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# Doing Gender as Resistance

## Waitresses and Servers in Contemporary Table Service

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This article examines the different ways in which “waitresses” in a traditional restaurant setting and “servers” in a routinized and standardized corporate restaurant setting “do gender” in the workplace. Whereas waitresses are permitted interpretative use of gender in the workplace, the goals and ideologies of the corporate restaurant limit servers’ use of gender in the workplace. My findings suggest that normatively accepted versions of gender can be done as a method of resistance, rather than conformity, in standardized and routinized workplace settings. These conclusions are informed by ethnographic research conducted over twenty-two months in two different Los Angeles area restaurants.

**Keywords:** *gender; work; resistance*

“Doing gender” refers to a complex array of socially guided behaviors that render particular pursuits and activities as evidentiary expressions of masculinity and femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). Moreover, doing gender produces, reproduces, and legitimates normatively acceptable versions of masculine and feminine expression (West and Zimmerman 1987). Doing a successful version of gender—successful in that it is accepted as appropriate and understandable by other persons—can thus be conceptualized as a practice of social conformity. Previous work suggests refraining from doing normative gender can be used as a form of resistance. The question then arises: can normatively acceptable versions of gender be done as resistance?

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To explore this question, I studied women table servers doing gender in two restaurant settings: “waitresses” in a traditional family-owned establishment and “servers” in a standardized corporate chain restaurant. A considerable amount of work has been done on the topic of doing gender as a waitress; however, there has been no analysis of doing gender as a server in a routinized corporate restaurant setting. This article comparatively examines experiences of doing gender as a waitress in a traditional restaurant setting and doing gender as a server in a routinized restaurant setting to explore the possibility of persons doing normative gender as resistance.

## Literature Review

### “Doing Gender” as Social Conformity

Based on the work of Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), it can be said that gender emerges out of social interactions and is therefore a socially organized achievement, rather than a “natural” occurrence. Additionally, according to R. W. Connell (1987), in any historical setting, gender and consequent gender presentations are guided by the idealized concepts of hegemonic masculinities for men and emphasized femininities for women. Therefore, when considering the agency implicit to the concept of doing gender in conjunction with socially sanctioned emphasized femininities and hegemonic masculinities, it follows that an individual may present gender-appropriate characteristics to “do” a socially advocated, gendered self.

Gender is done in the workplace (social setting), and certain types of gendered workplace performances are considered more appropriate for or actualized better by individuals with particular gendered presentations. For example, it has been found that woman nurses were better received and considered to be doing a better job by patients than their men colleagues (Hartman et al. 1988). Doing a version of appropriate gender for a particular workplace environment can often be beneficial to employment and finances. For example, Meika Loe (1996) found that women are often hired as waitresses if they epitomize stereotypically feminine characteristics and/or character types, such as the “girl next door” or the “prom queen.”

According to Robin Leidner (1993: 194-211), gender can only be done in the workplace as long as the gendered presentation coincides with and complements the particular institution. Leidner (1993) found, for example, that men insurance agents conceptualized the “manly” work they did as unacceptable labor for their wives. This implies that an inappropriate and unacceptable gendered presentation in the insurance agency would be one

that is considered unmanly. Iterations of workplace and institutional management of doing gender have been identified elsewhere. For example, Kristen Dellinger and Christine L. Williams (1997) found that institutionalized appearance rules regarding makeup use and appropriate dress guide women's gendered presentations in the workplace. Engaging appropriately in these gendered appearance rules affects conceptualizations of a woman's health, sexuality, and credibility, and not engaging in institutionally normative gender presentations can be done as a mode of resistance (Dellinger and Williams 1997). Lorraine B. de Volvo (2003) found that women cocktail servers' appearance and behaviors were controlled, in part, by coworkers', customers', and management's hegemonic conceptualizations of gender and labor. Instances of recalcitrant "microresistance," such as drinking alcohol while working and not serving poor tippers, helped employees negotiate control in the workplace. Not engaging in normatively appropriate gender presentations can negatively affect women and workers; however, in spite of social rewards that implicitly guide persons toward enacting particular gendered presentations, enacting normatively acceptable gendered presentations can still be regarded as a practice of social conformity.

### **"Doing Waitress" and the Performance of Low-Prestige Labor**

Women table servers employed as waitresses often tailor their presented "self"—or "do waitress"—to match socially sanctioned expectations of their gendered occupation. Physical appearance factors into a waitress's presentation. As was previously mentioned, Meika Loe (1996) found that waitresses are often hired if they epitomize stereotypically feminine characteristics and/or character types. Michael Lynn and Tony Simons (2000) found that normatively "attractive" waitresses were tipped better than their "unattractive" coworkers. Loraine de Volvo (2003) found that casino cocktail waitresses generally tailored their presentations to conform to idealized standards of beauty.

