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"Getting" and "Making" a Tip

The waitress can't help feeling a sense of personal failure and public censure when she is "stiffed."

—*William F. Whyte*, "When Workers and Customers Meet"

They're rude, they're ignorant, they're obnoxious, they're inconsiderate. . . . Half these people don't deserve to come out and eat, let alone try and tip a waitress.

—*Route waitress*

The financial and emotional hazards inherent in the tipping system have drawn attention from sociologists, and more recently anthropologists, concerned with the study of work. In general these researchers have concluded that workers who receive gratuities exercise little control over the material outcome of tipping and less over its symbolic implications. In his study of Chicago cabdrivers, Fred Davis (1959) found that drivers employ diverse strategies to increase the odds of getting a favorable tip, including padding fares with fictitious charges (for example, charging for extra luggage); embarrassing a passenger into relinquishing a bigger tip by creating a scene over making change; tailoring the ride to

fit the perceived temperament of the passenger (fast for businessmen, slow for old people); and subjecting passengers to hard-luck stories. In addition, cabdrivers develop typologies of passengers (the Sport, the Lady Shopper, Live Ones) in an effort to predict and explain the outcome of individual fares. Davis (1959:164) concludes, however, that "in the last analysis, neither the driver's typology of fares nor his stratagems further to any marked degree his control of the tip." A study of tipping among users of a suburban cab company in California (Karen 1962) revealed that the rendering of special services to passengers did not increase the likelihood of receiving a gratuity, and that on the whole tippers and nontippers are consistent in their tipping behavior. The driver's ability to control the outcome of a tip is thus presumably minimal.

Previous observations of restaurant servers support the thesis of limited worker control. Suellen Butler and William Snizek (1976) identify three strategies adopted by waitresses in an effort to manipulate the material rewards of their work: increased ritualization (exemplified by the wine ritual); friendly rapport or "buttering up" the customer; and product promotional activity, in which the waitress attempts to sell her customers more—and more expensive—menu items and so increase her 15 percent tip. While the authors were unable to investigate the efficacy of the first two strategies, they suggest that both are risky and largely ineffective. Only product promotional activity, which was directly tested by the authors, was found to be effective in increasing tip earnings.

Several observers of restaurant work have reported the existence of customer typologies similar to those used by cabdrivers. Gerald Mars and Michael Nicod (1984:54) note that waiters categorize customers

on the basis of crosscutting criteria such as length of stay and size of party but comment that these systems of classification are "unpredictable" and "dependent on unreliable verbal and appearance clues." James Spradley and Brenda Mann provide an extensive list of customer types recognized by cocktail waitresses and note that "it was important to the waitresses to make such fine distinctions" (1975:61). There is some indication that servers adapt their performance to fit different categories of diners, but the control function, if any, of customer typologies remains unclear from the authors' descriptions.

While some attention has been directed toward the worker's ability to control the financial outcome of the tipping transaction, it has been assumed that the emotional hazards of tipping are an evil the server is helpless to combat. This view is most clearly expressed by Whyte who writes that "the waitress can't help feeling a sense of personal failure and public censure when she is 'stiffed'" (1946:129). His contention is substantiated by the testimony of his informants: a restaurant owner recalls a waitress who would occasionally break down and cry, "I failed . . . I failed today. After all I did for them, they didn't like me" (1946:129). A waiter comments:

> This tipping business is a great evil. You know, waiters have inferiority complexes. They are afraid to tell people they are a waiter. . . . It's the tipping system that does it. (Whyte 1977:372)

And a headwaiter observes:

> When they were calling each other mister, I said to them, "Look, you are no gentlemen. Gentlemen do not take tips. And therefore you should not call one another mister." It is this tipping

> system that is the evil. That's the really degrading part of it. (Whyte 1977:372)

Along similar lines, Mars and Nicod (1984:74–75) report that overtipping may underscore the "socioeconomic superiority" of the customer, while disproportionately small tips may cause the server to feel "degraded, embarrassed, nonplussed, or otherwise upset." These comments suggest that servers adhere to a kind of symbolic illogic which compels them to interpret small and large tips alike as a negative reflection on themselves; thus, while a small tip is interpreted as an insult, a large tip is read not as a compliment, but as a sign of the server's social and economic subordination. Further, they suggest that servers perceive tips as symbolic statements about their personal qualities and social status.

