

DOING THE CORNER: A STUDY OF IMMIGRANT DAY LABORERS IN  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

by

CAROLYN PINEDO TURNOVSKY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2006

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Philip Kasinitz

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October 17, 2005

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Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Philip Kasinitz

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October 17, 2005

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Date

Executive Officer

Mitchell Duneier

---

Robert C. Smith

---

William Kornblum

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Supervision Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## Abstract

DOING THE CORNER: A STUDY OF IMMIGRANT DAY LABORERS IN  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

by

Carolyn Pinedo Turnovsky

Adviser: Professor Philip Kasinitz

Day labor is an important and growing sector of the economy across the United States today and New York is no exception. The dissertation is an ethnography about a community of male day laborers in Brooklyn, New York. My research illustrates a labor market in action on a New York City street corner and uncovers the complexity of how social processes of identity construction and management operated in the labor exchanges. Daily life on the corner illustrated how the men developed a self-concept through their particular work experience. I learned from the men about a social order on the corner that linked the men's perceived race, ethnic, and national identities with the desirable status of a "real day laborer" shaping outcomes in the hiring process. I observed how and why day laborers negotiated their identity in the hiring queue to attain and maintain the status of a desirable worker. Moreover, the spatial variation of this corner facilitated the examination of the hiring queue that was utilized by both employers and day laborers. Specifically, the spatial representation of the social order illustrated how racial and ethnic preferences affected the actual labor operations on the corner. Though less apparent, gender was also an integral element in the social order on the corner in a presentation of masculinity linking acts and displays that followed cultural definitions of *ser hombre* (being a man). As Regulars (immigrants who were mostly

Latinos) or Temps (U.S. native-born, who were mostly African American), the population of workers reflects a need to readdress this sector of informal employment in discussions of the changing nature of work in today's society. Though the day labor market is embedded in structural conditions, it is also grounded in the interactions of the persons participating in it and the constructs they use in ultimately shaping it. Struggling to articulate their place in New York City, the men shaped their own reality and constructed social meanings in their active efforts to negotiate their work and social experiences in their daily life on the corner.

## Acknowledgements

It is a great pleasure to have an opportunity to thank those who contributed to this work in progress. I am grateful to all of the men who allowed me to work beside them on the corner and also acquainted me with their lives. Aside from their significant contribution to this project, they helped construct my identity as a fieldworker. A special mention goes to Compadre, Luis, Octavio, Santiago, and William for impressing a part of their selves via my fieldnotes into this text. I hope the reader finds that I have articulated a competent interpretation of who they are and of their social world.

I had a supportive team of mentors at The CUNY Graduate Center. William Kornblum illuminated the path of fieldwork for me in my first qualitative methods course and through his own endeavors. Philip Kasinitz located this work historically and his insights consistently provided me with clarity and ease when I tackled new areas. Mitchell Duneier challenged me to articulate the ideas and necessary tools to simplify the complex world of day labor. Robert C. Smith helped me sharpen my argument, particularly in chapter three, and distinguish my own ideas to share with others. Lastly, I thank the staff, students and faculty at CUNY whom I met in and out of the classroom over many years for motivating and shaping my research interests.

There were institutions that facilitated this achievement, financial and otherwise. I thank the Sociology Program and The CUNY Graduate Center for the fellowships that I received in my graduate studies. In addition to my employment, a Mellon Dissertation Fellowship from the Center for Urban Research and a Russell Sage Foundation summer research grant gave me opportunities to pursue additional research interests and above all, awarded me with the resources to make substantial progress early on in my fieldwork.

The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies and the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies furnished me with the necessary time and funds in the early writing stages to advance my project in considerable ways, in particular through the intellectual exchanges with other research scholars during our research seminars.

Friends and family kept me from the solitude of this stage in the academic career. I thank Carla Barrett, Deborah Boehm, Xavier Escandell, Lieba Faier, Jon Fox, Nadia Kim, Gabriela Sandoval, Takeyuki (Gaku) Tsuda, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, and Jonathan Wynn for engaging earlier drafts with a critical and friendly eye and for enriching my social life. I thank Merih Anil for her unfailing friendship throughout the tribulations of graduate student life. I especially thank my sisters, Peggy and Debbie for encouraging my every venture and ambition. A few words only begin to express gratitude and love to my parents, Demesira and Samuel. Their integrity and spirit motivated me to pursue higher achievements in all parts of my life. My final words of thanks and love are saved for Geoffrey, my husband, who met many challenges with me from the onset of this experience. For their love and support, I dedicate this work to Geoffrey and my family.

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## **Part One: Pathways to the Corner**

### **Introduction**

Six a.m. in New York City. Out for a morning run or a head start on the rush hour commute to work. Lively children prepare to ride the bus or subway to school while others are still fast asleep at home. This morning, a man arrives at the corner of a street intersection in Brooklyn, New York. Others will join him later. The peak hour is 8 a.m. He smokes a cigarette and leans his backside against a fire hydrant. He speaks with his peers as they all stare down the avenue - waiting.

Ronaldo arrives early to the corner usually by 6:30am with a thermos of Café Bustelo in hand and waits for Luis and Santiago. At this early hour, William should be riding the W train to school, but today he has skipped class and will spend his morning alongside the others. He waits for Franklin who will likely cut his classes, too. Until Franklin arrives, William sits on top of a dumpster cart outside of an auto-body shop. Meanwhile Kasper sits on the curb quietly reading “Dziennik Nowojorski” one of the Polish daily newspapers.

“...1010 WINS News Time, 8:30 A.M. The high today [in New York City], 97. There’s a heat advisory in effect...” The report from the corner deli store’s radio is unsurprising. I’m already fanning myself. I look around and I see William on the far end of the street corner speaking with Octavio, who just arrived. The humid air perspires into a wet glow on everyone’s face and I can see the remnants of wet patches on the back of William’s shirt that’s already removed and now hanging on his shoulders. Octavio, a young Colombiano from Buenaventura, waits for Compadre to arrive with his new cell phone - a bargain deal from a former employer in Brooklyn’s Chinatown. Beside me are

Luis, Santiago and Ronaldo. While sitting on the grease and oil-stained pavement in front of the nearby auto shop, they tell me that they may not look for work today. Ronaldo wants to play soccer, but first he wants to check if there's any work for him. Luis and Santiago plan to leave early to shop for a birthday present for Santiago's brother in Puebla, Mexico.

The men patiently stand or sit while they wait for someone to pull up along the curb looking to hire "*un buen trabajador*" (a good worker) for the day. Some pass the time making conversation with each other, perhaps about the latest *fútbol* match in *la liga mexicana*. Others play card games or read the newspaper. A lot of them smoke, mostly the Polish and Russian men. Many of the men make good use of the spaces along the way – sitting on stoops near the laundromat, leaning on fences that surround the nearby train yard, or just sitting on the pavement outside of the corner bagel and deli shop.

A car pulls up along the curb and conversations stop. Heads look up from newspapers. Those sitting now stand. Bodies lean forward and faces look curious as they wait to hear a call from the driver...

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Similar scenes like this one occur at other street corners across New York City - a burgeoning and visible reminder of a vibrant informal economy. At the corner - *la parada* - Mexican, Ecuadoran, Panamanian, Colombian, Polish and young African American men looked for work on a daily basis.<sup>1</sup> Many men were seen as hardworking, but like the men on *Tally's Corner* they were also stigmatized in the public's eye because

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<sup>1</sup> I translate "la parada" as "the corner". The men used "la parada" or "la esquina" whenever they referred to looking for work on the street corner. I translate both words as "the corner" in this paper.

of their visibility and were often labeled as troublemakers for loitering on street corners.

Their struggle, as Ronaldo stated, was to

“do whatever I have to do to keep going. You see us here. It’s raining and freezing. In the snow. We’re here. Nobody is going to give me money for free. It’s cold today. Go inside. We’re used to it. You just drink a lot of *café y chocolate*. We do whatever, it doesn’t matter to me.

Like everybody else, I want to work. It’s the same for everybody.”

Day laborers point to this essential virtue of the American man and woman employed in the general economy, by aligning themselves with those who “work for a living” and in saying “we are like them.”

In only a few minutes of standing on the corner of *la parada*, I began to observe a world that has become familiar on the streets of New York City, yet still at odds with our social norms. Watching the men day-labor was a window into the different world they inhabited that started long before they reached the corners of *la parada*. I began my fieldwork at this corner in the late summer of 2001. I explored the day-to-day routines and activities of men who arrived at the corner in hopes of exchanging their bodies and skills for a wage to maintain and sustain a way of life. My fieldwork raised questions about day laborers’ reasons for participating in this form of employment over traditional work in the general economy. As I learned about the paths that led the men to day labor and to begin their days on the corners of *la parada*, my major breakthrough was the discovery of the men. I say this with all humility since from the onset of my fieldwork, the men were, in fact, invisible to me. That is, the activities that comprised part of their daily life on this corner were unknown to the casual passerby and me. It was only after I

began my own work on the corner that I learned about the relationships among the persons, activities and processes that collectively comprised this social world. Just as the men made efforts to get jobs in painting or roofing to assist their families living in New York and abroad, my effort was to learn the conceptual tools that would simplify their complex social world for those persons and me whose future endeavors might assist this community.

## Chapter 1: The Men at *la parada*

Daily life on the corner illustrated how the men developed a self-concept through their particular work experience at *la parada*.<sup>2</sup> Under capitalism, labor is thought of as a commodity. It is a factor in production and the human, the worker, is secondary to the economic, the processes of production. But the worker sees himself in a contrary position. Labor is a necessary experience of his life. Work was not just an activity or an occupation for the men at *la parada*. It was their livelihood. Work defined their social existence. As an important characteristic in life, work became a critical aspect of self-concept. It was apparent that the men found their self worth in the ability to maintain a discipline of work and to conduct responsible lives in order to carve a better life for themselves here, but more importantly for them and for their families in their native countries.<sup>3</sup> These standards, along with other benefits they found in day labor work (a sense of autonomy, often times a better pay) were the alternative to the success of a steady job in the formal economy.

While scholars have analyzed informal “street corner” day labor markets<sup>4</sup>, few studies have examined the day labor market at ground level, or as presented here, on the corner.<sup>5</sup> This ethnography provides a unique vantage point in observing the mechanics

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<sup>2</sup> In *Longshoremen*, William Difazio explored the relationship between community and work among Brooklyn longshoremen in the absence of a formal work setting (1985).

<sup>3</sup> Michèle Lamont found a similar morality and work ethic in the social and working lives of the working-class men in her study (2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Esbenshade, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999, 2001a, 2001b.

<sup>5</sup> The day labor market that was the focus of my research specifically refers to street-corner markets in New York City. Although the formalization of day labor work is not addressed in this thesis, I should note that day labor has become increasingly organized by formal organizations, either through formal temporary help agencies or formal hiring halls or work centers. Lastly, I am not referring to agencies characterized as day labor markets that pay laborers by the week or who temporary employment agencies who employ persons who are in more stable economic positions, nor for-profit companies, like Labor Ready.

of an actual labor market and how the stratification in hiring queues, involving the interaction of ethnicity, race and nationality, actually work on this street corner. My research illustrates a labor market in action on a New York City street corner and makes explicit the complexity of how social processes of identity construction and management operate in society, in particular race and ethnicity in labor exchanges. Further, the spatial variation of this corner by ethnicity, race, and nationality allowed me to observe these hiring queues in action and examine how racial preferences affected the actual operation of a labor market.

As more and more communities in urban and rural areas experience an increasing migrant population, particularly Latino immigrants, social identities are becoming less rigid. This changing aspect is woven throughout the fabric of American life and is captivated in our understandings and experience of race, ethnicity and gender. The endeavor of this project was to examine the social processes involved in the self concept of a day laborer to achieve a better understanding of the identity construction and management among the day laborers at this Brooklyn street corner. My fieldwork explored the fluidity of identity as an interactive social process that was particularly visible among the new immigrant groups attempting to locate and situate themselves in American society.

I learned about the men's active efforts in the management of their economic situation. Specifically, my fieldwork revealed their understanding and negotiation of their identity, in particular race and ethnicity, and their implications in labor exchanges on the corner. Thus a major focus concerned *how* and *why* these men negotiated their identity as it related to employment, but also in the group organization of their peers, and

in an understanding of culture. At *la parada*, I observed how and why particular race, ethnic and national identities were desirable but I also witnessed how and why day laborers managed their economic and social situation in order to negotiate their identity to attain and maintain the status of desirable workers - a “real day laborer”. I learned from the men and some employers that a ranking order on the corner linked the men’s perceived nationality and ethnicity with the status of a “real day laborer” shaping the outcomes in the hiring process. Since the men were cognizant of the desirable and expected traits of a “real day laborer”, they performed behaviors and carried out acts to improve their chances of finding work. Moreover, there was a spatial and visual dimension that framed the social order, that was utilized by both employers and day laborers in order to negotiate the situation - whether in a hiring queue that relied on the status of a “real day laborer” ordering men by race, ethnicity and residency status, or a gendered order of masculinity linking acts and displays that followed cultural definitions of *ser hombre* (being a man).

Although my research examined the details of the men’s work experiences and the structure of operations at the site, I explored the men’s understandings of their participation in this low-level industry and in relation to groups of different race, ethnic and national origins. While observing the process that took these men to day jobs in homes and construction sites, there were less apparent social practices that took place on the street corner. I learned about the varied social orders that did not solely involve labor, but also dynamic exchanges of cultural and social meanings of identity involving, race, ethnicity, national status and gender. Aside from work, the men shared parts of their daily lives with me so that I could better comprehend the unexplored purposes of the

corner that highlighted how the men cultivated a social life and community for themselves.

### Working on the Corner - Day Labor

Day labor is not a unique phenomenon in Brooklyn, New York and New York City is hardly an isolated case study. Traditional gateway cities like Los Angeles and Chicago have experienced a long-established history in day labor and New York is no exception. Across the United States, cities and towns, large and small, are experiencing a rise in informal labor activities and a need for an effective method in managing the challenges posed by day labor. One encounters daily scenes of street corner labor markets that are located across the various boroughs of New York City and that have increasingly become a familiar scene across cities in the nation.

Historically New York City has been a gateway for newly arrived immigrants. New York City has experienced a long history of day labor from Irish immigrants to African American domestics and Italian longshoremen on the waterfronts. Many found work in "shape-ups," or on street corners, as is so visible a scene today.<sup>6</sup> Meeting places between persons seeking work and those seeking workers was not uncommon in the early eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> While day labor sites remain an important and growing sector of the economy in the United States today, they are increasingly concentrated as street-corner markets where the majority of workers are by and large of Latino ethnicity and do not

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<sup>6</sup> A shape-up was a hiring practice where workers, particularly longshoremen (waterfront or dock workers), would gather together on a daily basis for selection to work for a shift or for the day.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Human Marketplace*, Martinez writes about how a "place was set aside on city streets [New York] where those seeking work could meet with those who wanted workers. (1973, p.8).

have official residency status in the United States.<sup>8</sup> However, my research illustrates that the majority race, ethnicity or nationality of day laborers varies at any given site across the city. Driving through the boroughs of Queens or Brooklyn, it is likely that one could see Indian Sikh men or Polish women day labor on street corners. The day labor market, in particular in New York, is growing fast partly due to the number of immigrants who are eager to work but who lack official documentation. According to Valenzuela's and Melendez's survey of day laborers in New York State, their estimate for the metropolitan region was between 5,831 and 8,283 day laborers. This estimate likely fell short of the real number since they could not account for those persons who did not day labor on a particular date of survey, or for the work sites that remained undiscovered. The casual nature of the worksite contributes to the likelihood that many informal sites are not widely known. Studies have been carried out detailing the demographic characteristics of day laborers as well as an examination of the processes shaping their work experiences.<sup>9</sup> Studying day labor in New York City offered a unique opportunity to challenge the conventional perceptions we have about day labor and about the populations of persons who day labor.

Driving through large metropolitan cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, but also smaller cities and towns like San Francisco and Farmingville, respectively, one can see

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<sup>8</sup> Valenzuela and Melendez note the day labor population in New York was comprised of one-third from Mexico, one-third from the remaining countries in Central America and the last third who came from South America.

<sup>9</sup> Abel Valenzuela, Jr. and Edwin Melendez carried out the New York Day Labor Survey in 2003, a breakthrough in the progress of analyzing this complex and often inaccessible working population in New York State. In 1999, Abel Valenzuela, Jr. conducted a random sample survey called the "Day Labor Survey" in southern California that was a comprehensive survey of 481 day laborers across 87 hiring sites, including 45 in-depth interviews along with 10 case studies of the hiring sites. See *Day Labor in New York: Findings from the NYDL Survey*. Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, UCLA, and Community Development Research Center, New School University, 2003.

day laborers similar to Luis, Ronaldo, William and Kasper who were introduced earlier. Like them, day laborers congregate in search of work opportunities from street corners, parking lots and around facilities like hardware stores that draw a favorable population of potential employers, i.e. Home Depot or UHaul. The majority do not have permanent jobs but maintain a work ethic by showing up to these sites on practically a daily basis. Like this corner, the scenes are similar, but the actors who participate in this type of employment are different - men *and* also women of different age, race, ethnicity, and class backgrounds. *At la parada*, the varied groups of men, whom I called Regulars or Temps, reflected a need to readdress this sector of informal employment in discussions of the changing nature of work in today's society.<sup>10</sup> The New York City context offers the opportunity to readdress day labor in studies on immigration and the informal economy, *and* to include day labor in studies of inequality, and the working poor.

An important and less explored area on day laborers is the structure of operations and social processes involved in working on the corner, that is what I have called, "doing the corner." While there have been many studies researching the incorporation of immigrants in the general labor market, few studies have highlighted the immigrants' understandings of their own participation in the labor market and in particular in the implications of race and ethnic identity.<sup>11</sup> The men had a clear understanding of the supply and demand for this type of labor and laborer. Various characteristics of day labor - like the flexibility in costs, willingness from workers to perform tasks, and the availability of men - created an attraction for this type of labor. The freedom to accept or

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<sup>10</sup> I labeled the men as Regulars (immigrants who were mostly Latino) or Temps (U.S. natives, who were mostly African American) based on how often they came to the corner to find work.

<sup>11</sup> See Stoller, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, 2001; Waters, 2001; Menjivar, 2000; Kasinitz, 1992.

refuse a job or employer was another valued attribute. There were many added benefits, including a better pay and a flexible schedule of hours, all of which provided them with a sense of autonomy in their work experience. These provisions were ones the men stated they could not enjoy working in traditional low-wage jobs in the general economy. These were benefits they considered just as valuable as the money they took home in their pocket. I am not arguing that day labor necessarily prescribed eventual economic success for these men or their successful social integration into American society. But day labor followed the category of self-employment whose characteristics imparted traits whose value went beyond monetary returns. And day labor offered the men a way to maintain a dignity in a place where the American dream was not fully available to them.

My time on the corner focused on those who were hired, the day laborers themselves and what was uncovered was a segmented work structure that followed a queue where persons were “ordered” by ethnicity, race, nationality (U.S. citizen or immigrant status) and less apparent, gender, to receive the distinction of “real day laborers.”<sup>12</sup> Similar studies have explained how the continuous migration of peoples into the United States has become a source of low-level labor and of how ethnicity has

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<sup>12</sup> Earlier research studies have characterized the labor market as a process of “ordered elements” (Reskin and Roos, 1990) and have examined differences and rankings in the match of employees and jobs (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Lieberman, 1980; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Holzer, 1996; Bean, et al., 2000; Espenshade, 2000; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003).

Roger Waldinger and Michael Lichter carried out interviews of managers and owners of “low-skilled” workers in six industries - printing, furniture manufacturing, hospitals, department stores, hotels, and restaurants - in Los Angeles County (Waldinger, 2003, p.22). Waldinger and Lichter referred to a “hiring queue” to explain the intersection of race and ethnicity and the social organization of work. While contributing to similar studies of segmented labor markets, my research focuses on those who are hired, that is, the day laborers themselves.

become the mechanism through which employers will categorically sort persons into different types of work.<sup>13</sup>

However, the men explained the active role they played in their own work experience in order to influence and manipulate their own participation in this market. Their behavior problematized the perception that these men were docile bodies who worked within these processes, especially given their undocumented status. Rather the men told me about the resources they utilized and the strategies they employed while they participated in this hiring queue. Their behavior was neither a mere response to the environment nor the result of unconscious motives. Rather the men reflected upon their actions and those of others so as to influence and control their situation. The men highlighted the management of their identity in various ways, particularly in the centrality of a visual queue used by the employers and by the workers in the hiring process on the corner.

I want to emphasize the significance of the worker's agency throughout this thesis – the practices and strategies the men employed in their own work experience. The forms of “impression management” that I observed at *la parada* highlighted the ways the men regularly controlled the ways in which they were perceived by others.<sup>14</sup> The day laborers illustrated the management of their identity in their self-presentation of race, ethnicity, nationality and gender.<sup>15</sup> Their efforts in defining and redefining their actions while engaging the reactions of others allowed them to mask or accentuate parts of the self in

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<sup>13</sup> See Lieberman, 1980; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Borjas, 1991; Waldinger, 1996; Espenshade, 2000; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> See Goffman, 1959.

<sup>15</sup> Building on the symbolic interactionist framework that states as individuals have selves, they have the capacity for self-interactions (Blumer, 1969)

different contexts.<sup>16</sup> A social order was the result of this skillful accomplishment among the day laborers. The resulting social hierarchy at the workplace reflected this order that was based on an employer's and also day laborer's constructed social meanings of identity, involving race, ethnicity, nationality and gender.

### *La parada*

Through the humming and rattling of engines, an ongoing traffic of cars, trucks and buses can be seen and heard at any hour of day or night. Nearby, a tranquil park setting and empty train yard helped to moderate the traffic disturbance among the neighboring community members. Anyone could see that the area surrounding the workplace did not offer much of interest for the local pedestrian. A walk through this area became a sort of obstacle course as one maneuvered past parked cars and dodged cars driving onto and off the sidewalk from the nearby auto repair shops. This site was ideal for an uncomplicated stop and pick-up for the many potential employers who drove by in search of workers.

New York City has a diverse immigrant population of whom Mexicans, although paling in comparison to cities like Los Angeles or Texas, are an increasing populace in New York City. Considering various characteristics of this immigrant group and their migration situation, there is great potential for their future growth in New York City, but also in cities, both regionally and along the eastern border, unfamiliar with their migration. Mirroring the city's diverse and vigorous nature, the neighborhood surrounding *la parada*, Sunset Park, was home to an array of individuals and cultures that

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<sup>16</sup> Blumer argued that the nature of social life is a dynamic process always redefining to an ever-changing environment (1969). Whereas the "other" is absent in Blumer's work, Erving Goffman's research asserts that in daily interactions, individuals interactions are performances that modify while engaging other people's views (1959).

was visible in its local businesses, school, churches and politics. Since its early days, Sunset Park was a settlement for newly arrived immigrants. As a prime location – waterfront and proximity to the tip of Manhattan Island – Sunset Park was one of the earliest parts of Brooklyn to be settled.<sup>17</sup> Primarily, Europeans were the early builders of the community. Beginning in the 1840s, heavy immigration from Ireland, many who were escaping from the potato famine, contributed to the population growth in Sunset Park. The next large wave of immigrants came from Poland and Norway followed by new arrivals from Finland and Italy in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the growing urban infrastructure contributed to the growing Sunset Park community so that it was one of the early benefactors when New York City began the construction of a new transportation system – the elevated steam.

As a result of federal immigration acts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigration from Europe dropped. However, following WWII and especially in the mid 1960s, a new source of newcomers arrived in New York City, this time from Puerto Rico.<sup>19</sup> Soon after, the Hispanic population increased dramatically resulting in a new ethnic look for

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<sup>17</sup> See David Ment and Mary S. Donovan. *The People of Brooklyn – A History of Two Neighborhoods* (1980).

<sup>18</sup> Italian immigration was comprised mostly of men who were recruited in Italy by the *padroni* (labor bosses). Workers were bound to their *padroni* through a one year contract in return for passage and a steady job, mostly for construction projects, in America.

<sup>19</sup> The majority of laborers from Mexico entered the U.S. market through the bracero program. The bracero program involved the arrangement of contract labor for Mexican agricultural workers in the early 1940s to the mid 1960s. During its duration, it has been estimated that 168,000 braceros had entered the United States. Following the end of their contracts and the termination of the program, many Mexicans remained in the United States as undocumented migrants. Moreover, this program had generated the initiative for future migratory trends of Mexicans to the United States. Motivations and efforts to migrate were encouraged when there was a friend or relative, a potential base of social capital in the receiving country – access to employment, assistance in housing, familiarity with the context of American life, to name a few. As a result, social, political, and economic circumstances on either side of the border were transformed influencing future migrations. Consequently, the history of this program is an example of how misguided policies result in unintended consequences, specifically, contributing to the surge in undocumented migration.

Sunset Park, a look that was quite distinct from its Scandinavian predecessor.<sup>20</sup> Since then Sunset Park underwent further changes with an increasing Asian population, mostly Chinese from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. And of late, there is a steeping rise in the number of immigrants from Israel, Lebanon and Iran.

*La parada* was not well-known for its food, entertainment, or bargain sales, but it was significant for men like Ronaldo, who understood the opportunity *la parada* offered him and his family. The four-cornered intersection was more than just sites for business locations, like Danny's corner deli store, residence buildings, or segues towards destinations in Downtown Brooklyn. As a workplace, the corners served as a personal billboard for the able bodies of men like Ronaldo, Señor Delgado, Hector, Jerome and Gerry who arrived daily looking for day jobs. The four adjoining corners marked the site for ready labor where small business owners, apartment building managers, or private home owners knew they could hire a "few good hardworking men,"; a preferable option to hiring professionals which was more costly.<sup>21</sup> As a result, employers and residents had come to expect the presence of day laborers at this and other street-corner markets that now spread across the boroughs of New York City. Given the demand, the ideal

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<sup>20</sup> Winnick, Louis. *New People in Old Neighborhoods: The Role of New Immigrants in Rejuvenating New York's Communities*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> From my fieldwork, it was my understanding that the expansion of the worksite was in part attributed to two major events. The first was an increase in visits from local law enforcement to the worksite following September 11. Unlike the police drive-bys made in the past, the police instructed the men to "spread out" and to refrain from gathering in large groups on the four corners. As a result, the men spread out over the adjacent corners of the nearby intersections. The expansion allowed for the accommodation for more day laborers to look for work at this particular site. I briefly discuss this in chapter eight concerning the social and economic implications of September 11 on undocumented persons living in New York City.

At the same time, there was an intensifying conflict among day laborers, local residents and businesses at a major site in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn that spanned across a main avenue of several intersections. Following talks with all interested parties, a formal day labor center opened in south Brooklyn. The opening of this center is my second explanation for the growth of the workspace at my fieldsite. I explore this further in the Part Four, Chapter 5.

circumstances and surroundings, and the visible supply of workers, workplaces like *la parada* were encouraged and fostered the gathering of men on street corners.