A waitress's presented demeanor is more readily mutable than her physical appearance and also contributes to her success at "doing waitress." It has been found that waitresses assess their customers and present them with what they perceive the patron to consider appropriate "waitress" characteristics (Creighton 1982; Hall 1993b). James Spradley and Brenda Mann (1975) determined that cocktail waitresses adopted stereotypically feminine characteristics of passivity and the acceptance of sexual objectification by men. Louise Kapp Howe (1977) found that waitresses would assign character

typifications to their customers and then perform their table service accordingly. Leon Elder and Lin Rolens (1985) found that most waitresses presented a maternal character when working. Debra Ginsberg (2000) discussed Belinda, a woman who imitated a number of different feminine character types. She would become nurturing, passive, flirtatious, and so on such that her assessment of her patrons' character typifications and table service preferences were coincident with her waitress presentation. These examples of evaluations and subsequent characteristic presentations are all interconnected to what Elaine J. Hall (1993a) describes as the waitress's endeavor to provide "good service."

Table service in the United States can be described as a low-prestige job. It is most often performed by women who are members of racial and/or ethnic minority groups. According to the 2000 United States Census, less than half the "waitresses" working in Los Angeles County are white and non-Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many stereotypically appropriate characteristics of the waitress draw on controlling images of women of color accentuating the performance of a "servant" dutifully waiting on her "master." Table service's low prestige is further intensified through the conceptual association of "service" with "servility" (Ehrenreich 2001; Hall 1993a; Paules 1991). Elaine J. Hall (1993a) found that a subservient demeanor is one of three requisite qualities that must be exhibited by a waitress when providing what the typical restaurant patron perceives to be "good service." Because the majority of the waitresses' income comes from customer tips, the patrons' license to bestow some sum of reward money on *their* waitress cements their powerful position (Ehrenreich 2001; Ginsberg 2000; Hall 1993a, 1993b; Howe 1977; Lynn and Simons 2000; Spradley and Mann 1975). Waitresses are also cast as servile by their required uniforms. Waitresses must often wear name tags, forcing them into a one-sided, first-name-based relationship with a nameless restaurant patron (Howe 1977), and the "costumes" they must wear to work are often sexualized, demeaning, and/or very impractical in nature. For example, Louise Kapp Howe (1977) discussed the "Sweet but Sexy Milkmaid" uniform's constricting cummerbund and flowing, impractical blouse sleeves. Meika Loe (1996) discussed the "tantalizing" Bazooms' uniforms, which consisted of short shorts and a choice of three skimpy, sexualized tops.

According to the literature, normatively appropriate and understandable versions of gender are ordinarily done in and often guided by the workplace. This is true of table servers "doing waitress." Regardless of individual intent, it can be said that persons doing appropriate and acceptable gender are also engaging a practice of social conformity. The remainder of this article will

explore the possibility of doing appropriate and understandable versions of gender as a mode of resistance, or nonconformity.

## Method

The data used in this article were obtained through ethnographic research conducted over the course of twenty-two months (February 2001 to November 2002) in two restaurant settings. I performed the duties of a table server in a traditional family-owned pizza and pasta restaurant, which I refer to as the Family Restaurant,<sup>2</sup> from February to September 2001 and in an outlet of a steadily expanding, standardized chain restaurant, which I refer to as the Concept Restaurant, from October 2001 to November 2002. My table-serving duties in both venues included taking customers' food and drink orders, attempting to ensure patrons received and were satisfied with their meals, and presenting bills and collecting payments. At the Family Restaurant, there were no additional logistical or sales requirements guiding the table-serving labor. The work could be completed in whatever manner the table server saw fit, as long as it was completed. At the Concept Restaurant, however, I was also required to "suggestive sell" (attempt to augment a table's bill by suggesting additional, more expensive food and drink items to patrons), orchestrate each table in conjunction with a corporate-prescribed "service timeline," and perform "running side work" duties.

These restaurants represent extremes of the contemporary table-serving experience—"waitressing" at the nonstandardized Family Restaurant verses "serving" at the routinized Concept Restaurant. Waitresses work in noncorporate restaurants with a predominantly female wait staff. Each waitress independently manages her own workload and balances the tasks she must perform to satisfy the particular dining needs of her patrons. "Serving" refers to a contemporary and increasingly prevalent concept of table service. Servers are found in chain restaurants and can be men or women<sup>3</sup> and are presented in as androgynous a manner as possible. This may be a consequence to such establishments' desire for predictability and replicability (Ritzer 2000). Servers are members of a restaurant table service "team" wherein each member of the wait staff is responsible for the needs of each restaurant patron. The Concept Restaurant provides servers with a "Service Time Line" (The Concept Restaurant *Server Training Manual*), an outline of the schedule each server must abide by to satisfy the dining needs of each restaurant patron. The nature of these two distinct types of restaurant establishments generates standardized and nonstandardized iterations of what superficially appears to be the exact same labor position.

My time as an employee and participant observer totaled approximately 1,900 hours (550 at the Family Restaurant and 1,350 at the Concept Restaurant). In each setting, I made my role as a researcher known to the managerial staff. I took notes in each setting as I worked, usually on the backs of tickets (forms used to record a table's order) or on register tape that fit easily in my restaurant-issued server notebook(s). These notes were elaborated at the end of each shift, and grounded theory was used to inform their subsequent analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

## The Restaurants

The Family Restaurant, established in 1968, is a casual family-oriented establishment located in an upper middle-class Los Angeles area suburb that serves lunch and dinner seven days a week. The dining area consisted of booths covered in burgundy vinyl and tables of birch-colored wood (forty-eight total booths or tables, approximately 150 seats). Leafy green plants were distributed throughout the restaurant, and watercolor prints of nature scenes decorated the walls. The Family Restaurant had a very simple Italian menu, serving pizzas and simple pasta dishes ranging in price from four to eighteen dollars. The beverage selection consisted of "the basics" (soda, coffee, milk, and tea), two draft beers, and three selections of wine.

