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Laboring for Inclusion: Debating Immigrant Contributions to Chile

Abstract

Over the last three decades, Chile has experienced transformative migratory flows, becoming more diverse in the process. As migrants from Latin American and Caribbean countries settle in Chile, they often face stereotypes laminating race, ethnicity, and nationality, and shape paths toward inclusion through the job market. Amid the implementation of visa restrictions and the rollout of a new migration law, current debates over migration foreground ideas about which groups productively contribute to the nation's development—discourses often linked to labor. Government rhetoric and policy debates frame broader discussion of the role of migration in Chile, with both Chileans and migrants alike employing discourses of hard work and discipline to dialectically define what it takes to be a “contributing migrant.” Drawing on ethnographic data, I illustrate how migrants make claims to inclusion through their labor, thus engaging with a coercive form of neoliberal governance proffering only conditional recognition.

Keywords: immigration, labor, race, discourse, the state, integration

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Introduction

Following the return to democracy in 1990 and propelled by economic growth under a staunchly neoliberal model, Chile became a destination for Latin American labor migrants. Initial flows of Peruvian migrants became more diverse in the late 2000s, with arrivals from Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti (DEM 2016, Stefoni 2003). Since 2015, the unprecedented influx of Venezuelan migrants further expanded migration, and by 2019 there were nearly 1.5 million migrants living in Chile, 30% of whom were Venezuelan (DEM 2020). Migrants now account for almost 8% of Chile's population, a significant increase from just 0.8% of the total population in 1992 and 2.3% in 2012 (DEM 2020, Rojas Pedemonte & Silva Dittborn 2016). Framed by strong demand for an inexpensive and flexible workforce, migrants often occupy low-paid positions, working as domestic sales personnel, street vendors,

wait staff, kitchen assistants, landscapers, construction workers, street sweepers, and parking attendants (Bellolio & Errázuriz 2014, Stefoni 2011). While migrant labor has supported Chile's economic expansion, it has also drawn public concerns about greater competition for jobs, the provision of state services, and falling wages.

The Chilean state's response to migration emphasizes discordant discourses emblematic of conditional inclusion, in which reliance on migrant labor exists alongside discrimination that undermines migrant belonging. Prior to 2017, the government facilitated bureaucratic integration through (relatively) accessible documentation processes, several rounds of regularization, and an emphasis on insertion in the workforce (Doña-Reveco & Mullan 2014; Stefoni 2011). Arriving migrants could enter with a tourist visa and receive three months to secure work, subsequently linking visas to employment contracts (DEM "Visa Sujeta a Contrato").¹ This path of entry combined with ambiguous and shifting legal and bureaucratic norms for migration epitomized neoliberal governmentality (Ong 2006) in which migrants were positioned as a pool of inexpensive, flexible, and docile laborers. Since 2018, however, visa changes, policy debates, and a new migration law—implemented in 2021—further restrict the visa process and prohibit migrants from applying for visas while in Chile, thus altering avenues for conditional inclusion.²

Immigration increasingly reanimates race in terms of nation (De Genova 2013, Silverstein 2005). In Chile certain nationalities—read through racialized context—are granted differential gradients of access, recognition, and inclusion based on the perceptions of their citizens. Racialization refers to both the practices of marking racial distinctions as well as

¹ Migrants from Mercosur nations, namely Argentina and Bolivia, could enter as tourists and immediately seek temporary residence, permitting employment (DEM "Visa Temporaria").

² Official estimates of irregular migration do not exist, however, most migrants have residency documents and migrants with lapsed documentation are still eligible to legalize their status (Stefoni 2011). As the new migratory law is fully implemented, migrants who overstay visas or enter as tourists will no longer be able to regain status (Ley de Migración y Extranjería 2021), representing a significant policy change.

ideological constructions linked to these practices (Omi & Winant 2015), and discursive framing of migration plays a critical role in the process of racial formation. Chilean discourses about migration emphasize both the importance of “contributing migrants” and concerns regarding “undesirable” additions to the national community. Circulating tropes about migrant contributions often reproduce racialized labor norms, juxtaposing “reserved and hardworking” Peruvian domestic laborers, “impoverished” Haitian janitors, and “educated” Venezuelan professionals. Chileans and migrants alike draw on these discourses to articulate labor, discipline, and docility as axis along which to evaluate contributions and to define which migrants are beneficial to the nation.

In this article, I draw on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the last ten years. My research is based in Santiago, where field sites included a migrant hiring hall, an agency that aids migrants, a public plaza, and individual homes. The data presented here draws from semi-structured interviews conducted with migrants in Santiago (n=139) and with Chilean residents (n=45), contextualized by participant observation. I argue that migrants seek inclusion through their labor, and the discourses that articulate this elusive path apply a coercive form of neoliberal governance. The role of migrant economic contributions, particularly through hard work, is often recognized, although its value is still debated, offset by racial stigmas and concerns over security. In this context, the framing of migrant labor, its racialization, and societal incorporation are interwoven and mutually constituting processes. As Chileans elaborate expectations of migrant labor, and as migrants seek to embody or find ways to reject the parameters of conditional recognition, they dialectically craft a notion of what it takes to be a “contributing migrant.”