The growth in day labor also provides a highly visible image of undocumented immigration, a distinctive proportion of this labor pool in the United States. The public, particularly local community members were often aware of the locations of these informal day labor sites. However, as a result of the stigmatization of informal work and socialization in public places, they identified the persons at these sites as troublemakers for loitering on street corners. Although the men's objective was to seek employment, their public activities on the street corner were outlooks into elements of public life that were frowned upon (Jacobs, 1961, Liebow, 1967; Anderson, 1978).<sup>22</sup> As a result, day laborers were often perceived as contributing to public disorder or even as criminals, including harassing women and the visibility of their homelessness. Yet, even though this part of the men's lives were visible, their plight, specifically as members of the working poor, was practically invisible, especially since they, themselves, did not always address their needs publicly, i.e. to local officials or social services, because of their undocumented residency status.<sup>23</sup> As a result, these men were both legally and socially on the margins of civil society.

Any conclusions drawn from this project are not generalizations that can be made to all of the men who stand on these corners or to all persons who are part of the day labor community. Since the New York State Department of Labor does not have an

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<sup>22</sup> Much like what Jane Jacobs found in her study of the social life of city sidewalks, "the casual public sidewalk life of cities ties directly into other types of public life" (1961, pg. 57).

<sup>23</sup> While these cases are underreported as a result of having undocumented residency status, there have been many studies that have concluded that immigrants are considerably less likely to seek out and receive public assistance (Cornelius, 1981; Massey, et al., 1987; Jensen, 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

official classification for day labor, statistical information is lacking in this area.<sup>24</sup> As these men are out of touch with formal networks of employment, a quantitative analysis is limited in providing complete information on the social situation of the day laborer. A qualitative analysis of the experience of the day laborer is an efficient and effective method to utilize in learning about this community.<sup>25</sup>

### Working on the Corner - Methods

With an early start to the day, a sparse few begin to show up around 7 a.m. Soon after, many more join these few so that by 8:00 a.m. and certainly by 9:00 a.m. there are crowds of men on these corners. Around noon, the end of the day is obvious since there are few persons who stop by the corners in search of a few good men. However, some remain until sometimes as late as 2:00 p.m. or even 4:00 p.m. Although the men do not resist looking for work, they usually close their workday with leisure activities, i.e. playing quarters against the wall, eating, or forming cohorts of two or three to join pickup soccer or basketball games in a neighborhood park.

Though naively unexpected, I also arrived on the corner to work alongside the men. On clammy sun-baked mornings of a July summer or in the early brisk hours of wintry days in February, I stood on the corner observing the interactions and processes

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<sup>24</sup> While there is no precise measure of informal labor activities, the processes that fall under this heading should not be thought of as random and or isolated in their activity. For a discussion on the analysis of the dynamics of the informal economy, see Sassen, Saskia and Robert Smith. 1991. "Post-Industrial Employment and Third World Immigration: Casualization and the New Mexican Migration in New York." Papers on Latin America, #26, The Institute of Latin American and Iberian Studies, Columbia University. See also "Mexicans: Social, Educational, Economic, and Political Problems and Prospects in New York," by Robert Smith in Nancy Foner's, *New Immigrants in New York*, 2001. See also "The Informal Economy" in Saskia Sassen in *Sassen's Globalization and Its Discontents*, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Cornelius provides an overview of various methods in studying "non-detained illegal immigrants." In particular, from his fieldwork in Mexico and the United States, he has detailed the procedures, problems, and effectiveness of personal interviewing as a primary method for data collection (Cornelius, 1982).

involving the men, employers and passersby that comprised a typical day on the corner. The nearby laundromat was the site from where I made my initial observations. Since it was well-situated, I could comfortably remove myself from the corners during or immediately following my visits to write fieldnotes. Another convenient place that offered a suitable space for recording fieldnotes and interviews was a nearby playground. Occasionally I also used the lower level of a nearby church for writing about and reflecting on my fieldwork. My visits occurred at least three times on a weekly basis where I usually spent two to three hours on the corner, usually from 8:00a.m. – 12:30p.m. This was the time of day when the majority of day laborers looked for work on these corners, though there were many men who arrived earlier, i.e. 6:30 or 7:00am, and stayed later, i.e. 2:00 or 3:00pm) at the corner, though time during these earlier and later blocs was spent leisurely.

Over two and a half years, I made observations and carried out interviews with the men who visited this corner practically on a daily basis.<sup>26</sup> The majority of the participants were Latino men, both immigrant or U.S. natives and African Americans. The Latino immigrants were the major group of men who looked for work at this site. The other major group of men was Eastern European – Polish and Russian men, though my contact with them was limited. The apparent methodological issue was language. Since I was proficient in speaking Spanish with the Latino participants, there was little problem in communication. I became friends with some of the Polish men who knew some English though our exchanges were modest compared with the Latino men.

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<sup>26</sup> All observations and statements were recorded on paper or on tape soon after their occurrence at the fieldsite. Most of the men had clearly stated that they would not allow me to use a tape recorder nor a camera during our visits. And so these places were efficient spaces for the immediate recordings of fieldnotes following our sessions.

Few of our interviews took place on-site. The bulk of interviews were held in a neighborhood park that was a short walking distance from the field site or in the men's homes.<sup>27</sup> Our interviews covered a range of areas of the men's lives located in New York City and in their native countries.<sup>28</sup> A flexible schedule of questions and key topics guided in-depth interviews that lasted from two to three hours documenting personal histories.<sup>29</sup> Their histories included the circumstances of the migration experience, the employment experience, both in formal and informal work, their living situation, including familial and non-familial relationships, and their expectations and concerns about their future.

The selection of the men who participated in the project was made on a voluntary basis. To encourage their cooperation, I assured these men complete anonymity in our conversations on the corner and in the personal interviews.<sup>30</sup> The majority who work on

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<sup>27</sup>While the majority of interviews that took place in the men's homes were inside their apartments, at times interviews also took place in courtyards, building stoops, and backyards.

<sup>28</sup> A model of key questions and topics guided the interview, but remained open-ended allowing for interesting tangents and breaks to be explored. The majority of the men agreed to the tape recording of the interview while there were some men who only allowed me to write notes and key responses throughout the interview.

<sup>29</sup> The fieldwork that contributes to this essay includes conversations and interviews that were carried out in Spanish, though I have translated all words, quotes and interview sections into English for this essay. While Spanish was the native language for the majority of the participants in this project, English was used whenever appropriate, i.e. at the request of the participant or if the participant was proficient in English. The use of quotations and italics differ in the following ways. Quotes will be used to denote the first mention of a unique identifier that I have named, i.e. Temps. Quotes will also mark the exact words of participants as stated, transcribed and translated from audio-recorded sessions. Indented notes that are unquoted indicate that these statements were recorded on paper from memory paying considerable attention to speech detail and phrasing. My effort to record and report their exact words was reasonable and careful in minimizing changes in interpretation of meaning from the situation. Lastly, italics are used to highlight phrases and words in Spanish, the original language of the participants, and for author's emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> In documenting fieldnotes, on paper and in tape recordings, all persons received a code that comprised of letters and numbers representing city/town, country of origin, age, gender, years in NYC, years working in casual day labor, and session date. For instance BC22M21\_071102 represents a session that took place on July 11th, 2002, with a twenty-two year old man who immigrated from Buenaventura, Colombia. Moreover, this participant has lived in New York City for two years and has been working as a casual day laborer for one year. This coding reference system assures the men of complete anonymity and

these corners do not have legal status in this country and are generally aware and suspicious of any onlookers and this was no different for me. Many of the men directly asked me or inquired one another about my possible affiliation with the local police, the Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services or a media outlet. I promised that I would not interfere with their chances of finding work, i.e. asking the potential employers questions while the men were speaking with them about work. As promised to all of the men, I replaced all names referring to the participants, places of business, neighborhoods and other locales with pseudonyms to assure both confidentiality and anonymity.

In addition I spoke with family members, local residents, business owners and employees, and organizers from formal institutions, though these sessions were not as extensive as were the interviews with the men. Many of the men who worked on the corner told me about family members living in New York City. Often these family members had offered assistance, financial and otherwise, in their migration to the United States. I was fortunate to meet and speak with some family members about some of the men and about their own life in New York City. Family members were contacted only as a result of having received permission from the men with whom I had developed a close association, usually ones I had met from the onset of this project. All of these meetings took place in the family homes. Neighbors like nearby business owners and local residents also contributed important details. I approached business employees at the workplace and met with them during their lunch break or briefly during the workday. As an example, the first participants were the employees from the nearby laundromat where I

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confidentiality and that I, alone, as the private investigator, have access to the original data. This procedure has been approved by the internal review board at my university overseeing the “protection of human subjects” in all research projects.

had made my initial observations of the work site and of these men. I had become a familiar face since it was often that I would launder my own clothing during my initial sessions. And since my visits to the corner occurred in the early morning when there were few patrons using the facility, I was able to speak with employees during their working hours. Finally, I met with organizers and leaders of formal institutions like the local community board about their interactions and efforts to reach these members of the community. Moreover, through the community board, I became a volunteer serving on a committee for the Human Service Cabinet— an extension of the board addressing specific concerns deemed by representative members of the community – concerns such as health, education, and housing, to name a few.<sup>31</sup>

In exchange for speaking with me, I agreed to share with the men information that could alleviate some of their concerns. For instance, translating the local news was significant in supporting my entrée with a small group of men. A poignant example occurred early on. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center occurred on September 11, 2001 in the early months of my fieldwork, though I was not with the men on that day. However, I spent mornings with the men on the corner in the days that followed where like everyone else, we painfully fixed our eyes and ears on any media outlet. Although the men were informed about this and other events from what they read and heard in the local Spanish media sources, an ever-present qualm compelled them, like me and others, to need more steady information. In the months that followed, the steady stream of news reports that I shared with them gradually became less of a topic that was at the forefront

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<sup>31</sup> After meeting with the district manager of Community Board Seven, I was invited to attend a meeting of the Human Service Cabinet. The cabinet is comprised of sub-committees who meet on a monthly basis focusing on specific concerns raised by community residents. Presently, the major areas of concentration are education, housing, community resources and health care.

of our conversations, though resurfaced concerning the circumstances surrounding the disease, Anthrax, and the impending war with Iraq.

I also informed the men about assistance or services that they were qualified to receive. Some of the men had expressed an interest in learning English and so I located local schools that offered language classes. It was often that our conversations turned into brief sessions of language instruction, which were always the more enjoyable and rewarding of my visits. Certainly, there were colloquial expressions and differences in vocabulary that were interesting to note in my fieldwork so that I was always reminded that I spoke a “certain type” or “different kind” or “American” Spanish. On any given day while hanging out on the corner, it was inevitable that questions came up about English words and phrases. I characterized these occasions at *la parada* as informal “lessons” comprised of mostly Q&A drills in translations.

For example, one day I was speaking with Luis and Gerry when Gerry asked me to translate the Spanish word, “pomelo” into the English word, “grapefruit.” A “lesson” then followed about the English names of produce and markets (bakery, butchers, and greengrocer). Then our conversation returned to Spanish where Luis and Gerry described the local markets where their families sold goods in their hometowns. The earlier “lesson” with Gerry and Luis illustrated how there were moments in our mornings together when there were occasions of language instruction. However, this case highlights interactions that incorporated more than just learning a grammatical rule of speech or noun identifications. During these occasions, the men shared personal details about their lives. I became better acquainted with them and they, in turn, learned more about each other, too. These times offered me an opportunity to learn about extended

family members living in their home countries or who were living with them in the United States. Apart from job opportunities, the corner offered the men an additional arena for social exchange.

It is clear that the focus of this project concentrated on male immigrants. Although race, ethnicity, nationality and age were varying characteristics among the day laborers, gender was not. There were no women who looked for work on this corner, though this was not uniform across the city. In two *New York Times* articles on day laborers, Charlie LeDuff and Nina Bernstein wrote about how women looked for work on a street corner in Williamsburg – a neighborhood in south Brooklyn.<sup>32</sup> Again, I raise this distinction to challenge the current discourse in highlighting the advantage of studying day labor in New York City which offers the opportunity to carry out comparative studies of different populations who day labor. There is a need to research the process and effects of this social situation among female immigrants. Research of this kind would engage us in understanding how gendered social ties contribute to differences in job attainment, for instance, either favorably or damaging, as compared to men. As cities make progress in planning spaces for day-labor work centers that will largely serve the needs of a male population of workers, related studies should focus on locating and designing equivalent spaces for women.

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<sup>32</sup> In a *New York Times* article, “Brooklyn Poles and Jews Refashion Old World Ties,” Charlie LeDuff wrote about the irony of Polish women who usually find work cleaning houses for Jewish families highlighting how outlooks and associations are frequently modified and reconstructed in the migration experience (2001). In addition to Polish women, there were also Latina and West Indian women who looked for work at this site. Nina Bernstein’s article focused on the women at the same location and also acknowledged the spatialization of employer preferences for different female day laborers that tended to follow racial and ethnic preferences as well as status of national residency/citizenship.

Following efforts to organize the women looking for work at this site, the Women’s Day Laborer Committee and the Latin American Workers Project opened up a formal day labor center. See also Valenzuela, Jr., Abel and Edwin Meléndez (2003) *Day Labor in New York: Findings from the NYDL Survey*. Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, University of California, Los Angeles, and Community Development Research Center, New School University.

All of the day laborers who worked on these corners were men, which introduced noteworthy methodological issues for the project arguably posed as both an advantage and disadvantage to the collection and interpretation of meaning of this social situation. A few of the men had confided in me their thoughts about my presence on the corner. They shared their opinions of how women do not look for work on a street corner as they do “unless you’re that kind of woman” and of how “a man would never let his wife stand with strange men outside in public”. Such behavior and actions were uncommon. As the men usually gathered in small groups at the intersection, I was able to inform many of them at once about my intentions and goals; though at the time I simply wanted permission to observe them and their daily activities up close.

I only visited those men who had agreed to allow me to stand with them on the corner. Though I made every attempt to identify myself and explain my presence on the corner, understandably, I could easily convey this information to those standing near me and presumed that in conversations with others, the men, in turn, would pass along the information (many of them did so). However, this task was not so easily achieved with the men standing across the street or with newcomers. In many instances, I became familiar with a small group of men and began my inquiries with them. Then I expanded the number of participants through personal references (snowball sample). This was typical of my early interactions with the men which more or less followed my assumptions. However, my later encounters introduced me to identities and roles that the men had already constructed for me. I describe these interactions in more detail in the remainder of this chapter and again in chapter four.

In my effort to simplify the complexity of this social world, the organization of this dissertation aims to provide tools with which to understand this community.

“Pathways to the Corner” gives an introduction to the burgeoning day labor market in New York City and highlights the distinctions of this study in the context of previous research carried out in other metropolitan cities. Situating the participants in this project in the larger context of recent immigration to New York City, the chapter argues for a critical understanding of the current dynamics of this new immigration as it affects the larger social structures and institutions of politics, economics, and culture. Next follows a description of the men’s workplace along with a description of the research methodology and main arguments that are developed throughout the dissertation.

“The Workers” makes the acquaintance with the men and presents them in assigned categories - the Regulars and Temps. The focus is on the circumstances that led them to day labor on street corners and highlights the life stories of certain men at this site, with a careful look at the Latino day laborers. These accounts are the result of in-depth interviews and personal histories of the men. There are two groups into which I’ve assigned the various participants in the study. The group labels only describe the men’s presence at the worksite - specifically the frequency of workdays. One group, labeled the “Regulars”, included the immigrant day laborers who daily looked for work at this site. The second group, labeled the “Temps”, visited the worksite less frequently and included mostly U.S. nationals. Lastly, this chapter begins to address the social order that existed among the day laborers where Temps were overlooked as desirable workers and Regulars held the desirable status of “real day laborer.” The social order of a real day laborer at *la*

*parada* illustrated how the men's perceived race, ethnicity and nationality operated and shaped outcomes in the hiring process.

I explore identity construction and management among the men to explore the meaning attached to the status of "A Real Day Laborer" and to see how the men work on the corner to attain that status. The chapters in Part Three explore the ranking of real day laborers with relation to the hiring process, but also in the formation of one's peers and in public activities on the corner. The chapters explore the active role the workers play in their own work experience by examining the negotiation and presentation of identity among the different groups of men working at this site. The first chapter analyzes the impact race and ethnicity in New York City has on the men's work experience and describes a "visual queue" that is central in the hiring process. While there were powerful implications of race and ethnicity in the exchanges that took place at the worksite, likewise, the second chapter illustrates how gender was also an integral element in the work processes on the street corner. There is also a discussion about how characteristics of this particular sector of the informal economy encouraged "ser hombre" (being a man) in the workplace.

The two chapters that comprise "Finding Community and Order n a Place on the Corner," explore the less obvious functions and purposes for the street corner that were secondary to finding work. The chapter examines the varied purposes served by the street corner that cultivated a social life for the men that was produced and sustained by the corner. In addition, the chapters highlight the men's desire for healthier social lives and a sense of community and explain how the men managed loneliness, renewed a sense of membership and claimed a social status on the street corner in a place where they often

felt they did not belong. The last chapter highlights one case study of these circumstances and experiences following the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Echoing the greater concerns that were raised in the previous chapter, the last chapter focuses on the far-reaching interests that were not limited to economic matters. There were more personal concerns involving, to name a few, separation from family members, their own safety, an anxiety over the heightened security measures along the U.S.-Mexico border, and the mood of being stranded and alone in a country to which many felt a sense of detachment, particularly as a result of the stigma attached to undocumented persons living in the United States.

Following the conclusion, the appendix introduces the fieldworker as one of the workers at *la parada*. The summary explores her participation in the fieldwork process by examining the implications of her presence in the workplace. The discussion challenges our understandings of the diverse elements and processes that inform and contribute to the ethnographer's work.

## Part Two: The Workers

Who is a day laborer? As reported in the *New York Day Labor Survey*, day laborers are overwhelmingly Latino.<sup>33</sup> One third come from Mexico, another third come from the remainder of Central American countries, and the last third are workers from South America. This statistic is hardly surprising given similar research studies of this particular day labor population in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco or Chicago where the majority of the workers are Latino men. However, there was a substantial number of African Americans who also day-labored at my site. As one visits the many informal sites across New York City, a different picture is painted each time of the people who day labor on street corners.

As noted earlier, Valenzuela and Melendez estimate the number of day laborers in the New York metropolitan region is between 5,831 and 8,283 persons. The majority of the men is young and most are recent arrivals (less than two years) in the United States. Aside from the men who were native-born United States citizens, the men fell into one of two groups regarding tenure in the United States. The first group comprised the majority of men who had been in the United States from one to three years while the second group comprised of men whose tenure ranged from five to fifteen. Nearly one quarter of the men at my site were living with a relative or another family. The remainder group was single men who either lived alone or shared a living space with others, typically, other day laborers.

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<sup>33</sup> The findings discussed in this section refer both to my fieldwork and estimates and/or characteristics from the New York Day Labor Survey. See *Day Labor in New York: Findings from the NYDL Survey*. Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, UCLA, and Community Development Research Center, New School University, 2003.

The men had a wide range of skills and were hired for a variety of jobs. Generally private homeowners and local small businesses hired these men for work in roofing, carpentry, painting, demolition, stockpiling landscape and construction. Just as their skills varied, so did their background in education. A significant number of the men at my site had some level of formal education. While the range varied from little formal education to college, the majority of the men completed their education up until and sometimes including their first year of high school.

Many of the men realized that while they risked earning less or no money looking for work day to day on the street corner, they could earn the minimum wage and often much more when they were hired from the street corner. Consistent with the findings from the NYDLS, men received a good pay for day labor work that generally paid better than the state and federal minimum wage (\$5.15). The men earned an hourly wage of eight to twelve dollars. If the men negotiated a wage for one-day's work that ranged from eight to twelve hours, they earned about eighty to one hundred twenty-five dollars. Though the opportunity to earn more money in day labor than in jobs found in the general economy, the work was not steady, especially during the seasons when work was difficult to secure, namely during the winter season.

The street corner was the makeshift office that was often referred to as "*la parada*." Situated in a locale that received a lot of automobile traffic and little in foot traffic, the space suited the momentum of the day labor hiring process. Weary and hungry drivers were likely to stop in at the corner deli store to revive themselves with cups of coffee and snacks for the road. Aside from deli customers and potential employers, the other individuals whom the day laborers encountered were persons who

utilized or worked in the nearby laundromat, the majority of whom were women. Business at the laundromat was never booming during the typical workday of a day laborer. While the customers varied, employees, like Joanne and Mathilde, remained familiar so that they and the day laborers frequently acknowledged one another when passing each other on the corner. In fact, men like Ronaldo or Luis, who lived quite near to *la parada* often used the laundromat to wash their clothes while they looked for work, on slow days, or during their free days – days when the men decided that they would not look for work but still arrived at the corner to socialize with friends. However, pedestrians were not abundant at *la parada* even though recreational activities in the streets were not uncommon just one to two blocks south, though this depended on time of day. As the workday ended, it was not uncommon to see mothers returning home with their children from school to the apartments and houses that were located by *la parada*. Certainly at night, *la parada* was a popular spot for young teens hanging out though groups remained small and private.

## Chapter 2: Regulars and Temps

*“The people who come here, with one look, they know everything.”*  
Compadre

While I found Compadre’s statement striking, it was not entirely true. I discovered this on the day when I first stepped onto the corner. One, two, three looks was insufficient in understanding the social processes that took place at *la parada*. Moreover, one look did not furnish a straightforward account about the different men who labored on the corner. As I moved along in my fieldwork, a key discovery was the distinct groups of men who utilized this corner and how like an outsider’s outlook, including me, their one look did not offer a singular outlook of this social world, but instead a prismatic view.

Men of distinct ethnic, racial, and national categories congregated at the intersection I labeled *la parada*. The street corner was a physical space that organized social identity in subtle ways. The most apparent was a spatial organization of separate groups of race and ethnic backgrounds. Since all the men shared the workplace, many stood together on the same corner while maintaining loose boundaries. For example, Polish men stood alongside the Mexican and Ecuadoran men gathered on the southeast corner while African American men stood beside Panamanian men on the southwest corner. During one of my early visits, I asked Gerry about his Polish and Russian co-workers on the opposite corner.

“Everyone stays with their own group in their own place. Everyone has an equal chance to find work. The Russians, they are fine. We don’t speak to each other. I don’t think there are any problems. Everyone is here for the same reason. But really the Russians don’t like us because the gringos

come looking for us first. We work hard and we do a good job. Some of the gringos complain that the Russians don't want to work hard. They don't want to work hard like us. And so the people who come here usually come to find us first. But there's no problem."

I identified the men according to three categories of workers who labored on this corner: Regulars, Temps, and *la profesora*, whom I described earlier. I labeled the men as Regulars or Temps based on how often they came to the corner to find work. The major group of the Regulars was Latino, mostly of Mexican national origin, though there were others from Ecuador, Colombia and Panama.<sup>34</sup> On average, thirty Latino men gathered at this intersection alongside another crew of Eastern Europeans, mainly Polish men. Together, these men comprised one group who I called the "Regulars." The majority of the Regulars did not have legal residency status in the United States, whereas a second group of men, who I called the "Temps," were United States citizens, who were mostly African American and some Puerto Rican young men.

While the Regulars looked for work almost on a daily basis on the corner, the Temps visited the corners less. The Regulars ranged in age from 16-32 years and were mostly in their early to mid-20s, while the Temps were between 18-22 years, but were mostly 18 and 19 year olds. While the Regulars' opinion of the Temps was not of total dislike, they certainly didn't take the Temps seriously nor considered them as "real day laborers" or "real workers". Luis told me,

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<sup>34</sup> I use 'Latino' when referring to all of the men as one group. Otherwise, the specific category of national origin or ethnicity is the reference. There is no universal term and its application is related to geography as much as it is to politics.

“I’m here every day. I need to work. They [Temps] don’t need to work. Not like us. They come when they want to. They play, make trouble. They’re okay, but we’re not friends. They’re kids, understand? They’re not serious.”

*La parada* was essentially a collective, though there were no strict rules for allowing others to join. Newcomers were usually invited to stand alongside the Regulars on the corner and relatives were by and large accepted without much scrutiny. Individuals who arrived alone often remained alone only for a short time since casual conversations with the Regulars often resulted in invitations to stand with them on the corner. A deeper level of acceptance included access to resources like playing on a soccer team, local guide, finding extra work, finding a roommate, etc. For instance, many of the men shared apartments to maintain lower individual rent and utility payments; typically, their roommates were men who also day-labored on the corner. For instance, Santiago shared a two-bedroom apartment with Luis, Jorge and Ronaldo – four men whom I knew since the onset of my fieldwork. They each paid \$150 to cover their \$600 monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment. Actually what the landlord called the second bedroom was a small open room whose floors match that of the adjoining kitchen.

Certainly the Regulars never extended invitations to men they disliked or with whom they had poor experiences. For example, men who had demonstrated poor character traits, i.e. distrustful, dishonest, unruly, were never invited to stand with the Regulars. The men who were most looked down upon were those who participated in unlawful activities or were flippant about looking for work on the corner. The men also discouraged drinking alcohol and least of all using drugs on the corner since they were

aware that distinctions in their appearance were critical in presenting themselves as desirable workers. The men considered these public displays as visible markers that would discourage a potential employer from pulling up in front of that particular person or group. Senor Delgado looked down on those men who sold drugs on the corner or who drank alcohol in public.

“You see that young man? He sells drugs here. I don’t know why he comes here. We’re not going to buy drugs from him. I can’t afford to lose a job because of these dummies. Who’s going to hire you if you’re drunk? Nobody. I just don’t understand them. I was in hell, to come here, I was in hell. Why do you want to risk your life to get here and then waste time. If you want to smoke drugs, do it at home. If you want to drink, drink at home. Then no one gets in trouble. I just don’t understand what’s wrong with them.”

At times these distinctions were ambiguous since all the men occupied the space on the corner. However, there was a distinct spatial divide between the Regulars and those who were out of favor in this street-corner community. Similar to what Michèle Lamont discovered among the blue-collar workers she interviewed in the United States and England, there was a morality and an underlying principle of decency that guided their interactions and self-presentation in defining who the men were and who they were not for me, for themselves and for others, in particular, potential employers (Lamont, 2000).

While there were often drifters or visitors to the corner, most of the men who frequented this hiring site looked for work on a daily basis, specifically the men whom I

called the Regulars. Over a period of time, the men recognized themselves as members of a community they had created and sustained on the street corner and came out of a desire to be sociable. This particular place was where the men found themselves among peers, who had undergone similar life events and together they were now experiencing similar plights. Much like what Elijah Anderson described in *A Place on the Corner*, I found that *la parada* “serves as a source of personal identity” and that “the extended primary group offers supportive social ties for its own” (1978; pg. 180). My observations of their everyday interactions at *la parada* revealed that the corner offered the men a space to enjoy the company of others, share their concerns, offer advice, provide information, and lend support to one another. Like the *yoseba* that Todd Gill found in Japan which represented a community for the day laborers, *la parada* was also where the men could regain a place within a community - a status that was missing or lacking in other areas of their lives in New York City (2001; p.134).<sup>35</sup>

### Regulars

Ronaldo was one of the men who worked on these corners, although not as frequently as others like Luis, Santiago, or Compadre. Ronaldo was twenty-seven years old and was from Ecuador. He often wore loosely fitting khaki pants, sneakers, and his Brooklyn Kings jersey – a royal blue with white letters tracing out the name of his soccer team. Ronaldo was a huge fan of soccer and even trained for the national team in his native country, Ecuador. That was before he left for the United States. He continued to play, but didn’t practice very much since he was usually working.