Twenty-two waitresses and one waiter were employed at the Family Restaurant during the course of this study. Ages ranged from early twenties to midsixties, with the approximate average age being mid- to late thirties. Each waitress had worked for the Family Restaurant for at least two years at the beginning of this study, but most had worked there much longer. There was no employee turnover during the time I worked at the Family Restaurant. Fifteen of the waitresses had at least one child; of these fifteen women, ten were single (never married) or divorced. Each waitress was apparently white and heterosexual.

The original Concept Restaurant was opened in 1979, a subsidiary venture of a nationwide breakfast restaurant chain. At the time of this study, there were twenty-three existing Concept Restaurants and four planned openings. The outlet of the Concept Restaurant where I was employed opened in October 2001 and was located a few miles from the Family Restaurant. It was a large restaurant with forty-six indoor booths and tables, thirty stools surrounding a large circular bar, and eight tables located in an outdoor dining area (approximately two hundred seats). The Concept Restaurant was decorated with a safari/jungle-animal motif (standard for all Concept Restaurants), complete with tiki torches lining the entryway and "Larger than Life" giraffe

and elephant statues positioned throughout the dining area. "Larger than Life" is how the Concept Restaurant describes the type of service presentation it intends to "WOW!" patrons with (The Concept Restaurant *Server Training Manual*). The Concept Restaurant had a varied menu consisting of steak, seafood, burgers, stir-fry dishes, salads, pasta dishes, sandwiches, and desserts, ranging in price from five to fifteen dollars. The beverage selection included "the basics," a full bar, several draft and bottled beer options complete with two home-brewed specialty selections, a wine list, and a myriad of specialty alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages.

At the time I began working at the Concept Restaurant, there were approximately seventy servers hired and trained for the store's opening. There were forty-eight women and men servers and eight women cocktail servers employed at the completion of this study fourteen months later. The turnover of employees was quite rapid; only seventeen of the final forty-eight servers had been waiting tables for the Concept Restaurant over the entire time I worked there. The final ratio of women to men servers was thirty-four to fourteen; this roughly two-to-one ratio was reflective of the wait staff's gender composition throughout the course of this study. Wait staff ages ranged from the late teens to the early twenties, with the main concentration of servers in their early twenties. At the completion of this study, there were two mothers and no fathers working in the wait staff; both mothers were single. Previous employees with children, who had since turned over, were always an anomalous few. The servers employed throughout the course of this study were overwhelmingly white and heterosexual, although there were a few black, Hispanic, and GLBT individuals.

## **Doing Gender in the Family and Concept Restaurants**

### **Presentation as a Waitress and**

### **Presentation as a Server: The Work Uniform**

At the Family Restaurant, each waitress was required to wear a long- or short-sleeved white shirt with a collar, black pants or skirt, black shoes, a plain full burgundy or green apron, and a color-coordinated bowtie. The bowtie was the only purely decorative item a Family Restaurant waitress was required to wear and, as will be discussed later, was strongly disliked by the younger waitresses. Both a burgundy and a green apron/bowtie set were provided by the restaurant. Name tags were not required, although some employees did wear them. Waitresses were given five table-serving books,



each of which could be decorated as the waitress saw fit, with which they were to stow their money and tickets and present checks to customers. Hair needed to be restrained enough to keep it from contacting food. A waitress was not required to wear any items with “Family Restaurant” logos while working.

Shirts could be as tight or loose as the waitress desired; pants could range from standard, functional work-uniform-store fare to cotton-polyester blends of Lycra stretch. Articles of clothing could be taken directly from one’s everyday wardrobe and incorporated into one’s work “uniform” if necessary or desired. A Family Restaurant waitress did not necessarily have to spend money constructing a work uniform, and each woman was permitted to tailor her work attire to her own personal preference and, thus, to her own particular gender presentation.

At the Concept Restaurant, the corporation aspired for an androgynous, interchangeable wait staff. Every server was required to wear a work uniform consisting of a “safari shirt,” a tan, short-sleeved, buttoned-up men’s shirt sold exclusively by the Concept Restaurant for twenty dollars each. These shirts were cut for a man’s frame, and they required precisely ironed sleeve and back creases. Servers were also required to wear black pants with no externally showing pockets. Women servers were instructed to refrain from wearing pants that fit too tightly. “We don’t wanna be able to see that [you are] not wearing underwear,” said Mark, one of the managers, during employee training. Two particular brands of pants, each costing over forty dollars, were suggested in the *Server Training Manual*. Servers were required to wear black “Shoes for Crews,” nonslip work shoes ranging in price from twenty to forty-five dollars. The catalog through which a server could purchase these shoes was provided by the Concept Restaurant. Servers were also required to wear plain black socks, a plain black belt, a black half apron, and a Concept Restaurant logo-embossed name tag. Half aprons were sold by the restaurant for seven dollars each. A server’s initial name tag was provided by the restaurant; any additional were two dollars each. Servers were given one “Concept Restaurant” server book, which was not to be decorated (bills were presented to customers on plastic trays). The Concept Restaurant’s *Server Workbook* states, “Your uniform should be clean and pressed and free of defect such as holes, tears, and obvious stains.” It then enthusiastically states, “Always invest in your appearance!! It PAYS off!!!”

