Spilling the ‘tea’ on the grocery sector: Situating the epistemological and ontological precarities of grocery work in Metro Vancouver during the global pandemic

by

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B.A. (Hons. with Distinction, Sociology), Simon Fraser University, 2018

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2022

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Abstract

This study investigates the material conditions of frontline grocery work in Metro Vancouver during the first year of the global pandemic, and contrasts the everyday experiences of grocery workers with the discursive production of essential workers as 'heroes' in the corporate media. I argue that the political response to the pandemic was a corollary of the continued interaction between the neoliberal project which exploits crisis to transfer wealth upward, and the settler colonial project which utilizes racial capitalism to structure the divisions between types of labour. Finally, drawing upon theories which span across the tradition of Black studies and critical feminist geography, I argue that the biopolitical nature of the BC Provincial government response to the pandemic exposed those marked as less grievable to necrotic conditions, and served as a warning of the further deterioration of conditions for the most vulnerable in the event of future crises.

Keywords: Precarious labour; Pandemic; Racial capitalism; Affective labour; Biopolitics

Dedication

In loving memory of Brian and Renee Downie.

Acknowledgements

This endeavor would not have been possible without my Supervisor, Dr. Kendra Strauss. I am grateful for her constant support, patience, invaluable insight, encouragement, generosity, and for her thoughtful feedback throughout this process. I am extremely grateful to my Committee Member, Dr. Travers for their generosity, for getting me hooked on social theory, for seeing value in my work, and for suggesting that graduate school was a possibility. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Pamela Stern for her guidance and support during the early stages of this process. I would also like to recognize SSHRC, CRIMT, and The Department of Sociology and Anthropology for the funding opportunities awarded to me during this research.

Words cannot express my gratitude to my research participants for generously volunteering their time, and for sharing their experiences with me.

I am thankful to my brother, Kevin Keil for his endless support and encouragement. I am also extremely grateful to my parents, Antoinette Keil and Reginald Keil for their love, and for encouraging my love of learning from an early age.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my dear friends for their support, including Alex Werier and Shaughna Cooper for their encouragement during this entire process. Special thanks to my dear friends and former co-conspirators at work over the years, including Gary Devion and Julie Jung. I would also like to recognize the unforgettable Randy and Sam for their support.

Finally, I could not have undertaken this journey without the unwavering support of my partner Glen Downie, and am grateful for his love, kindness, and patience, without which, returning to school would not have been a possibility. Big thanks as well to my beloved Kit for being a good dog.

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List of Acronyms

CERB	Canada Emergency Response Benefit.
CLAC	Christian Labour Association of Canada
COVID-19	Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV2
ESA	Employment Standards Act
IRS	Internal Responsibility System
MWAC	Migrant Workers Alliance for Change
NFB	National Film Board
NSCI	National Strategy for Critical Infrastructure
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PWD	Persons With Disabilities
SFU	Simon Fraser University
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers Union
WCB	Workers Compensation Board
WIB	Wartime Information Board

Chapter 1.

Introduction

On March 17, 2020, the BC Government declared a provincial state of emergency to support the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic, and shortly thereafter, grocery stores were announced as being part of the critical infrastructure providers which would remain open through the pandemic (Government of BC, 2020). As a result, frontline grocery workers became designated as essential workers, and have continued to work as the pandemic persisted, and conditions continued to worsen. Globally, COVID-19 has become a "mass disabling event resulting in millions of people adjusting to new and long-term conditions", and in Canada, has resulted in a decline in life expectancy rates in 2020 and 2021 (Ciciurkaite et al., 2021, p. 2; Dion, 2021, p. 6). While the pandemic resulted in increased relational precarity and uncertainty for most, for workers designated as essential in employment relationships already known to be precarious, conditions worsened further (Rose, 2021, p. 213; Cook et al., 2020, p. 74-75; Garcia et al., 2020, p. e77).

In an interview with *The Nation*, Butler discussed the ways in which racialized minorities in the United States have been "more easily left to die than others" during the pandemic. They argue that,

> death is a known and acceptable consequence of a policy that has the recovery of economic growth and profit as its explicit aim. I would not call this move passive. And it is something more than complicity with someone else's violence. It is rather, a eugenic calculation that depends on dispensable and replaceable workers to realize its aim of revitalizing a productive industry in the midst of pandemic. There is a good chance that it may become normalized in the course of restarting the economy (Wade, 2020).

Butler (2004) contends that "governmentality designates a model for conceptualizing power in its diffuse and multivalent operations, focusing on the management of populations, and operating through state and non-state institutions and discourses" (p. xii). With this said, the state, which includes *inter alia*, governments at federal and provincial levels, as well as the corporations involved in the provision of critical infrastructure, have dominion over the politics of life and death. Moreover, according to

Rodney (1973), “if there is no class stratification in a society, it follows that there is no state, because the state arose as an instrument to be used by a particular class to control the rest of society in its own interests” (p. 76-77). With this said, the social and political response to the pandemic by the provincial BC government was designed to exploit vulnerable populations for the benefit of a small few.

During the first month of the pandemic new forms of rhetoric emerged which may have served to mask that some groups had been rendered disposable in state responses to the pandemic. “We’re all in this together” was a ubiquitously used aphorism “mysteriously popping up on posters” across Toronto in the early days of the pandemic (Pelley, 2020). In British Columbia, health minister Adrian Dix offered the sentiment to his constituents, “this is really for all of us, as individuals and as a society, the greatest fight of our time” (Pelley, 2020). Former Governor Mario Cuomo assured New Yorkers that “we are all in this together” (McIvor et al., 2020, p. 173-174). According to McIvor et al. (2020), despite the ways “ordinary citizens have offered mutual aid and support to one another amidst the pandemic”, the idea that COVID-19 served as an ‘equalizer’ is a “common trope in times of disaster, natural and otherwise”, and “rings hollow in the face of the glaring inequalities of race and mourning in pandemic times” (p. 173-174). Likewise, Cook et al. (2020) argue that “we’re not ‘in it together’”, given that many of the catchphrases which became recognizable during the early stages of the pandemic overlooked the hierarchies and historically produced inequalities in terms of access to resources, and therefore, we do not ‘all’ experience the pandemic equally (p. 77). In other words, these narratives were strategic in that they obfuscated the inequalities which directly impacted risk and vulnerability to COVID-19, and equivocated elements of state responses which did not offer equal protection for all. Consequently, COVID-19 has killed over 46,000 people in Canada (Government of Canada, 2022a).

The pandemic revealed vulnerable populations locally within long term care facilities, those with disabilities and long term illness, and those exposed to the drug toxicity crisis (Loreto, 2020, May 29; Hansen & Sampert, 2022; Government of Canada, 2022b). Globally this unequal distribution of vulnerability has been exposed through the ways in which vaccine apartheid has impacted continental Africa, through unprecedented heat waves across India and Pakistan, and the economic collapse in Sri Lanka amidst shortages of food, fuel and medicines (Ivanova, 2021; Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2022; Partington, 2022). Moreover, histories shaped by white supremacy and

capitalist logic continue to create eugenic policies which place those whose lives are not included as “grievable”, such as those working in precarious labour, into “zones of slow death” (Butler, 2004, p. xiv; Mbembe 2019 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1414).

Ordering principles such as class and race shaped vulnerability during the global pandemic. Rose (2021) theorizes that three classes of workers have emerged during the early stages of the pandemic: the professional class which has transitioned to working online, those who have lost their employment, and “essential” workers “who remain in hazardous, exposed, frontline working conditions” (p. 213). Rose (2020) argues,

> The pandemic and our social and political response to it highlights an unjust and inequitable hierarchy of labor in late-stage capitalism. As some aspects of the economy have wound down or even ground to a halt, some types of labor are more indispensable than others. Most obviously, there are the frontline ‘essential’ workers who have not stopped working during the pandemic, and have not lost their jobs or shifted their functions to an online environment (p. 212).

While the pandemic has laid bare the ruptures within the working class, these ruptures have long existed in Canada.

The mutually constitutive violence produced through the convergence of race, citizenship and class has resulted in an unequal distribution of risk and vulnerability. In Canada, social, political and economic systems have produced a stratified labour force, resulting in a class of disposable workers. In research conducted years before the pandemic, Premji et al. (2014) found that in Toronto “irrespective of education level and professional work experience, immigrant women from racialized backgrounds are getting pushed into gendered occupations marked by low wages and high levels of precarity” (p. 137). Moreover, racialized immigrant women were found to be a “’captive labour force’ whereby they are ‘essential’ for the effective functioning of the labour market yet are treated as ‘disposable’” (Ng, 2002 in Premji, 2014, p. 126). Despite this, racial inequalities are often rendered invisible. White dominance is maintained in Canada through ‘post-racial’ politics wherein the success of some racialized individuals are used to exemplify a properly working meritocracy, and therefore signal the end of racial inequalities (Ku et al., 2018, p. 293). Having said that, neoliberal labour restructuring deepened class divisions, produced a low paid, racialized labour force and created a model of labour flexibility which strengthened the power of employers in relation to

workers (Thomas, 2010, p. 69, 77). Moreover, nation building practices and discourses of multiculturalism continue to obfuscate the ordering systems which marginalize racialized groups, neutralize anti-racist struggles, and continue to be a roadblock for working class women of colour seeking to improve their economic conditions (Thobani, 2007, p. 159). Long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada was already equipped with a low wage, racialized work force to perform the labour designated as essential, and maintain the interests of dominant groups. Given the continued impact of neoliberalism and settler colonialism on the labour market, I would argue that the social and political responses to the pandemic across Canada were far from unexpected.

According to a group of German scholars, during the pandemic "some socially necessary types of work became visible" while concomitantly "other vitally important types of worker are … rendered invisible" (Montag, 2020, p. 11 in Cook et al., 2020, p. 75). While other workers within the food supply chains such as those in the meat packing industry and migrant agricultural workers remained invisible, front line grocery workers were conferred a temporary visibility and recognized in some cities with a nightly '7pm cheer' which began as support for frontline healthcare workers, but expanded to include others designated as essential, including grocery workers (Kitteringham, 2020). During the first wave of COVID-19, workers at the larger Canadian grocery chains were recognized with a premium pay structure, commonly referenced by those with whom I spoke with as 'hero pay'. Despite the idea that the new pay structure could also be considered 'hazard pay' considering the increased risks during this time, grocers denied this designation (Chase, 2020a).

By June of 2020, the three largest corporate grocers in Canada, Sobeys, Loblaw and Metro, simultaneously ended the wage premiums, resulting in criticism from the corporate media, given the optics of their increased profits during the pandemic. Increased profits was an understatement. In 2020 Canada's twenty wealthiest billionaires grew their wealth collectively by $37 billion (Hemingway & Rozworski, 2020).

> At the same time as billionaires like Loblaws owner Galen Weston have seen their wealth balloon, front-line workers stocking shelves and scanning groceries at his stores have continued to risk their health and that of their loved ones by coming into work (Ibid).

Also joining Loblaw's owner on the list of wealthiest billionaires was BC based, Save-On-Foods owner Jim Pattison, another capitalist who ended hero pay for employees a few

months after the pandemic began. The decision on the part of the larger grocers to end paying workers 'hero pay' was investigated by a House of Commons industry committee in July of 2020 to determine if collusion was involved. Their recommendations included adding wage fixing and no-poach agreements to the list of criminal offenses, and subsequently, the Competition Act was amended in Bill C-19 to include these changes which will take effect in June of 2023 (Campbell, 2022; Government of Canada, 2022c).

The Weston family have had a sinister past with labour locally, across Canada and globally, where they have been known to exploit low-wage labour in other countries such as apartheid South Africa where W. Garfield Weston "opposed the extension of voting rights to [Black] South Africans", and in Bangladesh where Rana Plaza, a factory manufacturing Loblaw's Joe Fresh clothing brand, collapsed, killing more than a thousand workers (Thompson, 2021). Not only did they eliminate hero pay while BC was still in a state of emergency, but Galen Weston was among a trio of wealthy capitalists who authored a public letter to the Business Council of Canada demanding cuts to COVID-19 emergency support, arguing that "elevating the unemployed above abject poverty is unacceptable because it may mean that 'employees lack the incentives to return' to low-wage work" (Thompson, 2021).

Like the Weston family, Jim Pattison has a history of egregious labour practices including employing Indigenous workers and other racialized minorities to work under precarious, unpredictable conditions at OceanSide canneries in Prince Rupert, eventually closing and eliminating jobs in order to operate under lower costs elsewhere (Morgan, 2001, p. 84; November 19; Bennett, 2015). When questioned about "cutting hazard pay", Pattison was quoted as saying "I'm not involved", explaining that, "we own and finance the company, but we don't run them" (Billionaire owner of western Canadian supermarket chain suggests he's powerless to stop worker pay cut, 2020). According to the article, the current president of the company reports to former BC premier, Glen Clark, and Anthony Schein, the director of shareholder advocacy at the Shareholder Association for Research and Education, shared,

> Mr. Pattison may not have direct responsibility over the operations in the companies he owns, but he certainly is in a position of influence and leadership (Ibid).

Exemplary of the relationship between the state and capitalist class, prior to the ban in BC on corporate donations, “Pattison’s companies have made hundreds of thousands of dollars in corporate donations to the provincial BC Liberals” (Ibid). With this said, the investigation into collusion and the resulting amendments to the Competition Act might suggest that these corporations are *not* operating what might be considered ‘grocery cartels’. Despite this, the pandemic brought visibility to the small group of Canadian oligarchs who have their boots on the necks of both consumers and workers.

The social and political responses to the global pandemic have produced a class of workers which has undergone a further precaritization of working conditions in Canada. While politicians relied on catchy slogans which ostensibly represented the collective strategies required under crisis conditions, the pandemic exposed class divisions, and intensified the inequalities which make some groups more vulnerable than others both globally and locally. Grocery workers have always performed essential labour, but when grocery stores were categorized as essential, they continued to work through the pandemic without adequate pay or benefits. Working in close proximity to the public increased their vulnerability to the virus, yet despite a newfound visibility which valourized them as heroes in the public sphere, their employers denied them hazard pay and health benefits throughout the pandemic. To understand the ways in which grocery workers experienced a further precaritization of conditions during the pandemic the next chapter reviews literature relevant to retail work in Canada, provides an analytical framework to understand why some groups experienced more vulnerability during the pandemic than others, outlines my research questions, and concludes with an explanation of the methodology I used to answer my research questions.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review, Conceptual Framework, and Methodology

2.1. Literature Review

Situating my research within the existing scholarly literature involved examining scholarship which explored the type of labour performed in retail environments, the ways in which neoliberalism operates as a class project in Canada, and the relationship between racial capitalism and crisis. To answer my research questions and to understand the historical, social, and political context of frontline grocery work in Canada this literature review will be divided into sections discussing: 1) affective labour, 2) neoliberalism, and 3) racial capitalism. I found these concepts to be helpful in understanding the expectations surrounding service work, which conditions may have been the status quo for retail workers prior to the pandemic, the root causes for the worsening conditions over the past decades, and the underlying reasons for the disproportionate numbers of racialized essential workers working under precarious conditions during the pandemic.

2.1.1. Affective Labour

My research explores the ways in which frontline workers navigated interactions with customers in grocery stores during the global pandemic. In my research I use the terms 'emotional' and 'affective' labour interchangeably, and focus on their role within the context of paid employment. The literature on emotional or affective labour not only served as a model through which to understand the ways power operates in work spaces, but it also revealed methods workers used to mediate the expectations surrounding this type of labour. This section outlines the general theories of commodified emotion, it explores literature about performance and identity, it describes the ways in which workers cope with and subvert the expectations of affective labour, and finally, delves into literature which provides relevant concepts about performing affective labour under the existing power dynamics within a settler state.

In her germinal work about the ways in which the airline industry commodifies emotion, Hochschild (2012) conceptualizes emotional labour as a form of self-management which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). Hochschild's book is appropriately titled, "The Managed Heart", and outlines the ways in which emotion is sold as labour, shaped by corporate manuals, and performed under conditions where an inherent asymmetry of power exists between the customer and the service worker (p. 19). Hofmann and Moreno (2016) delve into the ways in which intimacy has become integrated into labour as a way to increase the value of labour and argue that,

> selling aspects of "the self," such as personal attributes, intimacy, sexuality, emotions, affect, creative energy or bodily substances is increasingly common in contemporary capitalism. Workers continually renegotiate access to their bodies, and the authenticity of emotions and personal identities at work (p. 1, 10).

To that end, Kenny (2005) contends that in retail arenas, service workers mediate the consumptive experience through affective relations (p. 200).

Normative scripts guide behaviour in the workplace as workers are encouraged to comport themselves, and manage their behaviour to fit into organizational cultures. Gregson and Rose (2000) describe service work as being a performance, wherein workers comport themselves in various ways to meet expectations, often using a script in their interactions (p. 436). Weeks (2011) asserts that gender is put to work in the workplace when workers use gendered codes and scripts to negotiate relationships with coworkers, bosses or customers (p. 9). Wright's (2005) work on frontline workers in book stores reveals that service workers' engagement in the performance of their working role has detrimental consequences to their psychic wellbeing and implicates the emotional selves of workers in the pursuit of corporate profit-oriented goals (p. 298).

The workplace serves as a site of contestation wherein scripts are not simply imposed on workers during training, but challenged through performance and identity. Apart from the company training manuals which guide emotional labour, Hochschild (2012) discusses 'feeling rules', which she defines as a "script or a moral stance", and operates as a technology for governance (p. 56). Building upon Hochschild's work, Tolich's (1993) research about supermarket employees suggests that emotional labour can become estranged from the worker when it is sold for a wage, but on the other hand,

can also alleviate a clerk's alienation (Tolich, 1993, p. 377-378). Adkins and Lury (1999) argue that a person's self-identity is a key site of contestation wherein gendered workers' identities are produced through relation to production, and are subject to appropriation (p. 604).

Although capitalism is inherently exploitative, workers manage the expected commodification of their embodied labour in varied ways. For instance, resistance to imposed rationalization can manifest through a reframing of performance and identity. Crang (1994) describes strategies workers employed to avoid managerial or customer control through avoidance, parody, and adaptation (p. 694). In Romero's (1983) research about domestic workers, she demonstrates how individual workers resisted against poor treatment by setting boundaries like not living with their employer, moving towards a flat rate, and focusing on the worker-employer relationship in relation to capitalism, rather than the exploitative domestic-mistress relationship (p.161). Affective labour exists within the confines of a worker-employer relationship, and while power can be located within that relationship, it is also shaped by broader social systems emblematic of settler colonial societies.

As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the unequal power dynamic between worker and consumer was intensified during the pandemic when some customers violated the policies set in place to protect workers in indoor spaces. Thus, also relevant to affective labour in Canada is literature about the ways in which power operates in spaces under settler colonialism. Grocery stores are spaces situated on stolen land, and as Mackey (2014) argues, the entitlement of settlers to land claims has become legitimized through law, and embedded into the 'common sense' of the broader dominant culture (Mackey, 2014, p. 238). This common sense is characteristic of the settler imaginary within which resides an attachment to the existing power relations. The unequal power dynamics found in precarious work exist under a social, economic and political hierarchy ordered by white supremacy, imperialism and a capitalist cisheteropatriarchy. Harris (1993) argues that property rights in America are "intertwined with, and conflated with race" (p. 1714).

> Slavery linked the privilege of whites to the subordination of Blacks through a legal regime that attempted the conversion of Blacks into objects of property. Similarly, the settlement and seizure of Native American land supported white privilege through a system of property rights in land in

> which the "race" of the Native Americans rendered their first possession rights invisible and justified conquest. This racist formulation embedded the fact of white privilege into the very definition of property, marking another stage in the evolution of the property interest in whiteness. Possession – the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property – was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness – that which whites alone possess – is valuable and is property (Harris, 1993, p. 1722).

Whiteness and property are both characteristic of the right to exclude, and through the affordance of legal status to whiteness "converted an aspect of identity into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest" (Harris, 1993, p. 1714, 1725). Moreton-Robinson (2015) builds upon Harris's scholarship through the concept of 'possessive logics' to describe the naturalization of whiteness in settler colonial Australia, "operationalized within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions" (p. xii). Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues that from the sixteenth century, race and gender ordered humans according to "owning property, becoming propertyless, and being property"(p. xxiii).

> Knowledge and power are produced in and through these concepts in relation to possession. You cannot dominate without seeking to possess the dominated. You cannot exclude unless you assume you already own. Classification therefore ascribes value and identification, which manifest in racial markers like blood quantum and skin color (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xxiv)

Moreton-Robinson (2015) suggests that under white possessive logics, behaviours such as a lack of respect paid to personal space is indicative of Indigenous people "not worthy of being in a professional domain controlled and owned by white people" (p. 100). Power conferred by whiteness results in an entitlement towards spaces and over the bodies of those relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy as 'propertyless', or 'being property'. This can be reflected in exclusion from spaces believed to be within the domain of white people, or of behaviour legitimizing white power and control. With this in mind, the pandemic elevated the grocery store as one of the few remaining indoor sites of in-person social engagement, and it could be said that these spaces were not in any way neutral, but shaped by histories of domination and control.

Retail workers in grocery stores designated as essential continued to interact with customers in socially distanced ways, while utilizing PPE and other safety protocols

to protect themselves from contracting and spreading the virus. The scholarship on affective labour provided insight on the tensions which arose when workers renegotiated access to their bodies through asserting their bodily integrity, under highly unequal relationships between workers and consumers in retail settings.

2.1.2. Neoliberalism

To understand the ways in which neoliberalism operates in Canada, I sought out literature which explained its basic tenets, its role as a class project which directs wealth upwards, the ways in which it further stratifies society resulting in more precarity, and its relationship with crises. Neoliberalism is an assemblage of philosophy, practice, policy, and economic principles. According to Harvey (2007), "the corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets have been signal features of the neoliberal project" and "it's primary aim has been to open up new fields for capital accumulation in domains formerly regarded off-limits to the calculus of profitability" (p. 36). Peck and Tickell (2002) argue that neoliberalism is contradictory, and "exists in historically and geographically contingent forms", and is "neither monolithic in form nor universal in effect" (p. 383-384). Above all, neoliberal discourse naturalizes the market as neutral and prescribes a single vision of responsible citizenry which appears self-evident because of the ways in which it is backed globally by all-encompassing variegated power relations (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 382).

Neoliberalism is a class project, and according to Harvey (2007), its main corollary has been "redistributive rather than generative", in that it seeks ways "to transfer assets and channel wealth and income either from the mass of the population towards the upper classes or from vulnerable to rich countries" (p. 34). With this said, Broad and Antony (2011) contend that neoliberalism ostensibly operates under the premise that trickle down wealth will result in the poor becoming richer while the wealth of the rich will remain preserved, while it more closely resembles an unrestrictive way of distributing inequality, viewed by neoliberals as a more equitable method of resource allocation than government intervention (p. 21; Braedley & Luxton, 2010, p. 8). The foundation of neoliberal philosophy was predicated on the idea that individual freedom from coercion and servitude was linked to capitalist accumulation, and arose from the freedom to optimize one's wealth and desires (Braedley & Luxton, 2010, p. 7). Having said that, neoliberalism's true master is revealed when governments prioritize the

interests of corporations when they require a financial bail-out, and when industry sectors request a cheaper labour force to work under poor conditions (Harvey, 2007, p. 39; Macklin, 2002, p. 232-233; Luxton, 2010, p. 166). Braedley and Luxton point out that given that the machine of capitalist accumulation has not halted while wages have declined is a flaw in the neoliberal rhetoric (Braedley & Luxton, p. 18-19). Moreover, despite the privileging of the capitalist elite, financial incentives and disincentives are not perceived as a mode of direct control while government interventions to assist individuals are viewed by neoliberal advocates to be intrusive. Fundamentally, government interventions that serve the worker and the collective good but prevent the free flow of capital, are looked upon as being "coercive and discriminatory" (Braedley & Luxton, 2010, p. 9).

The literature identifies neoliberalism as a zero-sum game which privileges the powerful who already benefit from the spoils of capitalism. Broad and Antony (2011) describe neoliberalism as, "capitalism with a new face", in support of an unfettered free market capitalist economy regardless of social justice concerns (p. 17-20). Braedley and Luxton (2010) argue that neoliberalism was devised in part to counter equality demands of feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and socialist concerns to end class exploitation, and according to Connell (2010), neoliberalism is hostile to social justice measures like Indigenous land rights, or any contested endeavours incompatible with commodification (p. 12; p. 34). As Armstrong (2010) posits, neoliberalism is a political doctrine which serves to protect certain interests, not an economic system which will distribute resources fairly (p. 184).

Neoliberalism is a long term historical project, which serves to further the interests of a small few while deepening existing class, race, and gender inequalities (Connell, 2010, p. 33; Thomas, 2010, p. 68). Braedley & Luxton (2010) argue that neoliberalism is apparent through the ways in which the white working class in Canada is enabled by the exploitation of workers all over the world, and through policy which favours the employer and ensures that labour market needs are met with the lowest waged workers possible whether that be in Canada, or in other countries wherein labour is cheaper and more flexible (p. 17). In a similar fashion, immigration policy is used to procure and exploit workers from other countries when employers are unable to attract Canadians due to low wages and unsatisfactory working conditions (Macklin, 2002, p. 232-233). This literature indicates that neoliberal governments will seek to exploit foreign

workers who will work for lower wages, and under less than desirable working conditions, while at the same time devaluing the labour of all workers. In short, neoliberalism prioritizes the needs of employers over the needs of workers.

Given that my research was conducted during a global pandemic, I explored scholarship to understand the relationship between neoliberalism and crisis. Klein (2007) links capital and crisis using Milton Friedman's concept of shock therapy whereby shock, or crisis is to be exploited as an opportunity to impose neoliberal principles (p. 6-7). Condon (2021) suggests that neoliberalism served as an existing crisis, and theorizes that COVID-19 provided a test-run for inevitable future climate crisis conditions, serving to assess both the "systemic resilience of the neoliberal institutional order without fundamentally altering its central principles", as well as a test of "global solidarity, collective responsibility, and crisis ethics" (p. 5813). Mezzadri (2022) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic is best understood as "a systemic crisis of social reproduction – that is a crisis of capitalist life", not a crisis of neoliberal capitalism (p. 380). With that said, she asserts that although it is not a crisis of neoliberal capitalism, "it represents both its outcome and the deepening of its logics", which should prompt questions about aspects of the crisis, and who is impacted (p. 380).

2.1.3. Racial Capitalism

Like neoliberalism, the concept of racial capitalism long predates the pandemic. Using Cedric Robinson's framework, Burden-Stelly (2020) sheds light on the historical roots of white supremacy and argues that "it was not capitalism that shaped modern European civilization, but rather European civilization that gave capitalism its world-historical and sociopolitical character" (p. 9). Kundnani's (2021) scholarship seems to call into question Harvey's underemphasis of race, and its role within capitalist logic. He argues that the "seemingly racially neutral" neoliberalism "reorganizes and reconstitutes racism to produce a new, integrated structure specific to the historical moment of neoliberalism and dependent on a distinctive and substantial intellectual and political hinterland" (p. 52). He furthers his argument using the ideological contradiction of the neoliberal project wherein, "the globalization of neoliberal rule produces masses of surplus populations who are of no value to neoliberal markets and must therefore be policed by an imperialist violence that neoliberal discourse cannot acknowledge on its own terms" (p. 52-53). Kundnani's (2021) analysis looks to border regimes, mass

incarceration and imperialist violence, wherein race is a way of coding and categorizing different forms of labour under neoliberalism as “citizen and migrant, waged and ‘unexploitable’, bearers of entitlements and bare life” (p. 53). He elevates Robinson’s conceptualization of ‘racial capitalism’ wherein “each period of the capitalist world system finds a distinctive way to reify regional and cultural differences into races in order to structure social divisions between different forms of labour” (p. 63). Moreover, he challenges Harvey’s term of ‘disposable workers’, noting that it is incomplete given that the disposability is in reference to a short term labour relationship, which is true for some workers, but not for the surplus populations not engaged with wage labour (p. 64).

During the pandemic and under the neoliberal regime, frontline grocery workers were among those manifested as being surplus subjects, whom Mezzadri (2022) calls, the ‘indispensably disposable’ (390). She names three types of surplus lives produced in the pandemic including: 1) racialized subjects overexposed to death, as Mbembe conceptualized in his theory of necropolitics, a key feature of racial capitalism across the world, 2) the reserve army of the pandemic, celebrated as essential, but whose “reproductive role in the neoliberal regime is embedded in disposability”, and 3) lives constructed as having little value whose survival is shaped by Malthusian rationale, or as being redundant, not central to paid work nor unpaid work of social reproduction, including disabled people, sex workers, migrants, and members of the trans community (p. 389-390).

The literature indicates that the labour market relegates racialized people into work that tends to be more dangerous, precarious and characterized by lower wages. Within a Canadian settler state, systemic inequalities produced by a history of colonialism and imperialism has resulted in a system which is socially ordered by race, class and governed by hegemonic whiteness (Braedley & Luxton, 2010, p. 16). According to Premji et al. (2014), it is racialized immigrant women in Canada who experience the worst labour market conditions, including higher rates of underemployment and unemployment, and are “over-represented in low-paid, low-skill jobs characterized by high risk and precarity” (p. 124). The precarity produced by the pandemic was distributed in uneven ways which revealed how race is inextricably imbricated with capitalism.

Robertson's concept of racial capitalism not only serves to explain the racially segmented labour market in Canada, but it puts race on the forefront in the analysis of the unequal ways in which social actors experienced the pandemic. In a settler colonial state workers performing affective labour are not only subject to the unequal power dynamic implicit within the customer-worker relationship, but to the broader structure of white supremacy, and the ways in which it has shaped class dynamics. If neoliberal principles are imposed during crisis, and if white supremacy is what "gave capitalism its world-historical and sociopolitical character", then it is not only class, but race and citizenship which are the driving factors of the ways in which actors experienced the pandemic (Ibid). Thus, race as a system of social organization is highly imbricated with precarity in Canada. The next section will build upon the concepts presented in the literature and explore theories to further understand the overlapping matrices of race and class which produced the conditions which not only existed prior to the pandemic, but continue to persist to further stratify society during the pandemic.

2.2. Analytical Framework

The concepts of affective labour, neoliberalism, racial capitalism, entitlement and possession each have a relationship to the precarious conditions which emerged during the pandemic, as well as to the precarity which has long characterized retail work in Canada. Those performing the affective labour required of service work have not only experienced a degradation of working conditions due to the dominance of neoliberalism in Canada, but have been subject to increased risk due to the face to face nature of the work upon the onset of the pandemic. Moreover, in settler states, white supremacy not only shapes the ways in which labour markets are stratified by race, but the entitlement to spaces like grocery stores and access to the bodies of those performing affective labour. Thus, integral to the understanding of the conditions produced by the pandemic for essential workers in retail, are lenses through which to view precarity and the ways in which white supremacy operates within a settler state to increase precarity for racialized workers.

I chose the theory included in this analytic framework to help me untangle and understand the interplay between capital, imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and the historical context within Canada which have produced the conditions which resulted in an unequal distribution of vulnerability for workers during the pandemic. While

some workers were afforded visibility within the public sphere, others were rendered invisible. This visibility revealed that some workers were left to die. Grocery workers were among the essential workers who continued to work amidst the uncertainty of a new virus, despite the precarious conditions which included limited protections, poor compensation and a lack of benefits. These conceptual frameworks span across traditions of postmodernist feminism, cultural theory, Black studies, and critical feminist geography. This section will be organized as follows. First, I examine two conceptualizations of precarity which form the analytical bedrock of my research, second, I explore Wynter's (2003) theorization of genres of human which continues the discussion of ontological precarity, third, I look at Weheliye's (2014) theoretical design which builds upon Wynter's framework and provides a critique of biopolitics, and fourth, I examine Sandset's (2021) work which connects necropolitics to ontological precarity.

2.2.1. Precarity

Strauss (2020a) delineates two distinct approaches to precarity discussed in the literature: ontological and epistemological. Ontological precarity is conceptualized as "the inherent vulnerability of bodies and social relations, and the precariousness that results from the political construction and uneven distribution of forms of insecurity", and epistemological precarity refers to a "conceptual framework for understanding dimensions of economic restructuring and labour market change, as experienced by workers, in relation to forms of insecurity and vulnerability that emerge out of political-economic structures and relations" (p. 151). Strauss (2020a) argues, "there are problems with such neat dualisms in labour geography", and as such, I strive to demonstrate the interplay between the two in my research, given the ways in which vulnerability may engender a further precaritization of working conditions for some, which in turn can serve to produce further vulnerability (p. 151).