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<sup>35</sup> The urban labor market or day-laboring district was called the *yoseba* which translates into a “place where people are gathered (pgs.4, 242).” Todd Gill found that the day laborers valued and were attached to the network of relationships they found at the *yoseba* which represented an idealized hometown or community.

Ronaldo immigrated to the United States from Cuenca, Ecuador via Mexico in 1999. After he finished his service in the Ecuadoran army, he obtained a student visa to travel to Mexico where he traveled to the United States. He had a job working twelve-hour shifts six days a week in a warehouse along “Cathedral Avenue” in Brooklyn. Still he worked on the corners on his only day off in order to supplement the pay from his other job,

I like to come here. I make a little money, but at least I have a job and I can work everyday. But I like to come here, too. I work less hours and I make more money. If there’s no work, then I’ll go play soccer. I’m not losing anything.

After meeting Luis at the laundromat, Ronaldo agreed to move in with him and Santiago in order to minimize both his and their living expenses. Upon offering an invitation to move into his apartment, Luis also invited Ronaldo to go with him to the corner to find work. Since Ronaldo had a full-time job, he agreed to go on his day off and has kept to this schedule ever since. As with most of the men on the corner, many utilized and benefited from the associations and friendships with others at *la parada*. Later in this chapter, I will detail how and why the men decided not to utilize certain associations and relationships, i.e. family members living in the United States.

Luis was from Atlixco, Mexico and had already been living in New York City for three years prior to our initial introductions on the corner. He was twenty-seven years old when I first met him on the corner. He was standing beside Santiago and reading to him a bit of text from an article in *Hoy*. In the months that transpired, I learned that this role would be replicated time and time again in his interactions with Santiago and with his

other roommates, too. Luis was a man who described himself as an experienced guide for the men,

“I know a lot. I know all the people who pass by here. I’ve been working here for a few years already and I know a lot. You see, Santiago, he’s young. I’m like his father in this country. Sometimes I like it. I try to teach him. The others, too. I tell them what I know, what I see. We have to help each other. Too many of the men want to do everything alone. That’s good, but sometimes you need to ask for help and help others, too. So, I try to do what I can. My family comes first, but I try to help some of these men, too. If I need help one day, maybe he can help me. I know more than you think.

Luis supported his wife, his five-year old son, and his parents, who all live in Puebla, Mexico. He was a stocky man standing at about 5’3”, and whose thick moustache contributed to my initial deception of his age. Luis enjoyed living in New York City, but when I asked him if he would like to remain in the United States for the rest of his life, he quickly responded,

“*Para toda mi vida?* (For all of my life?) NO! No, no, no. Eight years. I’d like to stay for eight years and then see what happens after that. But I want to go home. I miss my home. You should visit Mexico. It is so beautiful. No, I wouldn’t want to live here for the rest of my life. I don’t even want my family to come here. It’s dirty here. And there are always problems with other groups of people. Too many people from different countries, too. That creates problems, just like here [the corner]. I like the

life here. The pay is good, better than Mexico. I can do what I want but life here, it's difficult. That's what I don't like. It costs a lot to have a life in this country.”

Luis was certain he would return home but was worried for men like Santiago who seemed to have little or no direction in wanting to forge a new life in New York or returning to Mexico. Luis told me,

“You have to push him. Otherwise, he won't do it. Sometimes he looks for work by himself, but he's lazy. I try to help him.”

Luis met Santiago on the corner and together they looked for an apartment together, once Luis' niece returned to Mexico. Santiago came to look for work on the corner through the co-workers he met while working in a grocery store. A co-worker told him that he could make more money from the jobs offered at the corner and in a short time, compared to the long workdays in the grocery store. His co-worker assured him that there were people who were always looking for immediate help to do some temporary work and no one really cared but instead preferred if the men did not have their “papers.”

He didn't lie to me. I get work and I make more money. I didn't like working for that Italian man. So I quit and now I come here. It's good. I don't have to work for anyone here. I want to work, but I don't have to if I don't want to.

Santiago was optimistic that he could make at least sixty dollars a day sometimes and so with a couple of days of work, he would be financially secure for the week. He could continue to send money home and still have some money left over for himself.

Many of the other men also left jobs in the formal economy to look for work at *la parada*, particularly for the higher pay and manageable hours. However, Santiago was a bit naïve in believing that he would have a steady income from jobs on the corner. Many of the men were aware of the risks they were taking as a result of losing a steady income, however small it was and that they would certainly face difficult times looking for work on the corner. Luis commented,

“I used to work in the hotels by the airport. LaGuardia? But I didn’t like that kind of work. So I left. But I knew it was going to be hard. This is not easy. And the work you get, that’s not easy. And I know that. Him? He doesn’t care. He still dreams. Look at him...are you dreaming Santiago? [Santiago curiously looks up and nods at Luis to repeat the question. Luis laughs in my direction.]

Santiago’s immaturity was Luis’ concern and he often assumed responsibility in looking after Santiago.

Santiago was nineteen when we first met. He arrived in the United States in 1988 and he began working on this corner when he was seventeen. He was one of the youngest Mexican men working on the corner at the time I began my fieldwork. Like the other men, he always wore a cap on his head. His favorite was plain and navy blue. His younger brother, Ignacio, gave it to him before he left. Ignacio was also making plans to work in the United States, but for now, Santiago cautioned him to wait for one or two more years. Though Ignacio was younger, a picture of his mature, bulky physique at age fourteen was a clear distinction from Santiago’s almost adolescent lean build. Santiago’s thin frame outlined his height at no more than 5’4”, and was disguised by the baggy

clothes he wore, but his babyface exposed his immaturity. Unsurprisingly, Ignacio's cap was a bit oversized for Santiago, though he didn't mind since it covered his one blemish that when noticed caused a red smolder in Santiago's cheeks. There was a small growth on the back of Santiago's left ear, which was usually hidden by his hair which hung a bit loosely from underneath his cap.

Although at times, Santiago gave into his immaturity, there were select moments in my fieldwork when I recalled him being serious about making future plans. For example, in early December of 2001, Santiago's rent was going to increase because his roommate, Jorge, contemplated returning to Mexico. Santiago was concerned since he knew he could not afford the added increase in his portion of the rent and so it was likely that he would have to move, too. Although Santiago had relatives who might have assisted him, this avenue was a last option for consideration. Instead, Santiago inquired about additional work in the general economy, i.e. a warehouse job like Roaldo. He even called his family in Mexico to warn them about a possible early return. This call was something few men executed unless they were under the most dire circumstances, since an early return would not only result in a stigma of failure and disappointment, but also equally devastating was the poor conditions of their families.

It was too early for Gerry to have thoughts of returning to Mexico just yet. I met Gerry when he was twenty-one years old working in his first year as a day laborer on the corner. It was also his first year living in New York City and after two months of working on the corner, Gerry was quick to decide that the *la parada* was where his days should begin.

I use to work at ...where they sell the fruit and the vegetables. And then my friend told me to come here. It was in July. I came and that was it. I left my job.

Why, I asked.

*Por que? No ves!!* Why? Don't you see!! So many people come here, for anything! Sometimes you work hard – they want a new kitchen or bathroom but sometimes it's just to move boxes. You know, these Americans, they're lazy. And they are a lot of them here. [Laughing first, he smiles at me saying, They need us. It's true, isn't it? We do what they don't want to do. But that's okay. I make better money here for my time than I did over there. Maybe not every day but I make my money. And if I don't feel like working today, I don't have to. Sometimes I only work half a day, that's it. I earn my money and I then go home or to the park. You don't believe me? Look at how many came today. Come back on Monday...

And look at all of us. You have the Mexicans here, the Russians and Polish. Over there you have the blacks and Colombians. They come here from everywhere.

Gerry spent a good part of our conversations drilling me in translations of basic words he wished to say in English. He made a great impression on me during the short time we knew each other. I remember the eagerness and sincere interest he would bring to our conversations. He studied English in elementary school when he was in Mexico

and had completed his education through high school. But since he never had chances to practice what he had learned in school, he couldn't remember it all very well.

“In Mexico, I studied English in high school but since you don't need to speak it there, you don't remember it. Here, I have books and so I try to read but it's hard. I can learn how to spell and recognize words. I don't know how to pronounce the words. That's why I don't like to just learn from books. I need to take a class so that I can hear how the words are supposed to sound. I know a lot right now. I hear people speak at work and I even ask them to tell me how to say things so that I can show them that I want to do better. They speak so fast, but I pick it up. I would like so much to learn.”

Gerry didn't believe that his lack in English proficiency had prevented him from finding work.

“It isn't a real problem. One can still find work. But it is true that sometimes, you find work and you may not understand something the person needs to have done and so you lose time there. Sometimes, you can lose the job, too. But so far, I've been lucky. I pick and choose what I want and what I know I can do. I can do everything and so I'll always find something.”

Jerome enjoys living in New York City very much, but he does not want to work on the corner for a long time. He would prefer to have a more secure job, but as he does not have his “papers”, it is difficult to find a good job. And so for now he will continue to work on the corner in hopes of finding some steady work. Jerome, who crossed the

border over three years ago prior to the start of my fieldwork, described for me how he arrived at *la parada*,

“It’s now three years since I came to this country. I crossed with the *coyote* and it cost me \$1200.<sup>36</sup> I made it to Arizona. Then they took me in a minivan from Arizona to Chicago and then on a bus from Chicago to New York City. There were twelve of us in the minivan. You don’t believe me! You could never understand. Twelve of us. Imagine that! And five of us were standing for most of the trip.

Willie was one of the few men I men who had crossed the border with his family. Willie was twenty-seven when we met and he left Mexico in 1997 with his wife and four-year old son. His wife was pregnant at the time of their crossing. Willie traveled from as far as Midwood, Brooklyn (about a 45 minute commute) to work on this corner. Sometimes he received jobs that paid as much as \$80 per day. “If you have a skill, it’s even better for you. If you can tell them that you can do something, you’ll make more money. This was one of the reasons why he believed that he could get a job for a good pay. Willie’s skill was that he could fix any part of the interior of the house.

“I know how to work. I’m very good. Do you know how I found my apartment? We live in Marine Park. I took a job with a Russian, very nice man. He wanted me to fix his bathroom. The tiles, the sink, the shower, everything. And so I did it - everything. He only wanted marble.

Beautiful. He owns buildings and he liked what I did for him so much that he gave me an apartment in his building. Now he’s my landlord. I pay my rent but it isn’t very much and we have a nice home. And it’s good

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<sup>36</sup> A *coyote* is a person who smuggles immigrants into the United States.

because whenever he needs something fixed in the building, he asks me to do it. And he pays me. And if he knows about other work, he said he'll tell me first. I believe him.

Willie prided himself in being one of the valued members in the group. Willie knew quite a bit of English because he had taken a language course for which he paid about \$1750. However, he abandoned further lessons since his family could not afford the expense. Since Willie felt comfortable speaking some English, he frequently assisted the other men in negotiating a payment or in describing the work requested by potential employers. Besides having lucrative skills or expertise, Willie explained to me that the men faced some obstacles in finding work because of their lack of English proficiency.

If you don't know the language, you can lose a job sometimes. Either you cannot discuss the money they are going to pay you or you don't understand what they want you to do, and so you lose the job. People of all kinds come here and many of them don't speak any Spanish at all. You can understand the money, but that's about it. It's hard. You have a better life because you were born here. You know the language. It's something different if you cannot speak.

When I began my fieldwork, many of the men were recent arrivals, some having only worked on the corner from a few months to a little over two years. There were some “*viejos*”<sup>37</sup> who had been working on this particular corner for as long as five years and others who had already worked few or several years at another day labor site. Rubén, one of the *viejos*, migrated from Cuba to New York City nine years ago and had been

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<sup>37</sup> *Viejo* translates into the English words - an old man. In addition to this translation - *viejo* also symbolized a man who had a lot of experience and/or a man who worked as a day laborer for a long time.

working at this specific site for five years. Even though he lived in Queens, Rubén, told me that he continued to look for work at this corner because “the faces of the men on these corners are familiar – some are my friends.”

As Regulars, Ronaldo, Luis, Santiago, Gerry, Jerome and Willie were a few of the Latino immigrants who placed high in the social order of “real day laborers” at *la parada*. Luis, for example was even held in high esteem by a few of the “regular” employers who occasionally hired from the corner. Sal was one such employer. Sal was a young Italian who worked for his father – a contractor who owned his own home construction and repair business. Though Sal did not live nearby, he was dating a woman who lived two blocks south from the corner. At times, after spending the night at her home, he would sometimes hire one or two men from the corner on his way to work in Coney Island. Sal favored Luis as a diligent worker,

Luis? That’s Luis? I call him Louie. Same thing, isn’t it? Anyway, he’s great. My dad really likes the work he does for us. And he’s a good guy. Hardworking, respectable. He don’t mess around. Quiet, you know. He’s great with kids, too. I seen him with my nephew at the office. I think he misses his family.

However, not all of the Regulars were able to attain the same status of a “good worker” as Luis and the others. There were men whom I called Regulars, as a result of their immigrant status and their daily presence on the corner, who were not labeled “good workers” and fell to the bottom of the hiring queue in this social order on the corner. Though it was not an insurmountable task, the label of a “real day laborer” was an apparent and easy status to assign the Latino immigrant men on the corner. The

distinction I am raising is that some of the Regulars' appearance, namely their black skin tone, created a tension about the identity of a "real day laborer". Men like Octavio and Compadre who were both Latino immigrants were also black men. Their black skin tone was an apparent and visible marker for race that placed them low in the hierarchy of a "good" and "real" day laborer. For example, Octavio, who was a young black man, was marked by employers as an African American. Employers judged him as an "American" who was "afraid to work," "had no skills," and "lazy and arrogant." Unbeknownst to the potential employer that Octavio was also a Latino immigrant from Colombia, Octavio was therefore not "Hispanic" or "Mexican" and he was not judged as "hardworking," "skilled," and "wanting to work to help his family."<sup>38</sup>

As the men belonging to this particular sub-group of Latino Regulars were not fully assigned a status of Regular or Temp in the hiring queue and at times followed norms of both groups, in some ways, they were in a more anxious state than the others. Consequently some of the *viejos* often stepped in as leaders of particular groups. Compadre, a Panamanian and one of the older Latinos on the corner at age thirty-five, was considered a leader of a small group of young, black Latinos. Like the "old heads" whom Elijah Anderson identified in *StreetWise*, *viejos*, like Compadre attempted to give the young men guidance and instruction on the role of a "real day laborer."<sup>39</sup> Compadre was concerned about finding jobs for the group of young men. So, he assumed the responsibility of shaping up his men in hopes that he and they would be hired from the

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<sup>38</sup> In *StreetWise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (1990), Elijah Anderson examined how nonverbal communication in interactions worked through a lens of race, ethnicity and color. Much like his observations, my fieldwork illustrated how the interactions of these identity constructs operated in an urban public setting.

<sup>39</sup> "Old heads" in Elijah Anderson's *StreetWise* acted as role models for the "young heads" who were young Black men. "Old heads" were important figures in the community whose efforts were to instruct and instill values of hard work, family life, respect and a sense of purpose.

street corner. Considered as the foreman of this group, many of whom were from Colombia and Panama, Compadre told me, “I stay with these boys. They need me.” Compadre assisted in work-related issues often encouraging or discouraging the men from accepting a job. He was usually the first man to arrive curbside to speak with a potential employer, while the younger men remained engaged in deep discussion. Compadre felt it was necessary for him to look after the young men on the corner so that they would not miss out on a call for work. Often he negotiated better pay for the young men and like others at the workplace, he would call out dishonest employers to help any man avoid being robbed of a deserved pay for his labor.

Compadre was really a surrogate father for this group of men. Having no family of his own, Compadre sincerely took care of his men. Though he had his own apartment above a Chinese and Vietnamese café, he rarely stayed there. Often he stayed with a woman whom he never called his girlfriend, but rather “like a friend” who “helped me out a bit and I’m grateful.” Sometimes in perhaps his hopeful moments, he would talk about his future children and how he would serve as a better father figure for them than his own father. Compadre was a tall man whose looks charmed most women. He was well-dressed, better than most on the corner and always remarked about how his appearance was very important to him. He was different from “his boys”, not just in age but in his demeanor. Even his stride was upright and decent. He had little patience for unsightly behavior or unkempt clothing.

“This is demeaning work, you know? But I’m not begging. I’m asking for someone to give me a chance to work. I’m serious. Poverty kills you,

your spirit. But I'm not poor, so why do I have to look poor? That's what I tell them."

This was part of Compadre's integrity that I learned about as I listened to him speak about his experiences, particularly his reflections on his work experiences at *la parada*. As leader of this group, the attributes and values intrinsic with Compadre's merits were also expected to be the merits of "his boys", too.

Octavio was one of Compadre's boys. Octavio was twenty-five years old and is from Buenaventura, Colombia. The hottest of summer days revealed Octavio's typical daily fashion – a white Hanes string tee over a no-brand name of sweat pants. Otherwise, he was never without his oversized black bomber jacket. As it had been unseasonably warm in the early months of my fieldwork during October and November, he still wore his jacket though it was open exposing his usual tee and sweat pants. Octavio had only arrived to the United States one year prior to my visits to the corner. Octavio rented a room in a building for \$400 and lived by himself. This was not typical of the living arrangements of most of the men on the corner. As his housing situation was a disparity from that of the others, I asked him how it was that he could afford to pay his rent. Octavio assured me that it was possible for him to get a job that would pay him eighty dollars or more and as he spoke some English, he possessed an additional advantage over some of the other men. Although he hadn't taken any formal classes, he said that he watched English television programs and tried to read the English newspapers. He was looking into taking classes in a nearby school which would cost him \$35 weekly, though he was not entirely sure about taking it, since he would have to secure some sort of temporary job so that he could cover the expense. He boasted about having a remarkable

memory and that he was skilled in picking up words and phrases from conversation – something he was very proud to show off to me by reciting words and phrases he knew. He remarked to me that I should be impressed with what he had learned even though he had only been in the United States for a short time.

“Learning English is important to me. I have learned a lot on my own and I’ve only been here for one year. Many people are here for so many years and still cannot say anything. It’s a shame. I don’t want to work here for the rest of my life. I want to work, but not here. If I can learn English, I will get myself a good job. I want to live here for the rest of my life. I love it here. I’ll die here.”

The Latino Regulars, like Luis and Jerome, had opinions about the other Latino Regulars and the Temps. They found the Temps too boisterous and lacking the earnest and genuine dedication to work which they all attributed as their sole reason for being on the corner. Luis remarked on Octavio and the Temps,

I know they are from Colombia, Panama, sometimes from Cuba, too. I know some of them. I know some of them, too [pointing to the Temps]. You see, how they stand together. They understand each other. If they come over here, that’s fine. We are not fellow countrymen, but we both want to work. I know they need to work, too. But those Blacks and Puerto Ricans [glancing towards the Temps]. You see how they are and nobody hires them. Once in a while. They know that.

Why do they come then?

I guess to waste time. They don't even go to school. It doesn't matter to me. They're not going to take away anything from me.

But what about the others? Compadre?

Oh yes, they need to work. They are good men. But then why do they stand there. You see? It's not that I'm racist. But if I want to get the job, I'm not going to stand there. You understand?

Again, the location of where a man stood on the corner represented the friendships and association with others, but was also indicative of a man's sincere and serious efforts to find work. The unwritten rules of communication but also interactions worked through a lens of race, ethnicity and color among the day laborers themselves (Anderson, 1990).

### Temps

Spatial distinctions helped guide the hiring processes between the potential employers and day laborers so that, for example, a small business owner could stop in front of the southeast corner to hire Polish day laborers or stop ten yards ahead of them on the same corner to hire Mexican day laborers. This brings me to the Temps and their placement in the social order on the corner. The Regulars were intolerant of the “young Americans” [Temps] whose behavior was noisy compared to their mellow demeanor. Often the Temps yelled at the cars, “Take me, take me. I work cheap,” in hopes that they could coax potential employers to stop in front of them. In effect, their boisterous behavior often discouraged employers from stopping in front of them and anyone standing near them. As a result, the Regulars often moved away from the Temps on the corner, particularly in the early hours of the workday when there were more opportunities to be hired.

The Temps were a group of young men, boyish in fact, when compared to the Regulars. They were between 18 and 22 years of age and were mostly 17-18 year old Puerto Rican and African American young men. Their visits to the corners were infrequent although occurred more often during the summer months. The Temps had a different self-presentation for the potential “employers”. The Regulars were casually dressed in button down shirts or in t-shirts and jeans. Though the Temps were also casually dressed, they followed trend fashion, too. They wore baggy jeans that hung low at their waists and their baggy shirts were oversized for their thinly framed bodies. Their caps faced backwards and bore the logos of sports teams; sometimes of a favorite team, but mostly it was a keenness for the logo.

While the Regulars passed the time reading the newspaper or speaking with one another, as they quietly waited for an opportunity to work, the Temps passed the time in a more animated way. Wanting to work, they yelled at the cars and trucks that drove by. Their voices were loud and their bodies were jumping. They mimicked each other, but mostly others. They always greeted each other with a “pound” – bumping fists instead of shaking hands as they brought each other in closely to bump shoulders. And they spoke in English, a language you rarely heard from the men on these corners, but their vocabulary was different. Their words and dress belonged to a different generation and of a different culture, an urban youth culture.

Richie, a twenty-year old, Puerto Rican was one of the usual Temps who often wore a kerchief of the American flag on his head whose patriotic colors matched the waistband patch of his low-rise Tommy Hilfiger jeans. When I remarked on the name brand Richie said, “Gotta wear Tommy. They’re the only jeans that fit me right.” Richie has lived in the neighborhood since he was five years old. He visited the corner though less often than men like William and Franklin, whose visits were already irregular, except for the warm summer months when their daily presence on the corner was probable.

Meeting Richie was an event that had brought me some words of disapproval from my friends on the corner. The day started out like most mornings on the corner where I would walk over to the northeast corner of the intersection and stand with Luis. Jerome was standing with him and we chatted for a bit before I followed my routine of buying breakfast from the corner deli store. On my way inside, Richie yelled out from he was sitting – on the hood of a car – and asked, “You alright Miss?” My first thought of “did he speak in English” crossed too quickly with my second concern “is he a cop” such

that I merely glanced in his direction without uttering a sound. His follow-up was the same question only he asked in Spanish this time, “Estas bien chica?”

Yes. Sorry, I couldn't hear you very well.

That's alright. I ain't never seen you here before. That's why I asked.

Why?

Cuz. You don't see too many women looking to make some money here.

It's not my business, what you doing here and all, but I was just asking.

I've never seen you here either.

Me? I come here all the time. They know me. Your peeps over there know me.

I've been coming here a lot too and this is the first time I've seen you here.

Maybe we just missed each other.

Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah. I would remember seeing you here. It don't matter. How come you come here? One of them is your boyfriend or something?

No, they're my friends. They're helping me write a paper for one of my classes.

Oh, you in school? You in college or something?

Graduate school. I want to do learn about the men who look for work on this corner - what happens here, what goes on, how do you get a job – does that make sense?

Yeah. It's boring here, though. But it's your time, I guess. But I hear ya.

It's all good. But you should talk to everyone here, like me, for instance.

Get everyone's point of view, right?

Of course. We should definitely talk sometime then.

Like I said, I'm always here. I was here all summer. Anyway, go get your food, whatever. We'll talk sometime.

Sounds good. It was nice meeting you.

Hey, wait a minute - what's your name?

Oh goodness. I'm sorry. It's Carolyn. I guess I need some coffee after all.

And you?

Richie. Hey can you get me a coffee?

Ah, sure.

Hold up. (He hands me a single dollar bill.) Here's a single and I want my change (laughs at himself).

Leaving the bagel shop, I gave Richie his coffee and change after which he crossed the street to meet a friend. I returned to Luis and Jerome who were now joined by Santiago, Ronaldo and Manuel. I could tell right away that something upset them since they seemed aloof for about a few minutes. Santiago sat down right away without acknowledging me – a non-greeting which was rare in occurrence between the men and myself. As I described earlier, the Regulars always extended to me some form of “hello,” “good morning,” and “how are you” and so this was why I found Santiago's gesture significant. Luis and Ronaldo continued their conversation and I quietly ate my bagel anxious about my next move. Had I interrupted a private conversation or had I done

something? Ronaldo left the group to go to the deli store when I asked Luis if I had interrupted a private moment. “Why were you speaking to that man?” I explained that like everyone else, he wanted to know why I was spending time on the corner and then a conversation began. I inquired if my conversation with Richie was the cause for awkward greeting I received from the others. Luis explained,

No, it’s just that you have to be careful about who you talk to here.

There’s no problem, but they play around here. They’re not really looking for work. Sometimes they find a job, but most of the time they just waste time. The days pass and they don’t find work and they’re okay because they don’t need the money. [Will it bother you if I speak with him again?]

No, I understand. I see him here sometimes. He’s okay, but some of them are really bad. Sometimes they make it hard to find work. I come here and I want to be in peace. Don’t let them bother you [glancing at Santiago and Jerome]. They’re jealous, too. You know? But I understand. Just be careful.

Richie never shared details about a job in the formal economy. Rather he talked about a few temporary jobs he held in previous years (taking care of trash for the apartment manager of a building, and “messenger” for a friend who dealt drugs. He couldn’t find a job that summer and so he wanted to try to day-labor. Richie had his GED diploma and talked a lot about how he wanted to return to school and get a college diploma. But in the two and a half years of my fieldwork, he had not enrolled in any college classes nor filled out any college applications. I asked Richie about his opinions of the Regulars,

“I don’t think about them. Besides, I’m not taking anything away from them. If someone comes by to hire a few workers today, I bet you that that car won’t be stopping in front of me. But that’s alright. I don’t know if I really want to work today.

While we were speaking, a young white man pulled up along the avenue in front of an apartment building where a group of men, Polish and Mexican, had gathered around to see about the job. He had been standing there for at least five minutes when Richie’s friend said,

No, they ain’t getting it. Let me go over there.

Richie continued,

They taking too long. So he’s going to see if he can help out. You see, we can speak English, but that don’t help us. They come and pick up the Mexicans first, not me.

When I asked him how the Mexican and Polish men could understand what the people wanted, Richie laughed and answered,

Oh they understand. A lot of times, the man uses his hands to describe what he needs done. But a lot of them understand some English. Like this guy, I think he needs someone to mix cement for him because I seen him do this (He uses his hands to illustrate the motion of mixing cement). But I don’t want to mix no cement, especially on a day like today. They’ll pay you okay but that’s hard work and then your body’s aching after. It’s not worth it.

William echoed Richie's feeling when he said, "I was born here, I speak the language...But people don't want to hire me sometimes." William was a young twenty-year old who originally grew up in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He had a single mother and two younger siblings.

"I'm trying to do right, by them, by my moms. It's hard man. I messed up a lot in high school. But I'm in school and I hope I can get my associate's degree. That will make my moms happy."

William was taking classes at a local city college and while he was enrolled during the summer sessions, I would still see him on the corner. William was a charismatic character on the corner. Our interactions never fell short of one remark about his appearance and how he was in trouble for not maintain communication with a few women from his old neighborhood, Red Hook. His routine comment, "I got that million dollar look man, I'm telling ya, million dollar," included more than his smile or eyes that always looked tearful in the morning hours. William's look also comprised his clothes which he took great pride in telling the others and me that he could iron a "perfect crease" in tops and bottoms. Even though his attire usually comprised of a short-sleeve t-shirt and jeans, both items of apparel were neatly ironed. Having acknowledged that my clothes were rarely ironed, William jokingly remarked on how he could iron clothes for me but his talent and patience in doing a good job would force him to require a fee.