Servers had strict requirements for restraining their hair. Common hairstyles for women, such as ponytails for longer hair, were considered too loose. Braids or buns were preferred. Visible jewelry, with the exception of one stud earring per ear and one ring per hand; tattoos; and “unnaturally colored hair” were not permitted. Outlandish and/or ostentatious makeup

was also not permitted. Thus, according to store policy, a server could do virtually nothing to tailor her work uniform to her own personal preference and, thus, to her own particular gender presentation.

These rules and regulations were not consistently enforced, however. Cultivating an amiable relationship with managers facilitated many exceptions. For example, Joselyn's red and black quarter-sized star tattoos, located very obviously behind each of her earlobes when her hair was pulled back into a bun, were never mentioned. These standards were also not enforced for the cocktail servers, members of the wait staff who worked in the bar only. They were technically to be held to the same uniform standards as women servers with the exception of replacing the men's safari shirt with a more fitted women's leopard-printed v-neck shirt. Cocktail servers, all of whom were women throughout the course of this study, were regularly permitted to incorporate elements of (heterosexually normative) sexualized femininity into their presentation. According to management, uniform differences and allowances were made in light of the cocktail servers' role in the bar and thus their role in generating more revenue for the restaurant.

Servers and cocktail servers were given reference materials, which outlined some of the Concept Restaurant's policies and operating procedures, upon their hire. A "Service Time Line,"<sup>4</sup> guidelines for suggestive selling, uniform standards, and supplementary server duties were outlined by the Concept Restaurant's *Server Training Manual* and *Server Workbook*, two 50-plus-page spiral bound folios. These "service standards" were monitored by management and by secret shoppers. "Shoppers" were contracted by the Concept Restaurant's corporate office to conduct surveillance missions, usually twice per month. Shoppers would pose as customers and dine in the restaurant, unbeknownst to the servers, managers, or other restaurant employees, and score the quality of the entire restaurant experience. The restaurant was evaluated on many points, including restaurant cleanliness, the performance of the "hostess(es)," the quality of the food, and the performance of the server. The server's performance was evaluated by her adherence to a dining timeline, requisite questions and suggestions, and physical motions specified in the *Server Training Manual*. A perfect composite score of 100 percent resulted in a two hundred dollar cash reward for the server only, and a score of less than 80 percent resulted in the termination of all employees involved with the shopper report (server, busser, hostess, and so on where applicable). Like most rules at the Concept Restaurant, however, the cash reward and punitive termination(s) were selectively enforced. During the time I worked at the Concept Restaurant, no individual received the cash award, several but not all servers scoring below 80 percent were terminated,

and many bussers and hostesses mentioned in “shopper reports” were suspended for one to three shifts.

### **Waitress Characterizations: Nurturing or (Heterosexually) Sexualized**

Each table server employed at the Family Restaurant had the ability to incorporate different degrees of waitress character typifications into her presentation. The malleable dress code, the broad age demographic of the waitresses, and the fact that each woman could develop her own methods for completing work tasks all contributed to variations in gender presentation. Two common presentations were observed, which I refer to as the “nurturing waitress” and the “sexualized waitress.” Although only some waitresses epitomized one of these characterizations, each waitress incorporated some degree of one of these presentations into her act of table serving. Each characterization seemed to involve an incorporation of stereotypically feminine qualities into a crafted presentation of (waitress) self.

The nurturing waitresses tended to wear loose-fitting and functional work “costumes” and sturdy work shoes and incorporated subtle feminine touches into their presentation. Loosely tied back hair with strategically curled tendrils, jewelry such as earrings and necklaces, or pictures of children affixed to the outside of (table server) books were common. The nurturing waitress incorporated stereotypically feminine characteristics, such as kindness and patience, into the table-serving act. This characterization also included the waitress’s exhibition of personal consideration and care for her “regular”<sup>5</sup> customers. For example,

Rachel, who had worked at the Family Restaurant since the early 1970s, came rushing back from the front lobby. There were no tables working in the restaurant, but an elderly couple—the very frail-looking woman using a walker—was being seated at that moment in her section. “It’s my ‘Little Old Couple,’” she said. “They come in every week or so, but less now because she’s been real sick. They’re hard to wait on, really picky.” I must have made a quizzical face because she went on, “I don’t mind (the extra work). They always get so happy when I have their wine ready and their lunch going by the time they sit down. They order the same thing every single time. I don’t think she has much time left anyway.”