Parameters of Inclusion and Exclusion

Complex and multidimensional, citizenship centers on status, rights, identity, and participation in social and political realms (Bosniak 2002, Goodman 2021). While citizenship is often positioned as a way to name belonging, Bosniak writes that “inclusion is usually premised on a conception of a community that is bounded and exclusive. Citizenship as an ideal is understood to embody a commitment against subordination, but citizenship can also represent an axis of subordination itself” (2008: 1). For migrants, the tension between exclusionary pressures and limited avenues of inclusion condition possibilities of belonging. As Winter and Previsic note, “While legal status often generates belonging, the latter is undermined when individuals are excluded from the nation’s symbolic boundaries or subjectively feel this way” (2019: 342). Winter and Previsic instead point to the role of public discourse in crafting symbolic boundaries (2019, Schrover & Schinkel 2013). The terms of these debates are fluid and contextual; as Goodman notes: “Citizenship is not only multilayered and malleable but also reactive, transforming in response to historical change to reflect both national ambition and insecurity” (2021: 1492). These situated debates often focus on what it means to be a “good citizen,” delineating boundaries of belonging that must be continually negotiated. Thus, being a “good citizen” is not about fulfilling a desired list of qualities, but rather, it is dialectically constructed in response to perceived national problems and historical and social contexts (Goodman 2021, Baker-Cristales 2009).

As they seek recognition, migrants articulate diverse claims for inclusion. “Citizenship as claims-making” links discussions of status and rights with those of practice and identity all the while noting that individual actors are subject to the broader societal forces of uncertain, limited, or conditional recognition (Bloemraad 2018). For migrants, claims for inclusion frequently

articulate economic arguments. Scholarship on “economic citizenship” (Bosniak 2002), “market citizenship” (Nawyn 2011), and “neoliberal citizenship” (Deckard & Heslin 2016) illustrate the narrow spaces in which claims for migrant inclusion are made. These constructions of citizenship emphasize the right to economic empowerment through decent work (Bosniak 2002); individual contributions through self-sufficiency, discipline, and private enterprise (Nawyn 2011, Gleeson 2015); and the potential to successfully participate in the market (Baker-Cristales 2009, Deckard & Heslin 2016). In the context of labor migration, proving one’s ability to be self-sufficient, entrepreneurial, and not a threat to the nation become central to making a claim for belonging (Baker-Cristales 2009).

Immigration has long been linked to capitalism and its expansion (Kearney 1986, Heyman 1991). Prompted by globalization, neoliberal economic policies—epitomized by strong private property rights, deregulated markets, and free trade—became pervasive in shaping understandings of the economy, the role of the state, and how individuals interact with these structures (Harvey 2007, Ganti 2014). Related economic restructuring has had material and ideological impacts on individuals, with the pressure to demonstrate the value of one’s labor exemplifying the “the silent compulsion of economic relations” (De Genova 2013: 1189). For migrants, work ethic is foundational to claims making—demonstrated through docility and lawfulness (Gleeson 2015). The pressure to be a hardworking “good immigrant” acts to shape neoliberal subjects valued for their work, personal responsibility, and precarity (Ong 2006). As migrants seek inclusion in societies shaped by contemporary capitalism, however, the state of exception can endure, trapping them in the interstices of “precarious citizenship” (Durán-Migliardi & Thayer-Correa 2020). In many ways, the alluring possibility of inclusion reifies hard

work and docility as the best path toward recognition—one marked by differential gradients of access to the often-foreclosed claims of citizenship.

As migrants labor toward conditional inclusion in the receiving community, the parameters of inclusion and exclusion often hinge on durable racial and ethnic inequalities (Hale 2006, Hage 2012, Tijoux & Díaz Letelier 2014). In elaborating “neoliberal multiculturalism,” Hale details how elite Guatemalans employ an ostensible embrace of racial fairness and multiculturalism while concurrently maintaining important symbolic and material markers of racial hierarchy. Likewise, recognition—uneven and reluctant—of indigenous peoples is exemplified by the “*indio permitido*” (Hale & Millamán 2006: 284). Formed by cultural-political claims for recognition and the earned measure of respect, those who occupy a position of “authorized Indians” gain access to limited rights of inclusion (Hale & Millamán 2006). Scholarship on neoliberal multiculturalism illustrates how recognition of racial and cultural diversity reproduces consent for the neoliberal project rather than addressing power inequalities entailed by systemic racism and ethnocentrism (Richards 2013, Postero 2007, Hale 2006). This continual tension between forces of exclusion and avenues of inclusion articulate emerging racialized hierarchies, prompt differential treatment, and fundamentally shape the experiences and everyday lives of migrants (Fassin 2011). These competing frames for migration require renewed emphasis on governmentality, under which an increasingly racialized migrant populace become subject to the “biopolitics of otherness”—regardless of longevity in the receiving country or of documentary status (Fassin 2011).