Given that it offers concise empirical ways in which to track conditions at work, epistemological approaches aided in my understanding that employment on the frontlines in grocery stores could be categorized as precarious prior to the pandemic, and offered a starting point under which to track further precaritization. On the other hand, ontological approaches helped me reflect on the ways in which white supremacy not only distributed risk and vulnerability unevenly during the pandemic, but its role in the existing structure of the labour market. A focus on both approaches revealed what was

omitted in the corporate media representations I reviewed during the pandemic which minimized the conditions laid bare in epistemological approaches while elevating the shared vulnerability between the subject reading the material and the subjects represented in the material.

2.2.2. Epistemological Precarity

The term 'précarité' was first credited to Bourdieu's (1963) research on the divide between permanent and casual workers in Algeria, and was subsequently used in the academy to reference poverty, rather than employment until economic restructuring resulted in the concept no longer being mutually exclusive to being poor or employed, but rather both simultaneously (Waite, 2009, p. 414). According to Waite (2009), precaritization is "the process whereby society as a whole becomes more precarious and is potentially destabilized" (p. 415). Strauss (2017) contextualizes the epistemological approach within the academy as being partially influenced by the institutionalization of the concept of precarious employment in the late 1990s, through research motivated to understand the rise of non-standard employment as opposed to the normative standard employment relationship predicated upon the male breadwinner model (p. 3). Feminist approaches challenged the standard employment relationship which privileged the patriarchal breadwinner model, and were "relational in the sense that they link labour market subordination to both the social construction of difference (social location) and identities, and to the institutionalization of hierarchies" (Strauss, 2020a, p. 151). The breadwinner model was a postwar prescription for a division of labour based upon a "male 'breadwinner' and a female housekeeper" (Cohen & Pulkingham, 2000, p. 21). Particular to this model was also the idea that women "could also serve as a supply of cheap labour, especially in the service sector" (Ursel 1992, in Cossman & Fudge, 2002, p. 12).

Strauss (2020a) emphasizes that epistemologies of precarity "carefully map, analyze and often seek to intervene in debates about regulation, rights and distributive justice" (p. 151). The concept of precarity in employment was used in Europe to mobilize workers outside of union action (Vosko et al., 2009, p. 5). Vosko et al. (2009) contend that the term "precarious employment" is suited for empirical research, can be used as a conceptual tool to "identify the extent of change, the forms of change and the varied paths of change", and conceptualize it as "paid work characterized by limited

social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill-health" (p. 2). In her research about migrant labour conditions, Waite (2009) raises a similar point and argues that the term precarity is "less useful as a descriptor of life in general and more useful when attempting to understand particular groups in society who experience precarious lives as a consequence of their labour market positions" (p. 413). In short, precarity viewed through this lens offers a framework to critique, and therefore mobilize against poor working conditions.

Goldring and Joly (2014) distinguish between two narratives which exist within the literature on precarious employment. First, precarious employment affects some groups more than others: driven by "interlocking dimensions of social location, particularly gender, racialization, ethnic minority status, education, immigration, and age" (p. 96). Second, a narrative of commonality suggests that the rise of precarious employment directly or indirectly affects everyone, and therefore, "we are all in this together" (Teelucksing and Galabuzi 2005; Fuller and Vosko 2008; Creese 2007; Noack and Vosko 2011 in Goldring & Joly, 2014, p. 96). This narrative is shaped by the literature which argues that "precarious work arrangements have become generalized due to multi-scaler processes of economic, regulatory and labour market transformation, and these processes are accompanied by changes that normalize employment insecurity as flexibility and competitiveness" (Teelucksing & Galabuzi, 2005; Fuller & Vosko 2008; Creese 2007; Noack & Vosko 2011 in Goldring & Joly, 2014, p. 96). Epistemological approaches to precarity allow for an empirical approach to assess whether conditions are improving or declining in work settings. These approaches are particularly useful in my research to identify which conditions cannot be attributed to the pandemic, and existed prior to its onset. Above all, these approaches can be used to mobilize for better working conditions.

2.2.3. Ontological Precarity

Strauss (2020a) identifies two ontological approaches to precarity which I refer to frequently in this research: through relational approaches predicated upon Butler's engagement with vulnerability and grievability, and through approaches which engage with racial capitalism (p. 151). According to Butler (2004), vulnerability is distributed in uneven ways, and "becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions" (p. 29). Their formulation of precarity explicates that "no amount of will or

wealth can eliminate the possibilities of illness or accident for a living body", and yet "precisely because each body finds itself potentially threatened by others who are, by definition, precarious as well, forms of domination follow" (Butler, 2009, p. 30, 31). As such, Butler (2009) contends that shared precarity does not lead to "reciprocal recognition", but rather to "a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives" (p. 31). Above all, what is grievable rests upon the conception of who is "normatively human", and thus, "what counts as a livable life and a grievable death" (Butler, 2004, p. xv).

Butler (2009) contends that some populations in need of protection from threats to life, such as in the case of a pandemic, are instead cast as "'lose-able', or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited" (p. 31). They propose that, "when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of 'the living'" (Butler, 2009, p. 31). Moreover, McIvor et al. (2020) examines research on the relationship between sacrifice and democracy, and contends that it is *who* is being sacrificed for democracy which is often overlooked, as evidenced by the bevy of essential workers "positioned as sacrifices to the relatively well off and protected" (p. 167). Butler argues that vulnerable classes are left to die through policy which has decided upon which lives are "valuable—productive, useful—and which lives are dispensable" (Wade, 2020). The next section examines which lives are cast as disposable using Wynter's conceptualization of the social formations predicated upon a global hierarchy.

2.2.4. Ontologies of Precarity and Liberal Humanism

Wynter answers Butler's question of who counts as human through a conceptual framework predicated upon W.E.B. Dubois's concept of the colour line, which is the line drawn between "the lighter and darker peoples of the earth" and suggests that "all the peoples of the world, whatever their religions/cultures, are drawn into the homogenizing global structures that are based on the-model-of-a-natural-organism world-systemic order" (Butler, 2004, p. xv; Wynter, 2003, p. 310; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 21). Wynter (2003) contends that 'Man' overrepresents "itself as if it were the human itself", and therefore enables "the interests, reality and well-being of the empirical human world to continue to be imperatively subordinated to those of the now globally hegemonic

ethnoclass world of 'Man'" (p. 260-262). Black populations are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, and "nonwhite/non-Black" populations claim "'normal' North American identity by the putting of visible distance between themselves and the Black population group", indicating that ordering principles of the settler state continue to mirror Wynter's conceptualization of the creation of others in opposition to Man (p. 261, 262).

Given the ordering principle which places the construction of the fully human *homo oeconomicus* on top, "who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom", it is inadequate to assess power without an analysis of whiteness, of class, and of gender (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 10). Wynter challenges Butler's concept of "performing gender" with her concept of "performing being human", born from the perception that there is a danger in separating gender from genre (Davies, 2015, p. 220). Genre, according to Wynter is a coded term for 'race', and her analysis is based upon a "critique of race and coloniality that focuses on the liberation of all humans from all '-isms' verses only one specific form of subjugation such as sexist" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 25). As Weheliye (2014) concludes about this order, "black subjects, along with [Indigenous] populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as the universal human" (p. 24).

Wynter's work is relevant to the ordering systems which have created the social formations in Canada which have resulted in an unequal distribution of vulnerability. As Razack (2008) argues, the current global order is shaped by race thinking, and the ways in which humanity is denied to those not of European decent (p. 6). While whiteness is "dominant and dominating structuring that is more than a fixed identity, is able to escape these markings of identity while determining the markings of its racial others", racialization is comprised of "the social, political, economic, and historical processes that utilize essentialist and monolithic racial markings to construct diverse communities of colour" (Walia, 2013, p. 46). To this end, whiteness as a system of domination and processes of racialization have implications in the ways in which vulnerability is distributed in a settler colonial state.

Capitalism may be included as one of the 'isms' produced by 'Man', whereby Wynter asserts it to be "one economic aspect of the emerging colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, 2015, p. 113). Likewise, according to Tuck and Yang (2012), "capitalism and

the state are technologies of colonialism, developed over time to further colonial projects" (p. 4). They argue that under external colonialism, elements considered native, including people, are "recast as 'natural resources'" (p. 4). As such, the privileges of Man are at odds with those who have been rendered as "exploitable non-humans" (Weheliye, 2014, p 135). Processes including colonization, primitive accumulation, slavery, and imperialism have shaped,

> and are shaped by, the institution of wage labour. But the social and economic devaluation of the labour power of racialized workers simultaneously produces the conditions for the creation of excess surplus value and for social reproduction (Strauss, 2020, p. 1216; Blaut & Wilson, in Strauss, 2020b, p. 1215).

Relational precarity is of use to employers in Canada in achieving a dependency upon wage labour. According to Audre Lorde (2005) "institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people" (p. 245). With this said, McNally contributes a vital point about employers: "it's not that global business does not want immigrant labour to the West. It simply wants this labor on its own terms: frightened, oppressed, vulnerable" (McNally, 2006, p. 86 in 2003 in Walia, 2013, p. 46). Put another way, the production of vulnerability is critical to preserve the dominance and control of the most powerful in society.

Of the colonial projects, the recruitment of both high and low wage labour from other countries results in a set of colonial relations wherein settlers are not only white, but also racialized people occupying and settling on stolen land (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 7). In their work which denaturalizes the use of the word decolonization as a metaphor, Tuck and Yang (2012) contend that immigration is a colonial pathway wherein refugees, immigrants or migrant are "invited to be a settler in some scenarios, given the appropriate investments in whiteness, or is made an illegal, criminal presence in other scenarios" (p. 17). They refer to a triad of settler-native-slave unique to settler colonial regimes wherein "selective collapsibility" produces conditions where some minorities can become "model and quasi-assimilable" yet during crisis can "revert to the status of foreign contagions" (p. 18). Further, they argue that "'labor' or 'workers' as an agential political class fails to activate the decolonizing project", and rather,

> bisect the very category of labor into caste-like bodies built for work on one hand and rewardable citizen-workers on the other. Some labour becomes

settler, while excess labour becomes enslavable, criminal, murderable (p. 18).

In other words, the settler identity conferred to racialized others is fluid, conditional, and retractable. Decolonization cannot be achieved through the use of tools built by the settler colonial state.[1] Moreover, the endeavor to seek the same entitlements afforded to white settlers involves an investment in settler colonialism, and is not an active step towards decolonization. The complexity of social formations results in a hierarchical organization not only shaped by whiteness, but by processes including settler colonialism and imperialism. Without dismantling the systems which maintain the interests and the power of the dominant culture, the preservation of the existing social hierarchy will continue to produce vulnerable populations.

2.2.5. Biopolitics and Habeas Viscus

Precarious ontologies are evident in what "Hortense Spillers calls the flesh, the product of modern slavery and in effect, an alternative humanism" (Ibrahim, 2022, p. 52). Weheliye (2014) builds upon Spiller's concept of the flesh in 'habeas viscus', to describe how violent political domination "activates a fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality, and, on the other hand, to reclaim the atrocity of flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed" (p. 2). He acknowledges that neither Spillers nor Wynter force a choice between race and gender but rather, "their thinking demands vigilance about how different forms of domination create both the conditions of possibility and the 'semiosis of procedure' necessary to hierarchically distinguish full humans from not-quite-humans and nonhumans" (p. 24).

In order to understand the relationship between race and biopolitics, I sought theories which build upon the ontologies of precarity from a Black studies perspective, beginning with Weheliye's critique of Foucault's biopolitics. In his theorization of biopolitics, Foucault (2003) conceptualized sovereignty as the "power to make live and let die" (p. 241). According to Foucault's biopolitics of health management, good citizenship was to be attained through the disciplinary practices individuals must perform

1 'Colonial tools' is a reference to Audre Lorde's The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. See Lorde (1984) for further reading.

to be considered healthy, which was “treated as an imperative for dominant groups to the exclusion of poor, racially Othered groups”, in ways which maintains existing social hierarchies (Strings, 2019, p. 14-15). Relevant to the discussion of the politics of life and death, Weheliye uses the concept of “racializing assemblages” to understand the “sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” and provides a framework to understand the “relational ontological totality of the human” (p. 4). Weheliye (2014) argues that post-humanism and animal studies discourses of ‘Man’ “presume that we have now entered a stage in human development where all subjects have been granted equal access to western humanity…” (p. 10). This view is exemplified by McIvor et al.’s (2020) scholarship which argues that the contemporary settler colonial democracy operates “at the expense of racialized others whose sacrifices have repeatedly gone unrecognized”, and may be predicated “upon what Cedric Robinson has called a ‘delusion’ or ‘mythological veil’ within political science and political theory that obscures the ongoing chaos and violence of our contemporary condition with a fantasy that, underneath such chaos, ‘ordered systems reign’” (p. 170).

Given that in settler colonial states the precarity of racialized people is often veiled, Weheliye (2014) argues that a recalibration of the understanding of biopolitics is essential in order to abolish the global power structures,

> defined by the intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism, which interact in the creation and maintenance of systems of domination; and dispossession, criminalization, expropriation, exploitation, and violence that are predicated upon hierarchies of racialized, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence (p. 1).

Weheliye (2014) maintains that Foucault’s conceptualization of biopolitics naturalizes racial differences and “never interrogates the bare existence of racial difference and those hierarchies fabricated upon this primordial notion” (p. 62). Dominant epistemologies elevate the west over “the rest”, and whiteness assumes a universality in contrast with critiques originating from Black women and people of colour which are relegated to the status of ethnographic within the context of mainstream discourses (Weheliye, 2014, p. 65, 7). Weheliye argues that “oppression Olympics” serves as a win for white supremacy, and therefore focuses on the populations “rendered disposable”, and whose humanity is contingent upon the often indistinguishable “workings of

racialization (differentiation) and racism (hierarchization and exclusion)"(p. 14, 72). Weheliye builds upon Hortense Spiller's concept of distinguishing the body and the flesh.

> I use the phrase habeas viscus—"You shall have the flesh"—on the one hand, to signal how violent political domination activates a fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality, and, on the other hand, to reclaim the atrocity of flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed (Weheliye, 2014, p. 2).

Weheliye contends that "once the flesh becomes a centrifugal factor in the theorization of political violence, racialization, and modern politics construed more broadly, we have the beginnings of habeas viscus" (p. 52). With this in mind, crises can serve to produce the conditions to reveal who is considered fully human, and who is not.

2.2.6. Slow Violence and a State of Acceptance

In his research about death during the global pandemic, Sandset (2021) uses Mbembe's framework of necropolitics to understand "how health disparities and the COVID-19 pandemic has produced conditions not for living but for dying" (p. 1411). He distinguishes Mbembe's analysis from Foucault's "'make' live and 'let' die", whereby sovereign power not only lets die, but exposes members of the population to conditions which will ultimately lead to their deaths (p. 1413). Moreover, Sandset follows Butler's line of questioning in "…who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, what makes for a grievable life?", and argues that if some lives are more grievable than other lives "it is because we have come to accept that certain lives in certain situations will be exposed to the necropolitical conditions of slow violence and death" (Butler, 2006, p. 20 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1415; Sandset, 2021, p. 1415).

Sandset (2021) contends that Mbembe does not focus adequately on "the role played by society and less exceptional mechanisms for how zones of death and dying are produced", and uses the concept 'slow violence', which "insists we take seriously forms of violence that have, over time, become unmoored from their original causes (Davies, 2018, p. 2 in Sandset, p. 1414). He delves into Nixon's (2011) approach which theorizes that slow violence is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Davies, 2018, p. 2 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1414). Moreover, Sandset (2021) asserts that "the necropolitics of global health

inequality is driven not by a perpetual state of emergency, but by a state of chronic acceptance that some have poorer health than others" (p. 1412). He links this state of acceptance to forms of violence such as epistemic violence, to contextualize it within differing social, cultural, economic and political frameworks (p. 1413). He argues that necropolitical conditions wherein some are exposed to a "slow death", are fostered by a chronic state of acceptance.

Acceptance is tied to who is counted as 'grievable', and therefore some lives including racialized and poorer communities are exposed to more precarity and therefore, a higher risk of infection of COVID-19 (Sandset, 2021, p. 1416, 1417). During the pandemic, vulnerability can be linked with occupation, and as mentioned previously, it is critical to note that it is immigrant racialized women who are streamed into underpaid "gendered occupations" (Premji et al., 2014, p. 3137). .

> It is important to keep in mind how particular bodies are imagined as lesser than, and inferior to others and therefore regarded as disposable during a pandemic of the scale of COVID. In the rhetoric of COVID and its neoliberal focus on weighing the economy versus life, people in 'high contact, high risk' jobs are positioned as sacrifices to the relatively well-off and protected (Mcivor et al., 2020 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1419).

Therefore, Sandset argues that those who were already viewed as disposable have been the most devastated by the virus (p. 1420). Moreover, he contends that this disposability, the state of acceptance and ableism, in addition to the label of 'underlying health condition' have served to erase structural inequalities which produced these conditions (p. 1420). The concept of 'slow violence' connects the precarious labour designated as essential during the pandemic to the histories which have produced the uneven distribution of vulnerability and grieveability. The 'state of acceptance' is demonstrative of the ways violence against those in certain sectors of employment becomes naturalized, obfuscated and 'veiled'.

2.2.7. Research Questions

The conceptual frameworks I chose to assist with answering my research questions were far more varied than I had anticipated given the contrast between the data I collected in interviews and through media sources. While my questions changed

upon the onset of the pandemic, they remained centered on the conditions experienced by workers, and the media representation of workers and of these conditions.

- How have working conditions changed for grocery workers since the onset of the pandemic?
- How does the media representation of grocery workers compare to the quotidian experiences they describe?
- Which ideologies produced by the corporate media challenge, justify or reinforce the status quo?

The first question centered material concerns, through the comparison of working conditions before and after the onset of the pandemic. Inspired by the epistemological approaches of precarity to establish which conditions existed prior to the pandemic it evolved towards a more detailed, 'how did increasing precarity produced by the pandemic affect the conditions of work which had been previously categorized as precarious'? The second question involved locating ideologies which emerged upon the onset of the pandemic, and to determine, where they originated, and through which systems they were shaped. Question three is complementary to the first two questions in that it seeks to understand the relationship between the ideological and the material. Does the media shed light on the same concerns shared by participants? How does it justify and reinforce broader systems of oppression, and in what ways does it challenge, or maintain the status quo.

2.3. Methodology

I sought to employ my "killjoy subjectivities" as a researcher, to "go 'beyond reflexivity' to directly challenge raced, gendered, and other structures and politics" (Parker, 2017, p. 322). With this said, I paid attention to the ways in which my own subjectivities could shape conversations with participants and therefore affect my data. I took a qualitative approach to answer my research questions, influenced by the scholarship which formed my theoretical framework, the literature which shaped my understanding of affective labour and precarious work, and my interest in the ways in which I have observed working conditions deteriorate within my own lifetime.

To answer my research questions I employed both semi-structured interviews, a media content review, and critical discourse analysis. These were not my original plans. I had begun interviews and participant observation in grocery stores to understand the impacts of technology on work involving affective labour. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted my research considerably from what I had originally envisioned. I reimagined my project, modified my research design, and shifted my focus towards impacts of the pandemic on grocery work. This generated a myriad of new questions for me, but while I was interested in what was happening on the ground at grocery stores, I did not wish to pose a risk or burden to a group of individuals who were clearly taxed during the pandemic due to panic buying and an overwhelming lack of clear information about the virus early on. This, coupled with my curiosity led me to explore the media coverage of grocery work. I became interested in the ideological implications of cultural material disseminated during the pandemic, and its relationship to the material realities of workers.

Recruiting participants proved to be the most time consuming part of the research process, and delayed the data collection component of the project considerably. Between December of 2019 and December of 2020, I utilized snowball sampling methods, and put posters up at universities, colleges, coffee shop message boards, and at bus stops with a close proximity to grocery stores. I contacted the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers Union), as well as Facebook groups for worker organizations to see if any of their members might be interested. Additionally, I used social media platforms to recruit participants. Serious illness in my partner's family resulted in considerable travel back and forth from Vancouver Island for most of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, and when I was home, I re-postered once a week across Vancouver, Burnaby, Coquitlam, North Vancouver, West Vancouver and Surrey. Through posters, social media, and snowball sampling methods I was able to recruit 16 participants, but given what I imagine to be an increasingly stressful time, 5 participants did not attend interviews which I was unable to reschedule due to their schedules changing, illness, and in some cases, unknown reasons since I was unable to reach them. I was exceptionally grateful to the participants I interviewed, given that many seemed to be overextended, and were often rushing to log on to meet me after long days of work or school.

I conducted 11 one hour long semi-structured interviews and additional follow up interviews with current and former employees from grocery stores across Vancouver, and cities in close proximity including Burnaby, North Vancouver, West Vancouver, and Surrey. I conducted three interviews prior to the pandemic, and met participants in person at coffee shops of their choosing. I used $20 Visa gift cards to thank them for their time. After March of 2020, in accordance with Simon Fraser University's (SFU) research guidelines and with approval from the Office of Research Ethics, I began to conduct interviews using the online platform Zoom. Given that I was away from home for a significant part of 2020, using Zoom allowed me to continue to interview participants remotely while I was staying on Vancouver Island.

Prior to each interview I conducted in person and online, I informed participants that the SFU Office of Research Ethics had designated this study as being of minimal risk, and I discussed the ways in which I would mitigate risks including protecting their data, and maintaining their confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. I obtained their permission to record and transcribe the interviews for accuracy. Participants I met in person signed hard copies of the consent form. For those I interviewed using the online platform, I read a script of the consent form, and obtained their oral consent. To compensate them for their time and to show my gratitude, after the pandemic began I offered participants the choice to have a $20 gift card mailed through Canada Post, or emailed in the form of an Interac money transfer. All participants accepted the compensation with the exception of one who politely declined.

The participants I interviewed were generous and candid with the information they provided about their experiences. Given that researchers are not neutral observers and are implicated in the construction of knowledge, I tried to maintain an epistemological reflexivity, wherein I interrogated my existing assumptions about the world, and reflected on the nature of knowledge (Gray, 2013, p. 958). Interviews were semi-structured using predetermined questions I had created before I began interviewing participants. I followed an iterative process wherein I added and removed questions based upon previous interviews. I transcribed interviews manually, and used NVivo 12, a qualitative research data analysis software to code interviews. I followed Gray's (2014) approach and coded for themes and sub-themes, I searched for connections between codes, I merged codes when necessary, and I thought about the ways they connected to the literature (p. 686).

Participants were varied in their positionality and had disparate experiences during the pandemic. The duration of time worked ranged from between eight months and five years. Seven participants were currently students, two were not students, and two were intending to go back to school. Three participants were in Canada temporarily, two of whom were international students, and one was taking a break from school with a work visa to work in Canada. Of the three interviews conducted in person before the pandemic began, two participants no longer worked for their employer, but I was able to conduct a follow up interview with one participant to hear about her experiences during the pandemic. Eight participants were racialized minorities. Six participants read as women and five as men. All but two participants had part time status at work. Six participants belonged to a union, while five did not.

To study textual sources, I chose a multimodal approach, first to locate the themes within the particular historical context of the first year of the pandemic, and then second, to locate power and knowledge within the dominant themes using critical discourse analysis (Grant, 2018, p 48; Hall, 2001, p. 72). The cultural material I chose to review was corporate media data, using the database Canadian Newsstream. I set my parameters to include articles between March 15, 2020 and March 15, 2021. To cast the widest net I used search terms including 'grocery', 'grocery worker', and 'grocery store', and excluded material which centered consumers as opposed to workers. I found 147 articles relevant to my project, and used a combination of methods to code the data. To determine which I preferred, I used multiple methods to analyze the material including Excel, Zotero, and NVivo 12. I found Zotero the fastest to engage with, to annotate, and to tag and code the material, Excel was helpful with tracking specific mentions, and summarizing sources, and NVivo 12 provided helpful features such as identifying which words were used the most in articles.

Critical discourse analysis, according to Blommaert (2005), should involve a critique of power.

> […] it should be an analysis of power effects, of the outcome of power, of what power does to people, groups, and societies, and of how this impact comes about. The deepest effect of power everywhere is inequality, as power differentiates and selects, includes and excludes (Blommaert, 2005, p. 2).

Focusing on Hall's interpretation of Foucault's discourse analysis, I used the constructionist theory of meaning and representation wherein Foucault argues that we can only have knowledge of things if they have a meaning (Hall, 2001, p. 72). Within the dominant themes I located in the media analysis, I studied the statements which provided knowledge about the subject of the discourse, I sought to understand the rules which prescribed ways of discussing the subjects, I looked at who had the authority to speak within the media selection I had chosen, I sought to understand whose behaviour the discourse was seeking to regulate, and I compared the discourse to a previous episteme (Hall, 2001, p. 73-74). Combined with my interview data, this resulted in far too much material, leading me to make difficult decisions over what material to include and exclude.

The decision to use corporate media, as well as the method of locating it through a database had an impact on the outcome of my research. Searching through a database eliminated the ways news items are often editorialized by users when shared through social media platforms, therefore shifting and adding to the meaning and the knowledge produced. After a participant mentioned a video of an abusive customer at a local store, I searched to find it, feeding the Tiktok and YouTube algorithms with information about my potential interests. Shortly thereafter, YouTube and TikTok began showing videos of what they termed to be 'Karens' behaving in violent or racist ways towards workers and other customers in stores. Moreover, during the first year of the pandemic Tiktok drastically changed the way I consumed media. The algorithm drew me to 'labour-tok', where I viewed videos of customers lashing out at workers in stores, workers sharing stories of their exploitative employers, and some workers describing their resignations. As a researcher, this coupled with witnessing movements challenging various forms of injustice during the first year of the pandemic shaped my positionality, and the ways in which I engaged with the data.

2.4. Positionality

The corollary of isolation for me, and I would speculate, for many others who had the privilege to isolate at home, was the time to stop and observe what was happening locally, nationally, and internationally. Evidence of varying forms of inequality seemed to be everywhere, and under a global pandemic, were no longer as obscured under the patina of neoliberal governance which had long protected the interests of those in power.

At the beginning of the pandemic, when I would leave my building early in the morning to walk my dog, the roads were quiet, nearly empty, and the viaducts were free of congestion. With this said, the necropolitics which continue to characterize the toxic drug supply crisis were evidenced by the ambulances which were frequently stopped at a park one block past my building. On one of my regular walking routes, not far from this park, an encampment had emerged and served as a visible reminder of the ways vulnerability is unequally distributed.

My positionality was also shaped by growing up in Canada in predominately white spaces as a non-white person. I was born in Canada, and my parents are immigrants from the formerly British colonized, ethnically diverse, Sri Lanka, one Sinhalese, and one Burgher, both used to colonial norms imposed upon them long before they came to Canada. Like many, I have often been caught in the farcical but often humorous "where are you really from" or "what are you?" conversations which may be indicative of who is, and who is not afforded belonging on this stolen land. My positionality is also shaped by the privileges afforded through a proximity to whiteness as a non-Black, non-Indigenous, Canadian born individual. Given the nature of this research, it was necessary to reflect on biases, my personal background, and my belief systems in order to maintain reflexivity and challenge my conditioning (Gray, 2014, p. 424).

Given that the topic of wage labour is centered in this research, my own relationship with capital is relevant. Like many of those I interviewed, I had long worked for large 'family owned' Canadian corporations, in both unionized and nonunion roles. When I started in the industry in which I had worked, starting wages were higher than they are today, and the company for which I worked was generous with benefits. However, I observed conditions slowly diminish over the years, as cuts to labour costs became deeper, and as nonunion and union departments were pitted against each other, through a valuation of some skills and a devaluation of others. Despite this awareness, I continue to battle the compulsion to employ the absurd lexicon of corporate jargon to which I had become accustomed, which was shaped by capitalist logic. This vernacular not only served to justify and conceal exploitation, it often encouraged workers to be the architects of their own exploitation. Layoffs became a regular frightening and emotionally charged occurrence, and served to regulate the behaviour of those left behind for whom there was always a new normal. Ultimately this type of

normalization proved malignant as conditions continued to worsen. As I am sure many others have experienced, my years in corporate environments have provided me with a particular set of survival skills which I might argue would accomplish little to affect meaningful change, and indicate the need for collective rather than individual strategies.

When I began to research the history of grocery work in BC, out of curiosity I searched for historical accounts of the industry in which I had worked. I was dismayed to see that aside from a few book chapters which may have been difficult to locate without access to the university library, archived union news updates, and business articles, there was very little to document the gradual decay I observed over the years. This lack of accessible information erases histories in a way which preserves the status quo, and allows employers to save on labour costs by reinventing new forms of normal for workers. To that end, the erasure of the gradual production of precarity serves those with immense power over the lives of workers. The next chapter contextualizes grocery work within local histories of neoliberalism and settler colonialism, which have resulted in working conditions which were precarious long before the pandemic began.

Chapter 3.

Canadian and British Columbia Histories

3.1. Building 'Canada'

Canada's history of nation building, British Columbia's history of neoliberal politics, and the history of grocery labour in Canada are germane to the ways in which the social and political response to the pandemic has produced a class of essential workers who have been exposed to more risk than other occupational groups. Butler (2004) argues that "there are ways of distributing vulnerability", and during the global pandemic, vulnerability to exposure to the virus was distributed unevenly (p. xii). This uneven allocation of vulnerability is far from being a new phenomenon, and despite the ways neoliberalism increased precarity for workers during the pandemic, precarity exists regardless of neoliberalism (Strauss, 2017, p. 3). Canada has marked populations as disposable throughout its history, as evidenced by thousands of Indigenous children killed in the residential school system, by the growing numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and by the Chinese labourers who died centuries ago during the construction of the transcontinental railway (Follett Hosgood, 2022; Thobani, 2007, p. 120; Coulthard, 2014, p. 164; Mackey, 1999, p. 46).

That some lives have been marked as "ungrievable", and subsequently erased from national histories serves to support settler nation building through Canada's "selective and comparative narratives surrounding racism and the disappearance of racialized bodies from Canadian popular memory" (Butler, 2004, p. xiv; McKittrick, 2006 in Evans, 2021, p. 517). Canada is "forged by settler colonialism, and as a contemporary setter state maintains legal, political, and economic systems rooted in the settler colonial usurpation of Indigenous lands and the dispossession and disappearance of Indigenous [people]" which continues into the present in both ideological and material ways (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 138).

The conditions produced by the pandemic for the most vulnerable segments of the working class in Canada have profound historical roots which have been shaped by processes of immigration, nation building, assimilation, and white supremacy.

> In his 1869 speech, ‘We Are the Northmen of the New World’, Robert Grant Haliburton, an associate of the Canada First Movement, asserted that the distinct characteristic of the new Dominion was that it was and always should be ‘a Northern country inhabited by the descendants of the Northern races (Berger 1966:6 in Mackey, 1999 p. 43).

From its inception, the primary goals of nation building in Canada were to build an economy and a white citizenry (Avery, 1995, in Macklin, 2000, p. 237). This project was, and continues to be, contingent upon the displacement and destruction of Indigenous populations, and the maintenance of white supremacy. The highly venerated flag which bears Canada’s national colors representative of "the white of winter snows and the red of autumnal maple leaves" has long masked a violent history, long before the discomfort some felt after seeing it alongside symbols of hate during the recent astroturfing trucker convoy protests (Government of Canada, 2022d; Victor, 2022).

In the late nineteenth century the ‘Canada First Movement’ was a white ethnonationalist project which, in an Orientalist manner, constructed those of the "Northern races" as superior for their masculine coded "energy, strength, self-reliance, health and purity", to races originating in the South which they equated with feminine coded "decay and effeminacy, even libertinism and disease" (Berger, 1966, p. 6 in McKay, 1999, p. 43; Said, 1978). Similarly, ‘Keep Canada White’ was an organization established by Canadian women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century invested in "the quality of the race", and the advocacy for citizenship rights for white women (Thobani, 2007, p. 84). Nation building according to Mackey is a "Western project" predicated upon "transforming ‘wilderness’ into ‘civilisation’", and maintaining existing structures of domination through discourses of equality which oppose "rational civilisation to irrational savagery, as in the opposition between ethnic and civic nationalism" (p. 29, 170).

This entitlement of white supremacy bled into future initiatives to attract settlers to Canada. Mackey (1999) asserts that immigration policy is enmeshed with tensions between the material need for labour, and the nation-building goals attempting to produce an ideal "imagined community" (p. 45). While early 19th century policy favoured British and northern European candidates, they were difficult to attract to Canada, and to

maintain a white ethnostate, they cast a wider net into Eastern Europe[2] (Mackey, 1999, p. 46, 65). Immigration laws were also flexible when needed, and to construct the transcontinental railway, Canada imported 6500 Chinese labourers , many of whom died in the process. The workers were denied citizenship rights, and in BC, 26 bills were passed to prevent or restrict the settlement of Asian migrants (Mackey, 1999, p. 46).