Since moving from Red Hook, William had yet to feel comfortable with the people he met in the neighborhood or at college.

It's all good. I gotta get back on track, help my mom's out. I don't hang out too much at school. There some cool brothers out there, but they live too damn far, out in Coney Island and shit.

What about school?

I go when I can, but today I need to make some money.

But if you cut class, how are you going to pass?

Oh, I'll pass. It ain't that hard. I get by. What about you? You cutting class to be here?

No, I have classes in the evening.

Yeah, I should have done that. But I need my nights. Sometimes my mom works and so I gotta help out with my brother and sister. It's more for my sister. My brother can take care of himself. And you know, I gotta make time for my crew. They come first, after my family. They're my family, too.

I often saw William on the corner and so I wondered how much many classes he could miss and still receive credit for the course. William assured me he had everything under control. He was not very concerned about grades; he just needed the credit.

Finding "that extra cash" wasn't always easy. For the most part, William just hung out with Franklin on the corner. They were offered jobs, but the opportunities to work paled in comparison to the number of opportunities that were accessible to the Regulars. The following chapter details the processes and reasons behind the distribution of jobs offered to the Regulars and Temps.

Though younger than the other Temps, Franklin was outspoken and frank about his dislike for spending time on the corner with “illegals”. Franklin was sixteen when we first met but I didn’t really have conversations with him until one summer later when he was seventeen years old. “It’s a shame man. A real shame. I gotta be out here with these people. I’m an American.” Franklin was often upset during his time on the corner. He was never talkative, just outspoken. He didn’t speak unless he was asked a question and I quickly observed that whenever he volunteered a comment, his words were sure to be serious, almost intense.

Franklin lived in the Bronx for most of his life and moved to Brooklyn just one year prior to the start of high school. His mother and father were keen on having him attend a better high school and heard good things about Edward R. Murrow High School, in particular, the math and science program. Although he could have commuted to high school from the Bronx, his parents were also concerned with his change in attitude which they attributed to his friends. As a result, Franklin said that his parents wanted to give him a “fresh start” in a new neighborhood and hopefully with some new friends, too. Franklin was accepted to Edward R. Murrow and had attended classed during his freshman year. His sophomore year drastically changed and his good grades became poor ones causing him to fall short of credits to move onto his junior year. His parents were disappointed and their relationship with Franklin was tense and overwrought with criticism, mostly from his father. Franklin dropped out of high school, though in his own words, Franklin told me, “I just stopped going. For now, but I’ll go back. I ain’t no juvie. I just need a break.”

Going to the corner to look for work wasn't Franklin's idea. A friend convinced Franklin to go with him and at first Franklin said that he found some work that "wasn't great or nothing. I mean it didn't pay, but it was something." So he continued to return with his friend until his friend found work as a stock boy.

"He didn't help me out or nothing. He could have at least put in a good word for me. How hard is that for a brother! Friendships hurt more than any kind of relationship. You know what I'm saying? It ain't painful. But it gets to you. My father can say something harsh and it bounces off me like nothing. That don't mean shit to me. Boom Ricochet. But friends? That's the family you choose. You know it's gotta hurt."

I wanted to know his reasons for feeling bitter while looking for work on the corner.

Do they [Regulars] bother you?

Hell yeah! That's a stupid question.

Why? I mean, why is it stupid?

Well, okay, not stupid, but it's obvious, isn't it?

I guess I don't know what you mean?

Look at it this way. You have a right to be here. I have a right to be here.

They don't. But who gets the jobs. They do. This country, man. They have their priorities all screwed up.

I understand. Do you want the jobs? I mean the ones that are offered here?

Nah man. They're crap, but a penny's a penny. [A smirk escapes from his annoyed visage.] I tried to find work, but if I'm going to work, I want to make some good money. I want to buy a car. I'm not going to do that

working in Mickey D's. For that kind of money, I might as well look here. I found some work last summer. This year is slow man.

It looks like it's slow for everyone.

Not for them. They still get jobs. That's what I mean. It's unfair. It ain't right. I was born here. I got an education. I ain't illiterate. I'm not in school but that's by choice. You think they would want to hire me. They could train me. No problem. But I'm the last person they want.

Why?

You ask a lot of questions you should know the answers to.

I'm sorry.

No, it's okay. I guess for a woman, it's different. A young black man in this society ain't gonna go far. That's the bottom line. I'm not prejudiced against Hispanics. Otherwise we wouldn't be talking. I just think it's unfair for a man to pass me over to hire one of them.

Aside from feeling "passed over," Franklin also felt that he was too good for the jobs that were offered to him at the corner. He didn't want to pass out flyers which was a usual job offered to the Temps during the summer months. He liked painting since he said the job let him play around with paints. He disliked the lack of creativity in some of the persons who hired him to paint a room or rooms of businesses or houses,

"It's boring if you're just painting a single color, especially white. I did a paint-job for one woman and she had some crazy ideas-colors and everything. She paid attention to every detail. The job took time but it came out real nice in the end."

This particular job was worth Franklin's time and effort of looking for work on the corner that day. One of Franklin's passions was drawing. His pencil was a storyteller in ways that seemed clear in his drawings. Though I never saw any work outside of the pad of sketches he brought to our interview, he told me that he also painted in the basement of his family's house. Painting was a fun activity but also a way to show off his talent and aspiration for a future profession, though he was not entirely sure about the specifics of a career in art.

Marvin was clear about his job prospects. A bit more soft-spoken than Franklin, his complaint was similar that young black men would be overlooked for day jobs. However, it bothered him less since he wasn't seriously looking for work compared to Richie, William or Franklin. Marvin was eighteen and was attending Pace University. Marvin wanted to own a small business and had a sufficient number of ideas about the nature of the establishment that ranged from a hiphop bar to a Tower Records or Virgin Music equivalent where customers could sample video games instead of music. An apparent link in some of his ideas was music.

If I could spend my day around music, I'd be a happy man. I make tunes, y'know [looking over to the others with a humorous grin inviting their feedback]. But it's going to be how I make my money, one way or another. I don't need this, but I come here. I know these guys [pointing to William and others]. It's just to be social, for me, at least. Then I go to class in the afternoon and work at night. That's why you don't see me here everyday. I got better things to do with my time. I don't wait for things to happen. I make 'em happen [again looking over to the others].

Even though Marvin did not *need* to be on the corner, he was there about three out of the five days of the week, excluding weekends.

Marvin lived with his mother and younger brother. His parents divorced when he little and Marvin acknowledged that he did not make an effort to stay in touch with his father. He loved his little brother tremendously. Marvin's younger brother was in junior high school and Marvin was determined to, "be a good male figure in his life." Marvin strongly felt his parents socialized him ways that will help him be a successful person. "My mother taught me everything I want to be and my father taught me everything I didn't want to be. Both are important to have in your life."

Marvin was easy to spot on the corner. He often wore button-down shirts over jeans or khakis, if he was going directly to school or work after a morning on the corner. On other days, he was dressed casually in short-sleeve tops that had three buttons at the collar. I rarely saw him wear a t-shirt. Even when hot weather called for shorts, Marvin wore short-sleeve tops with a few buttons near the base of the neckline. Marvin utilized the corner for a social space which was common among the men on the corner. Verbal replays of sports games were common as were information about recent video game purchases. Talk about girlfriends was common, too.

"I would never let my girlfriend do what you do. You like talking to them? I mean, you talk to us, too. I know. I don't know. I would just be worried if I knew my girlfriend were talking to a bunch of men who were illegal, y'know, they don't have a legal right to be here.

### Social Networks

The strengths and weaknesses of social networks are significant in understanding the potential for their structural opportunities and mobility in society. While social networks involve resources of key institutions in the state and local economy, they are resources that are comprised of personal ties – family, but also friends and neighbors. Often the stories about family and friends who had assisted in their travels, expenses, and in their current situations came up in our conversations about the circumstances that led them to *la parada*. These stories helped to describe the personal ties that composed their social networks. Moreover, their experiences highlighted the advantages and disadvantages embedded in these networks which had either assisted or frustrated their present situations.

Ronaldo's brother helped him to move to the United States and when he arrived in New York City, he lived with him for some time. However, there was a fallout between his brother's wife and him. Consequently, he was forced to move out. His brother's wife objected to Ronaldo living with them because he was unable to contribute to the family expenses. Moreover, Ronaldo's friend, who needed his help, also moved into his brother's apartment. This proved to be all that Ronaldo's sister-in-law could manage and so Ronaldo had to leave, as did his friend.

He helped me out. Sometimes he tried to find jobs for both of us. He's a good man. So I wanted to help him, too. When he told me about the problems he was having in his apartment, I told him to move in with us. I asked my brother first. He gave me permission. But I guess his wife never agreed.

“She is bothered too easily. She doesn’t like to see us in *her* house, in the kitchen, watching television, using the telephone. Not just him, me, too. We are nice to her and we try to help. But she has a problem. I don’t care. She is not from our town. I don’t know her or her family. He met her here, in this country. I don’t care.”

Ronaldo still kept in touch with his family, but was hesitant about asking for any more help.

We will always be brothers. But his family comes first. I understand, but at the same time, he can’t forget about me. He shouldn’t have let her throw me out. I understand that she wanted my friend to leave, but I’m family. I’m his family.

“Sometimes I feel like came to this country and I have no family here. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone, especially family. He has to make sacrifices for his own family, now. I understand that. I respect that. We’ll be okay.”

Ronaldo’s friend eventually moved to Queens to live with a girlfriend and Ronaldo moved in with Luis and Santiago.

Luis had a brother who lived in Manhattan and who was the manager of a restaurant. He visited with him frequently although Luis often described their meetings as problematic.

I go to see him because he’s family. But I come back with more problems. So I don’t see him too much. It’s better that way. We get along better that way, too

Luis always made the effort to visit but his brother, but this endeavor was not a reciprocal one. Luis offered his brother an excuse by often telling me that his brother was always working, but at times of hardship, which seemed to pass from man to man on the corner like a virus, it was obvious that his brother's effortless attempt to stay in touch frustrated Luis.

Winters were always a difficult time and many of the men found their patience, not to mention physical stamina, tested in pitiless ways. One week in February, Luis had managed to save enough money for his own expenses and while it frustrated him that he could send money home, he assured me that he would make up the difference somehow. "I manage. It's true. You find something, anything and then you're okay. This happens every year." But this week of this year was different. Luis' aunt was ill and the family wanted her to have an operation. Luis was only sure that she had liver damage and like me, we presumed that perhaps it was cancer. On the morning following his conversation his family, Luis was visibly upset on the corner and even angry. This was a rare disposition for Luis who rarely showed an enthusiastic mood of any type. He was hardly the boisterous and joyful type, but rather mild in his mood. I asked him about his brother after I learned the troubling news,

He isn't going to help, but I knew that already. I told him to come to Brooklyn tonight so that we could try to figure what to do. But he told me that he's busy and that I need to go see him. Can you believe that? I have a job today. I can't go. He knows that I can't find work so easily but still he wants me to go see him.

Later in the year, Luis told me,

“No, he couldn’t help. He helped a little bit but he could have helped us more. But I understand. He has his own family to take care of. He has his business. It’s hard, I know. I was very angry with him, but then you have to let go of the anger. That’s why I never asked him for a job. We’ll have problems and then you get sick. The anger, frustration, especially from family, it eats you up inside.”

Although Luis still tried to keep in frequent contact with his brother, he never did ask him for a job, even in times like these when it was crucial for Luis to earn money. He told me, “To work with family is to have problems in your life. You want to avoid problems, not create them.”

Santiago had family living in Queens, New York and also relatives living in New Jersey, North Carolina, and California. However, he didn’t consider moving in with them immediately. This sort of assistance was low on his list of options.

If they want me. (He laughed). But they don’t even want to help me, now. No, I think I can move in with them. But I already started asking and he told me that he might have a job soon in New Jersey [pointing to another day laborer]. That will help me for a little while. And Luis said that we can find someone else. I can try to find a job, maybe with Ronaldo. I don’t want to, but if I have to. If not, I’ll go back to Mexico.

When Octavio first arrived in the United States, he stayed with his family in Houston, Texas. He expressed a strong dislike for Houston. He felt isolated living in Houston and spend most days inside of the house. As it was necessary to have a car to move around, Octavio felt confined to their living space since his relatives shared the family car and scheduled their routes to comply with one another’s jobs. Since Octavio

did not have a job at the time, he rarely left the house with everyone in the morning, mostly because there was little demand for him to be somewhere and because of the difficulty for him to return home earlier than the time when a relative could pick him up following the end of the workday. He compared the Houston setting with his situation in New York City.

“Here I can go anywhere I want. I love to walk. I can walk here. I couldn’t walk there. I was bored there. And I don’t like asking my family to take me here and there. They had to drive me everywhere. I work for myself and do for myself. I’m not like that. And so I didn’t like living there at all. Here I can do whatever I want and I don’t have to ask for help from any one.”

In response to whether his family lends him financial assistance, he responded,

“I am my own man. I do for myself. I’m twenty-five years old. I buy my own food, my own clothes, my own things, *tu sabes*. I’m a man. They are my family but I have to do for myself.”

Gerry was unmarried and lived alone in one room of a private house for which he paid a monthly rent of \$500. A Chinese man who was a grocer in Brooklyn’s renowned Chinatown owned the house and once offered Gerry a job in his store. Gerry declined the offer to avoid “*problemas*”,

It’s not good. If I have trouble at work, I’ll have trouble at home. I am not stubborn. I am grateful. He’s been very nice to me. He has a good wife and the children are nice to me, too. But what if I lose my job? I don’t

want to be without a job and home at the same time. It's better if I find my own job somewhere else.

Gerry had one sister living in Alabama who was married with one child. Gerry kept in touch with her and knew that she was organizing her "papers" since her husband had United States residency. However, Gerry was reluctant to ask his sister for any help throughout the time I spent with him on the corner.

"She is trying to make her life and I have to live my life. I didn't live with them because I wanted to come to New York City. I didn't want to go to Alabama. Also, it's difficult to live with family. It's better to live alone where you don't have to answer to anyone. You do things in your own way. It was hard for me to come here. I suffered a lot. I paid \$1500 to cross with the coyote. It took 15 days to cross and I had to walk a long time in the desert. Oh, that was so hard. Sometimes I went without drink or food. Once, I walked for three days straight. And so now that I am here, the life here, it's not so hard. I don't suffer like I did in order to get here. It is hard but I have a place to live and I have money to buy things and to send home. I found my place all by myself. When I arrived, I lived with a friend but he was sharing his apartment with a couple of other men. They drank and smoked too much and they always brought home women. Sometimes, I couldn't sleep. And so I walked around and asked questions. *Sabes*, you watch and pay attention and then you know who you can ask and who can help you. And so I'm doing okay by myself. I like it here and I want to stay."

“As we are all adults, we must do things for ourselves”. His response was so typical and predictable at any moment of adversity that I became concerned that he accepted his fate of hardship. But that was far from the truth. Gerry was an animated man whose vitality was catching. Often his spirited demeanor invited me to stand beside him expecting to see his energy arrest the distress and concerns of other, even those of my own.

Willie also had family living in New York City. He told me about one brother who lived in Brooklyn in the Sunset Park neighborhood. He had financially assisted Willie and his family’s trip to the United States. When they had first arrived, they lived with his brother for a short time – one month. But Willie said that he had to find his own place and so he began to ask people, especially ones for whom he had worked. His sister-in-law and his wife did not get along and also it was difficult for two families to live together in one small place. They needed their own place. Willie still kept in contact with his brother since they did not part on bad terms.

“To visit with family is one thing than to live with them. When you visit, you can do it happily and you want to see them. It isn’t very good if there are other things in between.”

Willie’s brother was a resident. I asked Willie if it was possible for his brother to assist him in securing his own residency. He didn’t respond immediately but then replied that he wasn’t sure. Moreover, Willie and his wife were still uncertain if they wanted to remain in the United States. They might return to Mexico in a few years but it all depended on how financially stable they were in New York. If money was sufficient, they would remain longer in the United States. At the time, Willie thought it was

premature to ask his brother about sponsoring him and to inquire about lawyers and such. And if in the future, Willie decided to stay, he told me that he still didn't know if his brother would be able to assist him.

In some ways, Willie's words contradicted with his actions. It was apparent that Willie had accomplished plenty in his time living in the United States, "When you have family here, it's different. I don't have a choice. I have to find a good home, a good job." He was trying to improve his living situation and even wanted to renovate his apartment, take more English language courses, and enroll his son in kindergarten. But again, he reminded me that his situation was temporary. It would make sense that he desired to take advantage of what he could and improve things for him and his family during their stay in the United States. However, as Willie told me about all that he had done and about his future plans for him and his family, the decision to remain in the United States was one that remained very uncertain and tenuous, despite having family in the city. Willie never felt that he had secured a life for his family in this country and always reminded me that in any day, they might have to leave for elsewhere or back to Mexico. He always ended our conversations with the same phrase, "I hope I see you next time" and each time I was reminded of his underlying uncertainty.

These stories provide intriguing anecdotes to the interviews that Cecilia Menjívar reports in her ethnographic study of Salvadoran immigrant networks.<sup>40</sup> A person's friends and relatives may be sympathetic and inclined to provide vital support in the early stages of arrival to the United States, but when they themselves are struggling in poverty, they sometimes cannot. They also expect or hope that the newcomer will be able to assist

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<sup>40</sup> Menjívar's study is counter to what she considered a problematic assumption about immigrant networks as stable and functional sets of relationships. In being sensitive to ethnic, gender and generational differences, Menjívar offered a distinctive account of the complex character and workings of this network.

them in their own difficulties, financial or otherwise. What is significant as a result of Menjivar's study, which suitably draws parallels with the life stories of these men, is not the negative interpretation that migrant networks are unsupportive and "fragmented," but that conditions in the host society can sometimes limit their functioning. Like Menjivar's participants, the men on the corner recognized their networks as unstable and inconsistent and thus did not immediately seek out assistance from relatives who comprised these networks. This is not to say, however, that social networks were then absent in the lives of the men on the corner. Rather, the men utilized their social networks for reasons that did not involve work opportunities. Moreover, the men often sought assistance from the networks they organized at *la parada*. For instance, Willie's wife was employed by a man who had first hired Willie from the corner.

He was very nice. I worked for him for a few days and he liked my work.

There were a lot of us there, but he really liked me. I guess he wanted to help me, too. He asked me if I knew any women who needed a job.

When I told him about my wife, he was so happy. So now she cleans his house twice a week. She likes him, too.

I asked Willie about whether or not he knew if other men's wives, sisters, nieces, etc. also found employment through the men's jobs from the corner. He told me that it was not uncommon for the employers to ask about women who needed work. Willie said that this was especially true among the Jewish men who hired day laborers from the corner. The women were often hired for household work (cooking and cleaning) and child care.

Luis's niece was working in a factory before she returned to Mexico. Prior to that job, she was working for a Hasidic man who first hired Luis from the corner.

I did not like working for him. He was nice, but he did not want to give me the money I deserved. We agreed on the amount and then I went to his house and helped a couple of other men to fix a third floor apartment. This was brand new. It was me, a couple from here and some Jamaicans, I think. We were not renovating. This was new, understand? So, I worked so hard on those days. Harder than those Jamaicans. And I was the first one there in the morning and I was ready to work. I stayed late. Since the work was for a while, I wanted to do a good job for him. Maybe he would hire me again in the future. Anyway, at the end, he gave me the exact amount that we agreed on when he came here. Can you believe it? He didn't rob me, but he could have given me a tip or something.

So on the last day, he asked me if I was married and if my wife was living here. I told him my wife was not here but that I had a niece living with me. He wanted someone to help his wife with the children and the cooking and the cleaning. I thought it would be good for her. Otherwise, she stays in the apartment all day and cries about home and the family. It's not healthy and my sister is upset with me because I'm not helping her. So, I introduced them and she worked with him for a while.

The preceding narratives complicate the literature on social networks by illustrated how the utilization of social networks rests on the social positions of the

persons involved and the context of the society persons encounter. My fieldwork illustrated how the men fashioned their own responses to accessing resources through their networks as they were informed by the context of their lives.

### **Part Three: A “Real Day Laborer”**

With speed and agility the men respond to calling voices or car horns. It was early Thursday morning, close to 10am and many of the men were still waiting. Some explained that the week had been difficult. Few had come by, perhaps since it was the Easter and Passover holiday. No more than a few minutes after taking rest on the nearest stoop, I heard from across the street the loud voices of men shouting over one another. A crowd of a little more than ten of the Regulars, the Latinos, gathered on the corner.<sup>41</sup> At the pace of a snail, they shifted along as they moved away from the corner still maintaining the cluster. The men furthest out were moving quickly in all directions trying to make their way to the center. The men standing on the opposite corners, including the few standing with me, rushed across to the scene, too. The Temps quickly caught on to what was happening and were soon among the others. Their determination and impatience and in some cases a few inches in height gave them an advantage. Soon they were among the few at the center. Then there was a break in the formation and a man of petite build walked out from its core. I could only tell that he was Asian, likely Chinese, as this neighborhood is home to a sizable Chinese community. In fact it is home to New York City’s second Chinatown, a growing competitor to Manhattan’s well renowned Chinatown. With continuous nods as he stepped away from the men, it was only a matter of seconds until I saw him leave the corner altogether with five Latino men in company. Disappointing sighs and the dismissive waving of arms of frustration followed from the others.

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<sup>41</sup> As described earlier, the Regulars was comprised of the Latino and Eastern European immigrants looking for work at this site. The second group of day laborers, the Temps, was comprised of U.S. citizens, mostly African American and Puerto Rican younger men.

Soon after, a station wagon drove up and parked across the street, directly across from me. Like before, the Hasidic man inside the car didn't have to wait for long before a group of men, mostly the Polish Regulars, gathered at his windows, both at the driver and passenger sides. The sounds were the same, only slightly quieter, that is until the Temps arrived. The activity was similar – men nudging each other along in order to present themselves to the potential employer. But this time I was not alone in watching this scene play out. The Latino Regulars were standing with me as we watched the Polish and Russian Regulars compete over this job. But the Hasidic man did not seem interested in their call. Assuredly and without a word to the men, he stepped out of the wagon, crossed the street and entered the corner bagel shop. Like before, the disappointed men walked away in frustration. When he exited the store, in swift pace, he approached the three Mexican men standing closest to me. “You want work?” Quick in their response, they nodded and assertively stated “No.” In a hasty comeback, he asked, “No? You don't want it?” In silence this time and looking away, the men nodded again. With an irritable sigh, he walked over to the other Latino men at the corner, “Do you want it or not? Yes?” Looking at each other for no more than a few seconds, they declined and walked away from him, too. One last attempt brought him across the street to where the Polish men stood. Unfortunately by that time, he didn't have much luck with them either. Even the Temps declined an interest in this opportunity.

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The implications of identity were especially relevant in one particular area of the employment experience – the hiring process. Specifically the race and ethnicity of the men affected the opportunities of being hired on the street-corner. Scenes like the one

just described were not isolated cases. The hiring queue had been socially constructed according to a stigma about day laborers.<sup>42</sup> Much like what I observed on that day, I saw employers stop their cars in front of the Regulars who were the desirable workers and avoid the Temps because they lacked the status of a “real day laborer.” This labor market expressed hierarchies that juxtaposed positions of race, ethnicity and nationality with perceived principles of a work ethic and morality. The two hierarchies were inseparable so that potential employers held perceptions, largely moral judgments, based on observations and stereotypes about the race, ethnic and national identities of the men who day labored.

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<sup>42</sup> We often turn to Erving Goffman’s definition of a stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and that disables and devalues the person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p.3). My fieldwork builds on this definition showing that stigma is also a process whereby others distinguish differences – whether real or not – that are informed by the experience of everyday living.

### **Chapter 3: Hiring Queues and Identity Management**

#### The Hiring Queue (Shifting Stigmas of Identity)

These hierarchies were clearly personified in the above event where the Chinese employer passed over the Temps and hired the Latino Regulars for the job. The status of a “real” or “good” day laborer was assigned to the Latino Regulars since they were characterized as “immigrants” who were seen as “hardworking” and “knew how to work.” This status was not evenhandedly attributed to the Temps, even though many of them jostled about with the others for the job. The Temps were characterized as “Americans” who were “lazy,” “irresponsible,” and “did not want to work hard” and consequently did not secure a high place in the social order of the hiring queue. The example of the Hasidic man who first offered the job to the Latino Regulars and only after being rejected passed along the offer to the Polish Regulars is a poignant example of how the Temps were often overlooked as potential workers. However, these judgment calls on the street corner that ordered men according to a hierarchy of race/ethnicity and ethics of morality/decency were not isolated to the workers as we saw in the men’s refusal to work for the Hasidic man, which I detail later in the chapter. The men reserved their own judgments of the potential employers so that they, too, were ranked in a hierarchical order on the corner that also followed perceptions concerning race, ethnicity and morality.

Consequently, the social labeling of a “real” or “good” day laborer, had varying implications on the different groups of men looking for work at this site. It was this social labeling that underlined the hiring queue at this site where persons were set apart in categories of us and them: “good” and “bad” workers, “legals” and “illegals”, “hispanos”

or “morenos”, resulting in a status loss and/or even a status gain leading to unequal outcomes in finding work. The efforts of identity management were especially visible among the Latino immigrants. In chapter six, I explore how the social labeling of a “real day laborer” also contributed to the management of gender identity.

The efforts of day laborers to carve out normality from the stigma of “undeserving”, “criminal” or “illegals” and to create a routine from the anomie of unemployment is by no means reflected in the main body of literature on day labor, on the working poor or unemployed, and work activities relegated to the informal economy. Although stigmatized as “illegals” or “aliens” and whose work is ascribed to the “informal” or “illicit” economy, these men have not developed a “culture of resistance” as a result of their social isolation.<sup>43</sup> Rather they demonstrate deserving characteristics of hard work and entrepreneurship. Despite their efforts, economic and social mobility is limited and they have joined the ranks of the working poor.

These perceptions had varying implications on the different men at my site and contributed to a socially constructed identity of the day laborer. At my field site, neighbors and onlookers described the day laborer as “illegal, dirty, uneducated, cheap labor, criminal and Mexican.” However, in addition to these disparaging traits, there were qualities ascribed to the day laborers that also worked in their favor, so to speak. From my interviews with the men and conversations with some of the more usual “employers”, I learned about the stigma of a “good worker” or “real day laborer”.

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<sup>43</sup> See Bourgois, 1993. *In Search of Respect*.

### The “Real” Day Laborer

A “good” or “real” day laborer was always a man. A “good” or “real” day laborer was considered to be an illegal and desperate man, but he was also “hardworking, a fast worker, obedient, knows how to work with his hands, and just trying to feed his family.” Lastly, he was sometimes described as “Hispanic”, but he was always identified as “Mexican”. This stigma of the typical day laborer mostly translated as advantageous in securing work for the Latino men, above all Mexican men and those men mistaken as Mexican men at my site. They were “desirable” in the social order of day labor on the street corner. Ethnicity but also nationality, i.e. residency status - immigrant or native, became the organizing principle upon which the hiring queue was structured (Tienda, 1989). This is not to say that race did not function in the social order of the hiring queue. The social structure of race in the context of the New York labor market was an inescapable ordering principle on the corner that defined and redefined racial categories among the men.<sup>44</sup> The rules that supported a racial hierarchy are discussed later in the chapter.