Contexts of Conditional Inclusion

Roots of Migrant Racialization

As in other Latin American nations, historic migrations to Chile—largely equated with settlers from Europe and Argentina³ (Martínez Pizarro 2003)—were often associated with “racial improvement” (Stefoni 2003), the goal of which was a deliberate move away from bodily, material, and cultural markers of indigeneity and blackness (Wade 1997).⁴ Seeking racial improvement through migration, in the 1800s Chile sought to attract “desired colonists” from Europe to help establish a productive and prosperous nation through their industriousness (Stefoni 2011: 35). European recruitment offices and gifts of land encouraged the settlement of Germans, Spaniards, Italians, and Croatians, positioning these groups as integral to Chile’s development as a modern nation (Tijoux & Díaz Letelier 2014), fostering the “pervasive ideology of the European immigrant” (Hale & Millamán 2006: 286), and establishing whiteness as the national reference point (Liberona Concha 2015). Migratory law and regulations no longer voice racial considerations, and Chilean indigenous, ethnic, and racial activism prompt robust discussions of difference and counter hegemonic norms (Postero et al. 2018), but this historical racialization provides subtext to current discussions of migration.

Scholars emphasize vast distinctions between current and historical migratory patterns (Stefoni 2003). However, during fieldwork, Chilean research participants continually compared past and present migratory flows. As one woman noted, “Chile was always a nation that received foreigners: Pedro de Valdivia [Chile’s colonial founder], the Germans, the Croatians, the Spanish

³Argentina’s significant European settlement contributes to the way it is racially perceived as aligned with Europe (Bastia & vom Hau 2014).

⁴Half of Chileans (52%) identify as white, 26% as *mestizo* (racially mixed), and 6% as indigenous (Latinobarómetro 2020). In interviews, however, most Chilean respondents typically noted that they were “just Chileans,” or “*chilenos no más*”—a nod to the idea of a “*raza Chilena*” (Palacios 1904). Scholars have stridently rebutted the “*raza Chilena*” as a discourse that legitimizes a normative and homogenous image of racial mixture, obscuring the nation’s diversity (Montecino 1991, Larraín 2001). While strongly critiqued, ideas of a homogenous Chilean race remain pervasive, producing racial terrain marked by an “exaggerated valuing of whitening” and “concealed racism” (Larraín 2001: 227-228). Richards adds, “Chileans are more likely to elide race altogether, preferring to emphasize class as a social marker” (2013: 9).

from the civil war in Spain. That is how Chile was built. Whoever attacks foreigners it is due solely to ignorance.”⁵ Framing migration as a defining feature of Chilean history is a rhetorical nod to inclusion, but many respondents simultaneously voiced racial distinctions. As an older Chilean man explained:

Migration is not such a recent thing. What is going on is that the migration from those nations [Peru, Bolivia] is recent. Migration in Chile began with the German colonies in the south.... When the Germans arrived, we gave them territory in the south and wished for them to come, right? [...] But when we say Peruvians, you think about the War of the Pacific and nannies. They are very different migrations—I am a son, I am descended from migrants because my grandparents on the López side were all Spaniards.

I never asked directly about family stories of migration, but these personal connections were common. Another woman shared, “My grandparents on my mother’s side came from Spain and my grandmother on my father’s side came from Italy. We are many mixtures.” In contrasting European and Latin American migration, these stories subtly reinforce distinctions—ones with deep racial subtext—and illustrate how current migrations are implicitly connected with historical roots of racism in postcolonial Chile. Bonhomme argues that Chileans understand migrant groups through “racial lens,” such that subtle racial ideologies permeate how people see and construct their social reality (Bonhomme 2021: 170).

Discussions of migrant racialization belie a complicated racial terrain. Illustrating the ambiguous social construction of perceived racial distinction, one Chilean man shared, “I believe that the majority of Colombians pass as Chileans, the, um, physical characteristics of Peruvians are notorious.” Later in the interview, however, he reflected: “I don’t understand [discrimination] because the phenotypical features are very similar between Chileans, Peruvians, and Bolivians. We all have many aboriginal genes.” Contrasting discussions of racial differences *and*

⁵ All translations are my own and all references to names are pseudonyms.

similarities—sometimes voiced by the same individual—are prevalent. Another Chilean man admitted “there are different features, but many times it’s happened to me that who I think is Peruvian is a Chilean or the reverse.” Furthermore, embodied markers of race—such as skin color, hair, stature—are often read in terms of racialized norms of labor (Liberona Concha 2015, Mora & Undurraga 2013, Stefoni 2016). As one woman noted, “Physically; those who come to work, to do less skilled labor, they have more indigenous features. One can easily tell them [apart] on the street. You can tell. It’s just, we think of ourselves as gringos [laughter].” This response illustrates the ways in which migrant racialization is also used as a comparative lens through which some Chileans racially align as different from other Latin Americans (Salazar 2013), while elaborating racial distinctions patterned on the types of labor for which certain migrants are perceived as “naturally apt” (Mora & Undurraga 2013, Stefoni 2016).