In this example, Rachel makes a point of having her customers’ needs met before they have the opportunity to articulate them. The degree to which Rachel customizes her routine for her “Little Old Couple” goes beyond

simply bringing a provision to the table without being asked. The thought, concern, and motivation with which the nurturing waitress serves her customers characterizes her entire work presentation, even in the case of non-regulars. In another example,

The restaurant was packed with people due to an early dinner rush. Only Ashley and I were working, each of us with half the restaurant's tables, and we were both very busy. At one point I glanced across the room just in time to see her standing next to a table serving pizza slices onto the plates of each person. I later asked her about it, and she explained: "I always [serve the pizza like that] . . . people just seem to like the attention more."

Ashley's behavior in this example exemplifies nurturing and care. In spite of the fact that the restaurant was busy, she paid specific attention to the table's needs. In fact, she claimed to pay this specific type of caring attention to every customer simply because people seemed to prefer it. This example shows Ashley as both a nurturing waitress and a pragmatic table server.

Another example of waitress gender typification is what I refer to as the (heterosexually normative) "sexualized waitress." A sexualized waitress presented herself in a manner coincident with various heterosexually normative concepts of "sexy." This general iteration of the Family Restaurant "costume" involved tight form-fitting pants and top paired with more fashionable and less functional shoes. This iteration of the uniform was background to the personal touches the sexualized waitress would adorn herself with to tailor her particular "sexy" presentation. For example, some waitresses opted for a relatively glamorous and vamp-like, aggressive presentation. These waitresses, such as Rhonda, wore elaborate heavy makeup, had long brightly colored acrylic fingernails, and wore boots with heels. The mainstay of the "vamp-sexualized" waitress performance, however, was the forward and familiar manner in which she interacted with her tables. In one such case,

Rhonda was chatting with two local civil service men in for lunch, leaning against one side of the booth with her knee propped up on the seat. "Why don't we go out this weekend?" one of them suggested. Rhonda responded suggestively, "If you go out with me this weekend baby, it'll be the best weekend of your life." They all laughed heartily. I later heard them speculating as to whether or not Rhonda was a "party girl."

Immediately following her response, each man appeared flushed and overjoyed at the prospect of taking a forward-acting blonde "party girl" out for

“the best weekend of [their] life.” Over the course of these observations, however, Rhonda, a mother of three in the middle of a divorce, never indicated she socialized with customers outside of work. Her forward comment peaked the interests of the civil servants, however. They consistently requested “Raunchy Rhonda” as their waitress for the duration of my observations.

Other waitresses opted for a more little-girl type presentation. These waitresses, such as Sunny, are more cheerful, flirtatious, and deferent in their table-serving performance. Body and face glitter, little-girl jewelry (plastic items with butterflies and hearts in pastel colors) and hair accessories, clip-on hair extension pieces configured into elaborate coifs, or server book decorations with the owner’s name emblazoned in flowers are some examples of extra uniform elements. As was the case with the nurturing and the vamp-sexualized waitress, the mainstay of the “girly-sexualized” waitress’s presentation was the distinctive manner in which she served tables. For example,

Sunny sashayed up to the table, flipping her hair all the while. After a minute or so of her giggling and pointing out words that rhymed with “Sunny,” the table of men patrons appeared awestruck. “Remember,” I heard her call as they left the restaurant after finishing their meal, “whenever you come to the Family Restaurant, ask for Sunny. It rhymes with Honey.”

Not only did Sunny make an impression on her new table with her self-presentation and serving skills, she made sure they remembered her name; thus, she immediately began cultivating an additional “regular” customer.

Some degree of gender typification, from nurturing to sexualized, was commonly incorporated into a waitress’s self-presentation at her table to augment her tips, which account for seventy to eighty percent of a table server’s income.<sup>6</sup> Waitresses assessed each of their tables and incorporated particular service characteristics that they determined would facilitate their goal of maximizing tips. Table evaluations were shared among waitresses via the running commentary they engaged in while, for example, passing each other in the aisles or fetching drinks throughout the duration of a shift. When a table was evaluated as incompatible or financially undesirable, waitresses would often attempt to pass on or swap the table with a coworker who had determined the same table to be more compatible or less financially undesirable. For example, less “nurturing” waitresses often attempted to pass tables that included elder individuals and children. When a table was evaluated as compatible or financially desirable, waitresses would often attempt to obtain the opportunity to serve it, sometimes by trading multiple neutrally evaluated tables for one desirable prospect. In example, waitresses would often trade multiple tables to obtain the perceived financial opportunity to

wait on one table of men. Waitresses would then “waitress” tables in the gender-typified manner they determined appropriate.

The financial payoff for an accurately matched customer-to-waitress presentation was often great. Based on my observations, Sunny would not have considered passing or trading the table described in the following example. Had it not been assigned to her initially, she probably would have traded multiple tables to obtain the opportunity to wait on it.

Sunny stood at a table of men fidgeting with her acrylic nails. “Tskuh,” she said “My nails are so thrashed. Look at this one.” She held up her hand. No man seemed to notice those nails, but they did seem to notice her hand’s line of sight position to her breasts, augmented double-Ds straining out the top and sides of her apron. “Wanna pay for my manicure?” She giggled and flipped her hair, enhanced with a flamboyant clip-on ponytail piece, while walking away. Twenty dollars cash later appeared in her book in addition to the charged tab and tip.