Trades unions were hostile to the 'non-preferred races' including Asian workers, whom were constructed "as taking jobs away from white workers", resulting in white workers mobilizing through "campaigns against their immigration and employment" (Thobani, 2007, p. 85). BC was a particularly hostile environment for non-white people, as exemplified by Ward's (2002) research on anti-Asian racism between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century which reveals the commitment on behalf of white residents to preserving their racial identity as the national identity (Ward, 2002 in Thobani, 2007, p. 85). Given that they were no longer threatened by Indigenous populations, white residents "with few exceptions, politicians, writers, media commentators, clergy, and trade unionists" problematized and targeted Asian populations to preserve white supremacy at both provincial and federal levels (Thobani, 2007, p. 85). During the first half of the twentieth century, people of colour organized and fought against racist laws and racist trade unions for labour rights and for the social entitlements provided to white citizens (Thobani, 2007, p. 159, 160).

White supremacy is in constant tension with the demand on the part of capitalists to "import cheap labour" and the post-colonial era saw white dominance under threat when post-colonial movements challenged western powers, and white capitalist countries attempted to distance themselves from the unpalatable whiteness associated with Nazi Europe (Macklin, 2002, p. 235; Thobani, 2007, p. 148). The 'Keep Canada White' policies were phased out in favour of 'multiculturism', a top down discourse which integrates immigrants "on the nation's terms" and "diverts political effort away from universalistic goals", while stealthily obfuscating white supremacy as an ordering principle (Thobani, 2007, p. 159, 160; Coulthard, 2014, p. 18).

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2 Jewish immigrants, and immigrants from Hungary were among those who have now been incorporated into whiteness in Canada, but during the twentieth century, were considered racially inferior to the British and French. See Thobani (2002), and Mackey (1999) for further reading.

Canadian immigration policy was among the measures used to “lower the costs of reproduction and provide cheap sources of labour” (Avery 1995; Bakan & Stasiulis 1997b; Muszynski 1996; Satzewich 1991 in Macklin, 2002, p. 8). According to Thobani, the “flow of human beings has been defined as the ‘direct result of the history of colonialism and imperialism of the previous centuries’” and in 1967, to accommodate the labour needs of the country, non-white applicants were permitted entry as a point system was introduced which “focused on the education, profession, occupation, language, and skill level of prospective immigrants, as well as on their family ties to Canada” (Brah, 1996, p. 21 in Thobani, 2007, p. 71; Thobani, 2007, p. 97).

Canada’s white supremacist history and the settler colonial project converged with other broader social processes resulting in an unequal distribution of vulnerability during the global pandemic (Butler, 2004, p. xii). The next two sections will demonstrate the ways in which frontline grocery work gradually came to be precarious in BC through the implementation of neoliberal policy which served to weaken labour protections while increasing employer power.

3.2. British Columbia: A History of Gentleman’s Agreements

Working conditions worsened for many after an overarching shift in economic structuring in Canada, and labour market restructuring in BC wherein employers have won increased power over the lives of workers. These changes have been gradual, and in line with the concept of ‘slow violence’, which “insists we take seriously forms of violence that have, over time, become unmoored from their original causes (Davies, 2018, p. 2 in Sandset, 2018, p. 1414). In other words, there are historical factors which contributed to the current working conditions, and as previously stated, the erasure of intensified vulnerability for racialized populations serves the settler colonial project and nation building agendas (McKittrick, 2006 in Evans, 2021, p. 517).

According to Aguiar (2004), British Columbia has been historically governed by a “belief system that dismisses inequalities and promotes individualism and the entrepreneurial self”, whereby “social policy shifts to ‘peer pressure’ and the view that ‘gentlemanly capitalists’ will not only do the right thing socially, but will also keep each other in line with regard to ‘proper’ business practices” (p. 107). Power over the lives of

workers has been historically shaped by the will of a small few including the benefactors of the wealth and power accumulated through systems of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal capitalism. Consequently, 'the few' continue to benefit from the exploitation of the many as a result of the dismantling of the welfare state, through the prioritization of the needs of business over the protection of workers' rights, and through neoliberal policy which passed labour to families.

A shift from welfare capitalism towards the neoliberal phase of capitalism began in the late 1970s, wherein "significant deindustrialization and the retrenchment of social services and welfare, the veneer of a 'nation' predicated on multicultural equality was eroded, while old and new divisions emerged with potential to destabilize the security and legitimacy of settler authority" (Mackey, 1999 in Evans, 2021, p. 527). The settler state countered the imminent threat to its authority with an aggressive assault on the working class. Born into a family legacy of politics, elected as British Columbia premier in 1975, and serving until 1986, Bill Bennett practiced a neo-conservative style of politics "far beyond what had been promised in the campaign and generally more extreme than that practiced by U.S. president Ronald Reagan or Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher", which targeted the working class and organized labour (Dyck, 1996, p. 619 in Aguiar, 2004, p. 106).

This type of conservatism was also reflected at a federal level during the 1980s and early 1990s. Fudge and Cossman (2002) astutely encapsulate the stringently conservative ethos of this time when they begin their account of privatization with this quote from former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

> The tragic process of swedenizing Canada must come to a halt ... I am a Canadian and I want to be free, to the extent reasonably possible, of government intrusion and direction and regimentation and bureaucratic overkill ... It is absolutely clear that the private sector is and must continue to be the driving force in the economy (p. 3).

According to Cohen and Pulkingham (2000), dismantling the postwar Keynesian approaches, "which had tried to reconcile social reproduction with the interests of capital, affected the way the economy functioned and thus people's economic security" (p. 20). Changes to public policy in Canada included the deregulation of labour markets which involved, "more restrictive unemployment insurance at the federal level, a reduction in employment standards in most provinces, a very large reduction in the real minimum

wage across the country, and a weakening of labour protections and their enforcement" (Cohen & Pulkingham, 2000, p. 20). This resulted in decreased availability of full time employment, and a precaritization of work wherein families required multiple members to earn wages in order to sustain themselves (Ibid). These conditions persist today, and Canada entered the pandemic with a government which treated this type of subsistence as the norm within social policy.

Just as nation building in Canada was predicated upon ideologies which supported cisheteropatriarchal white supremacy and features of settler colonialism, neoliberal ideology justified and provided a rationale for the introduction of this phase of capitalism. By the 1990s "citizenship and national belonging were recast in terms of how well one could reproduce themselves without state supports" (Evans, 2021, p. 527). Individualism is central to neoliberal ideology whereby the "best approach to securing and protecting human well-being is through individual economic and social freedoms and that state interventions in market activities should be kept to a minimum" (Cohen & Pulkingham, 2000, p. 16).

When the NDP assumed power in British Columbia in the 1990s, they did little to correct the damage done to economic policy by the preceding governments (Aguiar, 2004, p. 107). Gordon Campbell was elected in 2001, and during his tenure, the B.C. Liberal Party sought to better position themselves in the global economy through reamending labour legislation to "provide 'flexibility' for employers and ensure 'safeguards' and 'incentives' for employees" (Aguiar, 2004, p. 108). In other words, they resumed and intensified the onslaught on labour the Bennett government had initiated in the 1980s. Citing the reason for austerity as "a decade of decline" during NDP governance, the B.C. Liberals changed labour laws, ordered striking public sector workers back to work, restructured teachers contracts, shut down hospitals and courthouses, tearing up their collective agreement and firing hospital support staff, designated education as an essential service, eliminated the fair wage policy and pay equity legislation, reintroduced secret ballot votes for union certification, and cut income taxes (Waters, 2001, in Aguiar, 2004, p. 108; Cohen & Pulkingham, 2000, p. 3; Waters, 2002, in Aguiar, 2004, p. 108). Beginning in 2001, the B.C. Liberals undermined the role of the Employment Standards Act (ESA), reduced their budget, staffing levels, and "created significant administrative barriers to the filing of complaints by workers", which was detrimental to many workers given that over 80% of private sector workers "have no

other employment rights relating to wages, benefits, and other basic working conditions than those provided in the Employment Standards Act" (BC Employment Standards Coalition, 2022, p. 4-5).

The B.C. Liberal's approach to public health weighed in favour of local commerce, and neither towards the health of workers nor consumers. Not dissimilar to the delay in implementing policy to require masks in indoor public spaces or making adequate recommendations to employers in regard to indoor ventilation, the B.C. Liberals "forced the Worker's Compensation Board [WCB] to postpone its plan to introduce a smoking ban in the workplace" (Waters, 2001, in Aguiar, 2004, p. 108). On March 22, 2000, Justice Stromberg-Stein "ruled that the WCB had not consulted stakeholders sufficiently and overturned the extension of the regulation to both hospitality and long-term residential facilities", upon which, the WCB retained Pacific Analytics to produce a study to assess the impacts of the proposed workplace smoking restrictions, including the potential impacts on "BC's competitiveness" if the restrictions were reimplemented (The Workers Compensation Board, 2001). The report concluded that restrictions may result in short term impacts to commerce, but generally no long term impacts to employment or sales. Smoking was not officially banned in workplaces in BC until 2008. In 2020, masks were not announced as mandatory by the provincial government until eight months into the global pandemic. While there is no evidence that grocers petitioned against indoor mask legislation, they did not follow the recommendations of the union, by implementing store policy to require masks in stores to protect workers (Save-On-Foods refused calls to require face masks inside their BC grocery stores, company letter shows, 2020). According to Greg Wilson, the BC director of the Retail Council of Canada, "one of the difficulties in us requiring masks is we [receive] pushback from some customers [who] point out that it is not a public health order" (Paterson, 2020). Prior to the official mandate but after Dr. Bonnie Henry announced that masks were expected to be worn indoors, Stong's Market posted signage thanking customers for wearing masks instead of asking them to wear them (Paterson, 2020). While there was a delay on the part of the provincial government in announcing a public health order, this also indicates that the protection of workers appears to be of a lower priority to employers than the risk of antagonizing consumers in spaces wherein they are used to being right.

In their assessment of the current BC government's pandemic response, some scholars argue that public health officials may have downplayed the risks of aerosol transmission (Daflos, 2021).

> Rejection or under-emphasis of the airborne hypothesis for so long by bodies whose advice impacted on the lives of billions was, we believe, not merely a failure of the scientific process but a failure of the governance of that process" (Greenhalgh et al., 2021, p. 17).

If the political response to COVID-19 downplayed safety recommendations, then the health and safety of those working in essential jobs was egregiously neglected. As Sandset (2021) argues, "the necropolitics of COVID-19 is contingent upon what kind of job people have" (p. 1419). The aforementioned 'gentleman's agreements to maintain proper business practices between capitalists may be the legacy of the postwar era wherein "welfare provisions and social entitlements" were implemented to "cushion the inequities produced by capitalism and encourage continuing obedience to the economic order and its ruling elites" (Bohaker & Iacovetta, 2009, p. 433-434). However, relying on wealthy capitalists to 'peer pressure' each other into maintaining proper business practices in lieu of employment protections has degraded working conditions for those working in frontline grocery work.

The dismantling of the welfare state, inadequate enforcement of employment standards, and discourses of self-reliance produce conditions wherein workers lack the protections required to shield them from the necrotic forces of capitalism. It could be said that gazing down from above, crisis is profitable, the current conditions are 'by design', a veritable 'feature, and not a bug', and that the system is operating remarkably well for those conferred the legacy shaped by the capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal, white supremacist, nation building practices of early Canada. In contrast, from the bottom up, this type of politics is devastatingly inconducive to the health and safety of essential workers during a global pandemic.

3.3. The War on Labour

While frontline work at grocery stores faced more risk than many other forms of employment during the pandemic, it was not always considered precarious. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the unions fought to retain labour rights against the owners of Superstore, Save-On-Foods and Safeway. During this time there was a radical

transformation of the workplace, and those who had “spent years making careers at supermarkets watched as their former world unraveled in a few short years and was replaced by a new low-wage, low-benefit, part-time reality” (Darrah & Nesbitt, 2020).

> Union strength in the sector grew in the mid-twentieth century, which in turn helped workers secure and protect benefits. Compared to other retail work, grocery jobs could be quite attractive. “Back then, it was a career,” says Susan Hart-Kulbaba, who worked at Safeway in Manitoba, and was a member of UFCW Local 832” (Darrah, 2020).

For the frontline workers in the grocery sector, this prosperity began to degrade in the 1990s.

With increased competition from “non-union, big-box multinationals like Wal-Mart and Costco”, employers viewed labour as “their most controllable cost”, and in the 1990s, fought the unions to hire part-time workers (Darrah, 2020; Foster, 2018, p. 20). At the time there were grim portents of the demise of prosperity for workers, and loss of the vitality which had been established by unions during the post war period. First, Local 401 which represented Superstore, had signed a voluntary recognition with Loblaws in the 1980s “agreeing to lower base rates, longer periods for wage step-up, and more part-time workers”, and second, at the time, Save-On-Foods workers were represented by the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), which Foster (2018) contends, was “a union widely regarded as collaboration-oriented and employer-friendly” (Tufts & Thomas, 2014, p. 72-76 in Foster, 2018, p. 20). Third, both Superstore and Safeway workers were represented by Local 401 and were pitted against each other “with the local’s willingness to lower conditions at Superstore and inability to bargain parity between the two companies” (Foster, 2018, p. 20). Fourth, Safeway workers earned five to six dollars per hour more than Save-On-Foods and Superstore workers, and the company leveraged the argument against Safeway that “Save-On and Superstore were faster to adopt the models of cost containment, including increased use of part-timers and higher turnover, putting Safeway at a disadvantage” (Foster, 2018, p. 20).

In 1993, during negotiations, the local agreed to rollbacks of $40 million, which included a decrease of two dollars per hour to the average wage and a one-time buyout package intended for full-time employees (King,1993 in Foster, 2018, p 20). According to Foster (2018), “more than four thousand employees took advantage” of the buyout, and in turn, Safeway “used the buyout to replace mostly full-time, long-term employees

with ten thousand part-time, lower-cost workers" (King, 1993, in Foster, 2018, p. 20). In 1997 workers at "seventy-four of seventy-seven Safeway locations" in Alberta spent "seventy-five days on a picket line", after which time "the workers accepted a mediator's recommendations that looked very similar to the one presented by the company in the hours before the strike" with no resolution to recover wages lost in the rollbacks from 1993 (Foster, 2018, p. 22). According to Foster (2018), "as much as the wage rollbacks hurt, it was allowing Safeway to replace full-time with part-time workers that is now seen as having had the most enduring effect on the company and the industry" (p. 20).

Of the eleven participants I interviewed, six belonged to unions, and while participants described the low wages, lack of benefits and part-time hours, three participants discussed the two-tier model which produced a disparity between workers at the same stores.

> Ah, so how Safeway works is that we're divided into two grids, Grid A and Grid B, and it's divided by seniority basically and I'm not sure that we can even get to Grid A anymore and the thing is that Grid A are really protected by the union and they have way more benefits, that included, like getting paid for sick days I believe but for Grid B we don't have that (Hannah).

I found limited research on the impacts of two-tiered unions, especially in Canada, and more research is needed on their effect on rights during the pandemic. According to O'Brady (2021), inclusive unions, which "eliminate gaps in working conditions between core and non-core workers, unlike strategies that subordinate precarious workers to second-tier status or exclude them entirely", are critical to resisting precarity and deteriorating working conditions (p. 1086, 1104). Unions may have been weakened in the grocery sector, but, according to one participant, coupled with media attention and the newfound visibility of grocery workers, they were helpful in their campaign to make masks mandatory in indoor spaces (UFCW 1518 calls on the provincial government to mandate masks in stores, 2020). Nearly every unionized participant with whom I spoke discussed ways they felt supported by the union. However, my interviews also revealed that like those without union representation, workers were low-paid and afforded minimal meaningful employment benefits.

Chapter 4.

The Corona-Précariat

Upon the onset of the pandemic, a new “précariat” of essential workers emerged across Canada, across borders, and internationally, signifying the exigency for increased protections for those who continued to work despite increased risk, a lack of meaningful benefits, and inadequate compensation (Standing, 2014, p. 963). Standing (2014) coined the term “précariat” to describe a class of workers who were “denied so-called ‘labour rights’ and social entitlements that went with twentieth century industrial citizenship” (p. 963). Under pandemic conditions, precarious employment took on a new cast, and resulted in a new précariat.

In this chapter I will begin with an assessment of the everyday material conditions at work that participants described. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 explore the types of risks which emerged upon the onset of the pandemic. In section 4.4 I discuss the subtle ways in which workers renegotiated their ever increasing workloads. Section 4.5 consists of an assessment of the safety protocols implemented at stores when the pandemic began. Finally, in section 4.6 I discuss inconsistencies between stores in disclosing COVID-19 exposures to staff.

4.1. If We’re Heroes, Pay Us, and Make Masks Mandatory

My interviews with participants revealed that conditions prior to the pandemic were already deteriorating. Marta, a former grocery worker who worked full time prior to the pandemic, described the conditions at the store at which she had worked as less than ideal because “upper management didn’t care about anything”. She transferred to another location, and when the company was acquired by a larger corporation, conditions worsened further when the new employer stopped hiring full-time staff, and reduced their starting wage to minimum. Eventually she decided to leave the company after she was not compensated for the additional responsibilities her position had absorbed. Her role at the store was a team trainer, and she shared that she wanted “to go somewhere that hopefully treats people a little bit better”.

> It was just several different things, <laughs> spill that tea […] so it was good at first, and then once you kind of get into management, you see things and then I was starting to be treated like a supervisor and I was pretty much told several times that I was keeping the department together and I was like well, 'where's my money?' If you're going to make me do all these things but not pay me for it, I'm out of here and it just became a very hostile environment. Nobody wanted to go to work, everybody came to work in a crappy mood because nobody wanted to be there and just wasn't a place I wanted to be anymore, very hostile so I was like, yeah, I've had it.

Lack of fair renumeration for work rendered, and poor working conditions were problems prior the pandemic, but took on a different cast after the pandemic began, and participants noted that both their level of risk, and the volume of work increased.

> I mean, see that's--I think that's one of the problems that we all have is, people acknowledged the fact that we're doing so much during the pandemic and it's essential for us to be there but we're not being compensated enough for it, especially a lot of us being students […] heroes, it's a nice way to put it, but I think if that's the term people are using for us I think we should get paid for that (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth, and all the participants I interviewed during the pandemic were paid minimum wage, or only slightly above, and all part-time workers were denied meaningful employment benefits like paid sick leave, which would have been of use to those with a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Some participants described ways in which their employers attempted to appease them, or to demonstrate appreciation for them in ways other than through fair compensation and benefits. For some who were not already getting at discounts on their purchases, they were given ten percent off on groceries and additional points on their purchases. Others, like Jonas received a free drink from a coffee shop every shift.

> I think the only way we were appreciated were by the push of the unions to get benefits from the government, so it was media, unions, getting those benefits which made us heroes but the only benefit that the employers gave us was that every shift you could get a free drink at Starbucks <laughs> […] but that Starbucks was owned by [name of grocer] so yeah.

Recognitions such as discounts on their purchases, and free drinks were incommensurate with the increased work and risk, and unionized participants shared that they were waiting for the pay to be restored.

> Honestly it didn't do much for any of us because half of us don't shop there being that [name of grocer] is quite expensive compared to other stores--and the points were--it would take time to you know because you have to make a purchase for the points to build up so it was nothing compared to the $2 (Elizabeth).

That the grocery store at which Elizabeth worked was "quite expensive" and that she and many of her coworkers did not shop there was a revealing detail about the ways in which this employer sells groceries at rates beyond which their own employees can afford, and that workers in precarious forms of employment may find it difficult to survive on their wages. Put another way, when capitalists possess power over the lives over their employees, as well as on the affordability and availability of resources essential for human existence, they have disproportionate control over the allocation of vulnerability.

While participants shared a number of reasons why they enjoyed their work, the primary reason for their employment was, as described by Katherina, "the paycheck". For all participants, wages were one of the primary concerns, and for those who worked through the pandemic, safety was an additional worry.

> I feel like more so than hero pay, I think they should have more regulations, make masks mandatory cuz, yeah. I feel like safety and those kind of regulations matter more personally than hero pay because I think that even though hero pay is a help, personally, because I don't work as many hours, it's not that big an incentive for me. For someone who might work forty or more hours it would help them in a big way. So it's not a personal priority for me but I do believe they should bring it back and it's a good thing (Charlotte).

The risks that workers were forced to accept prior to the provincial health order to make indoor masks mandatory demonstrated the exigency for urgent change before the next crisis. Inadequate compensation to work under hazardous working conditions, along with appropriate safety protocol were concerns for participants. The next section will explore the risks participants navigated during this time.

4.2. Risks and "Precarious Bodies" in a Global Pandemic

As stated in Chapter 2, ontological precarity can be defined as "the inherent vulnerability of bodies and social relations, and the precariousness that results from the political construction and uneven distribution of forms of insecurity" (Strauss, 2020a, p. 151).

Hannah: When [customers] want to pay as well [with cash], I just hate that so much <laughs> because I don't like touching their money or anything like that. It makes me feel like, I don't know—for our conversation to be just like, 'here you go', that's it.

Rowena: Because you are risking your health?

Hannah: And my family's, that's what I am most worried about because I'm still young, I feel like I'm still a healthy person but--like my dad, he's not as healthy as I am and yeah so it's always very--it's just like a very anxious job I guess—anxiety inducing job.

Rowena: So you feel lots of stress?

Hannah: Yeah, because like when I start feeling a little sick, feeling a little bit hot sometimes which might be normal, because later in the day I feel well, just like in the mornings when I feel a little bit sick I'm like oh my god, do I have covid <both laugh>? I'm an anxious person myself.

Rowena: I totally understand. I'm the same.

Hannah: But the difference is between you and I that I can potentially have covid because I talk to a lot of people every day <laughs>.

I interviewed Hannah, an international student, before the province issued the health order to make masks mandatory in indoor spaces, and long before vaccines were available. What Hannah and I shared in common was the ontological conception of precarity which refers to our inherent vulnerability as humans (Ibid). While I was able to shift my interviews to online spaces, Hannah's work was front facing, and involved a high risk of exposure to COVID-19. Moreover, under the epistemological conception of precarity, labour conditions for participants could also be characterized as precarious. My interviews indicated that participants were not entitled to sick pay, which, according to Cook et al. (2020), can result in situations where workers are compelled to continue working when they are sick, which can lengthen recovery time, and put other workers at risk (Cook et al., 2020, p. 73-74). The pandemic brought precarity and uncertainty for all, however, in order to survive under capitalism, some had to accept more risk than others in labour relationships which did not prioritize their safety.

The question of risk was one of the dominant themes I encountered in interviews and in the media I reviewed. Prentice and Trueba's (2018) ethnographic research of workers in Bolivia and Trinidad confirm previous findings which indicate that "workers will negotiate health and safety risks as a 'risk assemblage' because they do not separate

immediate workplace risks for a livelihood in order to survive" (p. 52; Root, 2008, p. 405). The need for a paycheque can force one to accept employment relationships associated with physical pain or treacherous working conditions.

> […]it's not surprising if I have covid during my work or on [my commute] because I always contact with random people on the transit and random people at my workplace—but ummm, until now I was just lucky that I didn't contract [it], that I didn't have covid but I can't stop working there because there's no other way to make money in [another] workplace or any other thing I can do. I just wish I don't get covid. Yeah, that's the thing right now. That's the situation we're in right now (Magnus).

Prentice and Trueba (2018) argue that labour precarity produces "precarious bodies" who strategically make decisions to protect their livelihoods while "positioned in situations of exploitation and risk" (p. 53). Moreover, neoliberalism often forces social actors towards choices "under conditions that are not of their own making", but rather, shaped by "the small number of people who hold the reins of power" (Braedley & Luxton, 2020, p. 10-11). In an article which deviated from the neoliberal ethos I observed from the corporate media, Stephenson (2020) spoke with UFCW Local 401 president Tomas Hesse. He offered a vital observation at times inferred by participants when they discussed risk: "If you're leaving up the Plexiglas shield at the till, why are you taking the $2 away? Is there still a risk or isn't there?" (Stephenson, 2020).

Vulnerability is allocated unevenly throughout Canada. Given that my research was conducted in Metro Vancouver, it is of note that there are unique challenges in regard to relational precarity given that even prior to the pandemic, rising real estate prices and a lack of affordably for renters and new owners was a factor in wealth disparity (Leavitt, 2016, May 18). If, as Lee and Kofman (2012) suggest, that labour precarity is tied to issues of social reproduction, then the lack of affordable housing in Vancouver not only limits choices, but may force workers to accept and tolerate work which is precarious (p. 400-401; Grigoryeva & Ley, 2019, p. 1168).

Many of the participants I interviewed were students who were actively taking classes at the time. Students looking for flexible work to accommodate their school schedules may also find themselves working in precarious employment now classified as essential labour. Like the ways flexible work is constructed in the on-demand economy, the flexibility necessary for students may be "presumed to be desired by and desirable for the worker", and thereby "normalized, reproduced, and even romanticized

by those firms and platforms" (Cockayne, 2016, p. 75; Peck, 1992 in Cockayne, 2016, p. 75). On one hand given the flexible hours, working at a grocery store is conducive to accommodating school schedules. On the other hand, this type of work is precarious in that it offers low wages, and after the onset of the pandemic, a heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19.

4.2.1. Contagion Agents and Livelihoods

While most participants acknowledged that they felt secure with their own health, they worried about passing COVID-19 to those they considered more vulnerable. A few participants mentioned how customers had become reckless as the pandemic wore on, and would often forget about keeping a safe distance when they were in the aisles of the store, or being assisted by staff at the self-checkouts. As mentioned previously, Hannah was concerned about bringing sickness home to vulnerable family members. Loustaunau et al. (2021) found that their participants were afraid to be what they termed "contagion agents […] potentially asymptomatic carriers and posing a deadly threat to both their family members and to elderly coworkers and customers" (p. 868). Like Hannah, Jonas also had concerns about exposure and shared that he avoided contact with vulnerable family like his grandparents because of his increased risk of exposure. Moreover, Jonas was also concerned about the implications of contracting and passing the virus to his parents who may then be unable to go to work.

> My biggest concern would be contracting covid and bringing it home and in my immediate household it wouldn't be the big threat of dying but not having my parents be able to go to work because they've been in close contact of covid.

Mikkel was also worried about the financial implications of exposure to COVID-19.

> I think I do have a little bit of a worry because this is my main source of income. I don't know what would happen if I got sick and I had to, I don't know what I'd do for money.

As expected, most participants who worked through the pandemic did not have access to paid sick leave, and if they contracted COVID-19, they would have been forced to take unpaid sick time. While this type of precarity existed prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 adds a new dimension of precarity, whereby workers may feel pressured to work despite illness. While none of the participants with whom I spoke had contracted

COVID-19 at the time of our interviews, Loustaunau et al. (2021) found that workers coped with the knowledge of returning to the workplace after their recovery “in which exposure to bodily harm, and uncertainty around contracting the virus, has become a normative aspect of precarious work” (Loustanau et al., 2021, p. 867). This normalization of precarity is in line with Sandset’s (2021) use of the terms ‘slow violence’ and a ‘state of acceptance’, whereby “the slow and steady violence and death zones created every day rely on an affective mode of expecting and accepting that certain people and communities will die and suffer” (p. 1415). Most participants felt relatively healthy themselves, and were not necessarily concerned about the threat of imminent death. However, they were concerned about the potential health risks to vulnerable family, and how they and their households would pay bills if they were unable to go to work.

4.2.2. Transit

Most of the participants with whom I spoke lived in close proximity to the stores at which they worked, and were able to walk, or were given a ride by a family member. Three participants often used public transit to get to work. According to TransLink, “even at the lowest point of the pandemic, approximately 75,000 people still relied on transit every day, including many essential workers” (2021). Garcia et. al (2021) found that in the United States, many workers performing the work designated as essential during the pandemic “face an elevated risk of COVID-19 every time they go to work, particularly those who rely on crowded public transportation” (p. e77). Cook et al. (2020) highlight the dimension of class as it pertains to the pandemic and point out that “while many professionals continue to work from the relative safety of their homes, manual and precarious workers often travel on public transport and work side-by-side with their colleagues, facing a high risk of infection” (p. 74). Jonas, a student who worked part time hours had concerns about taking transit but laughed as he remarked, “in the end, it’s still a demand so I just have to take it”.

While TransLink introduced limited seating on buses to promote physical distancing, participants still found distancing in buses difficult (TransLink, 2020).

> Because now with the reduced transit, there are more people on one bus. It's so hard to even get a seat to sit down and definitely there are issues with social distancing, especially when you're standing. There's not really

> much room to go anywhere, but hasn't been much of a concern for me just because my bus rides [have] been like 15 minutes, you know, definitely before it was a definite concern […] but now I think it's become better (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth's experience indicates an increased risk at the beginning of the pandemic, but at the time of our second conversation she noted that her experiences on public transportation had improved.

Magnus had taken some time off from attending university in Korea to come to Canada for a "working holiday" in February of 2020. He had a one year visa during which time he had goals of discovering new experiences, making new friends, and improving his English. Upon his arrival he got a job at a restaurant which subsequently went out of business, and because of the pandemic he experienced difficulty finding work.

> I don't have some kind of special skill or something, I'm just a student so for people like me who doesn't have a special skill for a job might have a very hard time during that time.

Like Elizabeth he commented on the crowding on public transportation, difficulties with physically distancing, and that when he caught his bus at a stop located near one of the busier skytrain stations, half of the seats were already occupied.

> Yeah, [it's] really hard to keep the distance. So the only thing I can do when I see a person coughing—I just run away all the way back or things like that. Technically there's no way to prevent it perfectly and even in work too (Magnus).

Despite the safety measures TransLink had adopted, using public transit increased vulnerability for participants given that there were challenges with physical distancing in busy buses and trains.

While transit service was never fully interrupted in BC during the pandemic, the inextricable relationship between labour and transport was laid bare in Ontario when the Windsor mayor ordered the shut down of public transportation for two weeks in March of 2020. The transit union representing drivers pled with Mayor Drew Dilkens,

> They claim the shutdown announced Thursday makes it difficult for lower-income people without cars to access grocery stores and pharmacies, as well as get to jobs deemed essential to keeping the city running, like

> grocery store cashiers, pharmacy staff and long-term care workers (Cross, 2020).

In response to the union striving to protect workers' access to their workplaces, the Windsor Mayor argued that there were pharmacies and grocery stores which deliver, and "more than 1,500 volunteers have mobilized to help people get necessities." The mayor's response to the concern was reflective of the neoliberal logic which shaped state protocol and restrictions to contain the virus.

> 'There are family, there are friends, there are neighbours',[Dilkens] said. 'I can guarantee you, no one in the city is going to starve because we shut down transit for two weeks. People will figure this out' (Cross, 2020).

This sentiment is in keeping with the neoliberal expectations of families, wherein functions once performed by the state are downloaded onto families supported by "neoliberal goals of self-reliance in public policy" (Fudge & Cossman, 2002, p. 4). While BC did not have a transit lockdown, in the early days of the pandemic, Elizabeth encountered issues due to reduced buses. Like Elizabeth, for those without immediate family close by, self-reliance can involve unexpected out of pocket costs.

> I definitely did have issues like with transportation and stuff because of the pandemic. There were few buses and everything so it was harder to get to work, which is another problem and my workplace was understanding to the point where they just like change the timings for me. I had to take a cab and that was really difficult because that was coming out of my own pocket. That was something.

Neoliberal policy requires a great deal of flexibility from individuals and families (Creese, 2006, p. 3 in Spasevski, 2012, p. 7). Given that many workers may not be able to work within walking distance to their place of employment for many reasons including the housing crisis in Vancouver, public transportation is crucial for workers to access their workplaces (Housing affordability is emerging as a big issue this election Is anybody going to fix the problem?, 2021). Public policy written through the neoliberal lens of individualism and self-reliance added a layer of vulnerability for those who continued to travel to work on transit through the pandemic.

4.3. Uncompensated Risk, Additional Labour, and Unreported Injuries

As I described in the first two sections of this chapter, conditions were already precarious for many workers in British Columbia but the pandemic served as a catalyst to further precaritize working conditions for many essential workers. Marta had left her job prior to the onset of the pandemic, and when I asked her how her job in grocery compared with her other employment experiences, she said it was "very, very stressful" and "we'd have a lot of days where people would call in sick just because they didn't want to come to work, just like the crippling anxiety, of going to work". She discussed the ways in which her management often made herself and her coworkers feel expendable.