Racial stigmas often adhere to national groups, perpetuating essentialized notions of race and explicitly positioning some groups as “social problems,” thus foreclosing potential inclusion (Tijoux & Palominos Mandiola 2015: 260). Scholars recognize the compounded marginalization faced by Haitian migrants (Rojas Pedemonte et al. 2017, Tijoux & Díaz Letelier 2014), documenting Haitian recognition of their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Thayer Correa & Durán Migliardi 2015: 148). Burgeoning literature examines the ways in which nationalism, racism, and classism are entwined and mutually reinforcing such that migrants perceived as black or Afro-descendent are subject to the most exploitative conditions and discriminatory treatment (Tijoux & Díaz Letelier 2014). Migrants from Colombia (Liberona Concha 2015, Stang & Stefoni 2016) and the Dominican Republic (Liberona Concha and Riquelme Gómez 2020) also face entrenched racialized stereotypes—often circulated and reproduced in media portrayals—associating them with criminality, promiscuity, and trafficking

of people and drugs. These racial perceptions of national groups shape powerful hierarchies and differential access, seen in sectors such as housing (Bonhomme 2021), healthcare (Liberona Concha & Mansilla 2017), and education (Tijoux 2013).

Migrant racialization “seeks to naturalize certain moral, psychological, cultural and national characteristics with racial categories—Bolivians work well, they are tough; black laborers can endure long hours in construction” (Stefoni 2016: 70). These discourses illustrate how migrant racialization is multivocal, with complex meanings linked to perceived natural differences. In work on the construction of colonial racial categories, Stoler argues that racism is not merely a visual ideology, but rather seeks to ascertain who is “suitable for inclusion in the national community and whether those of ambiguous racial membership are to be classified as subjects or citizens within it” (2002: 84). As Chileans and migrants continue to elaborate notions of racial difference, practices of racialization become critical axes of exclusion.

Conditional Inclusion Framed by State Rhetoric

The laws and bureaucratic processes governing migration are themselves powerful discourses—practices that produce systems of knowledge while concealing their role in the process (Foucault 2012). Chilean migratory policy, law, and enforcement have been the subject of much recent debate. As of April 2021, Chile’s new migration law is being rolled out. The result of eight years of debate, the law replaces a Pinochet-era legal decree that prioritized national security and neoliberal labor norms, failed to meet the realities of current migratory flows, and afforded wide discretion for different administrations to be as restrictive or inclusive as desired—essentially, the legal decree established a “policy of no policy” (Stefoni 2011, c.f.

Finn & Umpierrez de Reguero 2020, Doña-Reveco 2018).⁶ Over the last five years, regulations have been enacted in increasingly more restrictive manners as President Piñera promised to “put the house in order” (Doña-Reveco 2018). With increasing public support for replacing the outdated law, the new law was drafted, passed by Congress, and is being implemented (Ley de Migración y Extranjería 2021). The text of the law starts by asserting “promotion, respect, and guarantee of rights” and emphasizes integration and interculturality. However, when announcing the new law’s rollout, President Piñera foregrounded a contrasting discourse, “the principle objective of this new migration law is to put our house in order, through a migratory policy that is orderly, secure, and documented.” The coexistence of security-focused and human rights-oriented approaches have also shaped regional approaches, with other South American nations shifting between the two approaches as administrations change (Acosta 2018). While typically juxtaposed, Chile’s new law simultaneously employs both discursive frames. Addressing similar visa measures enacted in 2018 by the same administration, Finn and Umpierrez de Reguero (2020) argue that new restrictions are articulated as protective of immigrants, saving them from the harm of human trafficking. In this rhetorical reframing, inclusive language is used to disguise exclusive outcomes, while also serving to deter potential migrants (Finn & Umpierrez de Reguero 2020).

The new law and the political discourse framing it delineate categories of inclusion and exclusion in terms of what is understood to be in the best interests of the national community. In a promotional video, individuals of diverse races, ethnicities, and accents declare:

“Chile has always been an open country. Our diversity is our richness because together we have built Chile—everyone together.... But at the moment, things are disorderly.... We need migration to change for the better, and to be secure,

⁶ Under Legal Decree 1094, foreigners could be barred from entry if they are deemed a threat to “the social order of the country,” were union members, engaged in acts “contrary to morality,” could not “practice a career or employment,” or “lack[ed] the resources that would permit them to live in Chile without becoming a social burden.”

orderly, and documented.... because before a visitor is welcomed, first the house must be tidied up....” (Nueva Ley de Migración nd).

While the video—and the law itself—overtly embrace cultural difference and acknowledge a role for migrants in the nation’s development, the rhetoric obscures the structural barriers that continue to perpetuate disparities in how exclusions are legally crafted. Indeed, requirements to obtain visas prior to arrival were implemented for migrants from the Dominican Republic in 2012, for Haitians in 2018, and for Venezuelans in 2018. Employing “visas as pre-migration bureaucracy” stemmed migratory flows, incentivized clandestine entry, and sent an exclusionary message about the Chilean state’s posture toward migration (Finn & Umpierrez de Reguero 2020: 57, c.f. Liberona Concha 2015, Doña-Reveco & Gouveia 2020). The new law further expands the restrictions seen in these visa changes, eliminating the possibility of entering as a tourist and then applying for another visa, marking a shift towards more strident legal parameters of exclusion (Ley de Migración y Extranjería 2021).