This type of gendered presentation would be tailored to the table’s needs, expectations, and level of tolerance, as not all tables were the same. The exchange involving Sunny and her manicure might not have been as well received from another group of customers. It is important to note that even sexually characterized waitresses would deliver nurturing and deferent performances for tables of women and children. They would, however, present sexualized performances for tables of men and children. It was up to the waitress to make an appropriate presentation-determining evaluation before interacting with a table, or at least in a nascent stage of serving them. This skill took time to develop and cultivate, but the reward for successful patron assessment was cash in hand at the end of a shift.

In addition to augmenting her tip return, the sexualized waitress used her presentation to regain control of or recast the character of a table-serving exchange. Customers expect “good service,” yet sometimes they do not receive overt friendliness or deference. It was observed that flirtatiousness through sexual allusions and sexualized illusion was capable of re-characterizing a table-serving exchange or compensating for a performance that might otherwise be considered an exhibition of “poor service.” In example, an allusion to sexiness overshadowed an impertinent attitude from a waitress displaying poor service:

They had been sitting for a few minutes when I finally got to their table. They looked unhappy. “You’re all sparkly!” said the man, commenting on the glitter make-up on my eyes, arms, and neck. “Leftover from work last night?”

“Yeah,” I stated sarcastically. “At my other job I’m a third-grader.” This statement and a wink induced a red face in the man and a grudging laugh from the woman, who had said “Jesus Jim, she probably borrowed [the glitter] from her little sister,” under her breath in response to his insinuation.

In this example, Jim’s inappropriate comment regarding what a decorative presentation might mean indicates both displeasure with the service and awareness of a prestige differential existing between him and the waitress. His attempt to augment this differential by implying that, in addition to engaging in a sexualized performance of low-prestige labor, I may also engage in sex work itself might have been directly linked to the affront he felt at not receiving “good service.” My response played on his sexualized allusion. This brief exchange seemed to recharacterize the interaction, and the patrons’ thereafter friendly demeanors indicated that they were willing to disregard my nondeferent attitude and initial delivery of substandard table service. This implies that, if occurring in the presence of the appropriate type of table/customers, a measure of “poor service” can be compensated for with a sexualized performance.

In each of the previously discussed examples, gender and “waitress” are done successfully. Waitresses used appropriate and understandable gendered presentations to augment their tips, bolster their cache of “regulars,” and manage the prestige differential present between themselves and their customers. Normatively expressed gender is a tool used by Family Restaurant waitresses to accomplish their work-related goals and, simultaneously, is a practice of social conformity.

### **Server Characterization: Interchangeable and “Androgynous”**

The degree to which waitresses were permitted to cultivate their various self-presentations and table server characterizations at the Family Restaurant was, in contrast, virtually absent in Concept Restaurant servers. Considering the stringent nature of the requisite uniform, the age demographic of the Concept Restaurant’s women and men servers, and the fact that each server was required to work within corporate written scripted “service standards,” each server at the Concept Restaurant was considered an interchangeable member of a “team.” Consequently, stereotypical feminine gender presentation was difficult to incorporate into a server’s uniform or work tasks. For example,

I was being followed around the bar by Tony (the restaurant manager), who intercepted me by the bar well. “Whatdaya think this is, Studio 54? What’s

all over your neck?" "Glitter," I answered. "People like glitter. '100% guest satisfaction,' right?" I quoted from the *Server Training Manual*. "Wrong, we don't do glitter here," he said. "Go wash it off."

Similar exchanges between managers and servers occurred in instances of using "too much make-up," wearing earrings that were considered "too big," having "too much stuff in [the server's] hair" in the form of hair clips or barrettes, and leaving the safari shirt's second button undone. "Button up," Tony chastised once while he fastened the second button of my safari shirt. Unlike the Family Restaurant waitresses, women servers in the Concept Restaurant did not have license to use appropriate and understandable gendered presentations in the workplace. However, repressing gender expression did not emerge as the Concept Restaurant's predominant goal. Preventing servers from distinguishing themselves through self-presentation to support the Concept Restaurant's larger goal of "team service" did.

The Concept Restaurant's advocacy of "team service," wherein each server is trained to provide table service in a replicable and interchangeable stepwise manner, often resulted in multiple, virtually indistinguishable members of the wait staff serving one table. Although the server taking the initial food order is technically responsible for the table, a different server may bring the food to the table, another the cocktails; one server may clear plates, another may deliver the dessert. Because of "team service" and standardized server presentation, it is often difficult for patrons to identify "their" server. For example,

A woman from a table neighboring one of mine called out to me as I walked by: "I asked you for some honey!?" "Oh, sorry, I'll be right back," I said not slowing my pace. As I was walking back to the table with the honey I passed Alexis, another blonde woman, who said "I totally forgot that woman's honey! Thanks [for getting it]!"

In this example, it is difficult to determine if the customer (incorrectly) recognized me as her server. Regardless, I knew exactly what was expected of me as a "team service" employee. This example illustrates restaurant employee acceptance of interchangeable team service facilitated by the routinization and standardization of labor and self-presentation.

An interesting artifact of interchangeable team service was observed in customer tipping practices. Concept Restaurant patrons consistently tipped servers around 15 percent of their total bill, the contemporary standard tip amount. This was done in spite of the quality of service provided or the patron's apparent enjoyment—or even recognition—of their server.