Making a Tip at Route

A common feature of past research is that the worker's control over the tipping system is evaluated in terms of her efforts to con, coerce, compel, or otherwise manipulate a customer into relinquishing a bigger tip. Because these efforts have for the most part proven futile, the worker has been seen as having little defense against the financial vicissitudes of the tipping system. What these studies have overlooked is that an employee can increase her tip income by controlling the number as well as the size of tips she receives. This oversight has arisen from the tendency of researchers to concentrate narrowly on the relationship between server and served, while failing to take into account the broader organizational context in which this relationship takes place.

Like service workers observed in earlier studies,

waitresses at Route strive to boost the amount of individual gratuities by rendering special services and being especially friendly. As one waitress put it, "I'll sell you the world if you're in my station." In general though, waitresses at Route Restaurant seek to boost their tip income, not by increasing the amount of individual gratuities, but by increasing the number of customers they serve. They accomplish this (a) by securing the largest or busiest stations and working the most lucrative shifts; (b) by "turning" their tables quickly; and (c) by controlling the flow of customers within the restaurant.

Technically, stations at Route are assigned on a rotating basis so that all waitresses, including rookies, work fast and slow stations equally. Station assignments are listed on the work schedule that is posted in the office window where it can be examined by all workers on all shifts, precluding the possibility of blatant favoritism or discrimination. Yet a number of methods exist whereby experienced waitresses are able to circumvent the formal rotation system and secure the more lucrative stations for themselves. A waitress can trade assignments with a rookie who is uncertain of her ability to handle a fast station; she can volunteer to take over a large station when a *call-out* necessitates reorganization of station assignments;[1] or she can establish herself as the only waitress capable of handling a particularly large or chaotic station. Changes in station assignments tend not to be formally recorded, so inconsistencies in the rotation system often do not show up on the schedule. Waitresses on the same shift may notice of course that a co-worker has managed to avoid an especially slow station for many days, or has somehow ended up in the busiest station two weekends in a row, but the waitresses' code of noninterference (discussed in Chapter 6), inhibits them from openly objecting to such irregularities.

A waitress can also increase her tip income by working the more lucrative shifts. Because day is the busiest and therefore most profitable shift at Route, it attracts experienced, professional waitresses who are most concerned and best able to maximize their tip earnings. There are exceptions: some competent, senior-ranking waitresses are unable to work during the day due to time constraints of family or second jobs. Others choose not to work during the day despite the potential monetary rewards, because they are unwilling to endure the intensely competitive atmosphere for which day shift is infamous.

The acutely competitive environment that characterizes day shift arises from the aggregate striving of each waitress to maximize her tip income by serving the greatest possible number of customers. Two strategies are enlisted to this end. First, each waitress attempts to *turn* her tables as quickly as possible. Briefly stated, this means she takes the order, delivers the food, clears and resets a table, and begins serving the next party as rapidly as customer lingering and the speed of the kitchen allow. A seven-year veteran of Route describes the strategy and its rewards:

> What I do is I prebus my tables. When the people get up and go all I got is glasses and cups, pull off, wipe, set, and I do the table turnover. But see that's from day shift. See the girls on graveyard . . . don't understand the more times you turn that table the more money you make. You could have three tables and still make a hundred dollars. If you turn them tables.

As the waitress indicates, a large part of turning tables involves getting the table cleared and set for the next

customer. During a rush, swing and grave waitresses tend to leave dirty tables standing, partly because they are less experienced and therefore less efficient, partly to avoid being given parties, or *sat*, when they are already behind. In contrast, day waitresses assign high priority to keeping their tables cleared and ready for customers. The difference in method reflects increased skill and growing awareness of and concern with money-making strategies.

A waitress can further increase her customer count by controlling the flow of customers within the restaurant. Ideally the hostess or manager running the front house rotates customers among stations, just as stations are rotated among waitresses.[2] Each waitress is given, or *sat*, one party at a time in turn so that all waitresses have comparable customer counts at the close of a shift. When no hostess is on duty, or both she and the manager are detained and customers are waiting to be seated, waitresses will typically seat incoming parties.