> Upper management was treating everybody like they were replaceable and worthless, and you know, everyone is replaceable no matter what your job is, no matter what you're doing, no matter who you are, everyone is replaceable, which I get but don't treat us like we're replaceable. We're here, we're giving you our time, and so people stopped wanting to come to work.

This lends credence to the hypothesis that the pandemic was a factor in the further precaritization of labour which was already characterized by poor working conditions. If as Marta explained, some grocery workers were already treated by their employers as "replaceable and worthless" prior to the onset of the pandemic, how did this change, when the pandemic began? Responses to this question were disparate including physical and emotional exhaustion from working extra shifts during a frenetic time, and layoffs resulting in increased labour for those who remained employed.

When I spoke with Elizabeth for the first time, before the pandemic began, she mentioned that layoffs were a regular occurrence. She described the workload as being high, given that the store strived for higher sales with fewer workers. However, upon the onset of the pandemic, her hours, and her workload increased further.

> Honestly I think it got worse, employers were definitely understanding because everyone was definitely going through the same thing; everyone was just done, everyone was just tired, at the end of the day, no one wanted to do five days in a row because we were just exhausted. Both physically and mentally.

Elizabeth is an international student and noted that the stress of an increased workload was compounded by her family being far away, and not knowing what was happening at home. She mentioned sadly that her plans to travel home to see her family during the semester break had been cancelled. For her it was not simply a vacation, but a way to check on her family, and to save money given the high cost of living in Vancouver.

Like Elizabeth, layoffs at Hannah's store were common, and also had a significant impact on her own and her coworkers' workloads. Those I interviewed after the pandemic began detailed the increased expectations around cleaning as being one of the most significant changes to their work day. Elizabeth noted that,

> The biggest difference would probably be obviously the work load we had to do, the constant cleaning because then we were required to clean after every customer, whether it was busy or not we had to constantly clean.

Most participants noted that they would have cleaning responsibilities for a portion of their workday, or sometimes the full day. Cleaning included sanitizing the shopping baskets and carts, the freezer door handles, stair railings, and all commonly touched surface areas in the store. For a short time, one of the retailers used contractors to clean outside of store hours, which temporarily alleviated the workloads for the frontline staff of these stores, but also prompts further questions and concerns about the exploitation of non-union workers in contract positions.

Elizabeth worked at the service desk, assisting customers on self-checkouts, and remarked that while cleaning had become a constant expectation of her job, "deli workers and bakery workers obviously have more work to do than even cashiers because they're dealing with food". This was confirmed by the participants I interviewed who worked in the deli, who revealed a grueling schedule for cleaning, especially for those working closing shifts.

> Well so cleaning includes a lot of things so when you say cleaning it can be just picking up the mats off the floor, sweeping, cleaning the counter tops and then if you're the closing person, if you're off at ten there's a whole bunch of things you use to cook in the back like the machinery. There's two ovens, there's one thermalizer which is water, boiling water that you put bags of food inside to heat up, there's the fryer and then there's some—um, well, and there's always dishes to do so all of that, all together, I think, is the hardest part (Charlotte).

When the pandemic began, deli workers temporarily worked in other departments sanitizing.

> A lot of the things in the deli that we used to serve, they stopped serving because of contamination issues and stuff like that. Uh, so we still had to work just as much, it just wasn't the same tasks so the deli workers would—so what they did was, the deli has a separate union in Safeway but during the pandemic all the unions had merged so we could do other department's jobs as well, so I would for example, stock shelves, sometimes I'd work in the produce department, and sometimes I would just, like for eight hours, clean and sanitize baskets that customers would use (Charlotte)

Charlotte noted that she appreciated the change, given that she got to work with friends in other departments, and that she was able to start her shift earlier in the day. Hannah recalled a time at the beginning of the pandemic, when there was no demand for deli meat and her department slowed to the point that they "lost a lot of [their] earnings". Her hours were cut, and it was devastating to her as an international student because being partially laid off meant that she could not afford tuition for the next semester, and would be forced to enroll at an institution with lower tuition fees.

The additional work exacerbated conditions which were already taxing for some of the participants I interviewed, and they welcomed the temporary wage increase.

> It was nice to get that $2, definitely because we were doing so much work but, yeah, they removed it in, in four months. If—if we had a choice I think it would have been nice if the government regulated the pay, in the sense that essential workers will be paid $2 extra regardless (Elizabeth).

Once the grocery chains eliminated the hero pay for their staff, the uncompensated extra physical labour had become a standard part of the job description, and participants who had union representation waited to have the pay reinstated.

Elizabeth developed an overuse injury from the added physical labour, and shared her fears about reporting the injury.

> Sometimes all of us were put into allocation which is cleaning the store--constantly cleaning stuff. I have like injuries on my wrist. Getting swollen and it's--I don't know what it's called and haven't gotten the time to get it checked but it might be carpal tunnel I'm not sure. But yeah, one of my friends, my closest friends actually had to quit the job because of that reason […] There are a lot of people some people step forward for these injuries, some people don't.

Elizabeth and her coworkers' reticence to report workplace injuries reveal the ways in which the interplay between the power held by institutions and the relational precarity of working through a pandemic limits choices and agency. Not only does precarious work involve higher risk, but injuries that occur on the job are often under-reported. In their research, Kreshpaj et al. (2021) found that in Sweden the under-reporting of occupational injuries was higher among precariously employed workers than among those working in standard employment (p. 6). Consequently, this places a burden on workers without access to social benefits, and may result in the injury becoming worse (Kreshpaj et al., 2021, p. 7).

> Yeah, this other girl just joined recently she got injured on the till […]. She got injured on her arm. She does get paid for it and everything but again she's like one of those people, one out of ten people who actually reported the injury. A lot of us people are just like, 'No, we don't know what's gonna happen they might just lay us off completely'. We just work through it, you know. So many get injured, myself included, and I haven't dealt with it just because of that, that we will not get paid for it, you know (Elizabeth).

Canadian research suggests that workers in precarious forms of employment are also less likely to report safety or health concerns. In his research about 'voice' in precarious forms of employment labour, Lewchuk found that workers "were six to seven times more likely to report that raising health and safety issues would have negative employment consequences" (p. 811). Moreover, racialized workers were 50% more likely to be concerned about reporting health and safety concerns than white workers (p. 808).

Prior to the mid-1970s, Canadian provinces used an external regulatory mechanism to monitor workplace health and safety (Lewchuk, 2013, p. 791). With the support of workers in male dominated, unionized sectors, this shifted towards an Internal Responsibility System (IRS) wherein "workers could be active participants of their own safety at work" and "exercise their voice" through participating on committees, requesting information on hazardous conditions, or through refusing to work until conditions improved (p. 790, 793). According to Lewchuk (2013),

> Worker voice and the IRS were adopted in Canada at a unique historical moment. The labour movement was near its post-war peak in terms of influence and the standard employment relationship was widespread. Workers in a number of economic sectors felt sufficiently secure that they were willing to demand changes to protect their health and to play more of a role in voicing their concerns to management. (p. 796).

Labour market restructuring has resulted in more service sector jobs, a decline in union density, and significantly fewer workers in standard employment relationships as there were in the 1970s when the IRS was implemented (Vosko et al., 2009, p. 1; Lewchuk, 2013, p. 792, 797). The IRS benefited workers in sectors such as mining and other heavy industry where safety issues included those related to underground mine or steel mills, and not “hazards such as stress, harassment, and employment security”, in fact “the health and safety concerns of women, racial minorities and workers in precarious employment relationships were addressed only where they were similar to those of this largely male, unionized, full-time industrial workforce” (Lewchuk, 2013, p. 793). Lewchuk’s (2013) findings suggest that given the rise of precarious work, “consideration needs to be given to increasing reliance on external regulation and inspection of workplace health and safety issues, and decreasing reliance on the IRS in sectors where employment is most insecure” (p. 812).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the changes made in the early 2000s to the ESA resulted in delays in the resolution of complaints, the failure to proactively investigate employers, industries and sectors with a history of ESA violations, barriers to employees in having their complaints addressed, suppression of complaints, and other issues pertaining to employment justice (BC Employment Standards Coalition, p. 5). In contrast to the BC Employment Standards Branch, WorkSafeBC has the very specific role of working “with affected employees that suffer from a work-related injury or disease with return-to-work rehabilitation, compensation, health care benefits and other services” (Government of British Columbia, 2022). However, the lack of proactive investigations into workplace conditions, and expecting workers to come forward when they are cautious about negative consequences leaves those in precarious employment relationships in a vulnerable position.

In her investigation of complaints about abuses of power, Ahmed (2021) argues that “to become a complainer is to become the location of a problem” (p. 2). As Moretan-Robinson (2015) asserts, “when Indigenous people raise issues of racism within the workforce they are more often than not positioned as ‘troublemakers’”, and as Caxaj and Cohen (2019) point out in their research about migrant farmworkers’ health and safety, “to identify a labour or health violation and come forward as a ‘whistle-blower’, [is] an action that can jeopardize their job status” (p. 99; p. 12). In other words, there are ‘features’ which serve to preserve the status quo and maintain systemic

inequalities which may further revictimize or reinjure the complainant if they were to voice negative conditions about a workplace. In the next section however, participants described the subtle ways in which they asserted themselves as social actors, as their workloads increased during the pandemic.

4.4. Reworking

In her work about the implications of imperialism on children's lives in Howa, a village in Sudan, Katz (2004) observed several strategies through which "people used to stay afloat and even reformulate the conditions and possibilities of their everyday lives"(p. x). To attain a better understanding of these responses to political change, she categorized them as being: resilience, reworking, and resistance (p. x). Katz (2004) describes these as practices which offer "the recuperation of dignity in a small range of transactions" (p. 246). She draws from James Scott's (1985) work which describes the "minimal cultural decencies that serve to define what full citizenship in local society means", and allows people to "get by" (Chin & Mittelman, 2000, p. 37). Scott's 'infrapolitics' focuses on the micro-interactive, everyday resistance that develops in subaltern populations, through actions that "fall short of openly declared contestations" yet still resist forces of subordination (Chin & Mittelman, 2000, p. 37). What emerged in my interviews was evidence of 'reworking', which Katz (2004) describes as practices "that alter the conditions of people's existence to enable more workable lives and create more viable terrains of practice" (p. 247). In the midst of the extra, uncompensated labour involved with cleaning, participants found small ways to 'rework' practices to alleviate the new conditions imposed upon them.

Participants described the extra cleaning as being disruptive at times, in particular for those customers who were in a rush. Mikkel noted that he did not clean the belt for those with only one or two items, and he found that some customers held their items and asked him to take out his scan gun so that they would not have to set their groceries down on the belt.

> They [name of grocer] make sure that none of us get lazy on our duties, like we're supposed to clean the belt after every customer but some of us don't do that all the time. I'm actually guilty of doing that a lot I think because sometimes the customer wants to rush and just pay for their stuff and some customers don't like it; they'll—they're like 'why didn't you stop this

> customer, you have to clean the belt first' and all that, but uh, yeah, sometimes my supervisor comes and just cleans the belt for me.

In a similar fashion to the way Mikkel reworked how he dealt with increased work through offloading it to a supervisor, Katherina also reworked the way she approached new store protocol, finding a way to take a short break between transactions. She found that some customers were not concerned with her cleaning the belt before they put their groceries down, and others expected it to be cleaned. She mentioned that she had to "gauge [her] customers", and cleaned the belt most of the time except for those with only a few items. To ensure proper sanitization, Katherina explained that her store had removed dividers from the cash desks to have only one transaction per belt. She noted that she liked how sanitizing the belt between customers gave her a break, and that even though it was only a few extra seconds it was a nice change from the busy pace to which she had become accustomed.

According to Loustaunau et al. (2021), the workers they interviewed in Oregon confided that practices, including cleaning procedures, "were already becoming more lax" when COVID-19 cases were rising in July of 2020, in comparison to the way they had been in the beginning (p. 867). During my interviews, participants mentioned that the strict protocol which had emerged at the beginning of the pandemic had eventually loosened. On one hand this change had implications for their continued safety, but on the other hand, for Elizabeth and her coworkers, it was an opportunity to renegotiate their increasingly high workloads.

> It's been like a roller coaster, especially because, um, I mean, it's okay now because I think like a lot of us have adapted to everything and also they've become kind of lenient, at work, but at a start of the pandemic was crazy. Just the amount of work was so much.

She discussed that once her employer stopped paying the premium wage, they no longer enforced the cleaning protocols as strictly as they had in the beginning of the pandemic, and she and her coworkers found a way to negotiate their workloads as they waited for the extra pay to be reinstated.

> Rowena: One more question. You'd mentioned that when you fought for higher wages after they ended, [name of grocer] just sort---of instead of paying you, they cut back on your required cleaning? They got a little bit more lax in that way?
>
> Elizabeth: Yeah, that's it.

Rowena: Okay, just wanted to make sure I understood that.

Elizabeth: Like they did cut back with our cleaning, they were like, 'Oh, you don't have to do it after every customer you could do it after every three to four customers'.

Rowena: Rather than you pay more?

Elizabeth: Yes, yes.

Rowena: Okay.

Elizabeth: Pretty much, this is the reality of it. I think the only reason we will manage to get our way, was because of the union aspect of it but, um, yeah, that's pretty much all they did for us was that, and then they did change our contract but again like I said that extra pay means extra taxes hence we're getting paid about the same amount we got paid before so what are you really doing for us, you know.

Elizabeth noted when protocol was loosening, cases were lower than they were at the time of our interview. Given that cases were rising she remarked that they would likely go back to the "constant cleaning" to try to prevent the spread. According to Katz,

> Projects of reworking are enfolded into hegemonic social relations because rather than attempt to undo these relations or call them into question, they attempt to recalibrate power relations and/or redistribute resources. This is not to say that those engaged in the politics of reworking accept or support the hegemony of the ruling classes and dominant social groups, but that in undertaking such politics, their interests are not so much in challenging hegemonic power as in attempting to undermine its inequities on the very grounds on which they are cast (p. 247).

These practices, especially after losing 'hero' or 'hazard' pay could be seen as a way to recoup their losses, and to "recalibrate power relations" (Ibid). Katz (2004) asserts that there are two interconnected aspects to the material practices of reworking, "one is associated with redirecting and in some cases reconstituting available resources and the other is associated with people's retooling themselves as political subjects and social actors" (p. 247).

Elizabeth and her coworkers negotiated their workloads to be more commensurate with their compensation, while at the same time remaining conscious of the impact of this type of resistance on the spread of the virus. Katherina used the newfound time to clean between customers as a way to take a few extra moments to disengage from continuous customer interactions. As his supervisors watched over him

closely to prevent indolence, Mikkel redistributed some of the extra cleaning work to them when he was able. While these subtle forms of resistance were not universal among everyone with whom I spoke, most participants described that their employers, like Elizabeth's had done, relaxed the safety protocol implemented during the first wave, as I will discuss in the next section.

4.5. Safety Protocol and Personal Protective Equipment

According to WorkSafe B.C., COVID-19 safety plans for employers include: installing barriers where workers are unable to maintain distance from customers or coworkers, expanding cleaning protocol to include barrier cleaning, and proper maintenance for buildings with heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems (Workplace BC, 2022). While Loustaunau et al. (2021) found that Oregon essential workers reported that their employers were slow to establish safety protocols at the onset of the pandemic, in contrast, those I interviewed confirmed that their employers implemented safety protocol almost immediately, including installing protective barriers, increased cleaning, and the distribution of gloves, hand sanitizer, masks and face shields (p. 865). Some felt that their safety was important to their employers.

> Um, if there was an instance we felt, unsafe we could tell a manager and just, like, if it was valid we could even go home if that was okay with them (Elizabeth).

The new store procedures and personal protective equipment (PPE) implemented to protect the safety of those working and shopping in the stores helped to offer a degree of protection for staff, but had a variety of subtle inadequacies: there were inconsistencies between grocery chains, some grocers relaxed COVID-19 protocols after the first wave, and some PPE proved to be challenging for some participants. While most were happy with the speed at which the safety measures were implemented, there were indeed ways in which participants struggled with PPE and other pandemic protocol during their work days. The following sections will focus on discussions with participants about challenges with masks, protective barriers, and store layouts which made social distancing challenging.

4.5.1. Masks

While she did not suffer from any respiratory conditions and was keenly aware that wearing a mask was to protect others, Elizabeth discussed the discomfort of wearing a mask for long hours.

> Sometimes it's just suffocating constantly wearing the mask, because you're wearing it in the store you're wearing it on the bus, at home's probably the only time I'm lucky because I stay at home alone, but other people stay amongst others, like other people are obviously scared about that, so yeah.

According to Mishra and Cousik (2021) the COVID-19 pandemic has been significantly impacting on the "work and lives with persons with disabilities (PWDs)", including those with respiratory conditions like "cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, and asthma", who may have difficulty wearing masks (p. 76). While none of the participants with whom I spoke disclosed any of these conditions, they did discuss the ways that the PPE posed a challenge to their comfort, and to both their physical and mental health.

> I can't really wear the gloves that they give us because either they don't fit and the rest of them are all latex and I have a mild allergy, thankfully not a serious one, but they're very uncomfortable on my skin—I get a rash so I sanitize my hands quite a bit--we have sanitizer at each till (Aleksander).

Katherina was allergic to the gloves and sanitizer, and while she noted that she did not have any disabilities, wearing a mask produced a disabling environment which resulted in anxiety and claustrophobia. She had a doctor's note exempting her from wearing a mask, and was able to continue working behind the protective barrier while wearing the mask not covering her nose. She shared with me that wearing a mask resulted in panic attacks for her, but both her manager and the union were helpful with finding appropriate accommodations.

> So, I mean, I went to them about the sanitizing. The glove wearing and stuff and the masks, and then they got right on it. They got me a care package and, but it's like, it was a for a long term disability thing which I mean I didn't, I don't think this is a long, it's not a disability so I didn't really fill out the forms and I didn't feel it was necessary. Plus, my manager was working with me anyway, so it wasn't like a big deal like I wanted to find out the protocol. So, but I mean they were right there, they were helpful, I have a couple of shop stewards at my work too so if I do have issues I can go to them and talk to them and they'll help me because they're the shop stewards and so they've been really good, the union […] it's just like an

> accommodation package, it's just you fill out these forms and you state your disability and then they, they'll put you in a different section of [name of grocer]. So, but like I said it wasn't disability, there was no need for me to fill out the forms. It's just like an accommodation package.

She found the union helpful in getting assistance with accommodations for the PPE, to mitigate her anxiety. However, not covering her nose with the mask resulted in conflict with one customer, who refused to come to her till. The customer proceeded to go to another till, and then complained to store management, who explained that Katherina had a doctor's note exempting her from wearing a mask.

There is evidence of an increased prevalence of invisible disabilities such as anxiety resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Gao et al., 2020; Lie et al. 2020 in Mishra & Cousik, 2021, p.77). According to Mishra and Cousik (2021),

> the greatest barrier to the effective functioning of PWDs is disabling work environments. This problem is aggravated further when governments and organizations institute one-size-fit-all regulations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 78).

The union was able to mitigate this one-size-fit-all constraint which produced a disabling environment for Katherina, by providing her with a care package which allowed her to continue working. However, not wearing a mask over her nose resulted in an uncomfortable situation for her when a customer "got upset".

4.5.2. Inconsistencies

Through interviews with participants I discovered that COVID-19 prevention protocol varied between grocers, and even between stores owned by the same grocers. Some retailers used thermometers to check staff for COVID-19 symptoms before shifts, some offered masks and sanitizer at entranceways to customers, some required staff to fill out a COVID-19 symptom check form before shifts, and some paid contractors to clean after hours. The protections provided to workers were uneven, and changed in intensity throughout the pandemic.

As previously mentioned, aligning with Loustaunau's work, participants found that their employers were becoming more relaxed with safety practices, and this was reflected in practices controlling store occupancy limits (p. 867). WorksafeBC recommended that retail stores use occupancy limits to "manage areas of crowding and

congestion in the workplace" (WorkSafeBC, 2021). Magnus said that his store had a guard contracted from a security company to monitor occupancy levels. Mikkel recalled that while his store enforced occupancy limits at first, they had stopped by the time of our interview, a result of what he believed had to do with being short on workers.

> Mikkel: […] enforce the masks a little better and the maximum number of customers in the store I think because we're not counting the people that come in the store
>
> Rowena: Did they count people at first?
>
> Mikkel: Yeah they did. They did used to.
>
> Rowena: Oh okay?
>
> Mikkel: But now we don't even have people at the front to hand out masks, we stopped doing that as well.

Jonas described a similar situation when I asked him about occupancy limits, and revealed the consequences his store faced when they did not adhere to the guidelines.

> So we're supposed to do it but we already got fined once for $10000. Yeah, so and after that it's become more strict but I'd still say it's more on and off. You have normally one person standing by the entrance, cleaning baskets, giving masks to people who don't have it and keeping like a head count of people inside the store and then, yeah but we don't do explicit counting because normally our store capacity is 105 I believe but normally we stay around seventy…sixty so we're not, we don't, yeah we don't count too explicitly because we're not that busy all the time.

The inconsistencies between stores in terms of safety precautions, and increasingly loosening protocol left some workers hoping that their employers would do more to protect their safety. There were other factors that resulted in frustration for participants during the early months of the pandemic. The next section will discuss the ways in which existing store designs limited the ability for workers and customers to effectively socially distance.

4.5.3. Store Layouts

Given that architecture and design varied between stores, store layouts limited the ability to socially distance for participants working at some stores. WorkplaceBC recommended that employers rearrange store layouts to support physical distancing, to consider stopping or reducing product stocking when stores were open, and to consider

blocking off aisles when staff are restocking shelves (Understanding the new WorkSafe regulations for retail and health care workers, 2020). Loustaunau et al. (2021) found that narrow aisles and “customers getting too close when they asked for assistance” proved to be a constant challenge for workers (p. 866). Some of the protocol to allow for social distancing were difficult for customers to follow, including the arrow stickers on the floor to direct foot traffic one way, which Katherina mentioned “kind of help”, then paused, laughed, and clarified that “it doesn’t”. Hannah worked at a different store than Katherina, and also remarked that the arrows in the aisles “doesn’t really work” to help customers physically distance.

For a short time Katherina worked in online order fulfilment, where she would gather products for customer orders for delivery and pickup. I asked her about challenges with social distancing when she was gathering their products.

> Yes, except when customers approach you. That’s when the social distancing was kind of difficult because then because you’re trying to shop and then you get some that say you’re too close but they’re coming towards you. I’m trying to social distance but they’re coming to me but trying to blame it on me kind of thing which is not really fair.

Store layouts were at times restrictive in maintaining a social distance. Magnus noted that the physical layout of the store at which he worked made it challenging to keep a distance from customers when stocking shelves.

> It’s almost impossible to keep the distance. I’m not sure if the distancing works or not—anyway, it’s almost impossible because when you put the products onto the shelf in the aisles, people need to pass by, but I need to work, but the aisle is not really spacious, it’s narrow—it’s no one’s fault, it’s not my fault and it’s not the customer’s fault, it’s just impossible to keep the distance […]

For smaller stores, like the one at which Magnus worked, the existing layout was inconducive to social distancing, but even for larger stores, measures like using arrows were not effective in directing foot traffic one way when they were ignored by some customers.

As I will discuss in further detail in the next chapter, the nature of grocery store work involves customer interactions and this can also, as Katherina describes, pose a challenge when relying on customers to maintain their distance when they approach to ask for assistance. The one size fits all safety plans recommended for grocery retailers

offered some workers peace of mind, but for others, it was a constant struggle to find a balance between meeting the expectations surrounding customer service, and their own personal comfort.

4.5.4. Protective Barriers

The protective barriers added a level of security for some, but others outlined the design flaw which did not shield the cashier and customer through the entire bagging and payment process. Aleksander noted that at his store "there are spaces that people can put their hands through to pay for something or take cash" but this was not consistent for all participants. Jonas, Katherina and Magnus all worked for different grocers but each commented on the ways that protective barriers were prohibitive to social distancing when customers paid for their groceries.

> I think that this is one minor flaw in the plexiglass is that it shields you directly in front of you but slightly to your left where they start paying, where they have to pay, right so they have to come a little closer that to the left side of that is like unprotected so if you lean over to bag groceries and at the same time they're leaning over to pay or something that's like probably the most dangerous and exposed time where you might get contract the virus or something but other than that I've kind of got used to it (Jonas).

Katherina recalls customers observing that the plexiglass should be longer to offer increased protection.

> Some do for the most part, stay behind the plexi but like to be behind it too, it's hard for us cashiers and we got to put the groceries to the side where it doesn't have a plexi. So you know so it kind of defeats the purpose.

Likewise, the protective barrier at the store at which Magnus worked was not long enough, and he laughed as he remarked that having the protective barrier was better than nothing.

> It's mandatory for the employees to wear face masks and in the checkout, in the till, when people pay we have a partition, a plastic partition between the cashier and the customers in line but it's set up in front, but in the side, it's open. I think it's just minimalist but better than nothing.

Put together, the protective barriers and masks produced communication barriers between cashiers and customers, and Magnus explained that when these challenges came up customers would circumvent the protective barrier, defeating its purpose.

> […] if we have to ask something, listen to—ask their phone number for getting points or something, it's really hard to, you know, listen. So, even though there's a partition, they just come—they don't talk directly to this way, but come around and talk to me.

These communication barriers were often exacerbated when store music was loud, and Hannah shared that she wished her employers would lower the volume of music at the store because "it's crazy loud". Hannah recalls customers asking her to take off her mask so they could hear her.

> I've seen people being like really careless about it, like they would be asking me to take off my mask because they cannot hear me, especially elder people and I always refuse because I don't want to—uh yeah, there was this old guy who was like, 'take off your mask, I cannot hear you, it's super loud', and I just like started [formulating] my answers because like, and I would just tell him, 'it's store policy, I cannot do that and honestly I don't want to', but like yeah, I just don't want to put in risk any one of you—customers are around me, because I deal with food—directly—you don't want me to take off my mask, trust me.

The ability to effectively communicate with an elderly customer who has challenges with hearing was in tension with Hannah's unwillingness to become a "contagion agent" to a vulnerable elder customer (Ibid). Her refusal to take off her mask demonstrates the challenges workers in the service industry face with interacting with customers. Complicating matters was loud music which made it even more difficult to communicate while wearing masks and speaking through protective barriers.

4.6. The Tea on Transparency

Another concern shared by a few participants was the lack of transparency on the part of their employers in notifying employees and the public when there had been COVID-19 exposures identified at the stores. While some participants praised their employers for their openness about exposures, others wished that they would do better at communicating to staff when a coworker had tested positive. While this information was accessible through the union and personal networks at work, it was not widely circulated in an official capacity to staff at the store.

> Oh and actually last thing, being more transparent with covid cases at the store because there was two covid cases I believe, which were not made available to coworkers but only to the people they closely work with so I

> had to find out that information out from emailing the union and through like, I guess, 'tea', from other coworkers just gossiping (Jonas).

Hannah laughed wryly as she asked me if I wanted to know how the store at which she works handles situations where they suspect a staff member may have contracted COVID-19.

> They don't tell us--that's how. <laughs>. So the person does that themselves, they just tell management like, 'I gotta go' <laughs> 'I'm sick', or they just call in sick and they just say what's happening but I think they don't do anything until the tests come back positive and even if they do I didn't hear management doing anything about one worker who actually had covid, like I don't remember them telling us anything related to that, like 'be careful' yeah, you know reinforcing the 'be careful', to 'check your symptoms because it has happened in our store' and nothing like that we never received, or there wasn't any meeting, anything like that because sometimes--I have like at the back of the deli and they just tell us so this is what's happening but we didn't have that when an actual worker had covid. Yeah, no I mean to be fair she was a cashier, she wasn't closely working to us but I feel like once you work at [grocery store name], it's a very close knit family in a way in the sense that everybody interacts with everybody, like the cashier person interacts a lot with other cashiers and the cashiers interact with deli people, like they buy your stuff, it's just like something that makes you realize how related—yeah.

Hannah speculated that her employers may not have wanted to disclose exposures because they may have felt that it was bad for business. She explained that another location had become a "ghost town" when people found out that there had been an exposure at that store. Her comments on the interconnectedness between workers, despite being in different departments demonstrates the importance of the social networks which develop at work. Working in close proximity with others increased the risk of exposure in contained spaces, and at the same time, the social connections which form informal networks served as a way to acquire important information about recent exposures.

Increased workloads were met with reluctant acceptance and subtle forms of resistance so as not to jeopardize store safety or their employment status. When she had difficulty communicating with an elderly customer, Hannah's refusal to take off her mask exemplified the complex social engagements in retail wherein employees must mediate the tensions between the expectations involved with affective labour, while simultaneously protecting themselves, and preventing the spread of the virus. Not only were participants concerned about an elevated risk of exposure at work and on transit

on their way to work, but there was also the concern of becoming ‘contagion agents’, and unknowingly exposing vulnerable family, coworkers and customers to the virus. It is important to consider that low paid workers may have been forced to accept a higher risk assemblage for a temporary wage increase. If proper safety measures are not in place, they risk becoming ‘contagion agents’ to vulnerable people who may die, as a result of systems which render entire sectors of workers as disposable. The next chapter will explore the increased risk during the pandemic for those forced to labour under conditions where the assumption is that ‘the customer is always right’.

Chapter 5.

Affective Labour, Possession and Entitlement

Discussions with participants revealed that grocery stores were sites of complex social engagements during the pandemic. Retail work can be characterized by its exploitation of affective labour, involving "selling aspects of 'the self'", including emotions (Hofmann & Moreno, 2016, p. 10). Some participants I interviewed experienced similar employer expectations as the airline workers Hochschild (2011) represented in her work, and were tasked to convey "middle class sensibilities, in the ways in which they interacted with customers" (p. 304-305). Shortly before the pandemic began, Marta, one of my first interview participants remarked that "it's definitely a lifestyle they're selling", as she discussed the types of customers who frequented the store, some of whom would "[pull] the 'I'm always right' strategy to get their way". Whether through the promise of an aspirational lifestyle, or as a way in which to signify comfort, employees are tasked to sell more than groceries during interactions. As grocery stores remained open as essential businesses, workers continued to navigate the expectations of performing commodified embodied labour while simultaneously trying to defend themselves from exposure to the virus.

In their roles as frontline workers, both Hannah and Magnus revealed an awareness about the possibility of becoming 'contagion agents' (Loustaunau et al., 2021, p. 868). They each remarked that they observed elderly people to be the most reckless with PPE, and Magnus found it ironic that "they're the most vulnerable people, right, but they don't like to wear face masks" (Magnus). Like Magnus, Hannah brought up concerns about safety.

> Yeah, the thing that's scary is you have this timeframe that you don't really know if you might be sick or not because some people may not be symptomatic and things like that right so it's just like, should I be staying at home, like should I be taking precautions to take care of the customers because you're also very aware of your customers, you know your customers, like elder people who always come at this time of the day and you're worried about them, I hope I'm not sick for their sake, like when you're my age you're just, it's really more about your customers, about your coworkers, like the older people or the people that you know that are diabetic, like you're just worried about them.

Again, it is important to stress that most participants were not immediately worried about themselves but of the impact their exposure might have on others, such as the more vulnerable customers entering the store, and as Hannah also mentioned, about her more vulnerable coworkers.

In this chapter I begin with an examination of the ways grocery work is a form care work which prioritizes the comfort of the customer at the expense of workers, and I explore the ways in which performing affective labour proves to be challenging while managing technology which does not always benefit workers. Section 5.2 explores the struggle under the paradigm of 'the customer is always right', and the inherent power imbalance which exists between workers and customers. Section 5.3 examines the ways workers are left to protect their own bodily integrity under potentially hazardous conditions, when they are continuing to work while attention to safety practices declines, and when 'annoying' customers refuse to wear masks. Section 5.4 compares the experiences of participants with the findings of Loustaunau's et al. (2021), wherein the pandemic increased experiences of everyday racism for workers (p. 870). Finally, section 5.5 discusses two types of difficult customers participants encountered, including those who refused to wear masks when entering stores, and the less common 'Karen', a gendered archetype that performs the labour to protect the interests of white supremacy.

5.1. Humans and Robots

Participants described warm exchanges with regular customers, and there was an acknowledgment that not only did they wish to be treated as human, they wanted to treat their customers with the same respect. Rose (2020) observed that "the frontline essential labor and the lost labor are functions that are now highlighted for many of us in our daily existence, where we viscerally feel their immediate contributions to our lived experience" (p. 212). Grocery stores are essential to the work of social reproduction, and frontline work bears similarities to care work in that care is "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and 'repair' our world so we can live in it as long as possible" (Tronto, 1993, p. 103 in Morrow & Dombroski, 2015, p. 89).