Occasional “stiffs” (no tip left at all) and extremely rare “overtips” (more than 15 percent of the bill) occurred, but standard compensation could usually be expected. Such regulated tipping practices illustrate that customers are themselves routinized into accepting and eventually compensating routinized, interchangeable table service. Tipping practices were not similar at the Family Restaurant, where standard compensation and the occasional “stiff” could also be expected, but extravagant tips were often left by regulars.

The server’s lack of ability to tailor her work uniform to suit her appropriated table server character in conjunction with the scripted service standards leaves her with a small window of opportunity in which to do gender. Attempts to deviate too far outside the scripted standard service advocated by the restaurant could result in the loss of one’s job, especially if a service standard monitoring “shopper” reported too many discrepancies. As a result, the server would eventually find herself repeating the same lines and suggestions over and over, incorporating very little sincerity and very few elements of individual personality into the scripted task that cycled again and again.

### **Resistance through Normative Gender? Physical Presentation and Attitude**

Family Restaurant waitresses often resist servility by presenting a version of their gendered selves at work that is very different from their presentation off-the-clock. For example,

One Wednesday afternoon, a bright yellow sundress- and sandal-clad woman strolled casually into the restaurant, flipping her long wavy red hair over her shoulders. She leaned on the counter like she owned the place, took off her sunglasses, and proceeded to stick her head into the kitchen and shout: “Hey Dan, can you get me my check, ah-kaaay?” I did a double take on hearing the familiar sounding “ah-kaaay.” I turned to Paige sitting on the bench beside me. “Is that *Grace*?” I asked. It was.

With her tightly coiffed bun to practical work costume, Grace epitomized the no-nonsense austere waitress who strode around the Family Restaurant with an air of extreme competence and purpose when working. Grace’s strolling, casual off-the-clock presentation was extremely different from the waitress-self she presented to the customers. Grace distanced herself from the servility of her low-prestige labor position by presenting a different version of “Grace” to her customers.

Some waitresses would shed or alter one integral component of their work attire whenever they felt they would not be reprimanded: the bowtie.

Immediately after the kitchen manager left for the evening, the relatively younger Family Restaurant waitresses (Sunny, Mya, Tiffany, Kelly, and myself) would immediately remove their decorative bowties. It is interesting to note that, when unsupervised, the younger waitresses would immediately remove their bowties, whereas the older waitresses would not. Because not all—or even most—of the women removed the tie, it is not likely that the younger waitresses removed it out of physical discomfort. This phenomenon indicates instead that the bowtie held some significance for the younger women waitresses, conscious or not. I would speculate that the subservience and low prestige indicated by an artifact such as a bowtie was managed differently by younger and older waitresses. Management of such labor and gender prestige differentials may be due in part to individuals' ages and eras of gender and labor socialization.

Waitresses also distanced themselves from their low-prestige labor positions through their attitudinal presentations. Consider, for example, the previous discussion wherein a man customer alluded to what my version of appropriate and acceptable gender display might mean (“You’re all sparkly! Leftover from work last night?”). My impertinent response helped me to regain control of the waitress-patron interaction, while simultaneously preventing him from lumping my low-prestige table-service position in with other, lower prestige service occupations.

While Family Restaurant waitresses were able to use normative gender presentations to accomplish their work goals (conformity) and had license to alter their presentation to distance themselves from servility, Concept Restaurant servers would do normative gender to resist standardization. Oftentimes, decorative printed socks in a color other than black would become visible as the server knelt down to perform some task. Servers attempted to wear more stylish belts of embossed leather or decorated with silver metal studs, which were very quickly identified as a wardrobe violation. Many women Concept Restaurant servers would attempt to leave the second button of their safari shirt undone while working; this was one button more than the restaurant permitted. Candace attempted to tailor her safari shirt to fit her own petite frame because she was “swimming in [an] extra-small” and was promptly forced to purchase a new one. Upon clocking out, practically every woman server would immediately free her hair and remove her safari shirt, revealing some form of undershirt beneath. The presence of the undershirt allowed the server to loiter in the restaurant, be seen by patrons and coworkers, and leave the restaurant out of an androgynous server presentation. Each of these instances, regardless of their recalcitrance, is a small yet significant attempt to convey the message that there is a gendered person beneath the work ensemble.

In another example, an interesting sort of ritual phenomenon began occurring at the Concept Restaurant. Servers would often enter the restroom at the beginning of a shift to adjust their work uniform or hair. If at least two servers were present, there would inevitably be a sarcastic discussion about how nice they looked, punctuated with compliments such as “You look so good tonight!” Servers also discussed how flattering their safari shirts were with sarcastic expressions, such as “That’s the cutest shirt! Where did you get it?” and how attractive the safari shirt made them feel with “I think I’m gonna wear this out [after work] tonight.” This mocking of their presented selves in Concept Restaurant attire seemed to be a reaction to the lack of ability they had to alter their physically unflattering server presentations. Through a description of that which rendered them “androgynous” entities—a *man*’s safari shirt—as feminine or sexy, these repetitious restroom exchanges imply that the Concept Restaurant employees desired some form of distance from their standardized “server” selves.