Migratory law, entry requirements, and political debates circulate widely, impacting how migration is seen by Chileans and migrants. In June 2019, I attended a panel discussion where a representative of Haitian activist groups noted, “the current government made us a very discriminated community, pushed in the sense of human rights by the application of the norms of the migration law enacted by the government with the goal of driving out people in an effort to ‘put the house in order.’” Echoing political rhetoric, he pushed back against stereotypes of criminalization by emphasizing the many contributions of Haitians to their neighborhoods. These powerful state discourses produce migrants as particular types of subjects. Contrasting discourses of “building Chile together” and “orderly” entry in the context of nationally-specific visa requirements position migrant groups at the nexus of inclusion and exclusion.

Laboring for Inclusion

Centering Migrant Labor

The primacy of work and the framing of migration in terms of labor are prevalent in public discourse and emerge as salient themes in interviews with Chileans. One man summarized, “They [migrants] work from sunrise to sunset and make money, make money.... so that they can send money out [abroad]. I believe that they work a lot, they work well, they work a lot. They work.” The reality of financial constraints, limited options, and the pressure associated with the need to earn a living were frequently mentioned. While the willingness of migrants to work hard in low-paying and physically demanding jobs was widely recognized, Chileans voiced this recognition in circumspect terms. In an interview with a Chilean construction worker, he voiced fondness for his Haitian co-workers before sharing:

In construction there is the stigma that the Haitian comes to take work from the Chilean. But it’s not like that. I would say that it’s because they do more for less work.... in construction they pay everyone a salary between \$380.000-\$400.000 [US \$555-585 as of July 2019], and there is always the [Chilean] who says, “ah, no, that is very little money” and he doesn’t want the job. And the Haitian arrives, “ah, yes, of course that money works for me and I want to work.”

The observation reifies the perception of Haitians as hard-working manual laborers, even as this respondent recognizes a system that capitalizes on migrant precarity. Whether raising concerns about wage stagnation, Chilean unemployment, or emphasizing that migrant salaries are often invested in the country of origin, discussions of migrant labor pair recognition of migrant diligence with debates over the true value of their contributions.

Similar to the circulated trope of hardworking Haitian laborers, the stereotype of the tireless and pliant Peruvian domestic laborer was pervasive. In work analyzing the preference among Chilean employers for Peruvian domestic laborers, Staab and Maher describe a “dual discourse” (2006). Comments praising hard working migrants simultaneously chastise working-

class Chileans for not adhering to the class structure, accepting available jobs, and working with the proper deference (Staab and Maher 2006). Mora and Undurraga (2013) add that Peruvian workers are described by employers both as good workers and as requiring oversight. Discussions about migrant “suitability” for specific jobs illustrates racialized articulations of labor norms (Correa Téllez 2016, Stefoni 2016, Stang & Stefoni 2016), further delineating limited paths for inclusion and channeling migrants into specific fields. These debates shape who is imagined to be a good employee and how stereotypical perceptions of workers constrain entry both for particular migrant groups as well as for Chilean workers (Stefoni et al. 2017).

Perceptions of labor migration are repeatedly voiced in terms of national groups, regardless of their skills or qualifications. For example, a Chilean man recounted:

You know that there are different types of foreigners—the Colombians, they come bringing here the culture of drugs, trafficking, and prostitution. The Venezuelan no, the Venezuelan is educated, because of that they come to work. The Peruvian also comes to work, he doesn’t have an education, but the Peruvian is a hard worker, they come to start businesses. There on the corner, those ceviche carts, see? But all the groups are different. And well, the Haitians, what can be said about them? I feel sorry for them.

These stereotypes obscure the high-level of educational and vocational training that many Peruvian and Haitian migrants have, reducing diverse experiences to easily circulated tropes. In research with Haitian migrants, Rojas Pedemonte and his collaborators found that new arrivals often come with skills, studies, and prepared resumes, exceeding the qualifications of the jobs that they typically fill—working as car washers, merchandise stockers, attendants at gas stations, in cleaning positions, or in construction—and suggesting the power of these stereotypical associations to limit full access to the job market (2017). In an opposite gloss, Venezuelan migration is typically presented as professional and skilled.⁷ As one Chilean man described

⁷ While two thirds of applications to validate university degrees are submitted by Venezuelans (Muñoz 2019), individuals with diverse skills, training, and educational levels are well-represented across all national groups.

Venezuelans, “They are people who in reality have more skills than a Chilean.” During fieldwork in 2019, concerns about migrant labor contributing to unemployment and driving down wages were frequently voiced, further conditioning Chilean recognition of migrant contributions. One Chilean woman suggested, “The problem with immigration is that now, if we continue on in this manner, we are all going to end up without work because the foreigner sometimes they work for less money.” As Venezuelan migrants enter higher-wage jobs, their skills and professional contributions are recognized, but also provoke divisive responses. As skilled migrant laborers compete with a more privileged sector of the Chilean workforce, they face a changing context of reception and additional barriers to social integration (Doña-Reveco & Mullan 2014).