Aside from the status of Regular or Temp, I learned from the men and some employers that an order on the corner linked the men’s perceived nationality and ethnicity with the status of a “real day laborer” shaping these outcomes in the hiring process. Each day I saw employers stop their cars in front of the Regulars who were the desirable workers and avoid the Temps because they lacked the status of a “real day laborer.” The day laborers themselves invoked these distinctions. Luis echoed Gerry’s earlier statement,

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant outline “racial formation” as the “socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed (1994, p. 55).

“We know how to work hard. We need to work and they [employers] know this. Also, they know that we don’t have our papers. So they take advantage of us. Yes, that’s true. But I want to work. Not these boys. What do they know? They just play around. Nobody wants to hire them.”

Employers held similar opinions. Joe, a Hasidic man, frequently stopped by to hire a few of the men, either for his business or for personal work at home. He said,

“I like to hire the Mexicans. They work hard and do good work. They really know what they are doing. They fixed a bathroom in my son-in-law’s house – beautiful. They just want to help their family. I know some of them are illegal, but who cares. They want to work, so I give them work. We are all immigrants in this country. So why are they different? I don’t say we should give them help with everything, but work is okay.”

Like Joe, I noticed Mr. Kaplan (he never shared his first name with me) often stopped by the corner to hire some of the Latino men, more specifically, the Mexican and Ecuadoran men to help renovate the houses he owned in the Borough Park neighborhood. Mr. Kaplan had hired two Mexican men from this corner in the previous summer and when he had more work opportunities, he tried to hire the same two men along with a couple of their friends from the corner,

“These men are good workers and they referred me to other good workers. I trust them. You see him [pointing to Jerome], I hired his niece, too, I think. She works for me in my home. She cleans, cooks. A very nice woman, a good worker. (Actually, it was Jerome’s sister-in-law, who along with her husband and son, share an apartment with Jerome.) I don’t

think it's wrong to say that there is a perception that Mexicans make good workers. Besides, they are the ones looking for the jobs here. So if I hire Mexicans, it's because here, most of them are Mexicans.”

So on the one hand, a Mexican man, like Gerry or Luis, or a Mexican-looking man, like Ronaldo, who is from Ecuador, is assigned a top spot in the hiring queue at the street corner. While they held a higher status at *la parada*, the distinction was not carried over into other areas. Moreover, they also remained at the bottom of the economic order since finding adequate employment for long periods of time was more difficult to secure than for what we would presume to be the advantage for the U.S. citizens looking for work on the corner.

This brings me to the Americans, the Temps, and where they fit in the hiring queue on the corner. As described earlier in chapter two, the Temps had a different self-presentation for their potential “employers”. Their words and dress resemble the latest trends of an urban youth culture. Speaking English was another key marker for their status on their corner as Americans or undesirable workers. Jerome described it best when he said,

“*Los trabajadores*...the workers, the real workers, that's us. We speak Spanish, not English. Go look anywhere and you'll see. We do the work. If I had a job working in a kitchen, I would have no problem. They all speak Spanish.”

Consequently, the Temps experienced a handicap in acquiring jobs because of their native English fluency – a discernible symbol of their nationality.<sup>45</sup> The employers

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<sup>45</sup> Cordelia Reimers conducted an analysis of earnings across different ethnic and racial groups arguing that a lack of English proficiency was a significant handicap in immigrant participation in the labor market

and the Regulars considered the Temps “irresponsible, lazy, dishonest, young, do drugs, have no skills, proud, and troublemakers”. According to this portrayal, the temps did not conform to the stereotyped and constructed identity of a typical day laborer and this translated the Temps as the “undesirable”. Thus, the Temps could not really day labor and their chances of finding work on the corner were limited and often unsuccessful.

The Regulars were intolerant of these “young Americans” looking for work on the corner. In understanding the core fundamentals of the hiring process, the Regulars then distinguished themselves from the Temps.<sup>46</sup> Ronaldo stated it best after losing a job when a shouting match erupted among four of the Temps standing nearby. A car had pulled up curbside by Ronaldo and a few of the other Latino Regulars. A few of the Temps standing near them had begun to raise their voices and push each other. To Ronaldo and the other Latinos, what appeared to be a loud disagreement was actually a playful debate about a recent NBA basketball game. Even though the context was ambiguous, the details of the scene were the same. The end result: the potential employer became annoyed with the surrounding noise and quickly drove away from the corner and stopped in front of another group of Mexican men standing at the next intersection. Ronaldo told me,

Estos muchachos no entienden lo que es vivir pobre. No conocen la pobreza. (These boys don’t understand what it is to live poor. They have never known poverty.) I need this job. They are Americans. Why do they come here? Don’t tell me that they need to work like us! They can work

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(Borjas and Tienda, 1985). My fieldwork supports Reimers’ findings but also reveals the paradox of *native* English fluency. See Kasinitz, 1992; Waldinger, 1996; Waters, 2001; Stoller, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> See Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996.

anywhere. Hes visto lo que paso? (Did you see what happened?) I lost maybe 80, 100 dollars. Bueno, me voy a parar alla. (Well, I'm going to stand over there.) You are not going to see much here, if you stay. If you want to understand better, come stand with us over there.

On one morning, a couple of Mexican men were sitting on crates when a few of the Temps walked over. They were only three but if you could just hear them, you would think the size of the group was twice their number. As they gathered, the Mexican men quietly moved to the other side of the same corner along the avenue. Their move didn't seem to matter to the "temps" who didn't appear uncomfortable about taking over the crates. I asked Luis about what had happened.

No, I stay away from them. They are only looking for trouble. They don't need the work. If I stay with them, I won't get any work. There's no problem. They don't bother us. And nobody wants to take them anyway.

When I asked him about the black Latino men, he answered,

"Oh yes, I know them. Sometimes I see them all together over there (referring also to the Temps). You see, they are the same. The only difference is the language. Son hispanos y tambien son negros. They are Hispanic and they are Black. To me, they get along better. If they come over here, that's fine. I know they need to work, too. But these Blacks and Puerto Ricans, they make too much noise. They don't need the money. That's why I moved. If someone comes and sees them, they won't stop. Me, I have my family, here, in Mexico. I came here to work."

A telling statement from Octavio, the young man from Buenaventura, also described the feelings of the majority of the Latino Regulars when he spoke about William, a 20 year old African American Temp. Octavio described William,

That man. He is so lazy. Sabes? Do you know? He's afro americano. You see all those negros [black men] over there. They are all afro americanos. They don't want to work. That's why the people don't take them. They want to work that day and get paid that day. You understand?

On a warm Saturday morning, I spoke with Richie about finding work on the corner. He remarked the following,

You see, we can speak English, but do we get the jobs? Not really. They come and pick up the Mexicans first and then the Polish. I find work, but they don't pick me first. It's the same in every job, everywhere. Not just here.

William echoed his opinion saying,

“Yeah, there a lot of black folk up in here now. Summertime, y'know, people want to make that extra cash. But it ain't always easy. Y'know, I was born here, I speak the language. No problem. But people don't want to hire me sometimes. Not even here. They go to the Mexicans first. I guess 'cause they're illegal, so they can pay them whatever. That's okay. I make my money, too.”

William visited the corners almost on a daily basis, but only during the summer. Throughout the rest of the year, he was in school attending classes at a local city college. Even though he and the other Temps wanted to make some “extra money”, they often

accepted jobs that were not too labor intensive, preferably less than a full day, and for a good pay. On this particularly hot summer day, William told me,

I ain't taking nothing today. It's too hot to be outside breaking your back.

Let them run for it [pointing to the Mexican men on the opposite corner].

I don't need it.

Immigrants were favored over U.S. citizens as “desirable workers”. Group membership was a principal ordering element of queues so that potential employers favored persons from the group they preferred, regardless of their qualifications<sup>47</sup> Danny, an Italian man living in Bay Ridge, was driving by the site on his way to help move his sister into her first home. He stopped at the corner to pick up “a few extra hands”. I asked him about why he pulled up in front of the Mexicans at the corner and not in front of the African Americans across the street. In fact, only some of the men standing across the street were African American (five to be exact) while the remaining men (seven) were Panamanian, Colombian and Dominican. Danny explained that he stopped in front of the Mexican men because,

“These men, I know will work hard. I hired them, not these guys, but different ones, you know the ones on 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They helped me fix up my backyard. Now I have a little deck. It's really nice. And it was cheap and quick.”

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<sup>47</sup> This is similar to what Philip Kasinitz and Jan Rosenberg found in their study of employment in a Brooklyn, New York City neighborhood with a high concentration of poor people who were also African American. Kasinitz and Rosenberg found that black immigrants were favored over African Americans and non-Puerto Rican Latinos were favored over Puerto Ricans. See Tienda, 1989; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Newman, 1999; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003. Barbara Reskin and Patricia Roos also discuss “raters’ preferences” as an integral structural property of the labor queue (1990).

I pressed him for his thoughts on not hiring the black men whom he perceived were all African Americans.

“I don’t know about them. They look so young – like they haven’t worked a day in their life. Why aren’t they working in McDonald’s or something. Anybody can get a job at Mickey D’s. Maybe they sell drugs here. I can’t trust them to fool around, especially moving my sister’s stuff into her home. Would you hire them?”

After I explained to him that some of the men in the group were also Latino immigrants, his response hadn’t changed except to acknowledge that he “couldn’t tell just by looking at them” that they were also “hispanic”.

For the Americans to have sought work on this street-corner alongside immigrant men or “illegal aliens,” must have meant that they were undesirable as workers in the general population (Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Newman, 1999). If they could not find work, even work in McDonald’s like Danny said, something must have been wrong with them. Since day labor is constrained by the stereotypes and perceptions of a “real day laborer” and of a good/bad worker, employers like Danny argued that people with skills, of a certain social status, namely legal and/or native-born status, and having desirable characteristics of a good employee, would never purposively choose or in fact be allowed to participate in “this kind of work.”<sup>48</sup>

The Temps were marginalized because “young Americans” would not choose to day labor since there should be no need to do so. It did not matter to Danny and the other employers that these young men were trying to maintain a work ethic along with the

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<sup>48</sup> See Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977.

other immigrant men who looked for work at this site.<sup>49</sup> The Temps' efforts in trying to find any kind of work went unnoticed as Danny and other employers criticized and speculated about their motives for looking for work on the corner. This is not to say that the Temps were never hired. However, they were not considered to be ideal workers. In fact, the Temps were mostly considered appropriate or "right" for only certain types of jobs.<sup>50</sup> Even though the Temps were hired for typical jobs, like home renovation, they were mostly offered jobs that required "less skills", i.e. posting or handing out flyers, moving inventory, painting, or assisting in home improvement projects. The Temps were overlooked as a population of persons who were part of the working poor and who also day labor.

Employers' preferences for hiring according to group-specific preferences can yield results like these.<sup>51</sup> Employers were less likely to hire blacks than others and were more likely to hire immigrants than U.S. citizens.<sup>52</sup> The stigma of who was a "real" day laborer kept the Temps at the bottom of the hiring queue at this worksite and placed immigrants, especially the Latinos, at the top.<sup>53</sup> However, this hiring queue also worked against the men who were Latino immigrants and who were also black. Again, we see an example of Elijah Anderson's observations of the implications of race in nonverbal communication (1990). The spatialization of the corner provided distinct observations of

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<sup>49</sup> Liebow, 1967, Anderson, 1988; Duneier, 1992

<sup>50</sup> Lieberman, 1980; Tienda, 1989; Reskin and Roos, 1990

<sup>51</sup> Katherine Newman's study of fast-food workers in Harlem shows just how 1999.

<sup>52</sup> See Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Waldinger, 1996; Newman, 1999; Waters, 2001; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003

<sup>53</sup> See Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Lieberman, 1980; Tienda, 1989; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Holzer, 1996; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Bean, 2000; Waters, 2001; Waldinger, 1996.

how the mechanics of the hiring queue were discernible through an employers and also day laborer's lens of race, ethnicity and color. This brings me to the visual element that also played an integral role in distinguishing the desirable and undesirable in the hiring process.

### The Practice of Stigma and Negotiating Identity

So far, we have seen that immigrants were given the top spot in the hiring queue while U.S. citizens remained at the bottom of the hiring queue at this site. This brings me to the men that fall in between. They were Latino immigrants and they were still part of the group I called the Regulars. However, they did not receive the top spot in the hiring queue along with the Mexican, Ecuadoran and Polish immigrants. These men were black Latinos and often fell to the bottom of the queue along with African Americans.<sup>54</sup> (See Table One). I asked William about a small group of black men standing on the same corner as the Mexican men.

They cool. They ain't black, y'know. They're Hispanic. One of them I know is Panamanian or something like that. They speak the language and everything. But they ain't that cool with the Mexicans either. See that guy? He's cool. He likes my music. Look at him sportin' his gear and shit. He's gonna be alright. I guess it's a black thang y'know. But it ain't always like that. They have a hard time, too. Them Mexicans, man, they take it all. But that's alright. Like I said. I make my money.

Many of the men who looked for work on these corners were Latino immigrants. However, this all-encompassing label broke down into two major groups at this site. Mexican and Ecuadoran men, Latinos who were visibly "not black", made up one group

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<sup>54</sup> Kasinitz, 1992; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Waters, 1999; Waters, 2001.

whom employers often labeled “the Mexicans” or “Hispanics” and sometimes “Spanish”. The black Latinos, who were mostly Panamanians and Colombians, comprised the other group and were called “the Americans”, “Blacks” or “African Americans.” Race was decisive, but more significant was the juxtaposition of skin color and national status that was then attached to identity that became the critical factor. When the phenotype was evidently clear, it became a significant indicator of nationality, socioeconomic status, and even cultural values.<sup>55</sup> On the corner, the black Latinos lost social status by being identified as African Americans, who were the undesirable workers at this site.<sup>56</sup> During a visit, Compadre told me,

We’re here [standing on the same corner with the Mexicans]. There is no problem. They are there. We are here. Somos hispanos pero somos diferentes. Do you understand? Sometimes, I tell them not to go over there too much [pointing to the Temps across the street]. We are not like them. I told you already. They sell drugs. The people who come here, with one look, they know everything. But when they hear us speak, they are surprised. Sometimes, they still don’t take us. We are not Mexicans. Oh mamita, I learned a lot here. Aquí, yo soy african-americano. (I am an African American here.) And that’s not good. No importa el idioma. (Language doesn’t matter.) Just this [points to the skin on the back of his

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<sup>55</sup> Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; Romero, et al., 1997; Twine and Warren, 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001.

<sup>56</sup> In a study of West Indians living in New York City, Philip Kasinitz (1992) wrote about how racial and ethnic identity participated in the political arena in New York City. “Thus while white immigrants stand to gain status by becoming “Americans” – by assimilating into a higher status group – black immigrants may actually lose social status if they lose their cultural distinctiveness (Kasinitz, p. 36)”.

hand]. That's why sometimes I stand here. They stop here first and so maybe I can get the job.

Compadre explained how and why these men managed their identity in their movement on the street corner. This picture clearly depicted how the negotiation of space on the corner located ethnicity in the hiring queue among the men, but also for the potential "employers" as well. As Compadre expressed, there was little flexibility in choosing identification, especially in how they were identified by the potential employers. Thus options of finding work were sometimes limited. However, the men demonstrated some control over the presentation of their identity through their movement on the corners. Movement and physical positioning on the corners allowed the men to manage their identity by using their place on the corner to separate themselves from the Temps and to visually mark themselves as the desired worker for the potential employers. I explore the significance and implications of placement on the corner, including the varied uses of the space in chapter seven.

Since the hiring process was informal and occurred quickly, the potential employers drove by the site and speedily assessed the labor pool. Based on a snapshot visual image of the men while stopped at a red traffic light in the previous intersection or while making a turn onto the avenue, the employers had to decide straight away who they would hire that day. So in addition to possessing the desirable traits of "good workers", the Mexicans and the Ecuadorans, were visually easier to pick out from the group of Latino immigrants on the corner. There was little time and effort from the employer to distinguish from among the black men on the corner those who were immigrants and those who were U.S. citizens. Compadre and the other black Latino men knew this. So

they often stood alongside the Mexican men to separate themselves from the African American men in order to improve their chances of finding work.<sup>57</sup> At times, some of the men in Compadre's group even marked their identity in more obvious and symbolic representations – a cap or t-shirt with the Panama flag or a soccer jersey from Colombia's national team. Moreover, there were attempts to distinguish one's dress. Typically, he instructed the men, "Arreglanse!"(fix up yourself), whenever he found their attire inappropriate and sloppy and often joked with them about how they started to "look American". As Compadre noted, one's dress was another cue for the potential employers in deciphering from among the black men those who were immigrant and/or Latino from those who were African Americans. Besides nationality, one's style of dress was the image representative of class, social skills, and even cultural values. When I asked Mr. Kaplan about hiring African Americans from the corner, he told me,

"I don't have a problem hiring blacks. You can ask them [pointing to Jerome and the other Latinos]. I hire black men, too. Right now I have one man from Trinidad who's going to tell them [pointing to Jerome and Luis] what to do. But he's not like other black men. I mean they are different from blacks from other countries. Well, you can say that about all Americans, too. Look I have no problem, so long as they do good work. He has to know what he is doing. He has to want to work. Like these men [pointing to Jerome and Luis]."

As described earlier, the immigrant men, particularly the Latino men, were favored by potential "employers". And so Octavio or Compadre who were both

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<sup>57</sup> See Anderson's, *StreetWise*, 1990 for a discussion on the implications of race, ethnicity and skin color in interactions in urban public settings.

immigrants should have been hired more easily and quickly than William or Richie, who were both U.S. citizens. However, as black men, Octavio's and Compadre's advantage was slight compared to Luis or Gerry who were both Mexican or "Hispanic-looking" men, as Danny, the potential employer, mentioned in our earlier conversation. Skin color, a telling indicator of race for the employers, became problematic. Distinctions in language, dress, and physical placement on the corner, became critical in presenting one's ethnicity. The extension of this image was a presumed and often stereotyped expression of class, nationality, values, and social skills.<sup>58</sup> Together, these distinctions were significant in facilitating the process of distinguishing the men as either the real/desirable or the undesirable workers for the potential employers. Compadre and the other black Latinos' efforts illustrated the work that day laborers carried out to minimize the chance that potential "employers" would miss this difference, not only their immigrant and Latino status among the American men, but overall their status as "real day laborers" and thus lose an opportunity for work. Their movement on the corner, the task of locating their ethnicity, the spatialization of their identity, was the visual image that was the incarnation of this endeavor.

A similar scenario involving the ranking of employers also took place on the corner. Again the day laborers demonstrated their efforts to operate and influence the hiring process by constructing their own hiring queue for the employers. Aside from payment or task, many of the men expressed a tendency to compete for certain jobs based on others' experiences, but also day laborers' recommendations that were anchored in perceptions of the race or ethnicity of the potential "employer". For instance, turning back to the event I described at the start of this chapter, I later learned from the Mexican

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<sup>58</sup> Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; Romero, et al., 1997; Twine and Warren, 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001.

men about their reasons for declining to work for the Hasidic man. The Hasidic man was labeled a dishonest man since he had cheated three men out of money earlier in the year. These men informed the others in their group and all agreed not to accept work from him since he could not be trusted to pay them in full for their labor. Aside from this experience, the men were reluctant to work for Jewish men since they felt they could not bargain for an acceptable wage. Gerry, one of the Mexican Regulars, explained,

*Los chinos* (The Chinese) pay more. They give you time for lunch.

Sometimes they even give you drinks. They don't pay too much but it's better than the others. *Pero los judíos*, (But the Jewish), I don't want to work for them. Some of them are okay. But they don't want to pay a lot and they make you work so hard. [In response to a Latino "employer"]

*Los hispanos* (The Hispanics), they cheat you. They are the same. But not too many come here. When I see a Chinese, I run. The Americans, too. I want to work for the Chinese. Then I'll be okay.

Much like on that day, Chinese men will come to the corner and the majority of his entourage will be Latino. Others like the Hasidic man and even other Latinos will not fare so easily with the men.

On one morning, Compadre and I were speaking about places where he and the young men in his charge could enroll in English language classes. When Compadre invited the others to join us so that he could encourage their participation, a Latino man approached Octavio and Compadre quickly took notice. Soon after, I heard Octavio's discussion becoming louder and Compadre's concern increasing. Compadre introduced the subject of English classes to the men and then left me to sort out the details and

questions while he investigated the situation. Within seconds, our conversation turned its attention to the three men. Compadre was holding the two men at a distance from each other and in a stern and demanding voice, he ordered the man to leave the site. The Latino man was reluctant to do so and explained to Compadre that Octavio had no reason to be angry since he received his full pay, despite Octavio's objections. At that point, Compadre was blocking Octavio's attempts to get past him so that he could confront the man. The other men moved towards the trio in an effort to show support and possibly get involved when Compadre yelled at them to remain in place. Rather Compadre instructed the men to take a good look at the man and advised them to reject any work that he might offer since he would not pay the full amount offered at the pickup, which was Octavio's experience. Then he instructed the men to return to me. Seeing that he was outnumbered, the Latino man yelled one last time to defend his reputation before crossing the street towards a small group of Mexican men.

However, such an incident varies according to circumstance, if for instance, the men can afford on that day to decline a work opportunity. Furthermore, the men did not exclusively decline work opportunities from particular groups. For instance, some of the men expressed additional benefits they found in working for Jewish employers. Some of the men explained how female relatives, i.e. wife, niece, sister, cousin, etc, were able to acquire jobs through the men's employment experiences, in particular with the Jewish potential employers. Much like Luis described earlier, Senor Delgado explained,

“To work for a Jewish man is good. Why? Because he will offer you a job and then your wife or your sister. Then he wants to give a job to your cousin and he keeps going. They want good workers. It's difficult to

come here with family, especially for the first time. So you should never turn them down right away.”

Luis’s similar experience involving his niece resonated with Senor Delgado’s opinion.

It’s difficult for women in this country. I see that. That’s why my niece returned home. She had a job and she met one friend but still she missed Mexico too much. But the Jewish man helped her a lot. He gave her a mattress that his family was no longer using. A good one. We all tried to make her comfortable. She loved his children and so it was hard for her to say goodbye to them. We were lucky to meet him.

Like the employers, the day laborers’ hiring queue relied on previous experiences, stereotypes and cultural beliefs that resulted in a constructed preference for a specific and desired *jefe*, much like the favored real or good day laborer.

#### Chapter 4: *Ser Hombre* and Working Masculinity

Standing with Javier on the corner, he tells me about his last job painting apartments in Midwood, Brooklyn. Wearing the same jeans he wore that day, he shows me his left pant leg - a dark blue jean wildly spotted in colors of white and yellow paint with a narrow patch of striped blue that covered an obvious tear. Proud of his neat patchwork, Javier tells me how he slipped on the high ladder and caught his pant leg on a damaged splintered rung. Reaching into his backpack, he nudges me to peer inside. Beside his tools are a sewing needle and a few spools of thread. “Yes, yo lo hice. Se mira mal? (See, I did it myself. Does it look bad?) As I tell him no, he also pulls out an old hammer that a neighbor gave him. He shows it to Luis who remarks to me that having tools is like gold on the corner.

Beep-beep. As the rusting indigo minivan pulls up, Javier grabs his hammer and runs with Luis and Ronaldo to meet it alongside the curb. Despite his stout and stocky build, Jerome arrives late, but manages to lean on others and squeeze in. Now he is among the few whose anxious faces stare in at the man who hollers, “I need two men, just two men.” Yelling to the men on either side, he continues, “Move away. I just need two. Move.” Pushing past Kaspar and Michal, two frail young Polish men, the man steps out of the car and points to Javier and Jerome. A stern, “come with me,” encourages them to do so. Meanwhile, Franklin whispers to me that he’s seen this man before, “This man ain’t right.” Vigorously shaking his head no to others while rubbing his fingers, he tells me, “When it came time to pay, he came at me crooked. I almost set him straight. I ain’t cut class today to work for this loser. You should tell ‘em, he ain’t for real.” Seeing that many of the men had begun to walk away, the man from the van appeared more

relaxed and explained this time in a more lenient tone that he needed them to do some “heavy lifting” at his hardware store. After stating his offer of payment, he extended his arm and patted Javier’s broad right shoulder. “Yes? Good?” Waiting for Javier’s nod of agreement, his hand fell to Javier’s right side and squeezed his upper arm. Later Luis remarked to me on how he would have moved away saying, “Mirame. Soy hombre, soy fuerte. No me tienes que tocar.” (Look at me. I’m a man, I’m strong. You don’t have to touch me.)

What did “*ser hombre*” (being a man) mean at the workplace? What were the implications of *ser hombre* in the outcomes of finding work as a day laborer on the street corner? How and why was this different from being a man outside of the corner? In studying the social organization of a casual day labor street-corner market in Brooklyn, New York, I learned about the social order among the men that illustrated shifting identity positions in social interactions that were not solely restricted to exchanges of labor. Aside from the powerful implications of race and ethnicity in these exchanges that were highlighted in the previous chapter, the focus of this chapter is the management of gender identity and the meaning of masculinity in the workplace. Masculinity was another structure that the men engaged through social practices that placed them in a system of gender relations, though it inevitably engaged other social structures of race, ethnicity, and nationality.<sup>59</sup> While the focus is on the men’s interactions with the employers, fieldworker, and themselves, there is also a discussion about how

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<sup>59</sup> See R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* for an examination of the gender as a structure of social practice. Also, his chapter on the masculine body analyzes the masculine body as a symbol of a social practice that refers to what bodies do. That is, gender, i.e. masculinity, is generated through social relations and is not determined by biology such that social relations are reduced to the body.

characteristics of this particular sector of the informal economy encouraged the performance of *ser hombre* in the workplace.<sup>60</sup>

Aside from the socially constructed meanings of race and ethnic identity, there were also cultural and socially constructed meanings of gender that shaped social interactions on the street corner. The performance of being a man was a key example of how men “do gender” illustrating how the men managed and presented “being a man”. This particular conduct was comprised of local conceptions of gender categories that ordered the men on the corner. The typology that follows explores how and why men like Luis, Octavio and Compadre “worked” masculinity - efforts to present and perform expected and fitting behavior of being a man (*ser hombre*) - and the ensuing implications on being a “real day laborer.”<sup>61</sup>

One of many stigmatizing images of the typical day laborer linked particular acts and displays of masculinity with finding work on the street corner. While race and ethnicity were factors that influenced an employer’s decisions of who to hire from the corner, the implications of masculinity were also significant. Even though men were the only persons who day labored at this site, the meanings and effects of masculinity were not suppressed in the absence of a feminine presence. Gender still mattered and was visible in the local meanings men attributed to masculine/man and in the cultural and class perceptions of masculinity. Masculinity became another identifying characteristic

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<sup>60</sup> See R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*. Also in *The Gendered Society* (2000), Michael Kimmel argues that aside from a person’s individual characteristics and traits that are masculine or feminine, gender is achieved as a result of institutions whose social structures we encounter and interact with in our daily lives. See James Messerschmidt’s *Masculinities and Crime* for an exploration about gender and workplace socialization that account for gender differences (1996).