Grocery work can be characterized by its employment of staff trained to produce a feeling of comfort for those purchasing the supplies they need to sustain themselves and their households. While it has its own particularities, retail work shares some

similarities to undervalued, commodified ‘care work’, which also commodifies workers’ emotions, involves precarity in terms of low wages, and exposure to injury (Parreñas, 2009, p. 135).

5.1.1. Grocery and Care Work

Care work maintains the needs of social reproduction, including elder care, domestic labour and childcare (Parreñas, 2009, p. 135). The work of social reproduction is profoundly undervalued, and yet essential work. Mitchell et al. (2003) describes social reproduction as “how we live” (p. 2). Gendered roles remain as specters of this history, and according to Spasevski (2012), the devaluation of social reproductive work, “is mirrored in broader labour market relations” resulting in “the mutually reinforcing negative cycle in which women are occupationally streamed into sectors that are undervalued and underpaid” (p. 6). Consequently, the effort required of service workers “seems invisible”, and like “mothering and other domains of female expertise, for example, are often thought instinctual and hence devalued” (Cobble and Merrill, 2009, p. 169). Fudge and Cossman (2002) describe this devaluation of work within spheres of production as “feminization”, (p. 26). Marta worked for two different stores within the same chain, in two different provinces, and observed that women “dominate” the industry, as they have very few men on the team at any given time.

Participants spoke fondly of the aspects of the job which involved human connections with regular customers. Marta described the ease of her interactions with regular customers, and when she noticed they were purchasing items to cook a specific recipe, she would initiate conversations like, “oh, you’re having lasagna tonight” to engage with them in a congenial way. Like Marta, Regina also worked as a trainer in addition to cashier work, and remarked that staff were encouraged in training to make conversations with customers about the products they were purchasing, and about whether they have tried specific items. She noted that she would also have friendly exchanges with customers she knew.

> Some of the regular customers, some of them are really nice because they’ll remember that some of us are going to school and they’ll ask us how it’s going or it’ll just be personal friendly chat, like they’ll ask ‘how was your weekend?’, ‘do you have plans for the weekend?’ Just kind of like friendly stuff.

Through Regina's description of these types of exchanges, it was clear that they were a pleasant, and welcome part of her day, especially given that not all customers behaved like the regulars.

Workers may have filled an affective void in the lives of some during a time when isolation was a reality for so many people. Given that "we're feeding human beings and not robots", Aleksander was aware of the connections he formed with customers at the cash desk, and said that he observed many lonely people, "whether they're seniors or young people [whom] when they shop want to hear someone say hello […] they want to hear somebody talk to them". Mikkel enjoyed interactions with parents and children at the cash desk, recalling: "sometimes they lift the baby up to the card machine and they make the baby hold the card". Marta said that her employer emphasized, "you want to welcome people like they're family, treat them like, be like, 'hey long time no see, how've you been? How's so and so?' So with the regular clients, yes, we definitely did that". She shared that she felt that this practice "was a good thing" that she "did like" about her employer.

According to Hofmann (2016), "a wide range of service workers perform prescribed emotions on an everyday basis, negotiating the authenticity of their emotions at work alongside their personal identities" (p. 100). While pleasant exchanges were encouraged by employers during training, they were willingly deployed by many of the participants *on their own terms*. They were reserved for certain customers, in particular, the regulars with whom they had already built a rapport, and in Mikkel's case, for the children who came shopping with their parents.

5.1.2. Invisibility and Objectification

Through the commodification of emotional work, workers are objectified and navigate interactions wherein they are "treated as a *mere* object" (Hofmann & Moreno, 2016, p. 7). Mikkel described interactions where he was not acknowledged by the customer.

> They don't acknowledge you, like they don't even look at you, they just, they're just there to get their stuff and just go. I feel like they could at least say 'hey' or something.

In her work on domestic workers in the United States, Romero (2002) learned that “the invisibility of workers in domestic service is a common characteristic of the occupation”, and connects it to Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s assessment of the historical aspect of invisibility in the United States wherein the “social role ‘servant’ so frequently carries with it the unspoken adjective invisible” (p. 56).

> It is precisely this continued rendering invisible of what Marston calls ‘the quotidian work of enabling and maintaining life—both human and non-human’ that also renders invisible and normalized racialized and class oppressions, the exploitation of workers, and the abrogation and denial of collective responsibility for the care of the young, the sick, those unable to engage in paid work, and the material world that supports us (Strauss & Meehan, 2015, p. 17).

Given that retail work in grocery bears similarities to care work, I would argue that frontline grocery workers, despite the temporary visibility in the public sphere, are also simultaneously subject to this type of invisibility wherein “racialized and class oppressions” are naturalized as part of the customer/employee dynamic (ibid).

Notably, Charlotte described how at times utilizing the emotion required for customer service interactions was also displeasing to customers.

> Sometimes some people just walk up to you with like the worst kind of like attitudes, right, there’s those people, and then you’re still expected to be polite and nice and because they’re kind of in a pissed off mood and you’re smiling, they take that as a personal offence.

Mikkel’s and Charlotte’s descriptions indicate that there are times when invisibility, or perhaps making oneself smaller, is yet another component of where a worker is expected to acquiesce to the emotional needs of the consumer. Like Hochschild (1983), Bishop and Hoel (2008) argue that “frontline workers are still required to suppress their own feeling in the face of awkward customers and to continue to display emotion that is desirable to management” (p. 343). In short, in grocery stores the comfort of the customer comes first.

Unsurprisingly, participants indicated that they preferred when customers treated them as living humans, and not simply as automatons which exist to check out their groceries. Mikkel said that he found his least favourite interactions to be the ones where customers did not greet him, or acknowledge him while he was scanning their groceries, indicating the ways in which some types of work are rendered invisible. It could be said

that in retail, like in care work, the comfort of the recipient of care is prioritized. Thereby, retail workers may be expected to acquiesce to the object of their care, the customer, and provide an interaction with which the customer is most comfortable. As mentioned previously, Aleksander remarked that through supplying groceries, they were feeding humans and not robots. With that said, workers are not robots either. In the next section participants described situations where cashiers were expected to perform labour in affective ways while employers and customers also expected the accuracy and efficiency of a computer.

5.1.3. Vibes and Tech

For Mikkel, prior to working at the store, and shortly after he started he said that he found the employees to be “very friendly”, and he “got a vibe that everything was just high quality and high standard”, but that changed, and he said that he began to “feel a little different, like they’re more human, my coworkers feel more human I guess, but yeah before it felt like, I don’t know, an elite grocery store, if that makes any sense?”

> I guess when I initially started it was like an expectation to be like super friendly and like, I don’t know, dressing up really nice and all that stuff and knowing about the products, just yeah—treating the customers really well and all that, but uh, I don’t know, when time passed, I just felt it was just less of what they, less like, less faking it I guess and more, they’re genuinely like that, I guess (Mikkel).

Prior to working at the store, Mikkel described that he thought that cashiers may have been “faking it”, but after doing the job, and getting to know his coworkers he said that he felt that they were genuinely friendly. There are conditions however, which tax that ‘friendliness’ for some working the cash desk.

Regina worked for the same company as Mikkel, and while we were exchanging goodbyes after our interview at a coffee shop she mentioned that she had *just* quit her job at the grocery store to work elsewhere. She remarked that the part of her job which she found the most challenging was maintaining her employer’s high expectations in terms of quality standards.

> It’s a little bit stressful but people shop at [grocery store name] for the experience so we’re expected to uphold that.

She was balancing the task of going to school and working, and found that combining the two produced considerable stress. At Regina's store, produce is not tagged and simply scanned at the till, but rather, represented by codes which must be remembered by the cashier, and keyed in at the point of sale. Regina noted that sometimes she found the friendly exchanges difficult to maintain, "especially when you have to focus on what you're doing, like typing in codes when people are talking to you" (Regina).

> Getting everything done correctly, in a friendly and a timely manner especially with larger things or with certain, repeat customers that come in that tend to be a little bit difficult, that was a little bit stressful, but I mean, customer service anywhere is going to be a little bit stressful, but, again, I feel because of their high standards it's amplified just a little bit (Regina).

Illuminating the ways in which the stores rely on workers to become human extensions of the often limited point of sale systems, Regina mentioned that there were "upwards of one hundred" codes to memorize, which they are tested on, and require 100% to pass. She recalled that they were told to make their own product code books, described how frequently codes were added, or blocked, that there were "a bunch of wacky organic produce", and a program her employer used to allot funds to farmers which involved additional codes also requiring memorization.

> It's just small, bits and pieces everywhere that are a little bit hard to remember sometimes makes it more difficult, especially for people who haven't worked at a grocery store before (Regina).

She laughed as she was describing the codes and added, "It's a lot, honestly. It's like another school subject". Marta also recalled that it was especially difficult for new cashiers to work quickly while also ensuring accuracy.

> […] a lot of people can be quite mean to new cashiers, they'll be like, 'I'm in a rush—you're so slow!', like we actually have people say that. So I would just kind of be there to help elevate the situation and also diffuse it, I guess, in some cases, just because some people aren't always the nicest to new cashiers—I mean, to all cashiers in general but really to new ones who are taking their time to make sure everything's correct. Yeah and then once that was done, they would do produce quizzes to make sure they were memorizing—the expectation was to memorize at least five codes a day.

Magnus worked for a different grocer and while he found there to be "more than 500" codes to memorize", he did not voice the same pressures to converse with customers at his store. The gendered dimensions of the expectations of care work may result in

differences in the experiential realities between men and women in this sector. Men may be encouraged to be efficient, while women may be expected to be both efficient and friendly. For Charlotte, she found the technology at her store to be "pretty archaic", and while they "function well enough", she explained that the store at which she worked prefers "to repair the things they have, and they seem to break down pretty often […]". Regina recalled the challenges she had with some customers when "things [were] not running smoothly", and they "get pissed off when their card doesn't tap correctly the first time". In short, the technology described by participants does not appear to make their work easier or more efficient. Instead it requires them to behave like computers, while simultaneously performing the required emotional labour of making customers feel comfortable and welcomed.

5.2. The Customer is Always Right

Nearly every participant with whom I spoke discussed the normative standard in which the 'customer is always right', albeit framed in disparate ways from store to store, and implemented differently through store policy and training. Some stores preferred to refer to the customer as being 'first', as opposed to 'right'. Some participants remarked that the companies were "keen on keeping their customers happy", and were directed to be "welcoming", "helpful", and to prioritize the needs of the customer. Others were even more explicit about the demands of their employers.

> One of the things in regards to customer service is—there's this kind of strange thing that they have which is called Customer Obsession which sounds [laughs], yeah, it's kinda weird right? Basically we just have to be like obsessed with making sure that the customer leaves happy--is what it tells us to do. It was never like that before (Regina).

My interviews revealed that the discourses of 'the customer is always right' produced an unequal power dynamic between the customer and the worker, whereby customers attempted to leverage power against workers to carry out various requests such as bagging groceries, after safety policies implemented after the pandemic required customers to bag their own groceries at some stores. Some situations were followed up with a complaint to a corporate office, or by a request to speak to a manager.

I interviewed Regina in February, one month before the pandemic began and she indicated that there was a class dimension to the ways in which customers treated employees at her store.

> There's a very specific demographic of people that come into [grocery store name], a specific type of person so sometimes people cannot be the most--they're not the most polite, they get frustrated at the smallest inconveniences […] If there's something wrong with a price, for example, we have to go over and check it, people get frustrated at that but I don't know why they would, because of price accuracy promise which is the same pretty much everywhere: if it's under ten bucks you get it for free, if we are incorrect about the price, you'll get the product for free […] I don't think that it's really anything caused by us, it's based around stuff like that or us being out of products.

Regina suggested that customers have higher expectations at the store at which she worked which Marta, who had also worked for the same company, had described as selling a "lifestyle". Marta also described the ways in which it was demonstrated that the customer is always right, and explained that once she was given more responsibilities she would always acquiesce to the customer's requests.

> I've had many times where, especially when I started working out as a cashier, where I was like, 'no this is the way, sorry you can't get this' and the customer would get mad and so my team leader would get involved and say 'oh yeah no we'll give it to you this time blah blah blah'.

Eventually Marta agreed to whatever customers wanted because she learned that when she refused, the concern would be escalated to management who would accede to the customer's demands.

Participants described tensions as being intensified in the early days of the pandemic, and this was reflected in the interactions workers faced.

> Customers became more mean, aggressive, um, people were so accustomed to us, having this--I think I our store was one of the stores that did the bagging you know, you will like everything for you so when the pandemic hit and we weren't doing any of that, a lot of customers were like were angry. Just because we denied to bag their stuff. They have literally dropped their groceries and walked out of the store, putting up a fit, other customers have just been mean to us. Overall, we'd see customers and customers fighting. It's just, yeah. We didn't have enough employees. There'd be like a huge lineup--seem like a huge line because you still have to maintain that distance…and customers would constantly complain, 'Oh, like they're not enough people on the cash till' and we're like, 'we don't know where to get them from', and just constantly complain--everyone was

> just--I think everyone was just trying to adjust to this but just kind of coming off on us. Like, again, these were people we met on a daily basis (Elizabeth).

These types of interactions gained visibility during the pandemic, as highlighted in a media article in which a grocery worker discussed new stresses of the job which included behaviours like a customer throwing a jug of milk at a cashier. Kelly Ferguson, the employee interviewed by the journalist explained, “They’re impatient and they’re pissed off because they can’t get what they want” (Bains, 2020). According to Katherina,

> I think everyone's just on high edge. So I think it's either you having a bad day or having a good day, and it all depends on how you're feeling that day and how you interact with each other.

When the ‘customer is always right’ in an affective labour setting, it produces an unequal power dynamic between the worker and the customer. Moreover, while difficult customers existed prior to the pandemic, challenging situations appear to have intensified after it began. As I will discuss in the next section, the heightened tension within the first year of the pandemic produced situations wherein customers, through enacting forms of control, can pose a threat when workers are torn between the expectations surrounding affective labour, and the stresses to protect their bodily integrity.

5.3. Bodily Integrity and Affective Labour

As discussed in Chapter 3, historically, British Columbia relied on the benevolence of ‘gentlemanly capitalists’, and upon peer pressure to uphold proper business practices in the ways they treated their labour. Relying on a ‘noblesse oblige’ method of protecting labour, together with declining union density, and a lack of enforcement of employment standards, has further diminished working conditions in grocery stores. Moreover, working under conditions where there is a power differential which favours the customer can produce situations which are difficult for workers to navigate. Charlotte expressed her intense discomfort when a customer grabbed her hand when she was working at the cash desk.

> There used to be a regular customer who would come in, in the evening, like close to before the store closing, and he would come in, and more likely

> than not he would be very drunk, and he would be not nice to the female cashiers, and like the female attendants, and I think I've only had one bad interaction with him where I was handing him his change so he grabbed the change but he also grabbed my hand so that was a little bit scary but…I don't think he could cause any harm---but I think he can---I think he's like you know, not a great person in that way, but I spoke to my manager and I didn't have any interactions with him after that but I know that other cashiers have.

Charlotte proceeded to ask her manager if she could refuse service to a customer who was making her uncomfortable but "didn't get a specific answer". Instead she was advised to "let me know if he comes back and I'll talk to the store manager about it" which Charlotte explained may result in the customer being banned from coming into the store. It is telling that management would not provide a definitive answer about refusing service, that other workers were also experiencing difficult interactions with this customer, and that the store management would only consider banning the customer from the store if he came back and repeated the behaviour. This indicates that at the store at which Charlotte works, workers were already exposed to behaviour from customers which threatened their body integrity in ways which were unrelated to the pandemic.

Protections for essential workers during the pandemic have echoed the neoliberal protocol referenced previously wherein the favoured approach to protecting people's well-being is "through individual economic and social freedoms", with minimal state intervention in commerce (Cohen & Pulkingham, 2000, p. 16). According to Loustaunau et al. (2021) "unsafe work conditions and difficult customers" force workers to "literally take their lives in their hands, making it feel to them that they are not essential, but rather disposable" (p. 859).

According to a letter from Save-On-Foods to UFCW Local 1518, their reason for not enforcing masks in stores was that "forcing masks where the legislation has not yet been established places a significant burden on our team members to enforce rules with customers" (Save-On-Foods refused calls to require face masks inside their BC grocery stores, company letter shows, 2020). Despite Dr. Bonnie Henry's encouragement of the public to wear masks in grocery stores prior to the indoor mask legislation, and despite the union's pleas for companies to "ensure they have the proper security measures in place to protect workers", Save-On-Foods resisted (Ibid).

> This is not their responsibility, and as you well know, today's workplace, amid the pandemic, is challenging for our teams, without having the weight of mandating non-legislated protocols on their shoulders (Save-On-Foods refused calls to require face masks inside their BC grocery stores, company letter shows, 2020, October 29).

I found the audacity of this statement infuriating given that it deflected the reasons for not properly protecting employees from exposure onto the employees themselves. According to the director of the BC Retail Council of Canada, "an order would eliminate the onus on our industry to make that requirement", which may indicate that employers did not wish to disrupt the power dynamic which positions the customer as always right, and risk losing profits. Instead of updating policy to refuse entry and acknowledge the union's recommendation to "alleviate any 'burden' on workers to enforce mask wearing rules by beefing up security measures", both Save-On-Foods and Stong's Market chose to view enforcement as a task for the front line workers already experiencing vulnerability and increased workloads (Save-On-Foods refused calls to require face masks inside their BC grocery stores, company letter shows, 2020; Paterson, 2020).

> I'm also having to make sure customers are maintaining distance. People have just kind of become accustomed to it and just kind of do everything that they want to do. (Elizabeth).

My research reveals that entrusting employee safety to employers with loose guidelines from the state allows inconsistencies between employers in the ways in which they implement safety protocol. Moreover, given the nature of affective work, workers are often forced to protect their own bodily integrity with limited assistance from their employers during their shifts. Even in situations unrelated to the pandemic, when, for instance, a customer behaved in concerning ways with Charlotte and other women at the store, there was limited intervention on the part of the employer. As I will discuss in the next section, the performance of affective labour is deeply implicated in the preservation of the status quo, including the maintenance of existing gendered colonial hierarchies.

5.3.1. The Threat of Violence

Once the indoor mask mandate came into effect in November of 2020, Elizabeth recalled that they were strict at first, but succumbed to customer pressure when her store "actually changed the rule and they told us: 'politely ask someone to wear a mask.

If they say no, just ignore it because it's not worth getting into a fight'". My interviews revealed similar findings to Loustaunau et al. (2021) in that on a daily basis, given the lack of intervention from management, workers were tasked with "enforcing [their] own bodily integrity" (p. 866).

> [In] late May there was no mask mandate and there was just barely social distancing procedures being enacted but a lot of people didn't follow that and you know obviously if some people are angry and just hard to enforce those things and everyone's unaccepting to change immediately so at that time it was quite difficult" (Jonas).

Balancing the expectations surrounding work which required emotional labour with the task of setting the necessary boundaries to protect their bodily integrity was a constant battle for participants.

Of course, difficult customers predate the pandemic, and Bishop and Hoel (2008) emphasize that "overall, writing on the frontliner—customer interaction paints a picture of a difficult relationship characterized by a power imbalance with frequently abusive and sometimes even violent customers" (Bishop & Hoel, 2008, p. 343-344). Elizabeth explained her fears in interacting with customers who may be volatile, based upon what she had heard had happened at another store.

> Elizabeth: A lot of customers just did not believe the pandemic was an actual thing. Would just totally ignore regulations and just did not keep, you know, a distance, and it was really hard to confront them especially because like there were so many people who are getting beat up, you know, during the pandemic and stuff so that was crazy.
>
> Rowena: Beat up? Do you mean like at the store?
>
> Elizabeth: Yeah, our store nothing in particular happened but I believe a different I think it was a Walmart in Richmond, one of the employees was hit by a customer--yeah, because he was asked to wear a mask and the customer denied but he decided to go on a rampage instead.

This unequal relationship between customers and workers, and difficult interactions were cast in a different light when customers posed a risk of exposing workers to COVID-19, especially prior to official indoor mask mandates and the availability of vaccines. The unequal power dynamic between the customers and worker produced situations wherein workers had to enforce their own individual protocol to maintain social distancing, which was often mediated by the desire to avoid conflict and for some, to avoid potential violence.

5.3.2. We Haven’t Stopped Exposing Ourselves

Loustaunau et al. (2021) found that not only did those they interviewed feel that their employers “placed the burden of safety on them to take action to improve conditions”, but as previously mentioned, safety practices both on the part of the store, as well as customers became more relaxed than they were in the first few months of the pandemic (p. 867). When both customers and employers began to behave as if the pandemic had ended, it placed a further burden on workers. Participants discussed the shift as the pandemic carried on, wherein practices and behaviours on the part of management and customers began to signify its perceived end. Hannah wryly recounted her concerns about this behaviour.

> Yeah, <laughs> we haven’t stopped being heroes <both laugh uncomfortably> like we haven’t stopped exposing ourselves and it’s not like it’s slowing down, it’s quite the opposite and that’s the thing that worries me actually, like how people are taking this as if they just got used to it and they’re just like well, we’ve survived this long, doesn’t seem as bad, that’s how I feel like people are taking it, just getting used to it and considering not as bad and it just scares me, the numbers are going up.

Charlotte reported a similar experience, and remarked that “the concern that people have has gone down a little bit, right, and the recklessness has gone a little bit up”. Many participants struggled with the ways that they continued to sustain the everyday risks of the pandemic while customers became reckless with recommended safety protocol like physical distancing.

Maintaining the performance required in affective labour environments is difficult when those you are working to serve may pose a health risk. Participants were forced to negotiate, and renegotiate proxemics in their interactions with customers. Selling aspects of the self, as required in affective labour requires workers not only to negotiate the ways they insert “emotions and personal identities at work”, but in the ways they are required to “continually renegotiate access to their bodies” (Hofmann & Moreno, 2016, p. 10). The tensions between the ways emotions are commodified in service work, and the ways workers are forced to individually enforce their bodily integrity was evident in nearly all the conversations I had with participants.

> And like with customers coming in, you know, it might be a simple cough, maybe allergies or something but you never know, you never know. You can't politely just tell them to step away (Elizabeth).

Under the expectations of commodified affective labour, workers are obligated to sell "aspects of 'the self'", to which customers are bequeathed an entitlement (Hofmann & Moreno, 2016, p. 10). According to Hawn (2020), civil and civility are terms which have "been used throughout history as tools of oppression, colonization and bigotry", and evolved from a "legalistic definition based on biological sex and land ownership status, to one that painted a clear line between those who have power and those who do not" (p. 221, 222). If social norms in the workplace, including remaining polite during uncomfortable interactions can be categorized as belonging within discourses of civility, then they are an indication of the ways in which some are able to unleash their structural power over others. Therefore, under the pandemic conditions at the time, and given the neoliberal response on the part of employers and the state, customers had disproportionate power over the lives of those in retail work. Workers were disciplined by discourses of civility which not only served to maintain existing power structures, but reinforced the production of systemic disposability. As previously referenced, "people in 'high contact, high risk' jobs are positioned as sacrifices to the relatively well-off and protected" (Mcivor et al., 2020 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1419). Workers forced to protect their own bodily integrity were not only marginalized under an ongoing colonial hierarchy, but therefore, according to the ordering principles as determined by the political response to the pandemic which designated some work as essential.

5.3.3. Annoying Customers

Participants discussed the challenges which arose from customers not respecting COVID-19 safety protocol at work, and the resulting irritation that came from interacting with those who wanted to discuss the legitimacy of the pandemic, or the efficacy of masks.

> I feel like, there's already like, enough conflict that there is with the people who adamantly refuse to wear masks, so I don't want to deal with the kind of person at work who is reluctantly wearing a mask, you know? I feel like that would be more of a thing to deal with, rather than if someone just wasn't, because I feel like there are still screens, and there's still enough precautions taken that it shouldn't be that big of an issue, but I feel like if a customer is just going to be really, really annoying about having to wear a mask, that would be a worse experience than not wearing one" (Charlotte).

Charlotte wanted to avoid the annoyance of this type of *ad nauseum* interaction, given that she felt a degree of protection behind the barrier, even if a customer was not

wearing a mask. For Katherina, despite the occasional difficult customer she said that 90% of customer interactions were “good”, and that she always tried to “be friendly, be nice”, and to “treat every customer with respect” (Katherina). Loustaunau et al. (2021) explored the tensions between trying to provide “good” service, while also enforcing pandemic safety protocol.

> They were confronted by customers who were also tense and afraid, requiring them to perform additional emotional management to meet the simultaneous demand of ‘good customer service’ and the enforcement of new safety rules that were met with resistance from some customers, while also regulating the emotions they experience as a result of the heightened risk under COVID-19. This left workers ‘emotionally exhausted’, as one worker put it, impacting their well-being and life outside work (p. 867).

Before and after masks were mandated as required in indoor spaces, participants were forced to protect their own bodily integrity. UFCW Local 1518 urged Save-On-Foods to adopt a mask policy to protect workers’ safety, but were refused on account that it would increase the burden on employees to enforce. Protecting themselves was a challenge when they were bound by the affective performances expected of workers, including friendliness, and by the civility discourses often involved in its deliverance which maintained existing power structures. Participants approached customers who challenged safety protocol with both a wariness of potential exposure, and with a weariness given that some customers were said to be ‘annoying’ if asked to wear a mask.

5.4. Everyday Forms of Racism

White supremacy took a very limited and temporally brief spotlight during 2020 and 2021 with the exposure of police brutality against Black, Indigenous, and other racialized minorities during traffic stops and wellness checks, and with the rise of violent hate crimes against Asian people amidst reports of xenophobia and racism (Cooke, 2020; Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Stolberg, 2020; Lou et al., 2021, p. 1). Not only was overt white supremacy rendered temporarily visible through these acts of violence, but also as referenced in Chapter 2.3, through the proliferation of videos depicting everyday forms of racism in retail spaces. Loustaunau et al. (2021) found that the pandemic increased conflict for non-white and migrant workers who began to experience more everyday racism (p. 870). While participants with whom I spoke said that they did not

experience an increase in everyday racism from customers directed towards them personally, some did witness it, or heard of it happening to their coworkers. Jonah described hearing hostile customers as using "racial slurs" a few times. Charlotte shared a story she was told by a coworker when she had asked the reason for another coworkers resignation.

> I think she's Punjabi, and she had like a really horrid interaction with a customer who would refuse to be served by her because of her skin colour and the customer was yelling obscenities at her. I wasn't present for it but I heard that that's why she quit. So I feel like if a bad enough thing happens like that as well, like a terrible, terrible customer interaction I would not want to work there anymore.

While this situation was an extreme, Charlotte also described some more subtle forms of racism experienced from customers.

> When someone goes through the website it's more of a big deal because the management is concerned about it and um, in those kind of complaints there's always like weird racial undertones where they feel the need to mention the race of the person that helped them uh, even though sometimes it includes that, because people when they're really displeased with your work they'll definitely ask for your name to complain so even though the person's name is included in the complaint, so there's no need for more clarification, it would still include their race so it's always funny when we see those kind of complaints posted and we just look at them and we're like Jesus this is ridiculous, and I think on a more minor scale which I also find funny is certain people because of you being a visible minority, they will enunciate more when they're talking to you right, they'd go like, 'Can. I. Get. A…' <laughs> .

She noted that while the management treats these complaints seriously, they do not "pay attention to the racial undertones", and workers are never reprimanded for the complaints. Elizabeth shared that she was recently asked by a coworker at another store if she ever felt that customers were racist at the store at which she worked. Her answer was 'no', and she explained that the reason she believes she has not experienced racism was because she worked at a smaller store where many of the customers were regulars with whom they build relationships.

> In other stores it's just random customers, chances are you don't really see them, bigger stores so you don't have that interaction but she's like 'the other store has a lot of Indians and people come in and literally tell her to her face 'go back to where you've came from, and this is a smaller version of India…na na na' so yeah, we haven't felt that. We have still got that in

our store but again, we're the kind of people who are like eh, whatever kind of thing.

While she notes that acts of racism have happened at her store, she and her coworkers may be inclined to disregard them. Elizabeth acknowledged that racist behaviour exists, but her use of the term 'whatever' suggests that there may not be anything that someone in that situation could successfully achieve through countering a racist customer, nor allowing such a situation to bother them. This may be construed as an strategy for survival, given the power employers hold over workers in addition to the unequal power dynamic between workers and customers. In short, drawing attention to racism is incongruent with the very foundation of retail work, to keep the customer happy. Parker (2017) uses Ahmed's concept of the "feminist killjoy" and argues that "one who exposes sexism, heterosexism, racism, and other power practices" becomes a recipient of social sanctions for "stealing happiness" (p. 322). In retail, the power dynamic between customers and workers is often made explicit by customers and employers. Dissent within the context of such exchanges may not only be unsafe for some workers, but it is debatable whether they, like other individual actions, would result in long term change.

Everyday forms of racism were intensified for those in Loustaunau's et al. research, however, my research suggests that while acts of racism did occur around them, participants did not experience an increase in intensity or volume during the pandemic. It did appear, however, that participants who may have been 'read' as a racialized minority shared more experiences of conflict during the pandemic than those who read as white. This may be due to the small sample size, or it may align with Loustaunas's et al. (2021) findings that the pandemic increased *conflict* for racialized workers, which may not be characterized as 'everyday racism' (p. 870). The next section highlights two types of customers, one of which refused to wear masks in stores, the other, the 'Karen', a much discussed archetype in the public sphere used, among other things, to critique the structural power of white women.

5.5. Difficult Customers

Individuals refusing to wear masks in indoor public spaces during the first year of the pandemic were asserting their structural power while concurrently increasing the vulnerability of those with whom they interacted. Whiteness is historically entrenched in Canada's history, and as such, the colonial hierarchy shapes entitlements to rights, to

bodies, and to spaces (Razack, 2002). While white supremacy is often popularly understood to be fringe movements, white power organizations, "individual and group hostility or 'racial animus', these are subterfuge for its "structural formation and the labor necessary to conceal it" (Bonds, 2020, p. 780). Put another way, white supremacy is a structure of domination; an ordering principle which places whiteness at the top.

Rabelo et al. (2021) argues that whiteness confers "entitlement to Black women's time, personal space, and bodies, often resulting in boundary violations" (p. 1850). With this said, I would argue that Canada's history of ongoing settler colonialism, and neoliberalism which have shaped which workers fill precarious jobs, have produced, and justify a highly stratified labour market within which exist the conditions for entitlement to workers' time, personal space and bodies in retail spaces. Moreover, the pandemic produced crisis conditions which offered visibility for some essential workers, while simultaneously increasing their vulnerability to exposure as they continued working. At the root of retail work exists an inherent power differential between customers and workers, which can also be expressed as an entitlement to workers time, personal space and bodies. My interviews revealed that dealing with customers refusing to wear masks became a part of the job post-pandemic, and this section will discuss these refusals which may have their roots in an increase in misinformation and through the desire to dominate and preserve the existing social order.

5.5.1. These are My Rights

According to B.C.'s Human Rights Commissioner, while masks are mandatory in indoor public spaces in BC, exemptions include those who are "unable to wear a mask because of a health condition or physical or mental impairment" (British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2021). The guidelines state that,

> You don't have to wear a mask if: you are under 5 years old, you are unable to wear a mask because of a health condition or physical or mental impairment, you are unable to put on or remove a mask without help from another person, [or if], wearing a mask prevents you from communicating with someone with a hearing impairment" (British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2021).

It is also noted that having a valid issue to not wear a mask did not *guarantee* access to indoor spaces, and businesses were able to provide alternative accommodations

including curbside pickup (Ibid). While there are reasons to critique a one size fits all method for PPE, the mask discourse revealed by participants was not about the ways in which restrictions negatively impacted full participation in society for customers with disabilities, but rather, closely resembled the discourse used in right wing movements overtly trying to preserve white supremacy, and appearing increasingly sinister to many vulnerable groups.

None of the reasons for refusal provided to participants by customers were included as valid by the B.C. Human Rights Commission. Participants disclosed that they were told by customers that: 1) the pandemic is a hoax, 2) it is their right not to wear a mask, and that 3) masks do not work. As previously mentioned, in keeping with Loustaunau et al.'s (2021) findings, management "did not commit to, or sometimes could not, enforce new regulations", which offloads responsibility to enforce protocol to the worker (p. 866). Elizabeth commented that there were "a lot of customers just who did not believe, like the pandemic was an actual thing". Hannah encountered customers who refused to wear masks because of reasons associated with their 'rights'.

> I haven't really refused people who aren't wearing masks because I know that they're just going to get all mad and ask for a manager. They'll say these are my rights or something along the lines of that.