Whether or not a formal hostess is on duty, day waitresses are notorious for bypassing the rotation system by racing to the door and directing incoming customers to their own tables. A sense of the urgency with which this strategy is pursued is conveyed in the comment of one five-year veteran, "They'll run you down to get that person at the door, to seat them in their station." The competition for customers is so intense during the day that some waitresses claim they cannot afford to leave the floor (even to use the restroom) lest they return to find a co-worker's station filled at their expense. "In the daytime, honey," remarks an eight-year Route waitress, "in the daytime it's like pulling teeth. You got to stay on the floor to survive. To survive." It is in part because they do not want to lose customers and tips to their co-workers that waitresses do not take formal breaks. Instead, they rest and eat between waiting tables or during lulls in busi-

ness, returning to the floor intermittently to check on parties in progress and seat customers in their stations.

The fast pace and chaotic nature of restaurant work provide a cover for the waitress's aggressive pursuit of customers, since it is difficult for other servers to monitor closely the allocation of parties in the bustle and confusion of a rush. Still, it is not uncommon for waitresses to grumble to management and co-workers if they notice an obvious imbalance in customer distribution. Here again, the waitress refrains from directly criticizing her fellow servers, voicing her displeasure by commenting on the paucity of customers in her own station, rather than the overabundance of customers in the stations of certain co-waitresses. In response to these grumblings, other waitresses may moderate somewhat their efforts to appropriate new parties, and management may make a special effort to seat the disgruntled server favorably.

A waitress can also exert pressure on the manager or hostess to keep her station filled. She may, for instance, threaten to leave if she is not seated enough customers.

> I said, "Innes [a manager], I'm in [station] one and two. If one and two is not filled at all times from now until three, I'm getting my coat, my pocketbook, and I'm leaving." And one and two was filled, and I made ninety-five dollars.

Alternatively, she can make it more convenient for the manager or hostess to seat her rather than her co-workers, either by keeping her tables open (as described), or by taking extra tables. If customers are waiting to be seated, a waitress may offer to pick up parties in a station that is closed or, occasionally, to pick up parties in another waitress's station.[3] In attempting either strategy, but especially the latter, the waitress must be adept not only at

waiting tables, but in interpersonal restaurant politics. Autonomy and possession are of central concern to waitresses, and a waitress who offers to pick up tables outside her station must select her words carefully if she is to avoid being accused of invading her co-workers' territory. Accordingly, she may choose to present her bid for extra parties as an offer to help—the manager, another waitress, the restaurant, customers—rather than as a request.

The waitress who seeks to increase her tip income by maximizing the number of customers she serves may endeavor to cut her losses by refusing to serve parties that have stiffed her in the past. If she is a low-ranking waitress, her refusal is likely to be overturned by the manager. If she is an experienced and valuable waitress, the manager may ask someone else to take the party, assure the waitress he will take care of her (that is, pad the bill and give her the difference), or even pick up the party himself. Though the practice is far from common, a waitress may go so far as to demand a tip from a customer who has been known to stiff in the past.

> This party of two guys come in and they order thirty to forty dollars worth of food . . . and they stiff us. Every time. So Kaddie told them, "If you don't tip us, we're not going to wait on you." They said, "We'll tip you." So Kaddie waited on them, and they tipped her. The next night they came in, I waited on them and they didn't tip me. The third time they came in [the manager] put them in my station and I told [the manager] straight up, "I'm not waiting on them. . . ." So he made Hailey pick them up. And they stiffed Hailey. So when they came in the next night . . . [they] said, "Are you going to give us a table?" I said, "You going to tip me? I'm not going to wait on

you. You got all that money, you sell all that crack on the streets and you come here and you can't even leave me a couple bucks?" . . . So they left me a dollar. So when they come in Tuesday night, I'm telling them a dollar ain't enough.