<sup>61</sup> See Fenstermaker and West for discussions on “doing gender”. Fenstermaker and West argue that gender is theoretically key to understanding both the reproduction of social structures and also human interactions located in social situations. West and Zimmerman also argued that the accomplishment of gender was “an achieved property of situated conduct.” (1987, p.126).

among the men. Employers and day laborers used masculinity as a relative distinction to rank order men as “real day laborers” which also mirrored their character as good or bad men.

There were three ways that men “worked” masculinity in the workplace. The first was a presentation of masculinity as a “real day laborer” that assisted the men and employers in the hiring process. The second was also a conduct of masculinity whose distinctions I labeled “good men” and “malcriados or brutos.”<sup>62</sup> This was most visible in public activities at the workplace on the street corner, such as, yelling out to women, drinking on the corner, or causing a disturbance that might discourage potential employers from stopping their cars. While these two types of masculinity transpired in public activities at the workplace, there was a third masculinity that I have called a “veiled masculinity.” This last type still pertained to their conduct and status as good or bad men in the workplace focusing on conduct, behavior, but also their speech – how the men spoke about their masculinity in the workplace. However, the times when the men expressed this type of masculinity were particularly visible in activities the men labeled as a “woman’s work”.

In order to meet the challenge that these activities presented that were opposed to the former expressions of masculinity, the men characterized their participation in activities such as housework and child care as masculine for the sake of maintaining their identity as “real men” and as “good men.” I identified this last category as a “veiled” masculinity because masculinity was implied in the activities that men labeled as a “woman’s work”. That is, the activities were veiled or disguised as masculine. The men’s mixed humor and satisfaction in the successful execution of tasks, such as

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<sup>62</sup> *Bruto* describes a person who is stupid, crude or a bully.

housework and child care, was another way for the men to reinforce their masculine role as “good and decent men”. Lastly, their pride and dignity was strengthened in realizing that a man *can* do everything if he is “strong” enough to do the tasks since it took a strong man to do a woman’s work.

*Mirame...Look at me. Markers of Being a Man in the Workplace*

As a worker in the day labor sector of the informal economy, a desirable and attractive trait to possess was the status of immigrant first and Latino second; though the juxtaposition of the two identity positions was obviously preferable (Tienda, 1989; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Newman, 1999; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Typically, real day laborers were men who comprised the Regulars since the Temps were not perceived as desirable workers. However, the status of “real day laborer” went beyond markers of residential status (immigrant versus native) and race and ethnic status (Mexican versus American). The “real day laborer” or “desirable worker” was all of the above, including “a strong man”, a “hardworking man”, and a “respectful man”, to name a few.

The start of this chapter provided a poignant illustration. The employer pushed aside Kaspar and Michal and instead offered the job to Javier and Jerome. Javier and Jerome were considered “real day laborers” as result of their perceived background - Mexican and immigrant status. Moreover, their stocky builds were an indicator of strength and ability to perform the work - heavy lifting – which was more obvious to employers when compared to Kaspar and Michal’s modest frame. This highlights the visual element that played an integral role in the social order at the workplace which

aided employers in distinguishing the desirable and undesirable in the hiring process, which was illustrated in the vignette presented at the start of this chapter.

Demonstrating certain cues at the workplace was necessary to improve one's chances of being hired as a day laborer. As the men on the corner were aware of the quick pace of the hiring process and the timeliness in their response, these cues illustrate the ways the men worked masculinity in the workplace to give self-presentations of real day laborers. Standing on the corner as opposed to sitting down on the sidewalk was another relevant cue to signal to potential employers that a man was looking for work and was prepared to work that day. Distance from the corner or the curb was also relevant. For instance, a man sitting on the curb was considered more interested in working that day than a man who was sitting on a building stoop that was far from the corner. Moreover, this particular cue illustrated that a man had a respectable work ethic which was an important distinction among the Regulars and Temps.

The Temps were often perceived as lazy, both by potential employers and day laborers. All of the men would sit down at some point during the morning, whether in front of a building, on a stoop or the curb. However, the Regulars characterized these times as "rest" periods during which they ate snacks, read the paper, played a game or called an end to their workday. On the other hand, the Temps frequently sat down on the ground, on top of car hoods and trunks, and on the curb throughout most of their time on the corner. The Regulars described their behavior as examples of having a poor work ethic and judged them as being flippant and unserious about finding work.

The potential employers and Regulars often spoke about how the Temps were less serious about finding work or even having the "need" to work. I invited Luis to share his

opinion of Franklin after I noticed a look of dismay on Luis' face when Franklin moved away from him. One hour had passed and Franklin was complaining about the heat and so he took refuge under the canopy of the apartment building. William then called Franklin to join him across the street to check out a new game on his Gameboy.

“Look at him. He doesn't want to work. You can see it. Look at his hands and then look at my hands. You see me, I have my tools. I'm ready. Look at his clothes. They don't know how to do real work. I know this. They don't have to work hard in this country. They'll get tired of waiting and then they'll leave. You'll see.

Public displays of alcohol or drugs were also markers of a poor work ethic that would discourage a potential employer from pulling up in front of that particular person or persons on the corner. In keeping with a social order in which many men felt they had to distinguish themselves as hardworking men from the less serious men to maintain the status of “real day laborers”, visible acts of drinking were banned among particular groups of men on the street corner.

It was also necessary to “look strong” to secure employment. As illustrated in the vignette at the start of the chapter, there were often times when employers chose the stockier men, or those with an apparent strong upper body, over those men who appeared less physically strong. Naturally this situation varied according to the type of work that was in need by the potential employer. This explains why the man had squeezed Javier's upper arm before taking him and Jerome to do some heavy lifting at his hardware store. Given Jerome's stocky build, his strength to perform the task was more noticeable to the employer whereas Javier's ability was visibly less obvious. Thus, many of the men were

concerned about their physical appearance on the street corner. Visible tools, like a drill, hammer, or tool belt were also coveted items for presentation that could lead to more job opportunities. Among the men, tools highlighted a man's expertise or skills, but also his preparedness to work on that day. Thus, the men emphasized that looking able in physical build and being armed with the appropriate tools was a necessary and significant self-presentation in this sector of the labor market.

In addition to visible physical strength and equipment, the presentation in one's attire was also relevant. As the leader of the young, black Latinos, Compadre assumed the responsibility of shaping up his men in hopes that he and they would be hired from the street corner. Part of this task involved the men's appearance, specifically, their clothes. Jeans were commonly worn by the men, though many also wore dark green or beige work pants that reminded me of my father's days working in the shipyards and welding shops in Brooklyn. Sneakers or sturdy construction boots were also typical footwear. Though Compadre assisted the men in finding good work attire and at bargain prices, he went further in advising the men about the manner in which the clothes were worn. Compadre often chided the young men, like Octavio, for wearing pants that fell below his hips. Compadre's opinion was that this style of dress indicated laziness and perhaps even an arrogant demeanor. He felt these were not character traits of a "serious man",

"A man has to look ready for work. No matter how I feel, even if I've been drinking all night, I wake up and clean myself. I shave. I wear clean clothes. They have some stains, but that's from working. They're still clean. Look at them. [Temps] They're boys. They make a little money.

People hire them. [Pointing to his group] These men need to be serious. They can play later.”

Aside from this concern, Compadre strongly felt that one’s style of dress was an image representative of class, social skills, and even cultural values. If his men dressed sloppily or carelessly, he was concerned that the potential employers would hesitate to hire them. Together with the distinctions raised in the previous chapter, language, dress, and physical placement on the corner became critical in presenting legitimate self-presentations as “real day laborers.”

#### Good Men and *Brutos* – Being a Man in Public Space

The public presentation of a masculinity that was acceptable or desirable on the corner also included displays of masculinity that were related to social activities, particularly visible in the treatment of women, and in assumed roles of a father, husband or community leader. Some examples of these gendered displays were visible in the niceties that the men extended to me during my visits. Men like Luis and Ronaldo, a couple of my oldest friends from the corner, always offered me a spot on the stoop whenever I arrived at the street corner. At times, others bought me orange juice or cocoa, which they came to know as part of my breakfast order. In turn, I reciprocated their kind gesture with cups of coffee from the corner deli store.

However, women in the neighborhood did not always welcome or encourage such niceties from the men, a pattern of interaction that became particularly visible as I observed the men’s behavior towards the women who passed them on the street corner. Though it was not often that pedestrians walked past the men on the corner, local residents who lived in the nearby houses or apartment buildings frequently crossed paths

with the men on the street corner. This was often the case for persons, primarily women, who used the laundromat that was just two storefronts past the street corner. Some of the men whistled at the women or remarked on their appearance as they walked past them. For the most part, many of the men remained quiet although they made enthusiastic efforts to make eye contact with the women. It was almost always that the men greeted the women with warm “holas,” “buenas,” and “buen dias”. These events would inevitably lead the men to discuss relationships with women. Santiago informed me almost in a remindful manner,

Don't be upset. We're men. Understand? That's what we do. We're out here all day. It's not different if we were in a bar or at a party. You're not supposed to be here, but you're here. And well, you're going to hear a lot of things you don't want to hear.

“If women pass by, we have to say something to them. We're men. Look, I have noone here. A lot of these men are alone here. They have noone. Don't you miss your husband? Women like to hear that they're pretty. We're not doing anything bad. We're just saying hello. They don't have to talk to us.”

Although Santiago explained his behavior as simply a consequence of “being a man,” his remarks towards and about women also reflected his prior experiences with them. Santiago often spoke poorly about women. On that same day, he explained to me his bad luck with women. Overall, he claimed that he did not trust women.

I have a girlfriend in Mexico, but I know that she's already betrayed me. I want to find a new love.

“They are all the same. Son traicioneras (They are treacherous, traitors). They play with men as if they were toys. I know that not all women are like that, but most of them. Not you. You are not like that. [With one raised eyebrow and a sarcastic tilt of his head] Are you? No, no. It’s just a joke, that’s all.”

Though talk about women in general was common, the men did not always speak about the specific women in their own lives, i.e. a wife or girlfriend. Rather the men considered it inappropriate to include the women in their personal lives in these sorts of conversations since they did not always entail positive images or commentary on male-female relationships. Often the conversations concerned sexuality and/or sexual relations with women. As the only woman present on the street corner with them, my level of comfort sometimes weakened during these times of my fieldwork.

The men whom I met in the early stages of my fieldwork and with whom I developed a close friendship looked down upon those men who allowed themselves to tell me stories about prostitutes they visited or about the women with whom they had affairs. They did not engage in this sort of banter in my presence. As did many of the men who became my friends, Luis told me that,

“These men, they do not respect women, especially the prostitutes. They treat them differently from their wives, daughters, girlfriends, mothers. There is no respect. I am a decent and honest man. These are not topics that should be talked about outside, in public, especially with you. Son brutos ellos. (They are stupid.) Why do you want to know about that from them anyway?”

My confidantes on the corner expressed strong concerns about men who did not respect other women, including me, and who were not upright decent men. Men like Luis, Ronaldo, Jerome, and Javier often warned me not to stand with certain men on the corner whom they felt were only interested in “bothering people”. This is not to say that they, themselves, did not make attempts to speak with women who walked past them. Usually comprised of “buenos dias” or “hola”, their attempts were subtle compared to the more enthusiastic interest of the other men, like Santiago or Ricardo, who often attempted to walk beside a woman and engage her in conversation. Although at these times, men like Luis or Ronaldo did not physically move away from the men who whistled or harassed women, they would not stand alongside them either, partly out of concern over losing jobs. Ronaldo remarked about this concern after witnessing Santiago walk away from a young woman who harshly warned Santiago “if you whistle at me when I come back, I’ll get my fucking boyfriend.” She continued to speak at full volume while walking to and from the deli shop. Though Santiago did not fully understand her words, he knew the level of irritation he provoked by the woman’s cautionary shout. Ronaldo commented,

He bothers women too much. Now she’s yelling at him. If someone comes by and sees a fight, you know what they’re going to do. They’ll leave. Then nobody gets the job. What if the police was here and they saw her yelling at him. He’s a problem. That’s why I don’t talk to him too much. I am an upright and proper man. I like him, but when he starts to act like that, it’s better if I move away. He’s young; he isn’t a man yet. He wants to play, that’s all. I came here for work.

Besides losing work, the men commented on how disrespectful this behavior was, especially if remarks were made towards women who had children with them or were particularly young, i.e. teenagers. By discouraging me from speaking with these particular men on the street corner, men like Luis or Ronaldo, related to me in the manner in which they would treat a sibling, daughter or wife.

“Look, you have to be careful here. *Algunos son malcriados*. (Some of the men are not good people [poorly raised].) If you start to talk about these things, then the men are going to think about other things. They are going to think that you like them. Understand? It’s not good. Your husband should be angry with you. Like I tell my wife, I even tell my daughter, I tell you the same. Don’t be offended, but understand.”

It was also common for the men to offer me advice, particularly about my family life. At the time, my husband was working outside of New York City and even though I informed the men about our frequent visits, they expressed concern about our current separation. They were equally concerned that I had no children and often relayed their own personal stories about family and fatherhood in hopes that I would reconsider having children. However, this same situation was discussed differently by some men, like Santiago or Ricardo, who often boasted to me about the young girls they would mislead in relationships and were certain that their female partners (wife and girlfriend, respectively) were doing the same with men in Mexico. Unlike Luis or Ronaldo’s concern, these men were suspicious of my current separation from my husband. Often,

they joked that we were not truly married and that like them, my husband and I were open to having extra-marital affairs with other persons.<sup>63</sup>

Men like Ronaldo, Jerome, or Luis regarded men like Santiago or Ricardo with some dislike. Although they were all Latino, albeit of different nationalities, experienced common circumstances of their situation in New York City and shared/spoke a common language, they did not instantly create a firm social bond with one another. There was a shared camaraderie among them on the corner, but there was also a social order that defined for the men who they were and who they were not. In this situation, this order was defined by the character traits associated with being a respectful, good, serious and hardworking man. Men with these character traits resonated with images of good fathers, loyal husbands and experienced/wise leaders. These attributes personified the “hardworking man,” “a provider,” even at times a “leader” – the traits that men linked to being a “real day laborer”.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, when men were perceived as disrespectful and lazy and thus bad men, they often resembled a drunk, clown, or even a criminal.

Getting work was visibly only a part of Compadre’s motivation for looking after the group of young men. Compadre felt it was necessary to take care of them (give example), as illustrated in his efforts to de-Americanize the appearance of his men. Like other men at la parada who assumed a similar role, the relationship between Compadre and the young men was that of a mentor and student. Following one of our conversations about the possibility for English language drills for the young men in his group,

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<sup>63</sup> Like Santiago, many of the men initially reacted in disbelief about my marriage because my behavior were uncommon for a woman in their culture, especially for a married woman. They also presumed/assumed that I was dishonest about my marriage in order to dissuade any personal or romantic interest form the men at the site.

<sup>64</sup> See description and significance of the role of “old heads” in Elijah Anderson’s *StreetWise* (1990).

Compadre spoke with the men, on my behalf, inviting and encouraging their participation.

I know English, bueno, not a lot but enough that I can understand you and you can understand me. But if these boys are here, they should try to learn the language. Even just a little bit. Why not? It's not going to hurt them, but it will help them.

Compadre was also a surrogate father figure for many of the young Latinos. He offered them advice about dating, health, situations with family members here and in their home countries, and always his motivation and support. Ties such as these among the men on the street corner fostered opportunities for the assistance many of these men did not seek out in formal arenas, like social services: family counseling, medical services, and most important, a public and social camaraderie.

#### Veiled Masculinity - Being a Man doing Women's Work

This last category of a "veiled masculinity" helped the men characterize their participation in "woman's work" such as housework and child care as "part of being a man" in order to maintain their identity as "real men" and as "good men." This status in the typology challenged the men to find ways to express their masculinity when carrying out activities that they labeled as a "woman's work". Part of being a man meant that he was being responsible if he washed his clothes, cleaned the apartment, and mended his own clothes. Part of being a man meant that he was a leader when he looked out for jobs for his men but also cooked for the other men in his apartment. There was a distinct pride that the men felt when carrying out activities that they typically would not have

done in their home countries. This pride characterized their masculinity and allowed them to uphold their status as “real men” and as “good men”.

Just as the men arrived with their conceptions and experiences of race, ethnicity and national status in the context of their home countries, they also engaged gender according to societal social norms. Consequently, the men experienced a reconstruction of these statuses, including gender that comprised their identity in the context of their present situation in New York City. The dominant narrative about gender and migration follows that traversing transnational space does little to trouble the gendered division of household labor or destabilize the gendered inequalities of a patriarchal state. Studies have argued that men and women remain complicit in the reproduction of patriarchy beyond national borders and in fact, resume existing power relations upon their return home.<sup>65</sup>

Theoretical interest in the reconstruction of patriarchy is valid since I cannot argue that the men escaped from the patriarchal social system of relations that was characteristic of many of the men’s native countries. However, previous studies have left little room the contestation or reconstruction of masculinity. Le Espiritu (2002) showed that while male Filipino migrants who became navy stewards doing feminized work brought back to the family a host of domestic skills, it was also possible that the “stripping of male privilege” experienced by these migrants resulted in their attempts to reclaim their masculinity by denigrating women and children. As Mahler (1999, p.712) notes, “transnational processes may produce new spaces, but this does not mean that actors within these spaces are set completely loose from their social moorings.”

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<sup>65</sup> See Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Guttman, 1996; Roger Rouse, 1991.

This last category in the typology, however, challenges this narrative by illustrating how and why the men have reconstructed the concept and status of masculinity as a result of their situation. Many of the men realized that upholding the male privilege they once experienced in their home countries was unproductive in this new context. The reality of migrant life subjected them to a female role in many of its practices and social interactions so that the men were obliged to adopt several practices that are usually associated with the construction of femininity. At times, the men welcomed opportunities to show me how they succeeded in taking care of tasks and responsibilities traditionally relegated to the women in their lives and how this was an integral aspect of their masculine status. It is important to understand gender identity, in this case, masculinity as a production and therefore an exploration of being a man on the corner should address “what men say and do to be men [ser hombre], and not simply what men say and do.”<sup>66</sup>

On a rainy afternoon that followed a morning of gusty winds, Santiago took cover in the nearby Chinese restaurant. Luis and I followed him in and sat at the table closest to the window. Mr. Zhao didn't mind that we sat down, even if we hadn't planned on buying food. He didn't have many customers and at times, he's been kind in letting a small group of day laborers find shelter in his restaurant from the cold, rain or heat. As always, we bought some food, usually egg rolls. Before ordering, I ran outside to meet Jerome to set up an appointment for an interview. Just a few moments later, I noticed Santiago walked out of the restaurant. His walk was hurried though no cars had pulled

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<sup>66</sup> See Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.17.

over to the curb and he had already called an end to his workday. Having set up the appointment, I returned to find Luis eating alone.

What happened?

(With a huff) Santiago. He has to learn. I'm not his mother.

What do you mean? What happened?

He eats all the time and spends all his money. You see this [pointing to a container of fried rice]? I bought this for him, not for me. All I want him to do is his laundry before he spends all his money and then he has nothing. So he left.

To do his laundry?

I hope so, but I don't think so. There's nothing wrong with doing laundry.

I have to do it here. Who's going to do it for me? I'm not going to do his laundry. Let him meet some woman and then she can take care of him.

Here, you have to be a man. To survive here, you have to be a man and do everything, no matter what it is. I make sacrifices for my family. He's young, you know? I treat him like my son. He has to learn.

Luis, Compadre, and others served as experienced guides in the community and resembled Elijah Anderson's "old heads," who represented a socializing agent in the absence of family relationships, and instructed young men about values such as, "commitment to honesty, hard work, independence, and family values." (1990, p. 70). Moreover, the men accepted the responsibility of carrying out activities such as laundry, cleaning, cooking as compulsory work. For example, some of the men who lived near the worksite took advantage of the nearby laundromat to wash their clothes while also

looking for work. It was during these times that the men took pride in telling me about how, aside from having little choice but to launder one's own clothes, they performed these and other tasks much better than their wives or girlfriends in their home countries.

Jerome was particularly proud of the meals he prepared and invited me over to his apartment to share a meal with his brother, sister-in-law and nephew. He prepared a mole sauce over grilled chicken that he served with flour tortillas on the side.

My food is authentic. Did you ever eat Mexican food before? Not Taco Bell. Real Mexican food? You will like it, I know. I cook real food.

Do you cook at home a lot?

No Mariana cooks [sister-in-law]. But I cook better than she does and I'm a man. That's embarrassing, no? On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, she sleeps in her boss's house to take care of their baby. Most of the time, we go out, but sometimes I cook. Noone taught me how to cook. I'm good, no?

What about in Mexico? Did you cook there?

[With a giddy laugh] No, no, no. My mother cooked for everybody. But now that I'm here, I have to cook sometimes. I like it. There is no shame in doing any kind of work in order to survive. It doesn't matter. [I grab another tortilla.] If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it.

Compadre explained to me that a lot of the men found pride in their ability to be a man and a woman.<sup>67</sup> It was a strength, not a flaw or weakness. They gloated about their

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<sup>67</sup> I draw on Judith Butler's concept of "discontinuities" in gender acts in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990, p.141). Butler explores how the polarity of male and female is "undermined" in the presence of unexpected performances or "occasional discontinuities" of gender roles.

abilities and were impressed with how well they carried out specific tasks that were considered “women’s work”.

“He can be a man and a woman. You understand. Here, he has no choice unless he has his wife with him. If he doesn’t, he has no choice. He’s a man because he does a woman’s work. Do you understand? He’s a man because he taking care of himself. He is responsible, a decent man. Even if it isn’t for himself, he will clean, cook, anything. That doesn’t mean he isn’t a man. He is a man. He is doing what he has to do so that he can provide for his family at home. He can be proud of that.”

As a result of migration, notions of appropriate gender roles rapidly shifted. Transnational movement and globalization is resulting in a range of new gendered subjectivities. The above highlights a creative strategy through which men asserted themselves, as well as a newly defined masculinity. This redefinition of masculinity was articulated by Compadre in his instructions to the younger men about their dress and their activities. In the absence of other mentors or leaders in the community, Compadre served as a leader among the group of young men and instructed them. He educated them about race, ethnicity and in this situation, gender.

This observation was crucial in the understanding of the men’s development of self-concept. As the men illustrated in their management of race and ethnic identity, gender was also never static. Since the men recognized both the familiar binary of male/female identity and also the unexpected performance of male/female, the subjectivity of masculinity and femininity constantly evolved and shifted. It is likely that

understandings of masculinity and femininity will continue to change as long as men and women continue to participate in the ongoing negotiation of “doing gender.”

Previous research illustrates how masculinity is both reasserted and compromised because of migration between other countries, i.e. Mexico and the United States.<sup>68</sup> However, fieldwork at *la parada* provided a unique vantage point to observe gender instruction in the career and also social life of the male day laborer. In addition to the tools, i.e. perceived race or ethnic identity, which employers used to determine who was a desirable worker, this chapter explores how gender was also significant in the work experience, specifically in the decisive ways the men “worked” masculinity on the corner, in their workplace. Just as the men were aware of the significance of their perceived racial, ethnic and national identity, they were cognizant of the implications of gender presentation.

First, gender displays at the workplace helped to rank order the men as desirable or undesirable workers on the street corner to mark the “hardworking man.” Second, their conduct of masculinity distinguished the good and decent men who were the “real day laborers” from the dishonest men who were *brutos*. Lastly, the men challenged their masculine identities by taking on duties that were typically carried out by the women in their lives. Their admissions to me masked the feminine associations with activities, like housework, to un“veil” their masculine character. This verbal dress-up was illustrated in the pride and satisfaction in their accomplishments. While the daily negotiation of masculinity was a poignant example of the men’s efforts to improve their hiring opportunities, their self-management of masculinity was yet another component that

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<sup>68</sup> See Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1991; Romero, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ortiz, 1997 for discussions about the temporary redefinition of masculine and feminine roles in U.S. society. However, patriarchal relations resume among migrant males who return home.

shaped the stratification among the men in the workplace - on the corner. The efforts of men like Luis, Javier and Compadre in the management and presentation of *ser hombre*/being a man illustrated how day laborers actively “worked” on the corner to attain the status of “good and hardworking man” and a “real day laborer”.

## **Part Four: Finding Community and Order in a Place on the Corner**

At 6:30a.m. on a Monday morning, Ronaldo is the first to arrive. He buys a cup of coffee, a newspaper copy of Hoy, and sits down to wait for the others. As the minutes pass, more men show up and follow Ronaldo's lead or stand almost single-file nearby. Handshakes and nods are exchanged, though most remain silent. Early mornings are quiet at *la parada* until someone breaks the calm. Señor Delgado is the likely man to do so with a comical report of last Saturday's match of pelota against a team of Jamaican men in East New York. Today, Hector casually listens, but is distracted by Jerome's conversation. Jerome's family in Mexico City has troubling news for him concerning his mother's health in addition to the usual report of the necessary payments for their household needs. Despite the upsetting news, Jerome's usual grin is slightly creviced allowing a smile to creep out since even he cannot ignore Señor Delgado's loud and witty banter. Meanwhile, sliding into the front seat of a station wagon, Gerry already has an early start to the workday by joining four others to repair the roof of a building. By 7:30am, most men have arrived. They stand on the corner and wait for the "beep-beep" of the horn from the first car that drives by that day...

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There is little research on the social practices and spaces where day laborers seek employment. Like the interaction between Ronaldo, Hector and Senor Delgado, there were less obvious functions and purposes for the street corner that were secondary to finding work. The findings in this chapter examine the social practices that went beyond exchanges of labor. Through a study of the social practices among the men at the workplace - *la parada* - this chapter explores the social meaning of place in the

immigrant experience. This research addresses recent Latino immigration in studies of identity, space and place by examining the economic and social incorporation of day laborers in New York City. My research answered the following questions: 1. What was the nature of this public space and how does it shape the social action occurring in this site? 2. How and why did the men negotiate the workplace and shape their own experience, as it related to employment, and also in cultivating a social life? 3. What else did it mean to “do the corner”? What were the unexplored purposes of the corner that were secondary to finding work?

### Chapter 5: *A la parada*

The corner was a space through which this community experienced both economic and cultural development. Any corner of *la parada* was an idea of “place” that played an effective role strengthening the life of this community. It is important to understand the role public spaces play in the ecology of a community, that is to say, the role of *la parada* as it affects and is affected by community life among the day laborers.

As illustrated in previous chapters, these men are active participants in shaping their work and social experiences. While there were institutional and systemic factors that shaped the lives and experiences of these men in the United States, they have also been able to shape their own circumstances and ease some of the limitations of their situation. The diverse purposes and functions of the street corner illustrate how the men contributed to constructing their own reality and social meanings through their daily activities.<sup>69</sup> While the provision of the space on the street corner shaped the men’s activities, they, in turn, also influenced their daily experiences in the utilization of this “found space.”<sup>70</sup> By creating alternative purposes for the corner, these men challenged its legitimate uses and constructed a meaningful place and community in the “new” society.

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the negotiation of this space and the significance of places like *la parada* in the immigrant experience. To do this, I will explore the men’s reasons for continuing to utilize *la parada* as a workplace after a

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<sup>69</sup> Much like how Setha Low “spatialized culture” in *On the Plaza* (2000), this essay also attempts to “spatialize” interacting “social relations and processes in a social space (pgs.36-37, 127-130).” In her analyses of Costa Rican plazas, Low demonstrates how distinctions in use of the plaza helped to define social groups and more important construct a meaningful reality for its users. Thus, I found similar findings existed at *la parada*.