This assertion of 'rights' at the expense of collective health practices during a time of crises evidences the presence of the neoliberal logic which centers individualism, as opposed to behaviours which are more conducive to public health which, would involve, as Elizabeth put it, "whether you believe it or not, it's just--could you just do it for the sake of everyone else".

Individualistic practices and 'possessive logics', combined with the imaginary which normalizes "settler presence, privilege and power", may be the driving force behind such behaviour which appears to be an attempt to reinscribe white supremacy (Bond, 2020, p. 783; Mackey, 2014, p. 239).

> Possessive logics encompass rationales for taking, as well as the conditions defining whose bodies are permitted to be where and under what circumstances. White possessive logics are discursively and materially produced and embodied within subjects (Bond, 2020, p. 783).

Unconstrained 'rights' to retail spaces are in line with the ways in which white cultural dominance assumes a "natural and universal authority", including "entitlement—to define

all others as 'cultural', marginal, and subordinate to its unmarked centre, and to authorize *which* differences *and* which similarities are allowed within its projects" (Mackey, 1999, p. 173). Those refusing masks in grocery stores were asserting their societal power under the existing social order, and their subsequent right to decide which members of society are disposable so they can continue living as they were prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Al-Ramahi et al. (2021) analyzed English language tweets and hashtags which were in opposition to wearing masks, and identified ten categories to which the tweets could be organized.

> A total of 51,170 tweets were analyzed with respect to categories identified from the LDA model. These categories were mainly related to (ordered per their frequency in posts) (1) constitutional rights and freedom of choice; (2) conspiracy theory, population control, and big pharma; (3) fake news, fake numbers, fake pandemic, and lies; (4) unhealthy, low oxygen, carbon dioxide, lung infections, and weakened immune system; (5) political, fear, and control people; (6) masks ineffective and cannot block tiny particles; (7) mental health and suicide; (8) herd immunity and dependency on the immune system; (9) child abuse and dehumanization; and (10) virus-related statistics (high recovery rates and low mortality rates) (Al-Ramahi et al., 2021, p. 4).

The researchers contend that their findings "emphasize the potential relationship between social media behaviour and its manifestation in the physical world", but without interviewing those who engage with workers in this way it is difficult to know the exact epistemologies which shaped these refusals (Al-Ramahi et al., 2021, p. 8). Indictive of the emergence of dominant language used by some to justify their refusal, my interview data revealed that those who were against wearing masks also fell into the categories the researchers used to categorize the tweets including categories 1, 3, and 6: "constitutional rights and freedom of choice", "fake news, fake numbers, fake pandemic, and lies", and "masks ineffective and cannot block tiny particles" (p. 4).

> Once I was serving someone at the sandwich station and I was wearing my mask and a guy comes up, and he's a regular, and everyone kind of just likes him because of his demeanor, um, but he wasn't wearing a mask, he was opposed to wearing them. He started telling me how they don't work, and how he's an expert on this blah blah blah (Charlotte).

My conversations with participants took place between 2020 and early 2021, making them antecedents to the broad scale anti-vaccine, anti-mask, and anti-mandate protests.

However, these entitlements have existed long before the pandemic, and are tied to the formation of the settler colonial state. Cheryl Harris (1993) argues that whiteness is intertwined with property law, and that white property rights were “cemented in law though the appropriation of Native American lands and the subsequent enslavement of Africans” (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xix; Harris, 1993, p. 1722). Consequently, refusals may be an assertion of dominance over spaces to which some feel entitled to enter unconditionally, as well as an entitlement over people’s bodies within these spaces. This entitlement may inform their perceived right to stand in close proximity, neglect to socially distance, to act as a “contagion agent” to workers carrying out labour essential to society, and to demonstrate their ‘superior immune systems’ to those they deem inferior within the existing social order (Loustanau et al., 2021, p. 868).

Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues that subjects “embody white possessive logics”, in ways that are “underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation state’s ownership, control and domination” (p. xii). These refusals may be a reflection of their entitlement to spaces, as well as an exertion of dominance within these spaces which would include a possessive type of proxemics which may also suggest an entitlement to, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, to workers’ time, personal space and bodies. Moreton-Robinson also contends that while men and some women are the benefactors of the sovereignty achieved through contract making, “sovereignty is not evenly distributed: queers, the disabled, recent immigrants or refugees, are outside of these regimes of presumed protection through contract making (Simpson, 2016, p. 1307). In other words, the privilege to assert the dominance exerted in these spaces is often reserved for those who do not violate the normative expectations of whiteness.

According to Mohanty (1999), “the consumer is created as *the* citizen”, and “this citizen-consumer is made possible through cheap and often invisible labour of racialized minorities or lesser-citizen minorities” (Mohanty, 1999, in Sa’ar, p. 684-685). While violating boundaries such as neglecting to properly social distance may occur out of forgetfulness or out of recklessness, it may also be indicative of an assertion of dominance over racialized minorities, or “lesser-citizen” workers seen as objects, as invisible, performing work “constructed as help, temporary, merely supplementary, and generally nonwork” (Mohanty, 1999, in Sa’ar, p. 684-685). To this end, the inherent

power dynamic in the customer-worker relationship works in tandem with the settler imaginary to justify perceived entitlements to certain spaces and bodies.

5.5.2. #KarensGoneWild

During 2020, 'Karen' discourse emerged across media platforms to indicate a gendered dimension in the reproduction of white supremacy and affirmation of the ownership of the settler state through means of "control and domination" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xii). As I discussed in the methodologies section, social media algorithms began to point me towards the 'Karen' discourse, most using hashtags like #KarenGoneWild. Nearly all the participants I interviewed conveyed experiences with challenging customers of varying genders, one of whom explicitly described the behaviour as 'Karen'-like. As previously mentioned, those who pose a threat to workers' bodily integrity go far beyond a conceivable definition of 'difficult customer'. A 'Karen' is not simply a difficult customer, however, but rather, serves to describe interactions through which white women assert dominance to uphold white supremacy.

Williams (2020) describes the Karen memes as a "cultural critique of White surveillance and White racial dominance", and argues that they serve to "[disrupt] White supremacist logics and performative racial ignorance by framing Karens and Beckys as racist—not just disgruntled and entitled" (p. 1).

> I almost exclusively deal with really understanding customers and I'd say about twenty percent of the people are like, not like that and like a very, very fringe are like the—absolutely terrible and like, you know like the *Karen customer* kind of thing but I don't think I've had an experience with that many of those people but it definitely is the case that the customer is right and you're always supposed to be like, smiling and greet them whatever but I think it's just like being a polite person, more polite because you're getting paid for it (Charlotte).

Charlotte explained that this customer returned to her after she had given her the deli meat she had just sliced, and demanded a manager. Given that it was late in the day her manager was not on shift, so while she offered to get a supervisor, she also probed more to find out the nature of the issue. It turned out that the customer was dissatisfied with how thin she had sliced the meat, and while Charlotte immediately offered to "redo it", the customer claimed that she did not have the time, and requested a manager anyway. Charlotte resliced the meat, and although the customer ended up speaking to a

manager, Charlotte said that never heard from the manager because “they’re all so familiar with those kind of people that like to complain”.

According to Bonds (2020), women’s labour “in implementing and sustaining colonial and settler colonial projects” have been a historical reality given the previously mentioned Keep Canada White organization which was organized by Canadian women, many of whom possessed the class standing to have “close ties to men of the ruling elite” (p 779; Thobani, 2007, p. 84). Bond (2020) contends that the role of white women within settler colonial projects advanced “a racially and class specific notion of womanhood” (p. 782).

> This gendered racialized framework emphasized white women’s roles as domestic managers and essential to the reproduction of white civil society in ways that both reinforced the white male status quo and afforded white women power and control over the lives of differently racialized and classed women (Bonds, 2020, p. 782)

Bond (2020) uses Moreton-Robinson’s (2015) aforementioned concept of “possessive logics”, and argues that white women are invested in white supremacy and use their labour to “accumulate assets, protect resources”, which protect the existing power structures through the denial of upward mobility and asset accumulation from people of colour (Bond, 2020, p. 783).

These lines are blurred in settler colonial states, when, according to Sa’ar (2005) liberalism promises “ever-expanding opportunities to ever-expanding numbers of individuals” and under an “ethnic bargain”, offers conditional acceptance to racialized minorities “to provide services to the dominant ethnic group in exchange for patronage or protection” (p. 685). In other words, the privileges afforded under white supremacy can motivate non-white people to uphold the dominant culture. In short, white supremacy is upheld not only by white men and women, but by those invested in the existing social order. Not only have “particular bodies” come to be “imagined as lesser than” during the pandemic, but in frontline work and within the confines of a relationship characterized by a power imbalance, the ideal conditions are produced for some to dominate workers perceived to be lower in the social order (Sandset, 2021, p. 1419). Whether or not the intentions of the customer Charlotte described was characteristic of the ‘Karen’ which Williams conceptualizes, this situation may still be seen as one in which a worker is describing an interaction wherein a customer is choosing to dominate and take

advantage of the unequal power inherent in interactions between workers and customers. Moreover, given that these interactions do not occur in a vacuum, the operations of the settler state are at play, and serve to shape the behaviours of social actors.

Chapter 6.

Heroes, Hard Work, and Sacrifice

The discourse produced by the corporate media at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic granted a temporary recognition of the importance of the labour performed in essential industries, much of which has been historically taken for granted. Using an inductive approach to thematic analysis, the dominant theme which emerged from the data was that some groups of workers designated as essential, including frontline grocery staff, were revered as the heroes of the pandemic. While hegemonic narratives quickly emerged, counternarratives revealed an acknowledgment of the conditions under which essential workers laboured, and offered critiques of the ways their employers handled compensation and safety. Grocery workers were among the essential workers praised for 'stepping up', and 'working hard' despite the risks, and were foundational to the resulting narratives of who was marked as deserving and who was undeserving of accepting social aid from the state. Readers were encouraged to express their thanks and praise to heroes for their 'sacrifice', terminology which not only inferred that some may lose their health, the health of their families, or their very lives, but that their own mortality had been deemed as less important than those for whom they were giving up their personal health and safety.

According to Tator and Henry (2000), the print media is a constituent element of "an intricate nexus" of cultural production which "articulate and communicate powerful discourses containing authoritative messages, symbols, icons, images and ideas through which individuals and groups experience culture" (p. 122). They argue that dominant, hegemonic discourses can marginalize and oppress, and alternative discourses can "challenge order and disrupt the status quo" (Tator & Henry, 2000, p. 121, 134). Hall (1980) describes Gramsci's concept of hegemony as "a state of politico-cultural relations between classes *through which* a class or class alliance dominates by consent" (p. 52). Distancing himself from Marx's "'ruling class/ruling ideas' propositions of *The German Ideology,* and the functionalist concept of 'dominant ideology' in Althusser's essay", Gramsci argues that hegemony is "never a permanent state of affairs and never uncontested" (Hall, 1980, p. 24). Indeed, it was apparent that the hero

narratives were highly contested by participants, and often involved transgressive responses to the disciplinary mechanisms imposed upon participants.

As discussed in the two previous chapters, participants revealed counternarratives challenging the dominant narratives, and shed light on the suboptimal working conditions left out of corporate media coverage. What was omitted from the public sphere serves to obfuscate power and maintain the disproportionate control societal power structures have over people's lives. According to Butler,

> The public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. The limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors (Butler, 2004, p xvii).

Given the credibility afforded to some actors and not to others, some narratives were therefore excluded from the public sphere, and this erasure served to conceal the material conditions which may have revealed the unequal distribution of vulnerability.

Using Hall's (2001) framework for Foucault's constructionist theory of representation and meaning, section 6.1 begins with an assessment of the historical foundations of Canada's approach to crisis management and maintaining critical infrastructure which manufactured authority for government officials and representatives from industry. Section 6.2 examines the statements from which the hero discourse emerged, delves into the prescribed ways of discussing heroes which involved discourses of hard work, sacrifice and duty, compares the discourse to that of another episteme, beginning with the ways the state galvanized Canadians during World War II through propaganda campaigns promoting the value of essential workers to increase industrial production, and discusses the ways in which the corporate media obfuscated class in their portrayal of essential workers. Section 6.3 explores the discursive creation of two subjects which served to reinforce the ideological borders which produce one subject personifying the hard working hero with a willingness for sacrifice, and another subject upon which to impose productivist norms to produce model citizens who are above all, consumers.

6.1. Authority and Truth

The corporate media representation of essential workers in Canada as heroes during the global pandemic is what Foucault termed, a "discursive formation" (Hall, 2001, p. 73). The authority that shapes which narratives are accepted as 'truth' have their historical foundation rooted in the ways in which the settler colonial state is preserved during times of crisis or emergency. An analytical tool provided by Hall's breakdown of Foucault's constructionist theory is the ways in which knowledge about a topic acquires authority and becomes known as 'truth' at a particular historical moment in time (Hall, 2001, p. 73). Edward Said (1978) argues that authority is:

> formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces (p. 19-20).

The lack of representation of workers in the cultural material produced by the corporate media was emblematic of the epistemic injustice which offers some actors less credibility because of negative perceptions of their social position (Samaržija & Cerovac, 2021, p. 624). In contrast, the state, acting in the interest of capital, shaped the emergency measures upon which the current pandemic emergency strategies were predicated. Those privileged with the authority to speak on the matters of essential workers in the corporate media were not the workers themselves but rather representatives of the state, and journalists who identify as the consumers dependent upon the labour of those in industries marked as critical. Above all, this authority was produced through the historical ways in which Canada approaches crisis and emergency.

6.1.1. Critical Infrastructure

Canada employs a National Strategy for Critical Infrastructure (NSCI) which was implemented to ensure the continuation of essential services during an emergency. The ten critical infrastructure sectors determined by Public Safety Canada include: energy and utilities, finance, food, transportation, government, information and communication technology, health, water, safety, and manufacturing. Essential workers are created through their relationship to these critical processes and industries. In their research of the safety and risk to essential workers in the United States, Gaitens et al. (2021) found that keeping critical industry open during crisis "requires balancing the protections of

individual workers against ensuring that the overall needs of the community are met" and can result in limited protections and poor working conditions for essential workers (p. 9). In Canada employers in critical industries are encouraged to protect worker safety using the methods recommended by public health authorities (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

The functions the state designates as critical in an emergency are influenced by the private sector. Public Safety Canada determined which services and functions can "help the private sector self-identify as essential", including "the functions provided by first responders, health care workers, critical infrastructure workers (e.g., hydro and natural gas), and workers who are essential to supply critical goods such as foods and medicines" (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Put another way, this method through which government policy allows the private sector to self-determine their relevance in the continued maintenance of critical infrastructure is exemplary of Marx's assessment whereby "the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx, 2018, p. 9)

The NSCI has its roots in a civil defense program known as the federal War Book of 1948 which was to come into effect upon the declaration of a national emergency, and allocated responsibility to the RCMP for identifying and detaining those determined to be a threat to the state, as well for the maintenance of "basic economic life" (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 84-85). Emergency response procedures were later expanded to include the aforementioned list of critical industries, and focused on strategies for "'optimized' circulations of liberal capitalist colonial order" (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 98). The public safety response to COVID-19 was shaped by strategies originally created to maintain order in the settler colonial state during emergency situations and act on threats "to the liberal way of life" (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 81). Thus, within the scope of the corporate media, those with the status to claim authority were elected officials, and those who represented capital. This authority rests on the hegemonic political ethos of neoliberal logic which not only advocates for personal responsibility, it prioritizes the needs of capital, and centres it as the solution to crises.

Authority was also afforded to a small few who represented labour, to university professors, and to economists. Some provided counternarratives to the dominant discourse which objectified essential workers as heroes. Ironically, those denied authority within the corporate media were essential workers themselves, the implications

of which may be in part responsible for the widely disparate ways of knowing which have produced misinformation, discord, and varied reactions to the state response. During the pandemic, ‘truth’ was established through narratives which were repeated and reinforced by those given stamps of authority through their relationship to capital and to the state which was responsible for the continued functioning of what was determined to be ‘critical’.

6.2. Heroes

6.2.1. There Goes My Hero

Narratives such as ‘the heroes journey’ involve “lessons centred on experiential learning”, crafted to resonate with audiences for themes involving overcoming hardships with the help of mentors, and “giving back to our families and communities” (Ascough, 2018, p. 535). In contrast, as previously argued, contemporary Canadian society is maintained by neoliberal policies and ideology which gives primacy to individualism over the collective forms of social arrangement which would “give back”, to communities (Ibid). Franco et al. (2011) operationalize heroism as a “social activity”, involving traits which include serving “others in need”, “engaged in voluntarily (even in military contexts, heroism remains an act that goes beyond actions required by military duty)”, “with recognition of possible risks/costs”, “in which the actor is willing to accept anticipated sacrifice”, and “without external gain anticipated at the time of the act” (p. 101).

The continued use of the term hero may have served to obfuscate the wage/labour relationship in favour of a perceived sense of duty. Moreover, the recognition of the risks involved for those working during the pandemic, coupled with the use of the word ‘sacrifice’ in relation to essential workers seemed to infer that some were accepting a ‘calling’, and not working to survive and pay their bills under an exploitative system of domination. Gago and Deese (2021) suggest a strong paradox within the understanding of essential work: workers are widely lauded for their work while not sufficiently compensated, creating a scenario through which classifying work as essential it “seems to stop being labor”, and “seems to be of a fundamentally symbolic and emergency value” (p. 28). For the working class, wage labour is not a choice under capitalism, but rather a means for survival. If heroism is a social activity which must be entered into voluntarily, then grocery workers, while providing their valuable labour,

cannot be defined as heroes under the above operationalization (Franco et al., 2011, p. 101).

The initial statements from those designated with the expertise and authority to produce 'truth' served as the bedrock of the subsequent knowledge produced through the corporate media. According to Hall (2001), "Foucault was concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning through discourse", which acquired 'truth' within a particular historical context (p. 73,74). As a site of knowledge production, the corporate media were of the institutions which explicitly designated essential workers as heroes during the first year of the pandemic. A Toronto Star article titled "A new breed of heroes steps up in the crisis" was emblematic of the ways in which grocery workers were initially centered during the pandemic.

> Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who's in the habit of praising our heroic police whenever possible, is now talking the same way about workers that he (and the rest of us) don't often appreciate (A new breed of heroes steps up in the crisis, 2020).

The narrative attempted to draw an equivalence between workers experiencing increased precarity working through the pandemic, and the "heroic police", previously mentioned as those responsible for identifying and detaining those who pose a threat to liberal, colonial order, and maintenance of "basic economic life" during an emergency (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 84-85).

> Our health-care and long-term care workers, nurses, doctors, grocery store employees, delivery people, cops, are the heroes in this one, risking their health day after day to serve the rest of us, as we make the supreme sacrifice of staying home, watching Netflix and old hockey games. I don't know how they do it, heroes to the extreme. Whenever pro sports cancels events, there is a crisis (Melnychuk, 2020).

This article serves as a reminder to the reader that essential workers are 'heroes', and, using 'cheeky' humour, implicitly illuminates the fractures within the working class which were rendered visible during the pandemic. The author suggests that essential workers "serve the rest of us", referring to non-essential workers, and those able to work from home (Melnychuk, 2020). Also implicit is that those at home may be 'working', taking advantage of "watching Netflix and old hockey games" while essential workers are "risking their health". This may serve as a disciplinary mechanism to construct a productive, model citizen working responsibility from home. For some during the

pandemic, including essential workers, the domestic sphere may have been retooled when schools were temporarily closed, or when family became sick and care work was required. Those able to work from home experienced capital "directly inserting itself inside homes", restructuring class relations, and producing a 'home factory' which demands productivity of those working from home and home schooling children (Gago & Deese, 2021, p. 28). Moreover, it takes a certain level of privilege to be able to describe "cops" as "serving" us. Put another way, many of these narratives highlighted a media class which shared few similarities to those who continued to work on the front lines during the pandemic. In short, the use of the word 'serve', reveals that the dominant narratives are shaped through the lens of a consumer.

Like Melnychuk's statement above, much of the discourse served to flatten essential workers so that jobs like nursing, law enforcement, and retail were often grouped together in ways that masks the intensity of precarity for some groups of workers. Within this discourse, some workers were not flattened into the grouping of essential worker, but were simply erased from the public sphere.

> 'I want to take a moment to recognize and thank the incredible employees throughout the supply chains that we're counting on right now,' Ford said last week. 'From the farmer producing food to the trucker delivering supplies to your local store to people stocking the shelves and especially those working at the cash registers. These people are working hard and doing their part for Ontario'(A new breed of heroes steps up in the crisis, 2020).

Ford mentions the farmer, but does not acknowledge the over 1100 migrant farm workers who reported "widespread wage theft, inadequate housing, lack of PPE, inadequate food, coercive restrictions on workers' movement, intimidation, surveillance and heightened racism" (Faraday, 2021). Migrant farm workers were not flattened into the hero discourse in this statement, but rather, their very existence, their labour, and their essential role within the food supply chain was left unacknowledged. In this case, what is left unsaid conceals the exploitation of those working under some of the most precarious conditions in Canada, yet also crucial to the continued functioning of the food supply chain. In short, the omission of certain workers from the public sphere serves those benefiting from their exploitation.

Not unlike Ford's call for appreciating essential workers, former Calgary Mayor, Naheed Nenshi reminded his constituency to show their appreciation towards workers when they patronize the establishments designated as essential.

> There are a ton of industries that either can't facilitate or the nature of the work simply doesn't allow. These people, keeping our stores stocked, our services running, and continuing to make sure that we have the smallest bit of normalcy in our days. The people who are still showing up and allowing for this are heroes, and we need to give them our full gratitude every time we use their services (Nenshi, 2020).

The knowledge produced through this statement suggests that the labour of those workers who cannot work from home, given the nature of the work, plays a crucial role in the continued comfort of others during the pandemic. Above all, this is a reminder that, as mentioned previously, the affective labour involved in grocery work bears similarities to care work. Similar to the ways in which a customer's comfort takes priority over a frontline grocery worker's comfort, 'our' comfort is prioritized over the workers performing the valuable labour which maintains survival during an emergency. In short, the comfort of the discursively produced model citizen is prioritized over the comfort of the worker performing commodified emotional labour. Normalcy is reserved for the consumer, and the article suggests in exchange, that customers engage in performative gestures and emotional labour to compensate workers for continuing to work through a global pandemic. Like Ford's message, this statement infers that those 'showing up' and 'keeping our stores stocked' are instilled with a work ethic which makes them heroes for their contributions to the maintenance of normalcy for the citizenry.

Quebec Premier François Legault referred to healthcare workers during the pandemic as "guardian angels", to which Montreal Gazette reporter, Allison Hanes remarked,

> But there are many other unsung heroes who also deserve our thanks in these unprecedented times. They are also working long hours out in the community while the rest of us hunker down at home. Besides pharmacists, they are truckers, delivery drivers, couriers, grocery store cashiers, stockroom clerks and postal workers … In a non-emergency, some of these occupations are invisible, unglamorous and under-appreciated. But those who hold down these jobs have certainly demonstrated their importance over these last few weeks. These hard-working folks have been moving goods, delivering packages, bringing fresh fruit and vegetables from far away, dispensing life-saving medication and ensuring people have food to put on their dinner tables. By showing up for work under extraordinary

> circumstances, they are providing us with a semblance of normalcy through this exceptional emergency (Hanes, 2020).

Like Ford's statement which suggests that this network of workers is one that goes unappreciated, the use of the word 'unsung' further implies that these workers are typically uncelebrated, unknown, and nameless. Those in precarious work now designated as essential have historically been unsung, and as mentioned previously, treated as invisible long before the increased visibility within the public sphere. Moreover, using the above operationalization of heroes indicates that they labour "without external gain anticipated at the time of the act" (Franco et al., 2011, p. 110). Thus, for precarious workers, being cast as a hero does not connote the need for change including fair renumeration for labour which has always been valuable. Simply put, referring to essential workers as heroes may serve to neutralize class struggles.

The article also asserts that these workers contribute to the 'semblance of normalcy', as Nenshi also applauded in his above statement. While "the rest of us hunker down at home", suggests a neat division between those upon which 'we' are reliant for their labour however, essential workers are consumers also reliant upon the continued functioning of critical infrastructure during an emergency. Despite the 'we' and 'they' commonly used in the data, no neat binary exists between essential work and those relying upon essential work, any more than there is clean division between paid work and the unpaid work of social reproduction. However, the expectations surrounding the continued maintenance of normalcy and comfort are shaped by the countours of gender, race and class and relies upon the continued exploitation of those in work designated as essential.

6.2.2. Sacrifice

Sacrifice and duty were themes which emerged in reference to heroes. The *Windsor Star* published an article referencing a YouTube video showcasing a pandemic inspired project by a graduate student at the University of Windsor. The project featured fifty residents discussing the gratitude they feel for "unsung heroes", and in the article the creator stresses the importance of properly reflecting the racial diversity, and multiculturalism of the Windsor Essex community.

> ‘And everyone has a unique experience during this pandemic and they want to express it in their own words.’ Participants spoke of the sacrifices of front-line workers in all areas, from bankers to health care, volunteers to delivery drivers, grocery stores to emergency services and the many unsung heroes behind the scenes. ‘I hope this was conveyed (in the video) to show the wide spectrum of people that are on the front lines and are the front-line heroes,’ Haidar said. ‘It's great that we're reaching out and we're thanking our health care workers, our truck drivers and grocery workers - that's wonderful’ (Kotsis, 2020).

The video the article discusses features, “Mayor Drew Dilkens, former mayor Eddie Francis, local MPs and MPPs, representatives from education, sports, tourism and entertainment, families and the *Windsor Star's* managing editor Craig Pearson” as among those sharing their gratitude. The video compiles relatively quick soundbites thanking essential workers in healthcare, waste services, grocery and other essential industries, and asking them to stay safe. The video itself included expressions of gratitude, while at the same time referencing ‘sacrifice’, ‘dedication’, ‘hard work’, ‘putting the community first’, ‘keeping us safe and/or fed’, ‘supporting us’, and ‘working hard to ensure our health’ (Kotsis, 2020). While this article and accompanying video were explicit in its use of the word ‘sacrifice’, I would argue that it was implicit every time ‘hero’ was used as a metaphor for those working essential labour, given that, as mentioned above, to be a hero involves the acceptance of an anticipated sacrifice (Franco et al. 2011, p 110).

The ways the discourses of sacrifice were romanticized in the corporate media may have served to mask the ways many workers in undervalued forms of employment have long been treated as disposable. In their research about migrant farm workers’ health and safety, Caxaj and Cohen (2019), argue that “workplace conditions encompass norms and practices that can contribute to a limiting of worth, a prescribing of sacrifice and an implying of the disposability of workers’ bodies” (p. 2). Treated as disposable, and excluded from the public sphere, the lack of visibility of migrant farm workers may have contributed to a further precaritization of conditions during the pandemic (Faraday, 2021). In contrast, while grocery workers were positioned as sacrifices, their inclusion within the public sphere as those performing work valuable to society, created space for counternarratives to shed light on some of the conditions they were experiencing.

Loustanau et al. (2021) found that for low wage workers living paycheck to paycheck, their continued employment is crucial to their survival, so they take on increased risks to their safety (p. 859). The participants they interviewed felt "sacrificial and disposable", which as previously mentioned, was already common for racialized immigrant women in Canada prior to the pandemic given that they were "'essential' for the effective functioning of the labour market", yet treated as 'disposable'" (Loustanau et al., 2021, p. 859; Ng, 2002 in Premji, 2014, p. 126). Mohammed et al.'s (2021) discourse analysis on the "nurse as a hero",

> culturally positions nurses to become 'necessary sacrifices' in order to respond to an emerging crisis" found that the "hero discourse is not a neutral expression of appreciation and sentimentality, but rather a political, social, and cultural technique employed to accomplish multiple aims such as the normalization of nurses' exposure to risk, the enforcement of model citizenship, and the preservation of existing power relationships that limit the ability of front line nurses to determine the conditions of their work (p. 7).

The participants with whom I spoke discussed disparate experiences in terms of the measures taken to ensure their safety. Despite deteriorating conditions, there were a few who still felt appreciated and valued by their immediate supervisors, and participants agreed that safety protocol, including the installation of protective barriers, were implemented immediately. Nevertheless, most were unsatisfied with their pay, especially while working under conditions in which their safety had become compromised, and the removal of what may have been considered 'hazard' pay signaled that employers were resistant to their concerns. Like nurses, the hero discourse may have also normalized grocery workers' exposure to risk, potentially constructing them 'necessary sacrifices', while preserving the structures of power which limit their ability to decide the conditions under which they will continue to work.

6.2.3. Superman Never Complains

Hegemonic narratives about heroes did not go uncontested, and counternarratives emerged. Like the aforementioned dominant narratives, both risk and the value of grocery work was acknowledged, but counternarratives also illuminated the precarity workers experienced beyond the conditions produced by the pandemic, drawing attention to the precarity produced by pre-existing labour market conditions. Paul Meinema, the president of the UFCW, was interviewed by the *Leader Post* and

emphasized that retail workers are undercompensated, and that they were “hopeful that there is a societal change in that we understand the value of all jobs” (Todd, 2020). Axonify’s CEO Carol Leamon told the *Waterloo Region Record* that if frontline workers are heroes now, “they don’t shed their capes when the pandemic threat eases”, and deserve meaningful support now and forever (Jackson, 2020). A *Toronto Star* reporter argued, “they’re people who deserve a fair wage and a safe place to work”, and posited that perhaps the use of the term hero makes it easier “to overlook the injustice of their situation if we give them hero status. After all, Superman never complains” (Teitel, 2020). Despite the overall neoliberal ethos reflected in the articles I reviewed, 35% of articles called for support of retail workers in ways which went beyond gestures of thanks, some of which argued for meaningful change.

Unlike the counternarratives, the dominant hero discourse obfuscated the limits of the agency of workers, it naturalized the risks to which they were exposed, it concealed the precarious conditions which predate the pandemic, and it did not acknowledge the precaritization of conditions under which grocery workers continued to work when the pandemic began. If it can be said that heroes enter into service willingly, anticipate sacrifice and do not expect any external gain, then the hero discourse is counter to the discourses of hard work which offer the promise of reward if one works hard enough (Franco et al., 2011, p. 101). In other words, describing essential workers as heroes serves to erase their relationship to wage labour. When the hero discourse is used alongside discourses of work ethic, it simultaneously contradicts their selflessness, reinjects their position under capitalism, and upholds them as an ideal member of society upon which discipline others. The hero discourse is not simply about being a hero in the traditional sense described above, it is about being a hero under capitalist logic which involves accepting exploitation without any reward except for the gratitude from those benefiting from the exploitation of essential workers.

6.2.4. Work Ethic and CERB

That heroes work hard was one component of the knowledge produced within the hero discourse. In this episteme, heroes are constructed as those who ‘step up’ in a crisis, ‘show up’, and ‘work hard’. This discourse influenced the practices within institutions for dealing with subjects, it moralizes who is deserving of rights, and it regulates the conduct of subjects. The ethos of work ethic is rooted in the idea that

through one's individual persistence and hard work, one can "pick oneself and one's family up by the bootstraps", with the reward of upward social mobility (Weeks, 2011, p. 46). In the corporate media, this type of moral discipline was weaponized against those who chose to challenge their dependence on their employers and accept social assistance.

Even if one of the manifest functions of the emergency state benefit was to preserve an auxiliary force of healthy workers to return to work, the introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) may have been seen as a threat to the dependence workers have on employers. In her analysis of Weber's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weeks (2011) states that work ethic advances the tensions between the contradicting ideas of "individual independence" and "social dependence" (p. 42). Weeks (2011) explains that while "wages freed the worker from dependence on state aid and family support", "the individual is thereby subject to dependence on waged labor and delivered to the sovereignty of employers" (p. 52). Jerry Dias, former national president of Unifor alleged that grocers may have briefly offered premium pay as a way to convince employees to continue to work instead of applying for the CERB, and may have ended the pay premium when they believed that the CERB was ending (Chase, 2020b). Through the brief introduction of hero pay, grocers may have wanted to preserve the dependence workers had on waged labour, and prevent the independence which could manifest from government assistance.

Both the CERB and the pay premium had an impact on the agency workers had in terms of mitigating risk. Some were motivated to take on a higher risk assemblage in exchange for a pay premium. Others were able to limit their risk by applying for the CERB. Two of the participants I interviewed chose to mitigate the risk of exposure by applying for the CERB, which allowed them to safely distance from home for a brief time. For those who continued to work, removing the premium pay before the risk was eliminated forced them to continue to accept increased risk at their pre-pandemic wage. While the grocers may have increased wages to retain workers during the initial months of the pandemic, discourses of work ethic may have also served as disciplinary mechanisms for workers to continue to 'step up' and 'show up' to work. Simply put, the incentive of hero pay, coupled with the regulating discourses of hard work may have served to interfere with workers' decisions to apply for the CERB and isolate. Therefore, I would argue that this lack of choice rendered essential workers what Kingston and

District Labour Council president Lesley Jamieson referred to as “conscripts” (Ferguson, 2020).