The tactics employed by waitresses, and particularly day-shift waitresses, to increase their customer count and thereby boost their tip earnings have earned them a resounding notoriety among their less competitive co-workers. Day (and some swing) waitresses are described as "money hungry," "sneaky little bitches," "self-centered," "aggressive," "backstabbing bitches," and "cutthroats over tables." The following remarks of two Route waitresses, however, indicate that those who employ these tactics see them as defensive, not aggressive measures. A sense of the waitress's preoccupation with autonomy and with protecting what is hers also emerges from these comments.

You have to be like that. Because if you don't be like that, people step on you. You know, like as far as getting customers. I mean, you know, I'm sorry everybody says I'm greedy. I guess that's why I've survived this long at Route. Cause I am greedy. . . . *I want what's mine,* and if it comes down to me cleaning your table or my table, I'm going to clean my table. Because see I went through all that stage where I would do your table. To be fair. And you would walk home with seventy dollars, and I'd have twenty-five, cause I was being fair all night. (emphasis added)

If the customer comes in the door and I'm there getting that door, don't expect me to cover your

backside while you in the back smoking a cigarette and I'm here working for myself. You not out there working for me. . . . When I go to the door and get the customers, when I keep my tables clean and your tables are dirty, and you wonder why you only got one person . . . then that's just tough shit. . . . You're damn right my station is filled. *I'm not here for you.* (emphasis added)

Whether the waitress who keeps her station filled with customers is acting aggressively or defensively, her tactics are effective. It is commonly accepted that determined day waitresses make better money than less competitive co-workers even when working swing or grave. Moreover Nera, the waitress most infamous for her relentless use of "money-hungry" tactics, is at the same time most famous for her consistently high daily takes. While other waitresses jingle change in their aprons, Nera is forced to store wads of bills in her shoes and in paper bags to prevent tips from overflowing her pockets. She claims to make a minimum of five hundred dollars a week in tip earnings; her record for one day's work exceeds two hundred dollars and is undoubtedly the record for the restaurant.

Inverting the Symbolism of Tipping

It may already be apparent that the waitress views the customer—not as a master to pamper and appease—but as substance to be processed as quickly and in as large a quantity as possible. The difference in perspective is expressed in the objectifying terminology of waitresses: a customer or party is referred to as a *table,* or by table number, as *table five* or simply *five;* serv-

ing successive parties at a table is referred to as *turning the table;* taking an order is also known as *picking up a table;* and to serve water, coffee, or other beverages is to *water, coffee,* or *beverage* a table, number, or customer. Even personal acquaintances assume the status of inanimate matter, or tip-bearing plants, in the language of the server:

> I got my fifth-grade teacher [as a customer] one time. . . . I kept her coffeed. I kept her boyfriend coked all night. Sodaed. . . . And I kept them filled up.

If the customer is perceived as material that is processed, the goal of this processing is the production or extraction of a finished product: the tip. This image too is conveyed in the language of the floor. A waitress may comment that she "got a good tip" or "gets good tips," but she is more likely to say that she "made" or "makes good tips." She may also say that she "got five bucks out of" a customer, or complain that some customers "don't want to give up on" their money. She may accuse a waitress who stays over into her shift of "tapping on" her money, or warn an aspiring waitress against family restaurants on the grounds that "there's no money in there." In all these comments (and all are actual), the waitress might as easily be talking about mining for coal or drilling for oil as serving customers.

Predictably, the waitress's view of the customer as substance to be processed influences her perception of the meaning of tips, and especially substandard tips. At Route, low tips and stiffs are not interpreted as a negative reflection on the waitress's personal qualities or social status. Rather, they are felt to reveal the refractory nature or poor quality of the raw material from which the tip is

extracted, produced, or fashioned. In less metaphorical terms, a low tip or stiff is thought to reflect the negative qualities and low status of the customer who is too cheap, too poor, too ignorant, or too coarse to leave an appropriate gratuity.[4] In this context, it is interesting to note that *stiff,* the term used in restaurants to refer to incidents of nontipping or to someone who does not tip, has also been used to refer to a wastrel or penniless man (Partridge 1984), a hobo, tramp, vagabond, deadbeat, and a moocher (Wentworth and Flexner 1975).[5]