<sup>70</sup> Carr, Stephen, Mark Francis, Leanne Rivlin, and Andrew M. Stone. *Public Space*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.) “Found spaces” are places for which people have created alternative uses that are different from the original formal design and purpose.

formal site, a work center, opened in Brooklyn one year following the start of my field research. *La parada* was their office, but it was also the tavern or club where they drank and chatted with friends. More than a geographical space in the urban landscape that was reconstructed as a hiring site or as a makeshift club to pass the time, *la parada* provided the men with a space where they discovered camaraderie and renewed a sense of community and membership. Beyond a workplace, the men considered the less visible purposes served by *la parada* valuable and necessary for carving out a meaningful life in New York. The men reclaimed a sense of belonging and regained a social status through their social interactions at *la parada*, where the men cultivated a social life satisfying the social needs that, at many times, outweighed their economic needs.

#### Finding Order in A Place of Our Own

A poignant example of the implications of spaces like *la parada* for the social incorporation of these men was illustrated in the days that followed the opening of a formal work center at Gravesend Bay in Brooklyn. The impetus for the creation of the center was the result from an intensifying conflict among Latino day laborers, local residents and businesses due to an increasing day laborer presence at a large informal site that spanned across a main avenue of several intersections. The Latin American Workers Project and other community advocacy groups, like the New Utrecht Reformed Church, worked with State Senator Vincent Gentile to help set up the site.<sup>71</sup> Following talks

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<sup>71</sup> Founded in 1997, the Latin American Workers Project's objective is to improve working conditions and secure the civil rights of laborers, particularly low-wage Latino workers. Council Member Vincent Gentile was the bill's prime sponsor during his tenure as State Senator. Also, the L.A.W.P. and The Women's Day Laborer Committee jointly operate a second job center in Williamsburgh, Brooklyn. This job center provides a space where Latina, Eastern European and West Indian women look for day labor jobs in domestic services, including child care and house cleaning.

with all parties, including local residents and day laborers at community board meetings, the formal hiring center opened in March 2002 in South Brooklyn.

While many of the men from the informal site utilized the formal hiring center, some men were reluctant to look for work there. Many of these men preferred to continue seeking work opportunities on street corners and thus traveled to other informal sites in the city as opposed to utilizing the formal hiring center. As a result, my site became one of the alternative workspaces for these men causing an increase in day laborers and expansion in workspace. This is not to say that the men did not see the benefits and resources offered by formal hiring centers which included an organized hiring process and improved work experience. For instance, they would have shelter from all types of abuse from harassment, fatigue, and weather. Furthermore, the men could report work-related problems to the staff, mainly L.A.W.P. members, who attempted to resolve disputes, including injuries and lack of payment from employers. Consequently, problem employers would be discouraged from abusing the resources found at the center. However, the men rationalized their decision to continue seeking work opportunities at street-corner markets in their explanation for their social attachment to places like *la parada*. This led me to further examine the workspace and the men's attachment to this place that was visible in the varied activities that took place on the corner and in their continued use of the space. The details that follow focus on concerns about rules, wages, law enforcement and community membership.

The men's reservations about the formal hiring center included the loss of control over the conditions of their work situation, particularly the rules at the center that would regulate their actions in the hiring process. Other concerns included set wages,

vulnerability to legal authorities or law enforcement, and the center's distant location from home. Since the hiring center matched workers with employers, the men felt they had less input in accepting or declining particular job tasks or working for specific employers. The men were also discouraged by the center's number system that ordered them on a first-come, first-served basis in order to receive jobs. This pressured men to show up earlier to the hiring center than the time when they would usually arrive at *la parada*. For example, men arrived at *la parada* as early as 6:30am, but many also showed up at 8:30am or 9:00am feeling confident that they could still find work from the many persons who continued to stop by. However, men felt pressure to arrive at 6:30am or earlier at the formal hiring center just to file in line to receive a high number in the hiring queue. This was hard for the men who did not live near the center which was located at the southern tip of Brooklyn since this would involve a long commute. Although all of the men appreciated the center's intention to bring order and decency to their situation, many did not find the numbering system as an ideal alternative. Lastly, they felt that the center would limit the pool of potential employers since hiring from informal sites like *la parada* was convenient, especially given the hiring center's remote location. Luis' outlook best described the general opinion.

“Who's going to go to there? Yes, some people will go, I know. But there are so many places like this one [FGC]. Why will you drive all the way over there when you know that there are men looking for work right across the street? Understand? They know that we're here. If I'm not here tomorrow, someone else will be.”

The men were also suspicious about the pay they would earn as recruitments from the Center. They were confident that they could earn the same amount and perhaps even more in continuing to look for work on the street corner. Many of these men had already left work in the general economy, i.e. the hotel and restaurant industry, custodial services, fruit and vegetable grocers, and in construction, to look for work at informal street-corner sites. The majority of the men, particularly those men who were early in their occupation as day laborers (one – three years) were reluctant to return to a more formal labor system.

Many of the men realized that while they risked earning less or no money looking for work day to day on the street corner, they could earn the minimum wage and often much more when they were hired from the street corner, sometimes as much as \$80-100 for one day's work (8-10hrs). To encourage the opportunity for improved earnings from work in the formal economy, the men agreed on a minimum wage rate among themselves and this varied little from group to group. The hourly rate was \$10-12 and the daily wage ranged from \$85-120, depending on type and duration of work. As a result they had safeguarded themselves and bargaining down the pay scale would occur less frequently. Thus, the men's chances of making a decent pay for a day's work would not be weakened.

Men's social ties to a particular place sometimes outweighed the potential opportunities for finding work at the formal hiring center and elsewhere (Gill, 2001). Although there would be opportunities for the men to develop social ties at the formal hiring center, the men did not want to break away from the established relationships and renewed status they found at *la parada*. Therefore, the men did not immediately recognize places like the hiring center as favorable alternatives given their attachment to

*la parada*. *La parada* became a familiar place where the men wanted to spend time while looking for work opportunities.

Men continued to come to *la parada* even when they lived far away or had options to look for work on street corners closer to home. Although the initial settlement for the majority of these men was localized in a particular neighborhood and often where social ties with others were bonds formed through a common language, ethnicity and experience, the men could not solely rely upon a localized support system, i.e. family or neighborhood. Moreover, it was often that friends and relatives were also struggling and thus unable to assist the men past the initial support provided in the early stages of arrival. Thus, usually following one year and sometimes less, some of the men moved elsewhere in Brooklyn or to other parts of New York City. However, their change in residence did not always affect a chance in the workplace. While the majority of the men lived near the worksite, there were a significant number of men who traveled to this site from other neighborhoods. While many of these neighborhoods also had street-corner markets, the men continued to utilize *la parada* as their workplace. Consequently, this chapter illustrates the underlying reasons for the men's continued visits to this worksite that often went beyond their economic needs. The street corner was a spatial configuration that mirrored the social *and* economic dynamics that were characteristic of life among recent immigrants in New York City.

For example, when Rubén first arrived in New York City, he lived near *la parada*. Rubén was one of the older men on the corner who migrated from Cuba to New York City eleven years ago and had been working as a day laborer for five years. Rubén originally lived within walking distance of *la parada*, but now lives in Queens. Though

he could look for work on one of the many street-corner sites throughout neighborhoods in Queens, he regularly took the long 45 minute subway ride to *la parada*. Rubén told me that, “The faces of the men on these corners are familiar. Some of them are my very good friends. We understand each other.” Like Rubén, there were many others who also commuted by bus or subway to *la parada*. While they chose to make the commute to *la parada*, they did not want to extend their commute to the formal hiring center. Though Rubén acknowledged that he could meet people at the center, both day laborers and community members who could offer assistance, like legal and medical services, he also explained that finding work at the center would “feel more like a job” than his experience at *la parada*, partly because of the center’s rules and the numbers hiring system. Membership and community were key reasons why Rubén and the other men chose to look for work at places like *la parada* instead of the formal hiring center.

The men saw other benefits in looking for work from the street corner. For instance, the men placed a significant value in the right to accept, but also decline work opportunities, especially from men who had the reputation of being dishonest, i.e. withholding or denying payment. They did not have this choice at the formal hiring center since the staff matched men with specific jobs. Though the men often sought after any potential opportunity for work, they also appreciated the option of declining work if they felt ill or just did not want to do a particular task. For instance, most of the men found demolition work as one of the more insufferable jobs; however disliked, they rarely turned down these jobs since the pay was generally very good.

Aside from work, finding opportunities for recreation was another resource men found at *la parada*. Men like Ronaldo who already had a job working twelve-hour shifts

six days a week, arrived on the corner on his only day off for two reasons. He wanted to find work to supplement the pay from his other job, but he also wanted to meet his friends and enjoy leisure activities, specifically play soccer. Warm sunny days often encouraged Ronaldo to arrive at the corner with a soccer ball in hand with hopes of coercing some his friends to join him in a match of fútbol. I asked Ronaldo about his visits to the corner after he had declined an offer to paint classrooms in a public elementary school.

“I’m not lazy, sabes? Life is hard here. I work practically every day. But in order to survive, I have my soccer ball. That’s why I come here. Sometimes I need to find work. Today, I want to enjoy myself, so that I can forget my problems here, my problems at home. I need to practice, too. I don’t want to waste the training I had at home. I’m bothering them today. Let’s go play. You just can’t work here, not all the time. I’ll die, I won’t make it here.”

When possible, men like Ronaldo took advantage of free days and the space at *la parada* to recruit players for recreation and also other social activities.<sup>72</sup> For instance, on most Sundays, many of the men would meet at the corner for an early breakfast before attending Mass at the local church. Others gathered on the corner before traveling to bars or restaurants in the neighborhood or to view sporting events in other boroughs like Queens. Sports, church meetings, and local events helped organize social ties among the men and develop networks that materialized a community (Massey et al. 1987; Smith, 1996).

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<sup>72</sup> I assigned the label, “free day,” to days when the men decided that they would not look for work. However, they still spent part of their “free day” on the corner since they desired the social atmosphere.

*La parada* was also a public place where the men could frequent with relatively little harassment from the residential community or local law enforcement. There were occasional complaints about the men's behaviors, mostly from residents in nearby housing and particularly during the summers when larger numbers of men gathered at *la parada*. However, the local police generally did not hassle the workers, though they frequently patrolled the area. Typically, their interactions involved asking the men some questions and suggesting that they move on or "spread out". Jerome shared with me his thoughts.

They are doing their jobs, I suppose, and just tell us to go. But that's it, really... They have never asked me [for papers]. I don't think they really ask the others either. Sometimes, they [the workers] walk away because they don't have any papers. They worry. Me, too, sometimes. But they just walk around the block and by the time they come back, the police are gone. It isn't a problem.

Thus the men felt they did not have to feel anxious about going to *la parada*. This level of comfort discouraged the men from utilizing the formal hiring center out of concern that they would be more vulnerable to legal authorities there. A common sentiment among the men was that they felt they belonged at *la parada*. Gerry, whom I met during his first year living in New York and had been a day laborer for a little over two months, agreed that there was a demand for the men at *la parada*:

"So many people come here for anything. Sometimes you work hard – they want a new kitchen or bathroom but sometimes it's just to move boxes. You know that Americans are very lazy. And there are a lot of

them here. (Laughing first, he then smiles at me.) They need us, no? We do what they don't want to do...Sometimes I only work half a day, that's it. I earn my money and then I go home or to the park...Look at how many came today..."

Gerry's opinion illustrates how these men utilized *la parada* as their legitimate workplace. The men were not romanticizing *la parada* as an ideal workplace situation. They recognized that the formal hiring center was a step in the right direction, but there was mistrust about the conditions at the center that left them hesitant about leaving their makeshift office at *la parada*. As a social establishment that was lacking in their new lives in New York, *la parada* embodied both figuratively and materially a social life in a city from which at times they felt excluded. Each man felt he was somebody on this corner and a member of a society, again.

#### Finding Community in a Place of Our Own

As in all field research, the fieldworker appreciates opportunities for reciprocity towards the persons who have been generous with their time and efforts in the project. The desire to learn some basic translations in conversational English language was a typical request.<sup>73</sup> Many of the men expressed the desire and determination to learn English, if circumstances were favorable. Many had already attempted to take some measures to do so, i.e. enroll in English language courses. But these same men also told me with disappointment of their inability to continue because of their work schedule, proximity to home, or having insufficient money to pay for the course. Others had

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<sup>73</sup> Much like what Cordelia Reimers found in her analysis of earnings across different ethnic and racial groups, a lack of English proficiency was a significant handicap in immigrant participation in the labor market (Borjas and Tienda, 1985). The social issue of fluency in English and its relationship to acquiring employment and accessing resources is supported in sociological research especially regarding the topic of bilingual education.

suggested that they need not bother since it was a waste of time to enroll, when from one day to the next they could not be sure that they would be able to attend. Conflicts in work schedule as well as limited cash funds were the reasons given to explain their inability to enroll in a class from start to finish.

I frequently acknowledged that I was not a real substitute for a formal teacher since my academic training was not in language instruction. I encouraged the men to seek formal assistance and informed them about opportunities at local schools, though I welcomed the opportunity to assist them with simple and quick translations. In turn, the men instructed me in Spanish, specifically with colloquial expressions that were unfamiliar to me. During these occasions the men discussed and explained to me about the variations in Spanish language among the distinct groups, i.e. Mexicans, Ecuadorans, and Colombians.

Aside from simple translations, it was during these conversations that the men welcomed me into a more intimate world involving relationships, hardships, and dreams. *La parada* provided a social arena where the men expressed their concerns, needs, aspirations and escaped from the daily routine of day labor on the street corner. The separation from one's own family, friends and country is an emotional and tormenting situation. Many of the men shared similar experiences, but were uncomfortable and suspicious about sharing these concerns with strangers, given their precarious situation. As a result, the men internalized their distress which contributed to the isolation they experienced in the "new society". At *la parada*, they were grateful to have the opportunity to socialize with peers who were undergoing similar dilemmas and frustrations.

While many of the men inquired about English words that would assist them in their work situation, they understood commonly used words and phrases for typical jobs including, roofing, demolition, plumbing, etc. and were able to accept or reject a job, mostly based on the pay that was offered in the initial stage of the hiring process. However, the men brought up concerns and complained that they were sometimes misunderstood and mistreated in typical daily interactions with neighbors, storeowners and possible new acquaintances. An example involved an incident when Octavio had offered to assist a woman carrying several bags and who was attempting to “beat the light” in crossing the street. His offer was quickly and rudely rejected since he could not communicate that he simply wished to assist her and not cause her any harm.

Consequently, much of our conversations involved quick and simple translations of phrases the men found helpful with managing exchanges and tasks in their everyday lives, like introductory phrases (my name is, what is your name, where do you come from, etc.), making purchases, requesting services (post office, hospital, church) and familial terms (mother, father, sister, etc.). Since many of the men also frequented shops, restaurants, and in general, areas where persons were of Latino ethnicity and presumably Spanish-speaking, they often stated that they were relieved in not having an urgent need to learn the English language.<sup>74</sup>

A word about the nature of these occasions which I labeled “lessons” in my fieldnotes.

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<sup>74</sup> The neighborhood surrounding the worksite has experienced an increase in the Latino residential population, along with increases among Chinese and Middle Eastern residents, too. Since one could frequent businesses that catered to a Spanish-speaking clientele, the necessity to learn English was offset to some extent. According to the 2000 population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, Latinos comprised 19.8% of the residential population in Brooklyn (population increase of 7.2% in 1990) while in New York State, Latinos comprised 15.1% of the total population (population increase of 5.5% from 1990).

The occasions for learning English on the corner did not replicate a real classroom. The casual nature of the requests for translations of words and phrases were unavoidable given their interest in improving their chances for finding work. These occasions that only I labeled as “lessons” in my fieldnotes were mainly impromptu Q&A sessions that usually occurred at the end of the workday. Unlike a real classroom, there was no concern for tuition payment and no anxiety over having formal documents or personal information like a home address for enrolment. The “lessons” were happenstance occurrences throughout our time together on the corner. Consequently the casual nature of our conversations allowed flexibility for any activity and never posed conflicts with their work schedule, which was their primary concern.

It was not unusual that questions about the English language were brought up in conversations involving small groups on the corner. However, men were free to join or leave these types of meetings at any time, especially to inquire about a job or just to go home.<sup>75</sup> Learning the language was a frustrating experience for many of them. Enrolling in classes was difficult since many of the men feared acknowledging their undocumented status. Also, they could not guarantee that they could attend classes on a regular basis. Since they did not control the end of the workday, employers frequently allowed the men to leave at a time usually past the initial estimated hour. Since making money was their primary objective, if given a choice, the men were likely to consider working late into the evenings and thus they anticipated missing many class meetings. Moreover many expressed that they would be too exhausted to attend school and learn a new language after long days of strenuous work. Ronaldo explained how his particular schedule discouraged him from taking night classes at a local school.

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<sup>75</sup> Though irregular, meetings were sometimes scheduled in advance and held over the weekend.

There are two elementary schools that offer English classes...But, I work until eight every night and I think that's when the class starts. I would be late every night. It's not worth time or spending money...Also, the school is not so close. When I finish working, I'm so tired and I don't want to walk or take the bus just to take classes...I want to learn and I watch some television, the news. Do you have some books? I can try to study them, if I'm not so tired.

Others shared the same concerns about taking classes. Many also could not manage the expense when they needed to send money to their families in their native countries and cover their personal expenses in New York City. Moreover, it was reasonable that the men would also use any money that remained for their own personal use, i.e. movies, clubs, restaurants.

Though translations were rewarding opportunities for the men and me, the significance of these moments in our conversations involved the intimacy of the men's daily lives. For instance, the men highlighted the difficulties faced by day laborers during these occasions. Striking moments in our conversations dealt with the hardships of work itself. During one group meeting, I was asked to teach phrases that described health or physical condition. I began teaching phrases like, "I have a headache" or "I have a stomach ache." Manuel asked me to say "I burned my leg." After telling him the English words, I asked him, only in Spanish this time, if he had burned his leg. Manuel proceeded to lift his right pant leg and revealed an unsightly area of scarred skin that was evidence of a burn he suffered some time ago. Manuel went on to describe how he had burned himself in a welding factory where he worked prior to looking for work as a day

laborer on street corners. He told us that he never received workers' compensation or the proper medical care for the burn because the employers explained to him that because of his part-time work status, non-union membership, and undocumented status, they were not legally obligated to offer him assistance. This situation was a typical account illustrating the various ways employers took advantage of the men's vulnerable situation, specifically their undocumented status and need for employment. Manuel's account was vivid, as if he relived that horrible day. He confided to us how he cried out of fear that he would lose his leg because of the severity of the burn. Like Manuel's ordeal, there were many emotionally stirring sessions that involved conversations about hardships, but also future aspirations, family, and the life the men fondly romanticized in their native countries. *La parada* was a place that fostered camaraderie among the men and encouraged the men and me to learn more about ourselves and from each other.

...It's noon and the men are starting to leave *la parada*. As I look around, I see Jerome exiting the van that picked up him, Luis and another man earlier this morning. In an effort to help out Jerome, Luis assertively convinced the employer that he needed to hire a third man, specifically Jerome, for the paint and tiling job. Unlike this morning when Jerome's concerns weighed heavy on his mind, his slouched frame now walks upright towards me and he is grinning. Grateful to his friend, he taps Luis on the back and in an assured tone he tells me, "This will be a good week. I need the money." He feels hopeful that he can send money home to his family and help cover the expense of his mother's healthcare. Hector begins to ask if I can help his friend fill out forms for her son's elementary school. Meanwhile, a young man hollers over the passing local city bus and waves us over. We cross the street and join a group of three Mexican men eating

food from the local Chinese restaurant. As I eat an egg roll, the men begin to play a game of quarters. Hector joins them and tells me that we can visit his friend tomorrow.

Policymakers and scholars have shown concern in learning about how the newly arrived incorporate socially and economically. Recent immigrants may have limited ties to an effective network of social connections in the United States, while their access to formal employment and assistance from the government may also be lacking. As is often the case, the men's families live outside of the United States and thus, their social situation has implications felt beyond the boundaries of New York City. While their families benefit from the remittances sent from abroad, they often take on additional responsibilities left behind and sadly deal with the absence of a husband, father or son. However, the men also share this burden. The men valued the status they once held within these social groups, either as a husband, father or leader of the community. The disheartening separation from family, friends and town left many of the men feeling anonymous in a place where they often felt they did not belong or were unwelcome. Though their struggle in the new society was economic, it was also a social endeavor to find a healthier social life in the new society. Their experiences and social practices on the street corner show how they cultivated this social life, managed loneliness, and renewed a sense of membership and belonging in a space that became *la parada*, the place where they constructed the impression of a community.<sup>76</sup>

While Latino communities are an increasing presence in New York, the men at *la parada* still found themselves without a central community. This chapter shows how the men cultivated a social life on a street corner as they struggled to locate their place in New York. Aside from a workplace, *la parada* offered them a social life where men

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<sup>76</sup> See Whyte, 1955; Anderson, 1978; Liebow, 1967; Duneier, 2000.

sought assistance from one another and from those who visited them at the site, including me. The social practices at *la parada* characterized a men's camaraderie that was produced and sustained by the corner (Whyte, 1955; Liebow, 1967; Anderson, 1978; Duneier, 2000) and uncovered the discrete meanings overlooked in this daily and largely stigmatized public practice.

Public spaces are connected to surrounding communities and are spaces in which people will meet others. The success of any public space is achieved through the interaction of various dynamics. Public space is shared and with this understanding, users recognize that there is a freedom of access and rights to the space. These include fulfilling needs of the community, extending and/or claiming rights to the space and creating a meaningful connection for its users. A space's community of users can belong to diverse populations with diverse interests competing for use of the space. The meaning is captured in its use and this can often come into conflict when there is a diverse community of users served by the place. How was the space at *la parada* utilized?

*La parada* was arguably a place that exhibited expressions of public life and was also a space which can be said to have embodied a "world of strangers."<sup>77</sup> It was infrequent that the men who utilized this space engaged other users in their activities. Aside from the labor exchanges, when the men engaged others, it was only through a passive engagement of observation rather than a more active engagement of recreation,

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<sup>77</sup> In Lofland's article on the city as a "world of strangers," Lofland argues that relationships involved in a sort of myth about the private and public life are idealized at the expense of the relationships that have come to be characteristic of the public realm in city life.

for example.<sup>78</sup> Rather the space of *la parada* was instrumental and situational in providing space through which others perhaps traveled from one neighborhood to another. However, these corners were also the spaces that served a more meaningful social ends among the men.

Studying the makeup of this space and its uses as it relates to the users who were considered “guests” was important because it distinguished the approved appropriator of the space as well as the approved activities for utilization of that space.<sup>79</sup> The men who utilized *la parada* intended to find work from these corners. The space at *la parada* became their workplace. This activity already challenged the social norms of the surrounding neighbors regarding formal spaces used for labor activities. Aside from labor exchanges, the space at *la parada* was expressive of culture among the men since it was in this place where the men found social camaraderie and overcame the loss of their status in the community as husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, etc in their home countries.

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Sennett wrote about a change in public behavior in nineteenth century Paris and London which prescribed a passive sort of participation in public life. Observation was the manner in which strangers came to know one another such that the discourse in knowledge was fundamentally altered. The discourse was one of silence rather than social.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Suzuki argued that it was significant to look at the struggle of design and use of space for representations of society through social interactions in different social activities. Suzuki’s study of walking as a cultural attribute in Germany’s railroad stations revealed cultural tensions among the German and Turkish persons utilizing the space.

## Chapter 6: A Post-9/11 Interlude

Staring through the clear glass panes of the laundromat storefront, the men and I could see the news televised on the mounted television. As a paying customer, I could walk inside and listen to the reports after which I returned to the men and shared any new updates or additional information. Another poignant example was the day that the men and I learned of the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Belle Harbor, Queens. We were together this time and in hectic fashion, I stepped in and out of the laundromat with reports. Calming my chaotic hop, the employee allowed me to leave the door so that I conversed with the group who stood nearby.

Like the case study of the formal work center in the previous chapter, the aftermath following the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> also illustrated the social problems the men faced in their efforts to find order and community in their everyday lives. The repercussions of September 11<sup>th</sup> had profound impacts in New York City and the extent of the ramifications varied, though acutely experienced by the poorest and most marginal communities. There were an unsubstantiated number of immigrants, many of whom were undocumented persons, who worked at low wage jobs in the World Trade Center.<sup>80</sup> A representative from, *Asociación Tepeyac*, an advocacy group in touch with the families of many missing persons who were undocumented, provided me with the estimate that close to one hundred families had come forward soon after September 11<sup>th</sup>, looking for assistance, financial and otherwise. Consequently, it was difficult for their families to apply for and receive assistance. And it was likely that many of these

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<sup>80</sup> The numbers quoted were stated in a personal communication with a staff member from *Asociación Tepeyac*. This conversation occurred after a conference held at the CUNY Graduate Center on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002 that addressed the mobilization of the Mexican population in New York City. From these families who had come forward, sixty-six persons who had been reported missing were still undeclared, thirty of whom were from Mexico.

families had either lost a primary wage earner or were without an income as a result of the loss of their workplace. This was especially troubling in situations where the families were living outside of the U.S. As this was often the case, the implications were felt beyond the boundaries of New York City.

Although this particular group of men was not among the considerable many who suffered the immediate consequences of September 11<sup>th</sup>, this chapter investigates the indirect effects of 9/11 on this particular population. September 11 occurred during my fieldwork and its implications reflect the findings of the previous chapter – that the greater impact and concerns for these men were far-reaching and did not necessarily involve economic ones. There were personal concerns involving, to name a few, their own safety, the welfare of their family, and at times an anxious sense of permanence in a country to which many of them felt a sense of detachment. These issues were prominent in their statements in the days and months following September 11<sup>th</sup>. As expected, this sentiment later subsided in the way of the general concerns that precipitated their initial migration to the United States. The reasons behind their initial motivations and goals in living and working in New York City had resumed priority.

How had their lives been affected, if at all, by September 11<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing consequences? Did the men reconsider building a life for themselves and their families in the United States? How did they feel about family members migrating to New York City? What were their feelings about living in New York City? One topic of conversation was the men's opinions and feelings about September 11th and whether it had any direct effect on their lives. In the following summer, Octavio felt strongly that

he would remain in New York so long as he was able to have a steady job or make money as a day laborer.

I love this country.

Even now?

Yes.

You're not scared about living in NYC?

Why?

Well, with the chance for another terrorist attack?

Oh that. No. That doesn't bother me. I don't think about that.

You weren't scared when it first happened?

Yes, I was. Very scared. But not now. Nothing has happened since. I don't think about it. Where I come from [Colombia], there's war everyday. You don't know what's going to happen. You know what happens down there?

I'm not scared to be here.

How about your mother?

Yes, she's scared about it, but what is she going to do. You know this country went down. Everything was fine. Everyone wanted to come here.

But then that happened and everything went down. The economy.

Everything. Now they're going crazy with the security and everything.

They are even bothering us here. For what. Everything's changed now.

This country isn't the same.

Octavio's comments highlighted many of the concerns that the men expressed in subsequent visits. The prevailing outlook was that these men and others had come to the United States and would continue to come to New York City for economic reasons.