While there were many reasons to criticize the federal government response to COVID-19, criticisms from some sources did not center marginalized populations who may or may not have been excluded by the approach. The article below used discourses of work ethic to make the assumption that some might exploit the situation, and remain on social aid instead of returning to work, again using work ethic as a moralizing disciplinary mechanism.

> Specifically, there is a worry that some workers might prefer to sit on their duffs for the next three months, pocketing $2,000 a month, rather than going back to work when called by their employers (Ivison, 2020).

The reporter draws upon C.D. Howe Institute research which suggests that “there is already anecdotal evidence that some people on CERB have refused to go back to work when employment opportunities have arisen” (Ibid). Anecdotal evidence aside, what is key to this particular take is that at the time this article was written, the CERB was in its first month, and most importantly, the pandemic was still ongoing. If essential workers are included in this critique, this take is an affront to worker rights and safety given that at this time masks were not required to be worn by customers indoors, and, as previously mentioned, some scholars argue that public health officials may have downplayed the risks of aerosol transmission (Daflos, 2021). Put simply, this particular take uses rhetoric to suggests that workers collecting CERB are idle, guilty of avarice, and prioritizes the needs of the capitalist class over the health and safety of workers.

The hero discourse may be disciplining for subjects because it moralizes essential work by suggesting that those who put themselves at risk are respectable while those who collect the CERB are not. The discourse is self-regulating, as Elizabeth’s remarks indicate.

> I mean, we are still going to work. While this is going to sound so bad, but some people were laid off, some people chose not to go to work, they're still getting $2,000 a month. We’re going to work, doing the work in the pandemic we're putting our lives at risk, and we're getting nothing. Numerous people have told me just quit your job, just quit your job sit at home you get paid for doing nothing. And I'm like, I personally just don't think it's right because I do know that some people have lost their jobs, but then there are other people who are taking total advantage of this. And they

> don't want to work. So, again, it's like, what do you do in this case you know. It definitely comes down to one's morals, but I think the government could have done a lot better

The immense pressure to continue to work despite risk is reflected in this statement, as well as the idea that some were taking advantage of access to social assistance.

Neoliberal policy was revealed in the political response to the emergency. While many recipients shared the economic hardships they experienced when they received letters from the Canada Revenue Agency requiring them to pay it back, companies like Rogers, Bell and Telus received "more than $240 million dollars from the federal government's wage subsidy program while continuing to pay out billions of dollars in dividends to shareholders" (Jones, 2022; Dobby, 2021). Harvey (2007) argues that the welfare programs in the United States "amount to a vast redistribution of public moneys for corporate benefit" (p. 39). Likewise, in Canada, this was a direct transfer of wealth from tax payers' pockets to corporate wallets. Moreover, the CERB also initiated transfers from recipients to landlords and suppliers of utilities such as internet and phone providers. Given that Metro paid executives "$3.48 million in annual bonuses for the fiscal year ending in September", it could be argued that they had the resources to fairly compensate workers who agreed to accept a higher risk assemblage (Charlebois, 2021). Instead, corporate and state responses to the pandemic demonstrate a neoliberal approach to further reintrench class power.

Drawing on Weber, Weeks observes that the work ethic discourse operates in adaptive ways which subjectify the worker, and serve as a "disciplinary mechanism that constructs subjects as productive individuals" (Weeks, 2011, p. 53-54). It may also serve to legitimate inequality.

> As an individualizing discourse, the work ethic serves the time honored ideological function of rationalizing exploitation and legitimating inequality. That all work is good work, that all work is equally desirable and inherently useful is, as William Morris once noted, 'a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others' (1999, 128 in Weeks, 2011, p. 53).

Not all essential work is "equally desirable", but like historically devalued forms of care work, it can be useful and valuable (Weeks, 2011, p. 53). However, valorizing underpaid and undervalued work as a 'calling', or as ground 'for a new breed of heroes' rationalizes exploitation and serves those who live off the exploitation of workers.

Discourses of hard work served as regulatory mechanisms, imposed upon those who personified the hero discourse, as well as upon the reader consuming the corporate media. Political responses to the pandemic favoured capital which exploited workers' labour power, interfered with their choice to work despite the health risks, and may have downplayed the risks of aerosol transmission. Furthermore, essential workers in precarious employment were not compensated fairly prior to the onset of the pandemic. The CERB challenged workers' dependence on the wages provided by their employers and the initial introduction of premium pay may have served as an incentive for workers to accept the intensified risk assemblage. Its swift removal indicated that employers may have already received the desired benefit through offering the hero pay: the continued dependence of their employees.

6.2.5. Class Lines Blurred

The hero discourse served as a way to obfuscate both class demarcations and the perceived boundaries between state and corporations, perhaps intended to pacify workers, depoliticize worker struggles, and produce opportunity through crisis. If major Canadian grocers offered the premium pay to fortify the dependence workers had on them as opposed to the state, there were other ways in which they attempted to maintain the status quo which privileged them, and allowed them to increase their profits exponentially. In an interview transcribed by *CTV National News*, a reporter, the president of Stong's Market, an employee, and 'unidentified' participants whom I suspect may be customers, discuss the ways in which essential workers are meeting the needs of consumers during the pandemic.

> Melanie Nagy (Reporter): With all the COVID-19 closures, grocery stores like Stong's Market remain open. The grocer, one of the oldest in BC, is now an essential service. Company president Brian Bradley no longer working in an office. The store's floor is where you find him.
>
> Brian Bradley (Stong's Market): I would say that the times have been stressful for everyone, so we've made a lot of operational changes.
>
> Nagy: The store has undergone a major transformation. To mitigate the risk of the virus's spread, carts and baskets are constantly disinfected. Physical distancing reminders have been pasted to the floor, along with limits on popular products. Only about 10 customers are allowed in at a time, moves meant to reduce the

panic buying many stores experienced early on in the pandemic.

Bradley: Controlling the number of customers in the store, has probably calmed things down quite a bit.

Nagy: Right across the country, people who work in grocery stores are taking on more shifts and working longer hours just to make sure the needs of their customers are met.

Nagy: Before COVID-19, Stong's florist, Alice Watson, mainly helped people pick out gifts. Now her job has shifted to crowd control. She admits, it's difficult keeping people apart, but she tries to do it with a smile.

Alice Watson (Stong's Market): Just keep an upbeat, positive attitude, because I have seen a lot of people really stressed.

Nagy: There have been hiring spikes and wage top-ups for those on the frontlines and there's increased recognition.

Unidentified woman: Very thankful for them.

Unidentified woman: If it wasn't for them, we'd starve, right?

Unidentified man: The people in here are working really hard.

Nagy: And putting themselves at risk to ensure people get the food they need. Melanie Nagy, CTV News, Vancouver. (LaFlamme, 2020).

The article placed the president of the company in close proximity to workers, obfuscating the class asymmetry. It indicates that the company was taking the necessary steps to ensure customer safety while in the store, placing their president on the shop floor to absorb some of the increased work, and that workers were "taking on more shifts and working longer hours". It does not mention that workers may be taking extra hours because their pay is low, because their hours may have been previously reduced, or that workers in precarious employment experience limitations to their agency due to increased vulnerability in general. Presidents and CEOs are not 'just like us', and in this case may have wanted to maintain a closer proximity to workers during a period of upheaval, and be on the floor to prevent potential worker agitation. Moreover, these performative gestures may serve as a disciplinary mechanism to encourage 'hard work', and to conceal the class differences, and unequal power differentials which allow for the continued exploitation of workers.

The unidentified customers and reporter close the interview with expressions of gratitude for the 'hard working' staff risking themselves so people can have access to food, and without whom, they joke, "we'd starve". This indicates the importance of the labour power of front line grocery workers. However, power over both workers and consumers can be attributed to the capitalists exploiting their labour, and profiting over the allocation of essential resources like food. Put simply, workers and consumers are at the will of the capitalists whose disproportionate power over our very survival under the current system could result in 'us starving'.

In an article for the *Ottawa Sun*, the author asserts that "there are heroes in our midst who, every day, put service above self", and in a similar fashion to the previous article, highlights the contributions of management.

> It takes special people to build a service business; people who take professional pride in doing the extraordinary to get the job done and embrace the challenge of unreasonable circumstances; people who know the difference between a reason and an excuse […] Loblaw CEO Galen Weston has communicated with the Loblaw team and customers regularly with frankness and transparency. He treats customers and staff with both respect and concern. In short, he perfectly demonstrates leadership in a service organization (Snobelen, 2020).

While the author employs rhetoric to control the narrative of the interconnectedness of the respectful grocery CEO to the heroic worker, like the previous article, it may also serve to suggest that class distinctions are of an illusory nature, especially when he closes the article with a message to truckers, to whom he offers, "you may use my bathroom anytime". Snobelen shares that he grew up in the service business, wherein his family trucking company delivered to grocery stores in Ontario. The article discloses Snobelen's claim to authority whereby he served in the Conservative government under Mike Harris from 1995 to 2002, but what is not revealed is Snobelen's neoliberal approach to crisis during his tenure in government.

> In September 1995, a video was leaked to the Canadian press of John Snobelen, Ontario's minister of education, telling a closed-door meeting of civil servants that before cuts to education and other unpopular reforms could be announced, a climate of panic needed to be created by leaking information that painted a more dire picture than he "would be inclined to talk about." He called it 'creating a useful crisis' (Klein, 2007, p. 259).

Through Klein's (2007) lens of the 'shock doctrine', the pandemic has served as a "useful crisis" for an unprecedented upward transfer of wealth (Ibid). While crisis has elevated the value of essential workers, institutions have exploited crisis to reorganize society in a way which retains wealth in the fewest of hands, while further marginalizing an increasing number of workers. According to Klein,

> A more accurate term for a system that erases the boundaries between Big Government and Big Business is not liberal, conservative or capitalist but corporatist. Its main characteristics are huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security. For those inside the bubble of extreme wealth created by such an arrangement, there can be no more profitable way to organize a society (p. 15).

Here Klein (2007) exposes the blurred lines which exist between government and capital through which what Althusser (1971) termed the "state apparatus", which "were being substituted by private companies and institutions" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 394). Simply put, crises provides an opportunity for a deepening of the power structures which serve to stratify society.

Snobelen's article adheres with the prescribed way of speaking of workers, as hard working heroes, but weaponizes it against those who do not abide by neoliberal principles of thought. It not only obfuscates class distinctions but shifts the focus to the behaviour of individuals. This technique of dedifferentiating the CEO or president from the worker during a time of crisis provides subterfuge for the goals of power. In short, blurry class lines serve to hide where power lies.

In a counternarrative to Snobelen's position, an anonymous *Toronto Star* article reminds the reader that Loblaws Cos. Ltd. announced first-quarter profits of $240 million, in contrast to $198 million during the same time in 2019 (Loblaws: You can do better, 2020).

> Loblaw Companies was a leader back in March when it announced a $2-per-hour pay premium for frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chair Galen Weston was particularly vocal and effusive in his praise for the "incredible people" who work to keep Loblaws, No Frills, Shoppers Drug Marts and more open during the crisis. Those low-wage workers deserve greater compensation given the value they produce for the company, the risks they take and the essential service they provide the community. None of that has changed. So it's callous to suddenly decide

> that those same workers no longer have that same value. Especially at a time when the company's profits are soaring (Loblaws: You can do better, 2020).

The article alleges that the grocery store chains have chosen to end pandemic pay, “simply because they can”, and that they are aware that they can, “reduce pay to its pre-pandemic lows and still retain the workers they need to keep the lights on, shelves stocked and cash registers operating” (Loblaws: You can do better, 2020). The hero narrative which recognizes the value of workers’ labour within the food supply chain, is maintained in the article, but instead of weaponizing the discourse to moralize who is deserving and undeserving, it identifies the injustice experienced by those working during the ongoing pandemic without the premiums the grocers initially offered.

The blurring of class in the media data referred me back to a comment made by one participant about the ways stores could better protect worker safety. Katherina had shrugged wearily and said,

> I mean, there’s really, I mean honestly there's really nothing nobody can do. I mean, what can--you just gotta kind of go with the flow and see what happens. I mean I don't know how, like my management is doing what they can. I don't know what the government can do. There's really nothing nobody can do you just kind of gotta go with the flow and see what happens (Katherina).

This comment resonated with me due to my own personal experience working within a large corporation. When layoffs occurred, or conditions worsened, the rhetoric that trickled downward revolved around oblique criticisms which deflected from the wealthy capitalist owners and shareholders and towards alternate enemies including the union, the economy, and the increased ‘cost of doing business’ despite increasing profits. Katherina identified the existence of a powerful source that needed to be challenged when she noted that the union was “fighting” for hero pay to be reinstated. As previously mentioned, one of the capitalist owners who profited from the pandemic was quoted as saying, “I’m not involved”, when asked about ending the pay premium (Billionaire owner of western Canadian supermarket chain suggests he’s powerless to stop worker pay cut, 2020). His statement deflects from the power of capital, and the fact that if the grocers wanted to restore the pay premium, they *would*. The blurring of class and obfuscation of power together operate as tools of capitalist logic to maintain the status quo.

6.2.6. Who Will Be Our Churchill?

Metaphors which inferred that essential workers were performing labour out of duty, and not due to the reliance on wage labour, formed elements of the hero discourse. In the first of a few military-themed articles, Maxwell (2020) deemed grocery and other essential workers as the 'quartermaster' of an army, responsible for running supply lines while risking their health for "us", "fighting to preserve ['our'] freedom". He calls them heroes, just like those working in the hospital 'battling' the virus. A *Chronicle-Herald* article poses the question of, "who will be our Churchill?", stating that "our shepherd in this crisis will need to marshall [sic] these essential workers by helping them understand why they have been called to this duty. That voice will also rally Canadians around these heroes" (Lethbridge, 2020). Murphy (2020) evokes terms such as 'bravery' and 'soldiers' to describe workers designated as essential. She requests that they be thanked, praised, and honoured for doing their jobs so that "we" can fulfil the request of staying home. These narratives are further shaped through the use of conceit to tie essential labour within this crisis to expressions used in the military to signify service and duty. Essential labour is ostensibly represented as a calling, and there is the suggestion that there is a duty to continue to work through the pandemic.

The focus on the essential worker was also relevant in a previous episteme, during World War II. While both Canada and the US implemented War Labour Boards to mitigate conflicts between workers and industrialists, and to keep workers engaged in the industries designated as critical during wartime, ideological strategies were also imposed to regulate subjects. The Wartime Information Board (WIB) was founded in 1942 to encourage support of the war effort, and attempted to produce "a patriotic allegiance to the nation" through propaganda, or as they were called, "'information' campaigns" (Payne, 2013, p. 80). According to Payne, "during the war the government of Canada – like nations around the globe – widely promoted the efforts of its industrial workers, including the thousands of women who entered the formal workplace", transforming the Canadian economy into an "emergent industrial force on the international stage after the stagnancy of the Depression and dependency on the export of raw materials" (p. 80, 81). The WIB, and the National Film Board's (NFB) Photo Service divisions produced photographs depicting "accelerated industrial activity", which were in turn, replicated by Canadian private sector print publications (Payne, 2013, p. 81). This discourse sought to regulate the conduct of not only the workers deemed

critical for continued industrial production, but of the greater citizenry to construct the patriotism to align with Canada's support of the wartime efforts.

Hall (2001) states that within Foucault's method of discourse analysis, that

> a different discourse or episteme will arise a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new discursive formation, and producing, in its turn, new conceptions of 'madness' or 'punishment' or 'sexuality', new discourses with the power and the authority, the 'truth' to regulate social practices in new ways (p. 74).

The ways 'information' campaigns attempted to regulate subjects during World War II have been revitalized and adapted to be relevant within the current context. In an address about the global pandemic, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was not subtle as he conjured the sentiments of wartime, and urged viewers: "we all have to answer the call of duty; this is service that most of us have never been called upon to do" (CTV National News, 2020). Trudeau employs nation building techniques, as used in World War II, to rally Canadians to support the prescribed containment strategies, and the critical infrastructure protocol which served to make some grocers even wealthier than before the pandemic.

When this discourse is coupled with the need for a 'Churchill', as one to guide "essential workers by helping them understand why they have been called to this duty" it could be seen as disciplinary mechanism to construct 'responsible citizens' (Lethbridge, 2020). Not only does this reveal the sinister nature of the need to convince vulnerable workers to continue to work despite the uncertainty of a novel virus, but the corporate media characterizes Churchill as a savior when he has been more accurately described as "a vile racist", "fanatical about violence and fiercely supportive of imperialism" (Seymour, 2018). With this in mind, Churchill may indeed be an appropriate 'shepherd' for this malevolent task given the ways in which imperialism, as described in Chapter 3, shaped the migration patterns which have produced a stratified work force within which racialized immigrants are relegated to the most precarious forms of employment (Brah, 1996, p. 21 in Thobani, 2007, p. 71; Thobani, 2007, p. 97). His essence is reified to regulate the conduct of workers, and valourized in British museums despite the fact that the policies of the British government under Churchill played a significant role in the Bengal famine in 1943, killing millions of people (Kuchay, 2019). Discourse which imposes military references as an abstraction inadvertently references a history deeply

rooted in white supremacy and imperialism, and serves the existing needs of the settler state as a tool which may serve to regulate the conduct of its subjects.

6.3. The Subjects

The cultural material I reviewed discursively produced two subjects: the grocery worker as defined by the hero discourse, and the consumer who is subjected to the discourse. The consumer is the reader of the material, and in relation to heroes, the consumer of goods provided by the heroes. Hall (2001) argues that according to Foucault it is discourse, not the subject which produces knowledge, and that given that "discourse is enmeshed with power", it is unnecessary to locate the subject for power and knowledge to operate (p. 79). Despite this, Foucault did include the subject in his theorizing while remaining critical of the notion of a subject as an individual but rather a reflection of one's own reflexivity (Hall, 2001, p. 80).

6.3.1. The Faceless

Grocery workers performing the work rendered visible during the pandemic are the first subjects I will discuss in this section given that they "personify the particular forms of knowledge which the discourse produces" (Hall, 2001, p. 80). The traits attributed to the discursive production of the hero include: selflessness and a willingness for sacrifice, a high level of work ethic, and working in roles integral to the continued functioning of the industries determined to be critical infrastructure. Simply put, heroes were constructed through their relationship to critical infrastructure, through their relationship to the consumer, and through the interplay of desirable individual characteristics which produce workers who could be relied upon during a crisis. What was notably absent within the dominant discourse which produced heroes was reference to the ways in which class, race, gender, or disability may also discipline subjects.

My data revealed that the topic of race was mostly avoided in the construction of the subject of the hero discourse. Likewise, disability was rarely mentioned. The material I reviewed referred to grocers offering shopping hours intended for seniors and immunocompromised customers, without mention of the ways disability may impact essential workers. There were only three articles in which race was referenced. The first was in an article in the *Toronto Star* by the NDP MPP for York South-Weston.

Faisal Hassan wrote about his constituents in the northwest corner of Toronto with a large proportion of Black residents “seeing COVID-19 rates more than 10 times higher than in the city’s least affected, wealthier areas”. He argued that “we are workers who have given our all during this pandemic, caring for seniors in nursing homes, driving city buses and bagging groceries”, and outlined the ways in which systemic racism continued to worsen the social and economic disparities during the pandemic (Hassan, 2020). The second article reported on the experience of a grocery worker in Etobicoke who wasunable to find housing near his place of work.

> Browne told the Star that early in the pandemic he wasn't allowed to wear a mask at work in case it panicked customers. In the report, he says COVID-19 has made life more complicated in other ways. "You're working harder but you're not making more money ... It's beyond you, it's just the housing market and how expensive it is. Housing prices aren't going down during COVID. In some cases, they're actually going up," he said. He also talks about the systemic racism that makes it difficult for him to find housing even though he has good credit (Kalinowski, 2020).

Like Toronto, the Vancouver housing crisis also increases relational precarity for workers, especially for those living paycheque to paycheque. Moreover, this article speaks to the deeply rooted structural concerns which make it difficult for racialized individuals to find housing.

The third article alluded to the existence of the ordering principles which shape the labour market when the author indicated that racialization, and gender were factors in filling the precarious employment required for maintaining critical infrastructure during the pandemic. According to Charlebois (2020), “mostly women, students, people who often need a second job occupy these positions”, loosely referencing class given the low paid nature of the positions. Most of the articles which included the voices of grocery workers, and/or included pictures of grocery workers, indicated that the workers were white or white passing (A new breed of heroes steps up in the crisis, 2020; Humanity on full display, says Kemptville produce manager, 2020; LaFlamme, 2020; Faulder, 2020). With so few workers represented, I would argue that the discursively produced pandemic hero was neither racialized, nor white, nor white passing. In true Canadian fashion, the discursively produced grocery worker could be seen as a post-racial, disconcertingly faceless assemblage of regulatory fiction. In Butler’s (2004) conceptualization of who is considered grievable, she discusses the boundaries which “constitute what will and will not appear within public life”, and that,

> those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed (p. xviii).

While Butler is referencing the United States and its vilification of 'enemies' after 9/11, it could be said that those performing the care work required for social reproduction are also rendered faceless in the public sphere, through the communication of "what is human, what is precarious, [and] what is injurable" (p. xvii). The dominant media representation of essential workers revealed that the labour of the subjects was valuable, but what was even more valuable was the continued maintenance of the status quo which involved the continued sacrifice of a faceless class of worker.

6.3.2. The 'Us' and the "We'

The second place in which the subject can be located is in the "reader or viewer, who is also 'subjected to' the discourse" (Hall, 2001, p. 80). The Canadian corporate media employs nation building techniques of control, or in other words, forms "systems of meaning", which contribute to the construction of a national identity (Jaworsky, 2019, p. 514). Tator and Henry (2000) argue that dominant discourse is often:

> hidden within the mythical norms that define 'Canadianness', - that is, to be White, male, heterosexual, Christian and English-speaking. It refers to the repertoire of discursive practices of the dominant culture that reflect the view that this group alone adheres to the values and ideals of democratic liberalism (p. 123).

These discourses serve to "marginalize and oppress" those who do not fit neatly into the narrative, and operate as regulatory and disciplinary in the ways in which they are imposed upon the reader (Tator & Henry, 2000, p. 121). This discursive construction of the national identity produces an "otherness", a decline into 'us' and 'them', which according to Tator and Henry (2000) "pervades the cultural industries" (p. 121). Hall (1997) argues that the 'other' is essential to meaning, but that national identity is "always up for grabs, always being negotiated in the dialogue between these national cultures and their 'others'" (p. 237). Furthermore, Hall (1997) references Bakhtin's hypothesis that meaning cannot be fixed, and therefore, one group can never be solely in charge of meaning (p. 236). In other words, this subject is shaped by power, but in a highly contested way.

Through reviewing the cultural materials included in my dataset I began to recognize the ways in which the corporate media reads like a playbook of how to win acceptance and belonging in Canada, but ultimately, the goal posts are constantly shifting, and neither acceptance, nor upward social mobility are ever guaranteed, especially for those with conditional forms of belonging. As previously mentioned, the corporate media is part of a network of cultural systems which produce content and messaging which "reinforce the beliefs and opinions of the in group" (Tator & Henry, 2000, p. 122). In other words, the discourse produced by corporate media serves as an advisory of the hegemonic views imposed by the dominant group and delineates who belongs and who does not. The dominant discourse produces a subject who signifies what it means to be 'Canadian', as shaped by the white, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy, and therefore, may also be shaped by who is counted as fully human, who is considered not quite human, and who is considered nonhuman (Weheliye, 2014, p. 3).

Who 'We' Are

While the hero discourse may serve as a disciplinary mechanism to impose productivist norms on subjects, discourses of gratitude may serve as a way to impose banal nationalism, produce model citizens, and regulate the conduct of those who are able to identify with the 'us', or 'we' as described in the media articles. According to Cruikshank (1993), a "'self' emerges out of confrontation with text, primarily", is a "productive technology", to "estimate, calculate, measure, evaluate, discipline, and to judge ourselves" (p. 233). A technology can serve to shape 'responsible citizenship', and "self-government for evaluating and acting upon our selves so that the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to" (Cruikshank, 1993, p. 234).

In their research of the representation of incoming refugees in Canadian and American newspaper articles, Jaworski (2019) located evidence of a narrative constructing 'who we are' in Canadian newspapers which represent Canada as a "generous, welcoming country for people fleeing extraordinarily difficult circumstances"(p. 517). My media review exposed a similar narrative about 'who we are': if the "we" are Canadian consumers, then 'we' are grateful to those designated as essential workers, exposing themselves to risk to ensure that the critical infrastructure required for normalcy is maintained during the pandemic. This narrative, in response to

the hero narrative serves the purposes of nation building, and produces the reader as a subject located within the collective imaginary of Canada.

The media discourse which emerged during the first year of the pandemic were shaped by what Billig (1995) termed, a “banal nationalism”, wherein, “in so many little ways, citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations” (Billig, 1995 in Jaworsky, 2019, p. 514). While there has been criticism of his theory, including Beck’s (2002) assertion that nationalism would become a relic replaced by ’banal cosmopolitanism’, the rise of white ethnonationalist movements which are inextricably intertwined with the aforementioned movements intent on reinscribing the ‘freedoms’ associated with whiteness indicate otherwise (Beck, 2002, in Atonsich, 2020, p. 1231). Like the ways in which the hero narrative did little to shape the perceptions of the participants I interviewed given their quotidian material realities, these impositions upon the citizenry are also highly contested, and do not include the ways the subject rejects, interpolates, or resists what is imposed upon them. Henry and Tator (2002) argue that media consumers do not passively consume what is imposed on them (p. 7). The discourses inform of the ways in which nation building is an ongoing project, and who is included and excluded from the narratives. It can inform us of the status quo, and of the ways in which power is enforced and maintained.

The discourses of gratitude also constructed a benevolent consumer in opposition to the essential worker. In an article in the *Tillsonburg News*, the author recalls the ways in which their town was “good and rallied behind our front line workers”, thanked people for “realizing the extra effort, danger they were in and that they were risking their families”, and ensured that “many mobilized to help the hospital get needed supplies, made masks, and helped others in need (Beechey, 2021). The article does acknowledge that those “willing” to put themselves at risk are some of the lowest paid workers, yet instead of encouraging solidarity with essential workers to challenge the power structures and institutions producing inequality, focuses on individual behaviours to thank “COVID Heroes”.

> Maybe a drawing from a child, cookies, coffee card, or a note left at the home of one of our COVID Heroes. Or maybe clearing the snow off their driveways or even the cars in the staff parking lots just before quitting time at the hospital or stores (Beechey, 2021).

While the article does suggest that inequality exists given the average rate of pay of retail workers, at the same time it frames the labour performed to maintain critical infrastructure as 'willing' which detracts from the wage relationship workers have with their employers. While agency is limited when one must rely upon wage labour for survival, the only way this type of labour could be considered somewhat 'willing' was if all workers could freely choose between staying home and isolating, or going to work.

Who 'We' Are Not

National identity differs in the ways it is expressed between Canada and the United States. According to Jaworsky (2019), Canadian publications employ a single narrative which encapsulates 'who we are', while US publications focus on 'who we are not' (p. 514). Implicit to the dominant narratives I reviewed was who 'we' are not. As discussed in Chapter 2, after a conversation with a participant about violent customer behaviour, I proceeded to watch several videos on social media depicting the objectionable behaviour of 'Karen's' during the first year of the pandemic. I speculate that the gratitude and kindness discourse may be a response to the discursively constructed 'pandemic Karen' which did not appear in the corporate material I reviewed. Given the scope of this project I do not have the relevant data to delve into the construction of the pandemic Karen within alternate forms of media. However, given that the gratitude discourse emerged in the corporate media at loosely the same time the 'Karen' discourse rose in other forms of media, it may have shaped the construction of 'we' and 'us' represented in the cultural material. As described in Chapter 5, to understand the difficult customers encountered by participants, I outlined theories of domination within spaces in which some members of the dominant culture feel entitled to uphold white supremacy within the settler colonial state. I speculate that the gratitude discourse may have been discursively produced in diametric opposition to what may be seen as a 'blight' on whiteness.

Hall (1997) notes that while it can be reductive, "meaning depends on the difference between opposites" and a 'responsible citizenry' may be discursively produced in opposition to the 'pandemic Karen' (p. 235). In a way which maintains the existing social hierarchy, the gratitude discourse produced a model subject who conformed to notions of civility, stayed at home, and thanked essential workers when they left their homes to get groceries. In contrast, the 'Karen' violates norms in indoor

public spaces by treating essential workers poorly, and as a consequence, may be relegated to misogynistic and classist representations. In short, the gratitude discourses are favourable to nation building goals and impose upon us who 'we' are, cast against an unmentionable who 'we' are not.

The labour involved in enforcing white supremacy in overt ways in public spaces not only compromises white supremacy's ostensibly benevolent, paternalistic role in society, it renders it visible, and thus, most importantly, makes it difficult to deny its existence. Gender is used to obfuscate the significance of race. The gratitude discourse may have been a reaction to 'bad apples' which can allow Canada to exist as a "non-racist country", wherein "Canadians believe that, aside from isolated acts by bigots and neo-Nazis, racism is not deeply embedded in our culture and social institutions" (Henry & Tator, 2000, p. 133). From what I observed from my own exposure to this discourse, the 'pandemic Karen' cannot possibly be an indictment of the way society is structured, so it was framed as a personal failing. Moreover, given that the Canada is constructed to be a multicultural utopia, any fractures which expose the racialized underpinnings of the settler colonial state may be an acknowledgement of the existence of white supremacy as an ordering principle. In short, discourses of gratitude protect the national identity and produces the ideological boundaries around 'who we are'.

The hero discourse also served to impose nation-building ideology upon the reader, described as the 'us' and the 'we' in Canadian corporate media, and signify what constituted a model citizen. These nation building techniques are predicated upon Canada's nascent goals which were to establish an economy, and create a citizenry shaped by a white ethnonationalist project contingent upon the destruction and displacement of Indigenous populations (Avery, 1995, in Macklin, 2000, p. 237; Berger, 1966, p. 6 in McKay, 1999, p. 43). Moreover, the writers and columnists who helped shape the 'us' in relation to 'heroes' often relied upon their own perspectives as consumers. As Mohanty (1999) describes, "the consumer is created as the citizen" and the 'we' and the 'us', produced through the corporate media's nation-building techniques signifies that the model citizen is a consumer (Mohanty, 1999, in Sa'ar, p. 684-685). Furthermore, Mohanty argues that "this citizen-consumer is made possible through cheap and often invisible labour of racialized minorities or lesser-citizen minorities" (Mohanty, 1999, in Sa'ar, p. 684-685). The hero discourse served as a disciplinary

mechanism to produce model citizens, upon whom to impose productivist norms, and to remind subjects of their place during crisis to preserve the “liberal way of life” (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 81).

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

7.1. Review of Findings and Analysis

The goal of this research was to center the quotidian experiences of grocery workers, while at the same time critically engage with the cultural material which represented them during the first year of the pandemic. The nation building which built and continues to maintain Canada as a settler colonial state, decades of neoliberal politics in British Columbia, the degradation of previously won labour rights, and the capitalist focused critical infrastructure strategy used in emergencies all had a significant impact on the ways the grocery industry entered the pandemic. In the next sections I will revisit my research questions, address the limitations of my research, and conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research.

7.2. Research Questions

7.2.1. Have Conditions Changed?

Grocery work went through the process of precaritization during the first year of the pandemic. Neoliberal politics have not only contributed to deteriorating working conditions over the past several decades, but shaped the pandemic response in British Columbia, resulting in intensified relational precarity for populations marked as less "grievable" (Butler, 2004, p. xv). Thereby, during the pandemic, vulnerability was distributed unevenly (Butler, 2004, p. 29). Since the onset of the pandemic, employers have relied upon the settler state to source workers to perform the labour characterized by risk, while also minimizing their labour costs. The nature of the settler state continues to shape the distribution of vulnerability. Ontologies of precarity engage with racial capitalism, inform us of who is considered as human in the liberal world order, and theorize that "bare life and biopolitics are but alternative terms for racism, through a designation that attempts to conjure a sphere more fundamental to the human than race" (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 21; Weheliye, 2014, p. 72-73). In a settler state like Canada, the distribution of vulnerability is shaped by the racializing assemblages which

place racialized populations into more precarious forms of work. Furthermore, the creation of essential workers according to their relationship to critical infrastructure, and "the rhetoric of COVID and its neoliberal focus on weighing the economy versus life", further distributed vulnerability according to occupation (Mcivor et al., 2020 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1419). The pandemic set the stage for a convergence of precarities. The ontological vulnerabilities produced by the organizing principles characteristic of the settler state, the precarity of working conditions resulting from a history of neoliberal politics, the vulnerability which is inherent to all humans amidst a global pandemic, and the neoliberal, biopolitical response to the pandemic coincided to result in a further precaritization of working conditions for front line grocery workers.