Evidence that waitresses assign blame for poor tips to the tipper is found in their reaction to being undertipped or stiffed. Rather than breaking down in tears and lamenting her "personal failure," the Route waitress responds to a stiff by announcing the event to her co-workers and managers in a tone of angry disbelief. Co-workers and managers echo the waitress's indignation and typically ask her to identify the party (by table number and physical description), or if she has already done so, to be more specific. This identification is crucial for it allows sympathizers to join the waitress in analyzing the cause of the stiff, which is assumed a priori to arise from some shortcoming of the party, not the waitress. The waitress and her co-workers may conclude that the customers in question were rude, troublemakers, or bums, or they may explain their behavior by identifying them as members of a particular category of customers. It might be revealed for instance, that the offending party was a church group: church groups are invariably tightfisted. It might be resolved that the offenders were senior citizens, Southerners, or businesspeople: all well-known cheapskates. If the customers were European, the stiff will be attributed to ignorance of the American tipping system; if they were young, to immaturity; if they had children, to lack of funds.

These classifications and their attendant explanations are neither fixed nor trustworthy. New categories are invented to explain otherwise puzzling incidents, and all categories are subject to exception. Though undependable as predictive devices, customer typologies serve a crucial function: they divert blame for stiffs and low tips from the waitress to the characteristics of the customer. It is for this reason that it is "important" for workers to distinguish between different categories of customers, despite the fact that such distinctions are based on "unreliable verbal and appearance clues." In fact, it is precisely the unreliability, or more appropriately the flexibility, of customer typologies that makes them valuable to waitresses. When categories can be constructed and dissolved on demand, there is no danger that an incident will fall outside the existing system of classification and hence be inexplicable.

While waitresses view the customer as something to be processed and the tip as the product of this processing, they are aware that the public does not share their understanding of the waitress–diner–tip relationship. Waitresses at Route recognize that many customers perceive them as needy creatures willing to commit great feats of service and absorb high doses of abuse in their anxiety to secure a favorable gratuity or protect their jobs. They are also aware that some customers leave small tips with the intent to insult the server and that others undertip on the assumption that for a Route waitress even fifty cents will be appreciated. One waitress indicated that prior to being employed in a restaurant, she herself subscribed to the stereotype of the down-and-out waitress "because you see stuff on television, you see these wives or single ladies who waitress and they live in slummy apartments or slummy houses and they dress in rags." It is these images of neediness and desperation,

which run so strongly against the waitress's perception of herself and her position, that she attacks when strained relations erupt into open conflict.

> Five rowdy black guys walked in the door and they went to seat themselves at table seven. I said, "Excuse me. You all got to wait to be seated." "We ain't got to do *shit*. We here to eat. . . ." So they went and sat down. And I turned around and just looked at them. And they said, "Well, I hope you ain't our waitress, cause you blew your tip. Cause you ain't getting nothing from us." And I turned around and I said, "You need it more than I do, baby."[6]

This waitress's desire to confront the customer's assumption of her destitution is widely shared among service workers whose status as tipped employees marks them as needy in the eyes of their customers. Davis (1959:162–63) reports that among cabdrivers "a forever repeated story is of the annoyed driver, who, after a grueling trip with a Lady Shopper, hands the coin back, telling her, 'Lady, keep your lousy dime. You need it more than I do.'" Mars and Nicod (1984:75) report a hotel waitress's claim that "if she had served a large family with children for one or two weeks, and then was given a 10p piece, she would give the money back, saying, 'It's all right, thank you, I've got enough change for my bus fare home.'" In an incident I observed (not at Route), a waitress followed two male customers out of a restaurant calling, "Excuse me! You forgot this!" and holding up the coins they had left as a tip. The customers appeared embarrassed, motioned for her to keep the money, and continued down the sidewalk. The waitress, now standing in the outdoor seating area of the restaurant and

observed by curious diners, threw the money after the retreating men and returned to her work. Episodes such as these allow the worker to repudiate openly the evaluation of her financial status that is implied in an offensively small gratuity, and permit her to articulate her own understanding of what a small tip says and about whom. If customers can only afford to leave a dime, or feel a 10p piece is adequate compensation for two weeks' service, they must be very hard up or very ignorant indeed.