Migrant Claims for Recognition

Migrants most frequently voice their contributions in terms of labor—how their hard work is an unsung part of Chile’s development. One Colombian woman shared: “I think of [migration] as a benefit—migrants come to do tasks that Chileans won’t do, right? ... Then, when people who come from outside fill those positions [that Chileans don’t want], they’re going to contribute to healthcare, to insurance.” The discussion of completing undesirable tasks is pervasive throughout interview data. However, when paired with racialized stereotypes of national groups and the work they are “best suited for,” this trope becomes a self-fulfilling mechanism, channeling migrants into certain forms of (often precarious) labor (Stefoni et al. 2017). Centering labor in the migratory project also raises the stakes for how migrants complete their jobs. An Argentinean woman noted:

The majority of migrants who I see are people of effort, of work. Haitians, one generally sees that they are working in cleaning, they are in unskilled labor. Even

Venezuelans, the majority are skilled, ... but they are people who work just as hard and despite what job they do, they work and send money to their families.

Across job sectors and nationalities, the value of hard work and effort was routinely reiterated, glossing over the financial concerns that often drive migration and integration in the job market.

When confronted with discrimination, many migrants noted that they would counter with discussions of labor, emphasizing their presence as beneficial. One Venezuelan woman shared that while attending a women's church group, she was told that Chile was too full of migrants and she should go "home." She responded by telling the women, "The intention was not to bother anyone. We want to work; we also want to help." She paused for a moment before reflecting:

I came here to work, to work honestly, to contribute to this country and, obviously, to provide for myself. But, I believe that there are Venezuelans who have come to do wrong things, and well, these people should leave. [Chile] has to take measures because no one wants bad people in their home—they call the country a home, right? But just like me, many people came with the desire to work, many, many people and I believe that there is capacity for them. I believe that we are a skilled workforce, we are hardworking people, good people, honest people. Unfortunately, few Chileans recognize this.

Even as this quote acknowledges the circulating trope of "putting the house in order," it also emphatically voices an interest in pitching in, illustrates the subtext of hard work as a moral value, highlights the limited recognition of migrant contributions, and speaks to the staying power of political debates that negatively frame migration. Her narrative also depicts how migrants precariously navigate an embarrassed recognition of "problematic workers" while distancing themselves from stereotypes of criminality (Tijoux & Palominos Mandiola 2015, Mora & Undurraga 2013). Furthermore, migrant perceptions of other migrants and their contributions are not uniform. In research with Venezuelan migrants, Doña-Reveco and Gouveia (2020) found significant discussion about conditioning migration and limiting entry for specific

groups. In positioning themselves as the imagined “ideal immigrant,” migrants voicing these concerns perpetuate notions of “good and bad immigrants” (Doña-Reveco & Gouveia 2020: 12) while overlooking the ways in which structural racism reinforces—and depends upon—racial and class tension among migrant groups as well as between migrants and Chileans (Bonhomme 2021).

In interviews, narratives of unrecognized economic contributions dominated conversation. An Ecuadorian man emphasized:

This country is moving forward because of immigrants, the workforce is migrant... the people who are supporting, are helping the lazy Chileans to live well [are migrants] because those who work pay [healthcare, retirement], they have to pay taxes, they have to do many things. . . the subsidies [for social welfare programs] we immigrants pay.

By rebuffing slights with claims of migrant labor and associated payments to the state, this narrative counters stereotypes with those voiced about the Chilean working class, juxtaposing hardworking versus lazy, paying into the system versus relying on the state programs. This relational positioning illustrates the ways that a dual discourse continues to pit migrant laborers against working class Chileans (Staab and Maher 2006, Stefoni 2016). As migrants craft claims of contributions through labor, they reanimate discourses highlighting class divisions within Chile, uneasily positioning themselves in an oppositional relationship with Chilean workers.

Beyond these ubiquitous claims, migrants noted an array of other economic contributions. Benefits associated with their consumption of Chilean goods and their payments into social welfare programs are directly tied to their insertion in the labor market. While most contributions are phrased in general terms, one Peruvian man observed:

Foreigners contribute so that this country can move forward because the majority of hard labor is done by foreigners. . . . the majority of Chileans prefer to work in an office . . . I see [migrant contribution] in the growth of the city and the country because, well, Santiago wasn't always so full of buildings, it was slowly built up

and a larger workforce was needed. Migrants were arriving and they also helped build up the workforce.

This powerful claim of helping construct the urban infrastructure begs greater recognition of the importance of migrant contributions to Chile's national development, even as it nods to the role of migrants in projects of modernization and echoes political discourses linking migration to continued economic expansion (Doña-Reveco & Mullan 2014, Bellolio & Errázuriz 2014).

Migrants interviewed overwhelmingly expressed the value of work and its potential contribution to the national development of both their countries of origin and reception. A young Venezuelan woman shared:

What we [Venezuelans] really, truthfully came here for is to work; what we want is to work. To work and to work, because we truthfully came for this and we want to work, and we want to live.... Here, one works more than in Venezuela . . . because a country gets ahead through work.... There is an expression that says, 'God helps the one who rises early.'

Her forceful emphasis on “work” closes by positioning labor as a moral imperative, highlighting this value through her significant repetition of the term. She also links national development to the dedicated labor of citizens, implicitly suggesting a rationale for Venezuela's recent decline and positioning Venezuelan migrants as part of Chile's ongoing development. Throughout the interviews, migrants repeatedly shared labor contributions, positioning their efforts as an argument for belonging and recognition. This claim recursively echoes state discourses outlining the beneficial incorporation of migrants. Through their everyday labor, migrants contribute to Chile's ongoing development project, and this claim is central to migrant efforts for inclusion and acceptance in Chile.

