a product and a means of capital accumulation. Marriott has offered a surprisingly candid representation of the ‘schizophrenia’ of capitalism which deterritorialize(s) with one hand what (it) reterritorialize(s) with the other’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983:257).

The sensation of difference has much currency today. Difference, cast as unique ethnicities, classes, locations, or nations, can

be used to negate the sense of alienation few escape in a capitalist, global economy. Marriott has grasped how the consumption of heterogeneous, quaint places and located others satisfies our craving for security in this shrinking, homogenizing global scene. Now Marriott has figured out how to market another kind of difference: the diversity of its labor force.

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