In the following incident the waitress interjects a denial of her neediness into an altercation that is not related to tipping, demonstrating that the customer's perception of her financial status is a prominent and persistent concern for her.

> She [a customer] wanted a California Burger with mayonnaise. And when I got the mayonnaise, the mayonnaise had a little brown on it. . . . So this girl said to me, she said, "What the fuck is this you giving me?" And I turned around, I thought, "Maybe she's talking to somebody else in the booth with her." And I turned around and I said, "Excuse me?" She said, "You hear what I said. I said, 'What the fuck are you giving me?'" And I turned around, I said, "I don't know if you're referring your information to *me*," I said, "but if you're referring your information to *me*," I said, "I don't *need* your bullshit." I said, "I'm not going to even take it. . . . Furthermore, I could care less if you eat or *don't* eat. . . . And you see this?" And I took her check and I ripped it apart. . . . And I took the California Burger and I says, "You don't have a problem anymore now, right?" She went up to the manager. And she says, "That black waitress"—I says, "Oh. By the way, what is

> my name? I don't have a name, [using the words] 'that black waitress'. . . . My name happens to be Nera. . . . That's N-E-R-A. . . . And I don't need your bullshit, sweetheart. . . . People like you I can walk on, because you don't know how to talk to human beings." And I said, "I don't need you. I don't need your quarters. I don't need your nickels. I don't need your dimes. So if you want service, be my guest. Don't you *ever* sit in my station, cause I won't wait on you." The manager said, "Nera, please. Would you wait in the back?" I said, "No. I don't take back seats no more for nobody."

In each of these cases, the waitress challenges the customer's definition of the relationship in which tipping occurs. By speaking out, by confronting the customer, she demonstrates that she is not subservient or in fear of losing her job; that she is not compelled by financial need or a sense of social hierarchy to accept abuse from customers; that she does not, in Nera's words, "take back seats no more for nobody." At the same time, she reverses the symbolic force of the low tip, converting a statement on her social status or work skills into a statement on the tipper's cheapness or lack of savoir faire.

Symbolic Dimensions of Tipping

Of 1.5 million restaurant servers employed in the United States, 90 percent are women who receive at least two-thirds of their earnings in the form of gratuities (Butler and Skipper 1980:489). For some waitresses the fact that tips have traditionally gone un- or underreported and therefore un- or undertaxed contributes to their eco-

nomic appeal, despite the adverse consequences of underreporting for social security and unemployment benefits (L. Howe 1977:123).[7] For others, the immediacy of tipping income is its central redeeming factor. "Waiting and waitressing is a MAC card," a Route waiter commented. "You walk in, you punch in your five hours of work, you walk out, you got forty bucks in your hand." For those whose financial needs are often small but urgent, the fast cash factor of the tipping system may be more valuable than the security of a steady weekly wage. This was the case for a seventeen-year-old hostess at Route who justified her demand to be trained for the floor partly on the grounds that if she were a waitress, whenever her baby needed something (Pampers, for example), she could come in and make the money by the end of her shift.

But a tip is more than payment for service rendered; it is a potent symbol capable of evoking a profound sense of triumph or provoking an angry blitz of expletives. It is, moreover, a symbol that embodies in coarse, even vulgar material form the myriad whisperings of power and control that pervade the server–served relationship. For this reason, careful examination of the symbolic potential of the tip is of relevance to the study of all service relationships—including those in which tipping does not occur.

Tip as Evaluative Device

The most salient symbolic function of the tip is that of evaluating the quality of service received by the consumer. Such a function is implied in the following passage from an article subtitled "Ten Commandments for All Food Servers":

> If the service is just OK, I usually leave a 10 percent tip. If the service is good, I leave 15 percent. But if the server has gone out of his or her way, or I think the service was excellent, I leave 20 percent. (Jerome n.d.)[8]

It is important to note that quality of service is increasingly bound up with the personal qualities of the employee: her ability to smile sincerely, to project an appropriate image (sexy, sophisticated, fun-loving), to harness or suppress private emotions and so cultivate a desired mood in the customer (Hochschild 1983). In assessing the caliber of service, therefore, customers also appraise the personality of the server. They are flattered by her smile and applaud her with 30 percent. They are offended by her terseness and censure her with thirty cents.