Migrant Contributions and Tacit Docility

The pervasive idea of proving oneself through hard work also shapes a tacit compliance to an ethos of efficiency, going the “extra mile,” and not questioning extra tasks. For migrants, finding a job is a high stakes task and new arrivals face pressure to settle for any job they can find, including informal options. Many migrants, including two thirds of Venezuelans, are underemployed (Muñoz 2019). One mining engineer from Venezuela shared:

I was lucky because I was able to get a job quickly—after ten days. I was lucky, but you know that as a migrant you don’t come as a king... I was working in a restaurant, a bar by night, washing glasses, plates, etc.... The life of the immigrant is harsh because one arrives, works, sleeps, and leaves again for work and that is life. It’s tough.

He described the rigors of his two jobs and the challenge of fitting in sleep while repeating how “fortunate” he was to have found work. Another Venezuelan shared matter-of-factly, “In terms of money and work, conditions won’t be the same for a Chilean and a foreigner.... as a foreigner, you have to accept the reality that you are going to work more, you are going to receive lower pay.” In research with migrants in the U.S., Gleeson argues that work ethic is a pillar of claims making for citizenship and inclusion (Gleeson 2015). Central to this argument is a willingness to engage in paid labor, regardless of how demanding and marginalized the position. While partially recognized, this claim links migrant rights to economic arguments, adheres to a market logic, and reifies the idea that “hardworking immigrants” are “good immigrants,” implicitly disciplining those who cannot fulfill this claim (Gleeson 2015).

Labor expectations of migrants often differ by nationality. Docility, however, is a recurring theme, with submission and hard work—even in the most menial jobs—typically viewed as a valuable contribution. Haitians often choose Chile based on perceptions of the labor market in comparison to the Dominican Republic and Brazil, positioning themselves as “exemplary laborers” even when they have limited access to a segmented and racialized labor

market (Rojas Pedemonte et al. 2017: 127). In July 2019, I went to use a public restroom at a popular community center. As I waited in a long line, I noticed that the Haitian bathroom attendant was trying to mop around the many people using the restroom. After cleaning the common area, she waited by the farthest stall. When its occupant emerged, she quickly started mopping, but a young woman from the line tried to push by her to enter the stall she was mopping. The cleaning lady politely said, “excuse me, I am cleaning it,” and the young woman shook her head as if she did not understand, trying to push by her again. The Haitian woman said again, “I am cleaning it. You will have to wait.” At this, the young woman silently returned to the line. When the next stall opened, an older woman emerged. As she passed the cleaning woman, she said loudly, “You are not in Haiti now, you are in Chile and you have to learn to work quickly.” The bathroom attendant kept her gaze on the mop and quickly opened the next stall, furiously mopping. Immediately, two young women in the line responded, “Hey, you can’t talk to her like that,” and “racism is never acceptable.” One of the two young women noted that it was not okay to put people down because they are migrants or because of their race and the other commented that the older woman’s statement was not an example of patriotism. During this exchange, no one spoke directly to the bathroom attendant and she never stopped working.

This moment depicts the ways migration and race are debated in Chile, from the racialized language ideology implicit in the claim to not understand what was said with a Haitian accent, to the explicitly racist remark, and to the vehement defense of a multicultural Chile. This commonplace interaction illustrates the ways in which racial notions of labor are reproduced. While the first woman overlooked the bathroom attendant’s efforts, the second scolded her for perceived inefficiency. Neither were in a position of oversight, and yet both sent disciplining messages about how this migrant should do her job. What response is there but the docile

continuation of labor? This example also depicts how Haitians and other Afro-descendent migrants face compounded marginalization, suggesting complete foreclosure of conditional inclusion through labor (Durán-Migliardi & Thayer-Correa 2020, Stefoni 2016, Tijoux & Díaz Letelier 2014).

Over the last three decades, Peruvian women have often been preferentially hired for domestic labor positions. Film and television portrayals highlight this dominant trope, and newspapers are replete with depictions of university-educated Peruvians pursuing the “Chilean dream” through their underemployment as domestic laborers (c.f. *El Mercurio* 2001, 2003). The implications of these powerful perceptions strongly shape migrant experiences working in Chilean houses. In reflecting upon what it takes to succeed as a domestic laborer, one Peruvian woman noted:

You have to be an Indian, silent, do everything.... If you go back through history ... the silent Indian had to do everything that she was told, the slave, right? ... Well, here, in the past the live-in nannies never used to get days off because ... the nannies came from the south. They were indigenous, right? They were like lambs and worked a lot, ... and now with the immigrant boom... Here there are many Peruvian nannies who are picking up the tab, they have let themselves be exploited, silenced, suffered, hour after hour.