I observed one very unique and interesting example of resistance through conformity during my observations at the Concept Restaurant. Dominique wore the name tag “Sam” for several shifts at the Concept Restaurant before being told by management to wear only her correct attribution. During Dominique’s foray into “Sam,” there were six total employees actually named Sam, or an iteration of Sam, such as Sammy, Samuel, or Samantha, working at the Concept Restaurant. Two were women and four were men. Dominique attempted to veil her easily identifiable name with what had (inadvertently) become the Concept Restaurant’s standardized employee attribution. In this example, attempting to standardize oneself even further was done as a form of resistance. Not only was Dominique presented in as androgynous a physical manner as possible via her uniform, she attempted to blend further into the standardized landscape of the Concept Restaurant by becoming just another androgynously attributed “Sam.” Regardless of this one ironic exception, successful, normative gender is done by women servers in the standardized Concept Restaurant as a form of resistance and thus without conformity.

## **Conclusion: Doing Gender as Resistance**

As was previously discussed, gender can be done in the workplace as long as it is done in a manner that reflects the ideologies and conceptualizations commonly affiliated with the workplace itself (Leidner 1993). Based on Leidner’s findings, presentation of a feminized version of gender is to be

expected of persons working in notoriously feminized jobs, such as table service. Prior work has suggested that persons do gender under the guiding praxes of emphasized femininities and hegemonic masculinities. With these versions of gender as guides, employers and labor institutions permit varying amounts of opportunity for employees to do normatively appropriate and acceptable gender in the workplace. The data from the Family Restaurant exemplify yet another illustration of this social phenomenon.

Because of the rationalization and standardization of venues such as the Concept Restaurant, a very different version of gender is expected in some workplaces, and the ideological compulsion to do an androgynous, degendered version of gender presents an interesting situation wherein a new use for doing normatively appropriate and acceptable gender performance is revealed. As my observations have shown, a degendered version of gender is expected from standardized and routinized Concept Restaurant women servers (the man's safari shirt notwithstanding). In venues such as the Concept Restaurant, normatively appropriate and acceptable versions of gender become recalcitrant, and engaging them becomes a method of resistance and nonconformity. By juxtaposing the Family and Concept Restaurants' allowances and regulations of gender performativity, the possibility for any gendered performance tactic—such as wearing body glitter—to become an act of conformity or an act of resistance depending on the workplace environment is vividly illustrated.

Doing normative versions of gender in a standardized and routinized workplace such as the Concept Restaurant relates to Lorraine de Volvo's (2003) conceptualization of "microresistance." According to de Volvo (2003), acts of microresistance are virtually imperceptible acts of workplace recalcitrance done in opposition to customer and workplace devaluation of one's self and one's labor. This work has shown doing gender as a form of resistance and also as an iteration of microresistance. Although doing gender at the microresistance level may be a useful tactic for individual persons to resist conformity, standardization, and routinization, it is unclear if doing gendered microresistance may aid society in the resistance of conformity, standardization, and routinization. Although the answer to that puzzle is beyond the scope of this project, as routinization and standardization become increasingly prevalent in society, it will be interesting to consider the possibility of doing gender as a wider reaching tactic of nonconformity and resistance.

Considering the spread of standardization, routinization, and McDonaldization into all aspects of culture (Leidner 1993; Ritzer 2000), the relevance of gender as a mode of nonconformity becomes clear. This work reveals a

presentation tactic that may initially be overlooked or read as social conformity to be a subversive method of asserting individual identity and personhood. Moreover, although only women workers doing normative gender as resistance were discussed here, this work opens the door for future exploration of other persons, classes, races, ages, and identity orientations doing normative gender as a method of resistance.

## Notes

1. This research was conducted in Los Angeles County, California. According to the United States Census, there were 26,536 total female waitresses working in Los Angeles County in 2000. Of these women, 11,604 were white and non-Hispanic.

2. The names of the settings, waitresses, servers, and managers have all been changed.

3. Some corporate-owned chain restaurants refer to their wait staff as “waitresses.” See Greta Foff Paules (1991) for a discussion of the “Route” restaurant or Meika Loe’s (1996) discussion of “Bazooms,” both of which refer to their all-woman wait staffs as “waitresses,” for examples.

4. The “Service Time Line” is a timetable included on page 29 of the *Server Training Manual*. It outlines the precise projected timing of a patron’s dining experience. For example, the table should be greeted thirty seconds after it had been sat, lunch should be delivered fourteen minutes and thirty seconds after the table had been sat (during dinner, nineteen minutes and thirty seconds were permitted), and dessert should be “consumed” after forty-one minutes and thirty seconds. Servers were responsible for managing their tables within the timeline’s constraints.

5. “Regular” customers dine consistently in a restaurant and often ask to be served by a particular waitress. Waitresses earn a large portion of their money through the cultivation of regulars, who often overtip. Although corporate restaurants often have regular, consistent diners (Ritzer 2000), these restaurant dining regulars are not the same as a waitress’s personal regulars.

6. This percentage was determined through a calculation of my own hourly wages and tips throughout the course of this study. At the Family Restaurant, tips made up approximately 80 percent of my income; at the Concept Restaurant, tips made up approximately 70 percent.

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