Though Robert Karen's (1962) study of cab passengers suggests that many customers do not calibrate the size of a gratuity to reflect the quality of service, most are aware, even without the guidance of journalists, that it is their prerogative to do so. The evaluative capacity of the tip may thus be said to constitute what Victor Turner (1975:176) refers to as a manifest sense of the symbol. In addition, the tip possesses what Turner refers to as latent meanings "of which the subject is only marginally aware." It is unlikely that either customer or waitress is conscious of the resemblance for instance, but the tip bears strong likeness to a gift both in the way it is handled and in its potential implications for the status of server and served.

Tip as Gift

The origin of the word *tip* as used in service contexts remains uncertain. Some contend that it is an acronym for the edict "To Insure Prompt Service" that was reportedly displayed on a box for customer donations in a London coffeehouse. Those complying with the edict by placing a contribution in the box received immediate

service (Butler and Skipper 1980:490; cf. Morris and Morris 1977). While gratifyingly coherent, the legitimacy of this derivation is doubtful. A more likely explanation is that *tip* derives from *stipend* and ultimately from the Latin *stips*, meaning *gift* (Morris and Morris 1977:567). This derivation of *tip* accords well with its current definition as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary:*

> **Tip,** . . . A small present of money given to an inferior, esp. to a servant or employee of another for a service rendered or expected; a gratuity, a douceur.

Past researchers of restaurant work have also found it appropriate to equate the tip with a gift, and the tipping transaction with gift exchange.

> Like the universal gift, the tip received for service may normally be expected, but can never be demanded. . . . Something given—service—must typically be returned with something of equivalent value—a tip. . . . It cannot be pressed for as an economic right. (Mars and Nicod 1984:75)

The comparison with gift exchange is underrather than overdrawn. It might further be noted that the transfer of the tip, like the exchange of *vagua* in the Kula, as described by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922:81), is "regulated by a set of traditional rules and conventions," and that these conventions are themselves similar. In the Kula, a system of Melanesian tribal exchange, "though the valuable has to be handed over by the giver, the receiver hardly takes any notice of it, and seldom receives it actually into his hands" (1922:352). This convention, Malinowski suggests, reflects the recipient's "reluctance

to appear in want of anything" and more generally, the "very human and understandable attitude of disdain at the reception of a gift" (1922:353).

Like the valuable, the tip is rarely received directly from the hand of the giver. It is left on the table, nudged under the sugar caddy or slipped between the salt and pepper, to be retrieved by the waitress when the customer is out of sight. Reluctant to appear in want, the waitress, like the Kula participant, accepts the gift with "nonchalance and disdain," sweeping it into her pocket while removing dirty plates and crumpled napkins, as though her chief concern were to clear the table of excess clutter.

Despite these parallels, the ritual of tipping differs from gift exchange in an important respect. As noted, the exchange of gifts demands that something given be returned with something of equal value. But what the waitress gives, namely service, cannot be described as a gift, for a gift is by definition voluntary (ostensibly at least), while the delivery of service is a formal duty of the waitress's job. For this reason, the transfer of a tip is more accurately compared to unilateral gift-giving than to gift exchange. In this connection it is significant that *gratuity,* a synonym for *tip,* shares Latin roots with *gratuitous* defined as follows:

> 1. Freely bestowed or obtained; granted without claim or merit; provided without payment or return; costing nothing to the recipient; free. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

For fulfilling duties that she has explicitly contracted to perform and for which she is already paid by another party, the waitress receives from the customer a tip, a gratuity, a gift.

The implications of unilateral gift-giving for the respective statuses of donor and recipient are illustrated in an analysis of gift-giving in a different service context. In her study of present-day household workers, Judith Rollins (1985) found that women frequently make presents of used clothes and furniture to their domestic servants. The custom, which dates at least to the seventeenth century, originally had economic motivation, as gifts were given in place of wages (Rollins 1985:191; see also Sutherland 1981:112–13). In its current use, the symbolic implications of unilateral gift-giving overshadow its material significance. Quoting Marcel Mauss (1925), Rollins explains:

> To give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher. . . . To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient. (1985:192)

In conferring gifts that are not reciprocated, the employer shows that she is "something more and higher" than the domestic who accepts without repaying more. In the same way, customers confirm and emphasize their superiority to the waitress who receives their gratuities—gratis.