Her reflection on what leads to successful navigation of working as a migrant domestic laborer is simple—a submissive attitude. Emblematic of Foucault’s “docile body,” this narrative illustrates how docility is enforced through powerful expectations of how a nanny should act (2012). While many migrants interviewed noted the ways in which domestic labor was understood in terms of indigeneity, this woman’s choice of metaphors epitomizes how the often-noted desire for a domestic laborer with the “right attitude” is a racialized construct rooted in historical labor relations (Staab & Maher 2006, Mora & Undurraga 2013). Limited by notions of what jobs are “suitable” for them, many migrant women—particularly Peruvian—find themselves in domestic

labor roles where pressure toward docility further narrows the limited paths of conditional inclusion.

As Hale describes in his work on indigenous recognition, individuals must choose whether “to occupy the category of *indio permitido*’ (authorized Indian) or to refuse the invitation completely” (2006: 45). Posited as a choice, Hale shows that inclusion is always conditional, and the specter of being judged, stereotyped, or discriminated shades every interaction, crafting the terms of interactional engagement (2006). In negotiating Chile’s racial terrain as foreigners, migrants—particularly racialized groups—face coercive pressure to adhere to the idea of a contributing worker. Given that many migrants seek economic stability for themselves and their families through their labor, there is a lot at stake in this effort, proffering further incentive to prove oneself a benefit to Chile.

Conclusion

Migrants come to Chile for diverse motives that highlight personal choices made in the context of broader structural and geopolitical options. Joining family members, saving for a future investment, gaining autonomy, and seeking economic security and governmental stability are all reasons that migrants shared for their emigration. Some migrants imagine their resettlement as permanent while others dream of a return to their country of origin. These varied, individual goals shape migrant engagements and their search for inclusion. Of course, there are other ways that migrants negotiate the terms of their belonging—by making friends, seeking out faith communities, engaging in activism, attending school, and playing in sports leagues. Through these engagements, migrants demonstrate that the agentic search for inclusion in local communities and broader society is not one-dimensional. Labor is just one axis—albeit a

significant one—along which migrants seek inclusion in workplaces, among coworkers and employers, and indirectly in the nation. In laboring for inclusion, migrants work for recognition of the value of their labor and for the often-elusive validation as a contributing member of Chilean society. These efforts also bring together the pursuit of socio-economic gains, the attainment of personal goals, and the often-unachievable relief from racism, discrimination, and xenophobia. All of the migrants quoted here opted to live in Chile, sought employment through diverse channels, and bring their experiences, perspectives, and creativity to their work. They are not without agency, and yet, the similarities in how migrants frame their labor and their contributions illustrates the ways in which their efforts towards inclusion are mediated “within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (Ong 1996: 738). As migrants take on an ethos of proving themselves through hard work, they reproduce the idea of contribution through labor, further solidifying this pathway as the norm for those seeking economic and social inclusion. In this way, migrants are enlisted as co-creators of the terms of conditional inclusion.

By crafting conditional inclusion around labor contributions, the value of migration is articulated as an economic benefit for the neoliberal state. Positioning migration in this way bounds it, emphasizing the potential labor of migrants and limiting who is imagined to be the ideal immigrant. This framing also steers the debate away from universal claims for full recognition and instead highlights the subtle positioning of claims for validation. There are, however, voices calling for broader terms of inclusion. In response to an exclusionary new request for documents, a Haitian activist countered, “to speak of putting the house in order, [we must] decide to put in order [all of] Latin America, and to do so in terms of respecting human rights.” The panel where he spoke was convened as part of a lecture series, “Migration is a Human Right,” perhaps heralding broader, more universal claims for inclusion.

The implications of making claims for migrant inclusion through labor contributions also impact Chileans, highlighting the neoliberal ethos of a labor market. As Chilean and migrant laborers discursively position themselves vis-à-vis the other group, competing critiques of the opposite group undercut broader claims as fellow workers. In interviews, both migrants and Chileans frame migrant labor in an implicit comparison with Chilean labor. Migrants note tasks that Chilean coworkers refuse to do; position their willingness, hustle, and dedication in a comparative light; and highlight the skills, training, and education that sets them apart. Chileans interviewed emphasize migrant work ethic, diligence, willingness to do more for less compensation, and point to greater professional, technical, and vocational training. While Chileans position Peruvians workers as “harder-working, educated, and clean . . . more devoted, caring, submissive, and service-oriented than Chilean workers,” they often simultaneously draw on stereotypes of Peruvians “as dirty, criminal, lazy, backward, uncivilized, uneducated, slow, and childlike” (Staab & Maher 2006: 88). The paired and contradictory discourses illustrate the limited success of conditional inclusion through labor, highlighting the way that racialized stigma constantly mediates the potential for inclusion. Even as migrants struggle for economic integration and bureaucratic recognition, they are always potentially subject to racial exclusions (Hale 2006). Cheap, docile, and flexible migrant labor is welcome but racialized others are not, resulting in an “economic presence and social separation” (Liberona Concha 2015: 149, c.f. Tijoux & Díaz Letelier 2014). As Thayer Correa and Durán Migliardi write, “migration is increasingly a dynamic in which its subjects never completely leave their place of origin nor do they ever finish arriving at the place of reception” (2015: 156). Through their labor, migrants make claims for recognition and inclusion. As migrants face push-back, discrimination, and racialization, they often find only conditional inclusion.

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