The factors demonstrative of the precaritization of working conditions included: 1) participants were poorly compensated despite the risk of injury given the increased physical labour of cleaning the stores, working under conditions which intensified their risk of exposure to COVID-19 at work, and for some, during their commute on public transportation, 2) there was room for improvement in the pandemic protocol implemented by employers, including the protective barriers which impeded communication, and did not offer adequate protection for workers throughout the entire payment process, the lack of enforcement of safety measures, and transparency about store exposures, 3) there were concerns about the consequences of contracting COVID-19 including the financial implications of losing income due to unpaid sick days, as well as exposing vulnerable family members, or elderly customers entering the store to the virus, and 4) the power dynamic inherent in the customer-worker relationship which prioritizes the comfort of the customer, coupled with a perceived entitlement some customers have over workers' bodies may have also served to increase the risk of exposure to the virus.

One final relevant condition which predated the pandemic was the ways in which technology did not serve to benefit workers, nor was it used to mitigate precarity for workers during the pandemic. The limitations of the technology used at the point of sale required a cognitive focus which interfered with performing the affective labour expected of the role, and at times heightened conflict when there were discrepancies. Additionally, while some employers used infrared thermometers to screen workers for COVID-19 before their shifts, they did not test the customers entering stores to protect workers from exposure. Depending on the efficacy of the infrared thermometers, the

use of this technology may have benefitted workers through mitigating the spread of the virus between them, given that workers would be subject to unpaid sick days if they had a fever. These employers, however, were not administering the test to customers entering the store, and this protocol may have been implemented simply to prevent interruptions to everyday operations. Technology could be used to improve the everyday tasks which pose a continued challenge for workers, and also potentially shield them, and other vulnerable populations from exposure to deadly viruses.

Given the disparities that I found between my data, and the American study conducted by Loustaunau et al. (2021), I contend that without intervention, the trajectory of neoliberalism may result in a further precaritization of conditions for workers. Despite the worsening conditions during the pandemic for everyone with whom I spoke, a few of the participants said that they felt supported by their immediate management, and praised their employers for their openness about COVID-19 exposures in the stores at which they worked. On the other hand, others revealed their fears of exposure at work and on transit, as well as inconsistencies, inadequacies, and a general lack of enforcement of safety protocol on the part of their employers. While the participants in the research conducted by Loustaunau et al. (2021) reported that their employers were slow to establish safety protocols upon the onset of the pandemic, every participant I interviewed who worked through the pandemic confirmed that their employers promptly installed protective barriers, increased expectations surrounding cleaning surface areas, and distributed gloves, masks and face shields. In other words, the difference in working conditions between the two samples may indicate an even further precaritization in working conditions for the American workers. This is not to say that because those I interviewed reported better conditions than those in the American study, that the Canadian treatment of grocery workers during the pandemic was acceptable. It indicates that under neoliberal governance, there is the room for a further precaritization to occur for Canadian grocery workers especially under conditions brought on by crises, and subsequent neoliberal emergency responses.

The neoliberal politics which eroded labour protections for decades has resulted in the limited enforcement of employment standards (BC Employment Standards Coalition, p. 5). These findings challenge the capitalist logic central to BC politics whereby "'gentlemanly capitalists' will not only do the right thing socially, but will keep each other in line with regard to 'proper' business practices" (Aguiar, 2004, p. 107). The

lack of consistency between retailers in both safety precautions and enforcement of protocol demonstrates a lack of ‘peer pressure’ to regulate their behaviours (Ibid). It could be argued that, in keeping with the rhetoric of COVID-19, that it was ‘they’ who were all ‘in this together’, in ways which they protected their class interests, and continued exploitation of workers.

7.2.2. Media Representation versus Workers’ Experiences

When I began reviewing the cultural material I had chosen, it quickly became apparent that there was a disparity between the experiences participants described, and the dominant narratives which constructed essential workers as heroes. The dominant narratives did not center workers, and instead constructed them from the top down, by those whose narratives were accepted as “truth” (Hall, 2001, p 73). The lack of self-representation of grocery workers in the cultural material was emblematic of the epistemic injustice which centered those voices invested in the preservation of the status quo. In other words, the hero discourse was shaped from the top-down, by writers and columnists who often relied upon their perspectives as consumers, and through quotes from those invested in the neoliberal emergency strategy used during the pandemic, the NSCI. Depicted as heroes, grocery workers were conferred a temporary but contained visibility in the public sphere, along with other workers who had been designated as essential. What was noteworthy was the exclusion of less visible workers from the hero discourse, including migrant farm workers, those working in care homes, and those working in meat packing plants.

The notable differences between the corporate media depictions of heroes and the everyday experiences participants shared included: 1) media narratives depicted heroes as hard working, and used military metaphors to describe them as accepting a ‘calling’, while participants described a wage labour relationship incommensurate with both the heightened risk of exposure, and the increased physical labour, 2) heroes’ were praised for their ‘sacrifice’ and ‘willingness’ to accept risk so ‘normalcy’ could be maintained, while participants shared their fears about the consequences of contracting COVID-19 including losing income, and exposing vulnerable family members and elderly customers to the virus, 3) CEOs and management were described in the corporate media as working alongside workers during the pandemic, while participants shared situations where management did little to ensure that customers complied with safety

protocols, but watched to ensure that they complied with pandemic cleaning procedures. Counternarratives emphasized the value of grocery work, called for meaningful change, and shed light on the precarious conditions grocery workers were already experiencing prior to the pandemic. There was no acknowledgement that of the grocery workers represented by unions, many have second-tier status within the union. Participants described that their tier status excluded them from access to benefits, and from additional union protections, indicating that precarity and relational vulnerability was not only unevenly distributed between occupations, but among workers belonging to the same union.

7.2.3. Challenging, Justifying, and Reinforcing the Status Quo

With very few exceptions, grocery workers were excluded from sharing their perspectives and experiences in the corporate media I reviewed, and this epistemic injustice served to produce a form of neoliberal propaganda which operated to justify the continued exploitation of essential workers during the pandemic. In particular, the dominant media narratives imposed productivist norms upon subjects through the use of ideologies of work ethic, they served to normalize the risk to which essential workers were exposed, they imposed nation-building strategies upon subjects, and they obfuscated where power could be located.

First, the ways in which the work ethic discourse was used concomitantly with the hero discourse may have worked to preserve the status quo. Ideologies of work ethic reinforced a dependence on wage labour when employers offered workers a premium wage to accept a higher risk assemblage and continue to work, rather than apply for the CERB. It served to "construct subjects as productive individuals", suggesting that that those who collected the CERB lacked work ethic (Weeks, 2011, p. 53-54). Moreover, the employers' decision to end the premium pay before the risk had been eliminated, coupled with the dominant discourses of work ethic may have resulted in some workers accepting a higher risk assemblage without the corresponding compensation. In other words, this behaviour on the part of the employers may have resulted in the continued dependence of many workers, and deprived many others from the independence which may have arisen from collecting government assistance.

Alternatively, there were counternarratives which strategically utilized discourses of work ethic as an opportunity to emphasize the value of grocery work, and to shed light on some of the poor conditions workers have historically experienced. The labourist ethic was an ideology constructed by the working class in the nineteenth century which takes aim at the "idle rich" rather than "malign the shiftless poor" (Weeks, 2015, p. 59). This discourse subverts the ideologies imposed by dominant classes, and according to Weeks (2015), "has been useful to the political projects of contesting the structural exclusions and cultural marginalization of the class" (p. 59). The labourist ethic could be observed in the ways in which both writers and representatives of labour praised workers for their continued efforts and challenged the status quo through their criticisms of the employers that ended hero pay despite earning record profits.

Second, discourses of sacrifice may have discursively produced a disposable class of workers. The dominant discourse may have not only served to normalize essential workers' continued exposure to risk, but positioned some as "necessary sacrifices" within the NSCI's commitment to preserve the "liberal capitalist colonial order" (Mohammed et al., 2021, p. 7; Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 98). This crises response left those designated as essential more exposed to the necrotic forces of capitalism, as well as to the uncertainties crises brings, as reflected in the corporate media positioning them as sacrifices. According to McIvor et al. (2020), "calls for sacrifice often overlook the facts of who is being asked to sacrifice, or – more pointedly – who is being sacrificed for democracy" (p. 167). Moreover, if heroes are said to serve others voluntarily, and not because of limited choices, then the sacrifice discourse may have served to conceal the agency of workers (Franco et al., 2011, p. 101). Dominant media representations of workers which center the consumer not only serve to veil the heightened relational precarity of working in front line employment through the pandemic, but it fails to acknowledge the ways in which service work has been historically devalued and long characterized by precarious working conditions (Cobble & Merrill, 2009, p. 169; McIvor et al., 2020, p. 170). In short, this narrative justifies the further precaritization of conditions for "lives that are not quite lives" (Butler, 2004, p. 29; Butler, 2009, p. 31).

Third, ideologies shaped by nation building strategies to depict the model citizen as grateful also accompanied the hero discourse. They operated as a disciplining

technique to impose upon the subject the acceptable ways in which to interact with essential workers amidst an emergency response which centers their needs and wants through the continuation of "basic economic life" (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 98). The dominant corporate media narratives highlighted the existence of a shared inherent vulnerability between the subject consuming the material and the subject of the discourse, essential workers. The 'willingness' to work through the pandemic was positioned as the difference between subjects, and the discursively produced model citizen was grateful to the essential workers upon whom they relied for the maintenance of normalcy. Discourses of gratitude may have served as a tool to maintain the status quo through the optics of recognizing, and celebrating essential workers in the public sphere while doing little to actually uplift workers in the struggle to improve their material conditions. The discursively produced, well intentioned model citizen consumer performs individual acts of kindness rather than align with workers in a way which might have a meaningful impact on the existing liberal social order. As Butler (2009) argues, shared precarity does not lead to "reciprocal recognition", but rather to "a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives" (p. 31). In short, the discourse obfuscates any hint of class struggle.

Fourth, the depiction of heroes in the corporate media blurs the power the state and capital hold over both workers and consumers during an emergency, given that survival is shaped to rest upon Canada's neoliberal critical infrastructure strategy, which is built upon the exploitation of the labour of essential workers. These dominant narratives not only impose upon the subject their role as a consumer, but upon the importance of the continued labour of essential workers during crisis to maintain the status quo for the consumer. In short, these disciplinary mechanisms impose upon the subject a singular way of life as shaped by neoliberal logic. Through the focus on individual workers, and not on larger structures of power, these ideologies deflect attention from the ways in which the neoliberal political response to the pandemic allowed for a reiteration of power structures resulting in an unprecedented upward transfer of wealth. The hero discourse may serve to preserve the status quo through obfuscating the systems of domination and oppression which place "people in 'high contact, high risk' jobs [who] are positioned as sacrifices to the relatively well-off and protected" (McIvor et al., 2020 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1419).

7.3. Limitations

While this research does not seek to represent the experiences of all grocery workers, its key limitations involved size and scope. Recruiting participants proved difficult given the increased burden the pandemic produced for workers in precarious forms of employment. The resulting small sample size limited analysis of factors including the effects of tiered union status on working conditions for first tier employees, and the differences of conditions between grocery chains. A larger sample size may have pointed to additional concerns brought on by the response to crisis, and its effects on workers of varied ages, those impacted by disability, and with different family configurations. The scope of the project limited analysis of the implications of increasing corporate media concentration, of alternate forms of media which may have offered different representations of essential workers, of the ways in which workers' home lives were impacted, and of the union struggles participants described including campaigns to win back hero pay, and the battle to make indoor masks mandatory in stores. Above all, both the interviews and the media analysis provided me with an overwhelming amount of data, and I made difficult decisions about which aspects to include and to exclude. With this said, I chose to focus on the everyday material conditions of grocery workers at work.

7.4. Implications

Future crises may result in a further precaritization of conditions for grocery workers. As I discussed in Chapter 4, one of the participants with whom I spoke described her experiences working in online order fulfillment at her store, which offered both delivery and pick up services for customers. According to Hobbs (2020), consumers adopted to online grocery delivery services more quickly because of the pandemic, and while usage may have fallen, some will continue to use these services (p. 174). This crisis saw some occupations conferred a level of visibility within the public sphere, briefly exposing the “hidden abode of production” (Marx, 1976, 279-280 in Weeks, 2015, p. 6). In the event of another crisis, now that grocers and consumers have demonstrated that they can quickly adapt to online systems of ordering, capitalists have the potential of hiding “the secret of profit-making” in warehouses or less visible locations with the potential to conceal abusive labour practices (Marx, 1976, 279-280 in

Weeks, 2015, p. 6). Moreover, like in the agricultural and food processing sectors where the work is mostly hidden from public scrutiny, there is the danger that employers can further save on labour costs through the exploitation of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW). Crises allow for capital to reintrench its power, and consequently, new forms of exploitation hidden from the public gaze may result in deleterious outcomes for vulnerable workers already experiencing precarious conditions.

7.4.1. Visibility and Hidden Abodes

The pandemic created a slight shift in the public sphere. 'Labour shortages', the increased visibility of grocery workers, and the increasing costs of living may have increased the public demand for transparency from grocers. In August of 2022, CTV news reported that workers at Metro Inc, one of the aforementioned grocers investigated for collusion "are putting in overtime to keep stores open as the company grapples with an ongoing labour crunch" (Bundale, 2022). The CEO of another grocer investigated for collusion, Empire Company, Michael Medline, was quoted in September of 2022 about profiting off inflation and rising food costs.

> Quite frankly I am tired of these armchair quarterbacks who make little effort to understand even the basics of our business but are comfortable sitting on the sidelines pontificating about how Canadian companies are reaping unreasonable profits off the backs of inflation […]. These reckless and incendiary attacks are meant to divide us and sit in stark contrast to the collaboration and problem solving that we experienced in the darkest moments of the pandemic (Nichols, 2022)

While a discussion about inflation and its causes are beyond the scope of this project, what is relevant is that there was a brief increased public interest in the behaviour of capitalists, resulting in an dramatic rebuttal from one of the capitalists who had benefited financially from the neoliberal pandemic response. To that end, leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) Jagmeet Singh took to Twitter to critique the exploitative practices of grocers.

> The CEO of Sobeys, Michael Medline made 8.6 million last year – 15% more than the year before. Did workers at his stores get a 15% raise? No. Instead, he took away their hero pay during the pandemic. Workers deserve better. (Nichols, 2022).

The ways in which the pandemic offered a partial glimpse into the exploitative practices of capitalists when they removed hazard pay for grocery workers, coupled with the anxiety over rising grocery bills, may have resulted in a demand for further transparency.

> […] the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business.' Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. (Marx, 1976, 279-280).

On the other hand, less visible workers along the food supply chain were excluded from representation in the public sphere, and as a result, employers may have been able to better shield their exploitative practices from the public gaze. For instance, as mentioned previously, migrant farm workers experienced a further precaritization of conditions during the pandemic (Faraday, 2021).

The reliance on hiring TFWs for agricultural labour resulted from difficulty in recruiting domestic workers, which is in line with the Canadian practice of the state delivering "cheap labour" to capital, so that they may "lower production costs in order to remain competitive" (Larue, 2021, p. 277; Macklin, 2002, p. 232-233). In January of 2022, due to a labour shortage, a coalition of lobby groups representing the food manufacturing sector were pushing to increase allowed TFWs from 10% to 30% of total workers (Edmiston, 2022). According to Syed Hussan, the executive director of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC), Canadian employers have been "using any crisis" to peel back restrictions on the TFW program, and labour advocates argue that shortages are a result of poor conditions, low wages, and "bringing in more migrants will relieve pressure on companies to improve both" (Ibid).

In a report completed shortly before the onset of the pandemic, the BC Federation of Labour (2020) assessed the impact of automation on workers, and found that not only does automation threaten a further precaritization of already precarious employment, but 60% of the labour force in BC will be impacted by automation within the next few decades (p. 5). According to the report, "automation in grocery store chains, fast food restaurants and other workplaces in the care and service category make these workers' positions even less secure" (p. 13). However, these processes may begin to occur more quickly than anticipated. Hobbs (2021) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic "will accelerate the push towards greater automation", and advancements in machine

learning creates possibilities for robotics and digitization to be used within the food supply chain (p. 2).

Schulz (2022) suggests that autonomous trucks will replace the need for human drivers “within the next two decades”, however Loblaws partnered with Gatik, an American autonomous vehicle company in 2020, and are now launching the latest phase of their program to use driverless trucks for deliveries across the Greater Toronto Area (p.2-3; Evans, 2022). Moreover, despite significant backlash from labour advocates, Freshii, a fast food franchise with locations across Canada, began a pilot project using ‘virtual cashiers’ in BC and Ontario (Dickson, 2022). While this practice was referred to as an ‘innovation’, it appeared to be a repackaged version of outsourcing to save on labour costs, by exploiting workers with fewer protections in countries with lower minimum wages (Dickson, 2020). Working from a call centre in Nicaragua, workers earn about $4.78 CDN. per hour, and BC Labour Minister Harry Bains says that there is little the government can do to prevent the exploitation of virtual cashiers, given that BC labour laws only protect workers who are physically in the province (Dickson, 2022). Bains asserts that he would prefer that businesses hire workers locally, so their earnings could be reinjected back into the local economy, to which the author claims, “with an ongoing labour shortage that’s forced employers to get creative to recruit and retain staff, that may be easier said than done” (Dickson, 2022). However, it does not appear that paying a living wage is a ‘creative’ strategy that this employer is willing to implement to recruit employees.

As of November of 2022, Freshii was still using virtual cashiers (Gamrot, 2022). Given that call centre work can be seen as a form of “labour which generates an intangible product, such as care, an emotion, communication, a conversation or knowledge”, it allows employers to continue to benefit from the exploitation of emotional labour, while also saving on the labour costs involved through the semi-digitization of the customer service process (Brophy, 2017, p. 215). This ‘innovation’ gives way to new forms of exploitation which shifts the care aspect of retail work to a “hidden abode”, characterized by “routinization, intensification, surveillance, and subjective shaping of labour”(Marx, 1976, 279–80 in Weeks, 2015, p. 6; Brophy, 2017, p. 37). Under the guise of a ‘labour shortage’, and ‘innovation’, and instead of increasing wages and improving conditions to attract potential candidates, this employer sought out to acquire labour more exploitable, and therefore even more vulnerable than Canadian workers.

Transmitted through bits and bytes, and represented in stores through pixels, the virtual cashier is a digitized assemblage of "not-quite-human", exploitable within the global systemic order (Weheliye, 2014, p. 4; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 21).

While the settler colonial state operates under a white supremacist paradigm, capital desires labour which is vulnerable and therefore exploitable (Walia, 2021, p. 170). If white supremacy has shaped the ways in which capitalism orders society, and if neoliberal responses to the pandemic resulted in increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 depending on workers' relationship to capital, then exposing some populations to hazardous conditions depending on their occupations requires what Weheliye (2014) argues is a recalibration of the understanding of biopolitics in order to abolish global power structures (Sandset, 2021, p. 1418; p. 1). Capital has adapted quickly during the pandemic, and will find new, insidious ways to exploit workers. Moreover, if the status quo of the settler state involves policies "which defined some groups of immigrants as 'workers only,' disposable non-members who despite their contributions, are given no acknowledged part in the 'nation' or 'nation-building' project", then it is important to consider whose lives will continue to be exposed to risk during crises, for the benefit of those invested in the preservation of the status quo (Arat-Koç in Walia, 2021, p. 195).

7.4.2. Crises

During the global pandemic some lives were revealed to be more grievable than other lives "because we have come to accept that certain lives in certain situations will be exposed to the necropolitical conditions of slow violence and death" (Butler, 2006, p. 20 in Sandset, 2021, p. 1415; Sandset, 2021, p. 1415). In other words, the ordering principles of race, gender, and class converge with processes like imperialism and neoliberalism to produce a hierarchy wherein some are not seen as fully human, and are therefore not only left to die, but are exposed to necrotic conditions. Condon (2020), proposes that "the coronavirus is instructive for the world of tomorrow", and the ways in which it is "tackled is setting the historical path upon which global society embarks towards the climate crisis" (p. 5813).

The emergency response strategy used by the state is among the ways necropolitics are imposed upon who Mezzadri (2022) calls, "the reserve army of the pandemic", that is, essential workers, in low paid, already precarious employment (p.

390) The NSCI response to emergency demonstrates a fracture in democracy when it continues to fail First Nations reserves by neglecting to address the infrastructure which has resulted in “hundreds of boil water advisories”, when it continues to allow further deaths from toxic drug poisoning, and through its neglect to take the necessary precautions prior to the heat event in June of 2021 which resulted in 619 deaths across BC (One-third of Indigenous people in Canada are struggling to pay for essentials during the Coronavirus pandemic, 2020; Government of Canada, 2022b; British Columbia Coroners Service, 2022). Furthermore, given what might be seen from the top as a “useful crisis’, the pandemic and subsequent response resulted in a further widening of the “chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor” (Klein, 2007, p. 15, 259). If the pandemic was used to test the “neoliberal institutional order”, then it is too late to wait for the next crisis to ameliorate conditions for the most vulnerable who may be subject to more intensified forms of exploitation in the future (Condon, 2020, p. 5813).

According to Bhagat and Rajan (2018), “climate change is likely to affect migration through a number of socio-economic and political drivers and its direct effect is confounded by the overlapping nature of climate change and socio-economic conditions” (p. 4). Consequently, they argue that vulnerability is “the key issue to climate change”, affecting the poor the most (p. 7). If vulnerable populations are produced by climate change, and if, as Condon (2020) argues that “on the current trajectory, [crises] will increase in frequency and magnitude”, then BC’s neoliberal response to the pandemic could be indicative of a future wherein employers may look forward to a greater supply of “frightened, oppressed, [and] vulnerable” racialized populations to exploit (Condon, 2020, p. 5813; McNally in Walia, 2021, p. 170). Furthermore, if Condon’s (2020) hypothesis that the coronavirus crisis served as “a test of the systemic resilience of the neoliberal institutional order”, and the BC provincial government’s neoliberal response resulted in unprecedented profits for grocery corporations, then future crises may result in new forms of exploitation by capitalists, and further vulnerability for greater numbers of workers (p. 5813).

7.4.3. Stolen Land and Disposable Heroes

The emergency strategies used in Canada during the pandemic exploited the valuable labour of workers in precarious employment, who were long known to be essential, yet treated as disposable (Ng, 2002, in Premji, 2014, p. 126). The ephemeral

nature of the popular hero discourse conferred these workers a modicum of visibility, yet did little of value to improve their material conditions at work. When converging precarities resulted in a further precaritization of conditions for front line grocery workers during the pandemic, power could be located in the continued domination of the "colonial state and state society", for which it requires "land, labor and resources" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 40). Coulthard (2014) contends that while Indigenous labour became increasingly superfluous to the development of Canada, "state-formation and colonial-capitalist development required first and foremost land, and only secondarily the surplus value afforded by Indigenous labor" (p. 12). The racialized workforce "imported" to satisfy both the state formation and colonialist capitalist development was shaped by an ordering principle which places Wynter's *homo oeconomicus* on top, created in opposition to those discursively constructed as non-humans including Black subjects and Indigenous populations (Coulthard, 2014, p. 14; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 10; Weheliye, 2014, p. 20). Refugees, immigrants or migrants are "invited to be a settler in some scenarios", yet, to be clear, life is reserved for the "universal human", as characterized through Wynter's depiction of 'Man', while racialized subjects are relegated the "zones of death and dying"(Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 17; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 10; Mezzadri, 2022, p. 389-390; Sandset, 2021, p. 1414). As previously stated, a largely invisiblized "reserve army of labour", shaped by "racializing assemblages", and comprised of racialized immigrant women channeled into gendered occupations, existed in Canada long before the pandemic (Premji et al., 2014, p. 137). Moreover, these occupations can be characterized by their precarious nature, whereby workers are forced to take on a "risk assemblage" in order to survive, which in turn furthers vulnerability and produces what Prentice and Trueba (2018) term "precarious bodies" (p. 53).

Included among this reserve army were grocery workers, the "indispensably disposable" celebrated very briefly in the hero narratives found within corporate media, yet overexposed to conditions which are indicative of their position as "outsiders as surplus people", and "exploitable non-humans" (Mezzadri, 2022, p. 390; Lorde, 2005, p. 245; Weheliye, 2014, p. 135;). The material conditions I described in Chapter 4 evidenced the ways in which grocery workers were overexposed to death, and whose "reproductive role in the neoliberal regime is embedded in disposability" (Mezzadri, 2022, p. 390). There were tensions produced between protecting their own bodily

integrity and engaging in the civility required in the performance of affective labour, which has been used as a way to preserve the power of the colonial capitalist state, whether that power manifests in interactions between the worker and customer, or between the "lesser-citizen minority", and the consumer-citizen (Hawn, 2020, p. 221; Mohanty, 1996, p. 5). This can be further exemplified by participants' depictions of their experiences with customers refusing to wear masks, or asserting power over them as a 'Karen' customer. Power was revealed through the ways customers demonstrated their entitlement to bodies and spaces through the "white possessive logics" which have been shaped by the ways in which property rights have long been conflated with race (Razack, 2002; Moreton-Robinson, p. xii; Harris, 1993, p. 1714).

The politics of visibility within the context of "colonial-capitalist domination and exploitation on the ground" cannot be compared to what Ladurie termed, a "safety valve", that is, "a release of tensions which ensured that the social hierarchy remained unchanged the rest of the year" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 143; Ladurie in Roces, 2021, p. 4). Given that the temporary introduction of hero pay may have operated to preserve the dependence grocery workers have on the wage labour relationship with their employers, and to prevent the freedom which may have manifested from accepting emergency social assistance, the increased pay did not "unsettle" the existing social hierarchies as shaped by the colonial capitalist state (Weeks, 2011, p. 52; Roces, 2021, p. 4). Instead, it is demonstrative of the ways in which power was upheld during crisis. Recognizing the contributions of vulnerable workers from institutions within the colonialist capitalist regime may serve as a tool to construct a responsible citizenry characterized by a "state of acceptance" that less grievable members of the population may die, while simultaneously coopting workers into becoming instruments of their own exploitation through discourses of work ethic (Sandset, 2021, p. 1415; Butler, 2004, p. xiv; Coulthard, 2014, p. 156). The limited accommodations provided to 'heroes' never included raising wages to what could be considered as a living wage in Metro Vancouver, nor was the safety protocol implemented in the beginning of the pandemic improved to help mitigate the increased risk to which grocery workers were exposed. Instead of implementing meaningful change which may have alleviated relational precarity and improved working conditions for workers, employers chose to placate them with concessions like discounts, rewards points, and free coffee after they ended hero pay.

The historical antecedents to the precaritization of conditions for workers can be found from the inception of the settler colonial and neoliberal projects which long predate the COVID-19 global pandemic. These projects also shape the epistemic injustice which excludes some forms of knowledge from the public sphere. While this excluded knowledge may have served to deepen the understanding of the ways crises affects the most vulnerable, its erasure allows both projects to maintain their dominance (McKittrick, 2006 in Evans, 2021, p. 517). The ability to overtly challenge power is not a privilege afforded to most, considering that our very survival as workers is contingent upon our participation within the current mode of production. Moreover, the emergency response strategies in Canada are predicated upon measures which act against threats to the existing liberal, colonialist, capitalist order (Boyle & Dafnos, 2019, p. 84-85). Put simply, challenging power is dangerous. But meaningful change will require a collective focus against colonial capitalist domination, as opposed to individual actions like the neoliberal performativity recommended in the dominant corporate media discourse.

While colonial state power structures cannot be relied upon to ameliorate the unequal allocation of vulnerability under capitalism, the visibility of some essential workers may have contributed to small wins for workers in precarious employment. Bill 10 was passed on May 17, 2022, and through a return to single-step certification, makes it more difficult for employers to “intimidate and interfere in organizing drives” (Hemingway, 2022). Additionally, five days of paid sick leave became standard for both full time and part time workers in BC on January 1, 2022 (British Columbia Office of the Premier, 2021). However, waiting for politicians to bring about meaningful change suits the needs of power, as noted by Loblaw’s CEO, Galen Weston: “I continue to be a strong believer in a progressive minimum wage and would support any government-led effort to establish a living wage” (Carmichael, 2020). Given that the “state apparatus”, muddies the line between capital and the state, a ‘government-led effort’ is likely to have little effect on changing the status quo for those employed in precarious forms of work (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 394). Going through the ‘proper channels’ as Weston infers above, asking for rights ‘politely’, and wishing for ‘gentlemanly capitalists’ to accede to demands, will not dismantle the systems which will continue to produce an unequal distribution of vulnerability, and drive wealth and power upwards. As Frederick Douglass declared, “Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will” (Douglass & Davis, 1977).

The threat of future crises and the deepening of neoliberal logic which may serve to further precaritize conditions for a greater number of workers indicates the exigency for change. What may have served as a brief crisis for neoliberalism in the early days of the pandemic "due to the inability to exploit the labour-power of a significant share of the population", may result in adaptations which will further serve the needs of capitalists (Mezzadri, 2022, p. 380). Capitalism, plays a key role in the dispossession of land and self-determining authority for Indigenous people, aided further by systems of domination "configured along racial, gender and state lines" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 172). Instead of working to conceal oppressions by channeling those with marginalized identities into positions of power to exploit others, considering strategies which dismantle all systems of oppression is key to responding to crises from the bottom up, and ameliorating the unequal allocation of vulnerability. In other words, a true disruption of the status quo involves identifying attachments to an oppressive system that serve to allow it to maintain itself, and then dismantling it, rather than attempting to succeed within it.

A movement which centers the needs of the most vulnerable has the potential to challenge the colonial capitalist state's neoliberal response to the pandemic which prioritized profits over people. As Strauss (2022) observes, "if the labour movement in Canada can mobilize working people who are seeing and feeling how corporations have profited from the pandemic while ordinary people have paid the price, the change could be significant" (Strauss, 2022, August 10). Challenging the "eugenic calculation" upon which the political response to the pandemic was predicated, will require a movement which centres the needs of the most vulnerable (Wade, 2020). The Combahee River Collective, for example, was built on the analysis of "Black women's oppression under capitalism" and argued for "the reorganization of society based on the collective needs of the most oppressed" (Taylor, 2017, p. 5). Responding to crises in a way where if "you could free the most oppressed people in society, then you would have to free everyone" would require an empirical analyses of the working conditions, as defined under the epistemological conceptions of precarity, to determine the needs of the most vulnerable workers (Ibid). .Given the capitalist exploitation of the global hierarchy which places whiteness, and those adjacent to it at the top, I would argue that change to the status quo will require a convergence of international and local solidarities which center the needs of the most vulnerable.

Challenging the colonial capital regime rests upon healing the fractures within the working class, which will involve strengthening both international and local solidarities, and challenging our investment in the systems from which we may benefit. These systems are not only responsible for the oppressive conditions imposed upon local workers in grocery stores and farms, but for the exploitation of international workers in other segments of the food supply chain, like those performing emotional labour as virtual cashiers. Kundnani (2021) asserts that borders become spatial tools for the boundaries between different types of workers, and a “material aspect of the racist global division of labour under neoliberalism”, drawing upon Stuart Hall’s concept that “race is the modality in which the global class relations is ‘lived’” (p. 66). Coulthard (2014) suggests that,

> this reality demands that we continue to remain open to, if not actively seek out and establish, relations of solidarity and networks of trade and mutual aid with national and transnational communities and organizations that are also struggling against the imposed effects of globalized capital (p. 173).

Aligning with those most vulnerable under capitalism, rather than with the capitalists may be a dangerous endeavor given what capitalists stand to lose. However, the waves of precarity which persist after the “eugenic calculation” of the colonial capitalist state continue to reveal the systemic concerns which endanger access to food for an increasing number of members of the population. The demand for change is urgent, and as Douglass proclaimed, “if there is no struggle, there is no progress” (Douglass & Davis, 1977). The potential consequences of future neoliberal responses to crises indicates an urgency for solidarity within disparate layers of the working class. Forming and strengthening solidarities, aligning with the most vulnerable against all systems of domination, and reimagining other possibilities to care for the material needs of all could mitigate the uneven allocation of vulnerability.

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