The symbolic force of the unilateral gift may be still more potent than suggested by Rollins. In service work and conceivably also in domestic service, the transfer of a gift can invert as well as reinforce status relations operating outside the service context. Such a situation is described by Frances Donovan in her firsthand account of waitressing in Chicago.

> Presently two mail carriers came in, one white and one colored, and each, when he left, gave me

> a dime. I had tipped colored boys many times but it was indeed a new experience to have one tip me. (1920:194)

That Donovan regards the African-American tipper as her inferior is indicated both by her acknowledgment of the incident as noteworthy, and by her reference to the carrier, who is presumably an adult, as a "boy." Through the act of tipping, the "boy" inverts status relations operating outside the restaurant and asserts his superiority—however restricted in time and space—to Donovan. The same opportunity for status inversion exists between all tipped employees and customers whom they consider their social or economic inferiors. The ambivalence experienced by the server in this situation is conveyed in Donovan's description of the first tip she received as a waitress.

> A shabby, dissipated wreck of a man came in and sat down on one of the stools at my counter. To my surprise, he ordered a forty-five-cent meal. I became very busy and I did not at once remove his dirty dishes. A boy sat down on the stool vacated by this man and I took his order. When I was attempting to clear a place for it, I saw a greasy, dirty nickel on the counter. The boy gave it a little push towards me and said, "I guess this is yours." (1920:194)

Donovan does not explicitly recount her reaction to the episode; nor does she need to. It is evident from her description that she is uncomfortable with receiving a "greasy, dirty nickel" from a "shabby, dissipated wreck," and it can be inferred that her discomfort arises from the recognition that the normative social order has been violated, and her position therein threatened.

As Rollins (1985) points out, the quality of the gift conferred upon the worker, whether a greasy nickel or hand-me-down clothes, reinforces the declaration of status difference conveyed in the act of giving itself. In the case of the domestic,

> the employer, in giving old clothes and furniture and leftover food, is transmitting to the servant the employer's perception of the servant as needy, unable to provide adequately for herself, and willing to accept others' devalued goods. (1985:193)

In the restaurant, the quantity rather than the quality of the gift is the decisive variable, but the effect is the same. Like the discarded shoes, dead flowers, and soggy salad bestowed upon domestics, the pennies and dimes left among the dirty plates for the waitress carry an implicit devaluation of her status and life quality. Penny pails are now placed in front of cash registers to spare customers the annoyance of pocketing the troublesome coin; yet pennies are considered appropriate gifts for women who wait tables. The symbolic statement is clear: so down, so destitute is the waitress that she will be pleased to accept what to the customer is bothersome change.

In drawing attention to the waitress's ability to subvert this complex and potentially degrading symbolism and moderate the financial risks of tipping, my purpose has been to demonstrate the waitress's power of resistance, her spirit of defiance, and her ability to manipulate her work environment to protect her interests. It has not been my intention to question the exploitive nature of a system of compensation that compels women to compete against one another to secure a fair wage, and absolves employers from responsibility for the economic

security of workers from whose labor they profit. Nor has it been the aim of this discussion to suggest that waitresses are immune to the financial and emotional dangers of the tipping system. However skillfully the waitress maximizes her customer count, she remains vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the food service industry. Route servers suffered periodic drops in their tip income because of seasonal fluctuations in customer volume and unexpected slumps in business, as when the restaurant stood nearly empty for three weeks while road construction obscured the entrance to the parking lot. Likewise, though waitresses blame their customers and not themselves for low tips, being stiffed or undertipped remains an emotionally taxing experience. At Route as elsewhere, the failure of a customer to provide adequate compensation for service was the frequent cause of impassioned outbursts. Nonetheless, throughout the course of research and in five years' prior experience waiting tables, I never encountered a waitress who interpreted a bad tip as a "personal failure." What tears were shed were shed in anger, not in self-rebuke.