Many of the participants stated that they had never returned to their home countries. This was especially true for the recent arrivals like Santiago. He, like Daniel, a twenty-two year old Ecuadorian, whose *fútbol* stories last summer commanded the interest in most of our conversations, felt that a return trip was not a visit, but instead a one-way ticket to stay.

Once I return, I won't come back and so I'll stay for as long as I can or until someone tells me to go. I came a long way, from very far, to get here. Go back? For what? It's not bad here. I make my money. I have some friends. Maybe I'll find a nice American girl and marry. Anything is possible. If I go back, that's it. I'm done. But for now, I'm not going back.

Five or ten years seemed to be the usual quote for the length of time that many of the men planned to work in the United States before returning to their home countries. Of course, there were some who returned, at least once, for short stays. Jorge, one of the older Mexican men at twenty-nine years of age frequently visited his family in Mexico. His visits were annually planned in accordance with the festivities of the Mexican Independence Day. But given the changes in security along the border as a result of 9/11, plans for visits to the home country were less likely. In late December of 2001, a few men told me of their plans to return to Mexico by the end of the month. But in late January of the new year, they were still working on the corner and have been ever since.

Given the tense security conditions, they told me that they feared being caught by *la Migra* in making the trip across the border.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, it seemed that their bigger fear was that they would not be able to return to the United States. They told me that they learned from others that the trips were more dangerous and costly. The price to have the *coyote* assist in the trip across the border had increased. Jerome stated,

Now my family in Mexico tells me that it's more dangerous to cross now.

There's more security and it's more expensive. More than \$2000, can you believe it! It's even worse for people coming from Ecuador or Guatemala.

They have to cross Mexico first and then the U.S. What for? To work here. There's no work now. Better to stay there maybe."

Ronaldo, told me that a friend of his crossed from Mexico into southern Arizona in early January of the new year, 2002. His friend was successful in his trip to Mexico from Cuenca, Ecuador, Ronaldo's hometown. Unlike Ronaldo who traveled to Mexico on a student visa, his friend entered the country with the assistance of the *coyote*. He told Ronaldo that travel was even more difficult now and that he had a difficult time finding a means of transportation from getting to New York City from Arizona. Some men had told me that they and others – friends and relatives – sometimes traveled from state to state in search of work without too much anxiety about official identification. After a bit of searching, Ronaldo's friend told him that he had found a bus that would take him to New York City. Ronaldo anxiously and happily awaited his arrival. Then a couple of months had passed when I did not see Ronaldo on the corner. This was not a surprise to me, because Ronaldo had a full-time job. Then in early March, I saw Ronaldo who updated me on his friend's misfortune. Having taken a bus in Arizona, he arrived in

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<sup>81</sup> *La Migra* is a Spanish expression for the agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Pennsylvania after four days of travel. Soon after his arrival in Pennsylvania, the police apprehended him along with other undocumented men riding the bus. They were all sent back to Mexico. Later that summer, I saw Ronaldo on the corner while he was on his way to visit a friend. It was a visit to his friend from Cuenca. He finally made it! He crossed *la frontera*, the U.S.-Mexico border, again and only recently arrived in New York City after securing a flight from Los Angeles. Ronaldo did not want to share more details with me at the time as he was already running late for a baseball game with his friend.

Opportunities to reacquaint themselves with the familiar social world they left to find work in the United States was now complicated and discouraged. Luis explained to me what he learned from his wife about recent border crossings.

“Now *la Migra* is everywhere. They are hungry to catch people. It is more dangerous to cross now. And now the routes have changed. They are longer and it takes more time to cross the desert. Imagine that! Longer. I crossed the desert in one whole day. I walked from 5pm to 1 or 2 in the morning. You have to cross at night to avoid *la Migra*. That’s nothing. And I paid \$1500 to cross with the *coyote*. Now, it’s more money and more dangerous. It gives me grief, a lot of grief for those persons.”

“I came to this country with my niece and my friend. My niece is nineteen now. She didn’t want to stay here. She is young and it was harder for a woman here. She went back to Mexico with her brother to visit the family. She misses them too much. My nephew was already living here. He works in a restaurant in Manhattan. He doesn’t make much money. My niece worked in a factory. I didn’t want her to go back. She can’t come

back now, not now. It's dangerous. She should try to make her life here. Thanks to God that nothing happened to her when we crossed the first time, but now – *la Migra, los coyotes*, criminals, anyone. I am worried for her.”

Only a few of the men crossed the border with their families. Return trips for visits to home countries like Mexico were irregular and occurred less for men who came from Ecuador or Panama. Given the tense security conditions, higher surveillance and risks involved in crossing the US-Mexico border, the men told me that they feared being caught by *la Migra* in making frequent trips across the border and feared the risk of severing a crucial source of financial support for those persons dependent on them. Fortunately, the distance that separated them from family and friends did not sever their communication. For example, when I asked Luis about his family, he lowered his head and quietly said,

“I miss them very much. I want to see my son. I left when he was only one years old. It is so hard to do that. I speak to them every eight days. Sometimes, it's every two weeks. (His voice cracks slightly and he fights back the tears in his eyes.) I call from the apartment using a card...But my wife has to go into town to an agency to receive the calls. So we set up a time to speak to each other each week. The lines are set up in my town but the phones haven't been installed yet. It's been that way for a few years now Even if I wanted to go home, I couldn't. I need to make more money first. And then I'll go home, for good.”

Luis best described his time on the corner when he said to me, “*Sin mis amigos...* Without my friends on the corner, I have nobody here. One needs his friends given the way things are in this country.” Luis’s anguish resonated with Octavio, who had family living at home in Buenaventura, Colombia.

I have family here, but I have my own family in Colombia. My son is four and my daughter is three (He shows me a picture of them.) They live with their mother. I’m not married. She is, yes and so my kids live with him. I don’t speak much to her but I talk to my kids all the time. I take care of them. They’re my kids, no? I send them money, clothes, whatever they need. I am a proper and upstanding man. I want to bring them here. I saw them one year ago. It is very sad to be apart from your children. You don’t have children? (I nod no in response.) When you do, I wish for you that they will always be with you.

If these men remained in an area where economic opportunities were diminishing, the loss of financial support for oneself could prove to be detrimental and the implication of this situation would be even greater. There was also a loss of financial assistance for their family and friends living abroad. Moreover, many of the men felt stranded in this country, to which many of them felt a sense of detachment. Gerry did not foresee a future for him nor his family in the United States.

“It’s nice in this country. I wanted to live here but the way I see things, it’s better for me to go home. First I have to make my money. And then I can go back home, help my family, and then have my own family...I work here, that’s it. And they don’t want us here, except to work. Only to

work. Then it's okay. But not even now. They were talking with *el presidente*, Fox. And what happened? Nothing. Nothing is going to change. And now, it's worse. I'll stay here for a few more years and then I'll see. But things are bad in this city now. I hope nothing else happens. I'm already used to the life here.”

Following September 11<sup>th</sup> and months thereafter, there was a sense of detachment that many of these men felt such that they did not identify themselves as part of the American community, the association that was so emphasized in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. In fact, I was told numerous times of how they felt that perhaps they would have left if the situation had worsened. The following helps to illustrate their disengagement with the national mood of American patriotism at the time. On the morning of November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in Belle Harbor, Queens.<sup>82</sup> I was standing with four of the men outside of the 37<sup>th</sup> Street Laundromat when a gypsy service car pulled up alongside the curb to tell us what had happened. The men waited outside of the laundromat while I hurried inside to catch the “breaking news” on the television. Noticing their curious stares through the window, I quickly returned to share with them the information. One of the younger men quickly ran to the payphone and pretended to speak to an operator – “*Un billete á Mexico, por favor* (one ticket to Mexico, please). It's time to go.” Nervously, I laughed and tried to reassure him and myself that it wasn't an act of terrorism. In a previous visit, Santiago had shared with me his fear of more terrorist attacks and even breathing the air around someone who might open mail laced

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<sup>82</sup> American Airlines Flight 587 was en route from New York City to the Dominican Republic when it crashed in Belle Harbor, Queens, on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001. All persons on board (265) were killed in the crash. This tragedy compounded a distress in both communities and in New York City, following in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

with Anthrax. On that day, he told me “I don’t want to die in this country alone. I want to go home. If things get worse, I’m going home.”

A lot of anxious and uncertain opinions about illegal immigration accompanied ill sentiment towards the men on the corner and added to their lack of membership in the larger community. On one occasion, Joanne, an employee of the nearby laundromat, had a rude exchange with one of the day laborers who had come inside hoping to use the restroom. Since I was standing by the washing machines, I was within an earshot and clear view of what had transpired. I saw a man enter and without a word, he quickly moved towards the door leading to the restroom. He was one of the Regulars who stood on the opposite corner with the majority of the Eastern Europeans. He was a white man with a short uncombed cut of dusty brown hair. He was unshaven and had a thick brown mustache. His unclean blue denim jacket was a snug fit over his blue jeans. Joanne quickly instructed him in her New York City Italian accent to leave the premises.

No. I’m sorry. You can’t. No. (Without saying anything, he tried again to open the door. She kindly cautioned him twice and then firmly.) No, no. No!. You can’t use it. Go somewhere else. Go to another store. (He tried again.) No! (He put his hand in his pocket.) I don’t want your money. No. (The man left the laundromat and she then turned to me.) I can’t let them use it. I don’t know who they are.

She told me that they “steal the clothes” and they “pee all over the floor”. They make a mess of the bathroom. “Stink up the bathroom”, is actually what she had said. Although she had been stern with the man, her attitude contradicted her usual behavior with the men outside on the corner. I often saw her smile and say

hello to the men as she walked to and from the bagel shop. And she never disrespected them as customers when they used the facilities to wash and dry their clothes. It is possible that she would have behaved this way with any person coming into the laundromat to use the bathroom who was not a paying customer. In the months that followed this incident, I asked Joanne, an employee of the nearby laundromat, for her opinion about the increased security measures along the U.S.-Mexico border.

“That’s how these guys got in here! We have to do something. And if it means that we stop more illegals from coming here, no matter who they are, then that’s what we have to do. But it’s not gonna work. They know all the tricks. How do you think these guys got here.”

September 11<sup>th</sup> did not directly affect Joanne nor did she really know anyone whose life was greatly impacted on that day. However, like so many, she had plenty opinions and thoughts to share about the ensuing events that would follow from that day. In the couple of days following the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Belle Harbor, Queens, a telling conversation with Joanne matched the points of views so many others had shared with me about the men on these corners and 9/11.

“Can you understand what I’m saying? I know these guys didn’t do anything. They’re just trying to make a living. But what if? You never know. They’re illegal, just like those horrible men. Why not them? You just can’t be sure about anybody these days. That’s all I’m saying. That’s why I don’t want them in here unless they’re going to wash their clothes. I don’t think they’re going to bomb this place but these days (pause), I just

don't know. First the World Trade Center and now that plane in Queens.

What's next?"

There were others who shared similar feelings. While attending a local community board meeting, I met Felix, an Ecuadoran man living in New York City for the past twelve years and who works at a bodega. We met briefly after the meeting and he told me that a large number of Mexican men looked for work on the corner of where he used to live in Bay Ridge. He told me that he didn't feel any sympathy for their situation. He described himself to me as having "worked hard all my life", and "proud of what I have accomplished in this country". Felix shared with me his thoughts,

"I understand what you're doing and it's good. And I know that a lot of Mexicans died in the World Trade Center. Nobody knows about them. But you see, we know how these terrorists got in. They crossed the border. These guys [Mexicans] are coming back and forth. What if one of those guys, those Arabs, pays one of them [Mexicans] to bring something in with them. They need the money and they might not even know what they are doing. This is what I'm talking about."

A woman who had walked past us and overheard his remarks added,

These guys are not the enemy, I know. But they're coming back and forth whenever they want and what if. Oh my god, I don't even want to say it. What if one of these guys, y'know, these Arabs pays one of them to bring something in with them. They need the money, right and they might not even know. This is what I'm talking about. These Arabs, not all of them,

of course, but *these* Arabs will do anything. You see what they've done already. We have to protect ourselves.

Not all shared the same opinion. During another meeting, a member of the Human Service Cabinet told me,

This country is backwards. I know these guys are illegal. But why do they come here? They come here for a reason, right? Because we hire them. They need the money and we need them, too. And now we're going to make it harder for them. They didn't kill all those people. It doesn't make sense.

In the months that followed September 11<sup>th</sup>, there had been a decline in the number of men who looked for work at this particular site. The majority of men gathered in large groups on only two corners of the main intersection. And a sparse number of men strategically roamed the corners of the two nearby intersections along the avenue. More often than not, the corner was empty outside of the corner deli store. The majority of the Regulars stood and waited only on the corners opposite the deli store and the residential housing complex. As spring was nearing, it seemed unlikely that the seasonal change would have caused a decrease in the demand for work and labor, especially since many of the men had told me that work opportunities increased during the warm months, summer in particular. Although patrons and/or employees of nearby businesses, like the laundromat, might have expressed dislike in seeing the men wait directly in front of these establishments, it was never clear that this was a serious concern. Certainly, at times the employees in the corner deli store were pleased to have the men look for work near or in front of the store since indirectly, the men seemed to bring them business, too. Persons

who would pick up workers on the corner would often stop into the store to purchase coffee, breakfast or lunch.

It was a warm sun-drenched morning in March that called both me and many of the men to the corner. A police car pulled up at the curb in front of me and a few of the Regulars. The officer told the men that they could not stand on this particular corner and that they should move across the avenue, near the park. As they pulled away from the curb, I quickly inquired to know the reason behind this change in their actions. But they drove away leaving me without an answer. Pointing across the street towards the housing complex, Jerome told me that the neighbors had filed complaints with the police about them. Jerome did not share with me many more details about the situation since this was all that the police had told him and the others on prior occasions. As a result, their space had been restricted to two street corners. Jerome was sincerely worried that if the situation continued, especially throughout the summer when there were improved chances to work, he might have had to find a new work site. The two corners were insufficient space for the number of men who usually worked at this intersection.

In the months following September 11<sup>th</sup>, Gerry and Luis told me that there had been an increased presence of police activity in the area. Neither stated that this was a direct result of September 11<sup>th</sup> but both had agreed that it was not too long after when they had noticed this change. Gerry explained,

“The police – they speak English and Spanish and they are white. We Mexicans, *hispanos*, we understand English, too. Maybe not the ones who have just come, but a lot of us have been living here for a while. We understand a lot more than people think...The police, they bother us now.

They keep us moving, but I don't move. They only do it because they have to. Maybe they're looking for that guy here, too. Y'know, *ese arabe*, Osama. They're everywhere and noone can find him. What's going to happen next? This country is nervous now. That's why they do this – the police, immigration, the president – everybody is nervous. They have to do something. So long as they don't bother me, let them look.”

In late July, I spent one morning standing with William, whom I hadn't seen on the corners in the past few weeks. We spoke about the changes at the intersection – increased police activity, the new faces,<sup>83</sup> the number of men waiting and the obvious expansion of the work site. Willie had an interesting outlook about the changes.

“You see what happened here, right? The police run all of them off. They pass by more, a lot more now. But they (pointing to the Mexicans) still here. Just on the opposite side and down there, too (pointing towards nearby corners along the avenue). They still here. *This is their space* [author's emphasis]. They [police] tell them that they can only stand on those corners (pointing at corners across from the deli shop, the opposite corners of the avenue). The people around here probably complained. But you see, now they have a bigger problem now. It's funny, actually. The police come up in here, tell these guys to move away, not to hang out on these corners. So they did. Now they all spread out on this corner, that corner, down there. They [police] thought that if they move them from

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<sup>83</sup> “New” in this context does not necessarily mean that this was the first time the men had come to this corner. In this situation, I describe these men as “new” to state the fact that I had not recognized them in my previous visits. Some like William had looked for work on these corners in the previous summer, prior to when my fieldwork had begun. They were not familiar faces whom I had usually seen, like Santiago, Luis or Jerome.

here, they wouldn't come back? And they're even more people here now.

It's a bigger problem. Oh well."

In light of September 11<sup>th</sup>, many new challenges transpired including the political climate that encouraged a disquieting increase in the significance placed on national security and defense. Many of the men shared with me their concerns about living in New York City and more broadly, in the United States. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, many of the men worry that job opportunities may start to decline. However, on the whole, my fieldnotes revealed that their concerns extended far beyond economic ones. Regardless of poor job prospects, many had said that they felt they have little choice but to remain in New York City. And so they were concerned that if opportunities for unskilled work continued to decline in New York City, and given the slowdown in the economy, their situation would become desperate. This built up into a considerable distress that reached beyond the geographical boundaries of New York City and of the U.S. – on those who were dependent on them in their home countries. It is arguable that 9/11 had doubly impacted the lives of men, not only in their work situation but also in their everyday lives. As the majority of these men had no official status in this country, the findings discussed in this and in the previous chapter illustrate how these men have constructed and are now reconstructing what it means to live in New York City in relation to a real and perceived stigma attached to all immigrants, particularly undocumented persons.

One year later on September 12, 2002, I spoke with Jerome and Santiago about their future plans. Jerome was sympathetic as it had been the one year memorial, but the concerns about security and safety that he held one year prior subsided to his immediate

pressing concerns about financial stability and assistance for himself and his family in Mexico.

“What happened that day was terrible. So many people. You have to remember and then you have to move on. I’m going to go later, maybe. Don’t you want to? Too sad, no? All those people crying. You have to feel that way today. But then tomorrow is another day. I have to keep living my life. I have to make my money. Who’s going to support my family? Last year, I thought about leaving. A lot of people did. Some of them did (pointing to the other men). But now, I don’t think about it. I don’t think anything is going to happen. I have to worry about work. I have to make a living. I only think about my family. That’s it. That’s all that matters.”

Santiago echoed Jerome’s feelings,

“I don’t want to think about it. I have to worry about what’s in my pocket now. I am very bad, yes? It’s sad but you can’t be sad everyday...I’m not scared. The only thing I’m scared about is Immigration. That’s it. My cousin is going to come. He’s crazy to come to the United States. (In response to worries about crossing at the border) It’s dangerous but they already know how to cross. They had to change the route, but they know it already. It just takes more time and more money.”

Many of the men told me about plans to help friends or relatives come to New York City. The condition for this decision depended on the change in the economy in New York City. None of the men reiterated concerns about their own personal safety and

consequently did not discourage friends or relatives from making the move to New York City. It was apparent that given the lapse of one year, the underlying concerns that were primarily related to economic concerns had been reaffirmed. In sharing their goals and dreams, many of these men still do not anticipate a future life in the United States. Many stated that their objective only concerned finding work to earn enough money to build a better life for themselves and their families in their home countries. In the meantime, they sought out stability and community in their temporary home at *la parada*.

## Conclusion

My findings illustrate the complexity of the social structure of the day labor market, which was primarily based on observed and also perceived characterizations of day laborers. This research offers the opportunity to readdress day labor in studies on the informal economy and immigration, but also in studies of inequality and identity by examining the implications of social positions, like race and gender, in the labor experience. This study uncovers the complex ways these social processes operate in our society and are manifested in the everyday practices on a New York City street corner.

First, identity is a constant process of negotiation composed of the dictating situations of race, ethnicity, culture, and the experiences of these circumstances. My research enabled an understanding of these social practices on the corner uncovering these tensions. Latino or Hispanic, as a pan-ethnic category, is no longer sufficient to address the concerns of the many populations that fall under this umbrella association. Race can no longer be considered the essential characteristic of blacks living in the United States. This was an obvious concern among the black Latinos who spoke about how they were affirming their place among the other Latinos on the corner and within the pan-ethnic group in New York City in general. Their behavior and speech illustrated their conscious decision to maintain themselves as a distinct group. And this action was most apparent in their tactics in movement to improve their chances in the hiring queue among the other Latino immigrants and U.S. citizens to attain their status as real day laborers. Understanding how social identities can hold both powerful and marginalized positions in certain contexts uncovers the complex ways that race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class operate in our society and facilitates a more comprehensive

understanding of these relations in New York City. The negotiations of these men – whether Mexican, Panamanian, Polish, African American – created conflict in the presentation and understanding of identity, as they struggled to find their place in the largely white-black-brown racial situation of New York City.

Second, day labor is an important area of today's economy. Its population of workers – both immigrants and marginalized persons – reflects the need to address this sector of informal employment as a significant part of the urban landscape and in discussions of the changing nature of work in today's society. Beyond looking at the connections between immigration and day labor, research should consider how the working-poor negotiate the day labor market. For instance, what are the connections between the day labor market and urban youth? By using day labor as a case study, we can examine the participation of African-American youth in the informal economy.

The informal economy is defined by the activities that lie outside of the watchful eyes of traditional economic and state regulatory structures. Day labor is typically relegated to studies in the informal economy and my research covered a site that was not a formal work setting i.e. day labor center. However, my field research in an open street-corner market found similar organization processes and structures that were representative of formal work settings (Sassen and Smith, 1991; Sassen, 1998). The informal economy is neither solely nor sufficiently defined by the activities that are relegated to the informal economy nor by the characteristics of these activities (job elements, management, employee status, work conditions, etc.) and labor populations (Castells and Portes, 1989).

Participation in informal activities, like day labor, would discourage participation in criminal and delinquent activities, in the absence of better options. While the majority of the workers held an undocumented residency status, there was a group of workers who were U.S. citizens. Thus, as Saskia Sassen states, the undocumented status of the labor population was neither necessary nor sufficient in determining activities as informal or formal. Rather, informalization is a process that can be analyzed in its relationship to the formal economy (Sassen, 1998).<sup>84</sup> Clearly, all workers would be well served by changes that reduced the costs of engaging in this type of self-employment. Instead of focusing on the social ills of these communities – immigrant and marginalized persons – researchers should engage in studies that explore both the circumstances of their connections to work in the informal economy and also improvements of these activities that would stimulate economic growth in these communities.

Aside from their work experience, these men also desired a place that dignified their day-to-day living experience, i.e. cultural events, sport activities like soccer leagues, or holiday celebrations. *La parada* served this function in the men's lives. *La parada* was a physical place, but it was also a space that contained and communicated meaning in its purpose, function, and perception. Visibly, these actions were economic; the men utilized the open space at the street corner to publicly find work opportunities as day laborers in the informal sector of the New York local economy. Less apparent, however, were the practices that were social in nature. Whether a friendly conversation, a game of quarters on the sidewalk, or sharing containers of egg rolls and fried rice from the nearby

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<sup>84</sup> Sassen goes on to explore the trends in the changing types of jobs, growths/declines in the economy, and the changing nature of advanced economies to understand the conditions and circumstances that encourage the proliferation and participation in informal labor activities.

Chinese restaurant, the social atmosphere of *la parada* helped the men escape the anguish of the separation from their lives with their families and in their home towns.

At *la parada*, the men created a space for recreation, for learning, and finding status and membership in a community of their peers. Public advocates and policymakers should continue to develop and establish resources, like hiring centers, where these men can establish themselves as good neighbors in local communities. These opportunities help to remove the stigma attached to these men as members of deviant populations, namely day laborers, “illegal aliens,” the working poor, and homeless. While institutional and cultural factors affect the men’s lives and experiences, they had also been able to shape their own reality and construct social meanings through their daily activities on the corner.

What are the challenges then faced by recent immigrants and newcomers, community residents, advocacy groups and policymakers? Many studies have concluded that immigrants are considerably less likely to seek out and receive public assistance (Cornelius, 1981; Massey, et al., 1987; Jensen, 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). The variable aspects of this assistance, including a social support system, have not been sufficiently addressed. Since these men were both legally and also socially on the margins of civil society, this study is significant to the study of the social incorporation of recent immigrants in American society because it showed how these men had socially met their needs outside of traditional forums, i.e. community organizations, schools, local politics, local economies and religious organizations. The findings of this study provided an in-depth examination of Latino immigrants who participated in this sector of the economy in expanding our discussions of how they managed in the new society and

addressed their economic and social needs in a place that desired their employment, but not their participation as residents or members of local communities.

Formal hiring centers are a step in the right direction in acknowledging that the men need a space that will address both an economic and also social need of this population. Cities like Los Angeles have made further progress in designing use and strategizing goals for work centers and there are some like the Macehualli Work Center in north Phoenix, Arizona that have been marked as a potential model for future work centers elsewhere. Local advocates and community residents must continue to improve the resources at these centers and consequently resolve the men's issues of mistrust and pessimism about the hiring processes and social services offered at the centers (see chapter seven). There are also implications for public policy regarding employment practices, immigration law and social services available to undocumented persons (language instruction, medical services, housing, etc). An increase in the number of undocumented residents in communities approaches a discussion of equity in light of the poverty and social inequality that exists in communities, i.e. the obstacles for social and economic mobility among these groups. Furthermore, public policy can reflect on whether as a result of demand for particular skills and expected benefits to the economy, some types of migrant labor or "guest workers" are regarded as more deserving.

New York City is a vibrant setting for transnational activity where specific modes of incorporation are embedded in social processes that extend across and connect local, regional, nation-state and international practices. It is therefore imperative to understand the current dynamics of the "new" immigration as it affects the larger social structures and institutions of politics, economics, and culture. This includes examples of how

migrants, particularly non-white racial-ethnic groups, are incorporated into the economic, social, political and cultural life of diverse communities informed by dynamics of economic, social, political, historical, cultural and regional factors.

New York is not alone. As more and more communities across the United States, and not exclusively urban, experience an increasing Latino population, they are coming across changing aspects in these various forums. The disapproval and disdain towards day laborers, particularly if they are undocumented persons, concern taking jobs away from American citizens, exploiting social services in education and healthcare, effecting change in American culture, and participation in criminal activities. However, these men received mixed messages from the persons who sought their labor and from the subtle efforts of local law enforcement to deter their attempts in finding work. Since their labor is desirable, their venture as day laborers is encouraged at the costs that are brought about by the economic injustice that is carried out daily at this site and others, including work-related abuses, the loss of status and membership in the new society, and the guilt and melancholy that result from being absent in their families' lives.

As public policy considers the obstacles for both economic and social mobility among these groups, it is important to assess the implications and consequences of the issues raised in this study. These local processes are linked with larger political and economic ones that are at the forefront of debates over job distribution between native-born and U.S. citizens, benefits of social services, and more recently, the heightened security and defense of our national borders under homeland security. However, issues about the civil rights of undocumented persons, assimilation and development of an immigrant community, citizenship and identity, and transnational ties to native countries,

also contribute and collectively produce the larger comprehensive narrative of the day labor situation.

New immigrant groups have presented a challenge to our current understandings of race and ethnic relations, identification and adaptation in New York City. As illustrated in the day laborers' efforts to organize and control the social and labor processes on the corner, there is a situational response to immigrant and ethnic identity formation and adaptation (Laguerre, 1984). This project has addressed the negotiation, shaping and management of identity as it related to employment, but also in the formation of peer groups and in an understanding of culture. These men experienced a transformation of their identity in the context of their home countries and then in the context of their present situation in New York City. They experienced a personal makeover of their identity as it was modified by a new language, a new culture, and the new politics of a polity to be learned at fast pace to sustain a living (Gutierrez, 1995; Mahler, 1995; Menjívar, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The multiple realities and shifting identities of the men and myself revealed the complex ways that identity operates in our society. Based on visual and spatial markers of residential status (immigrant versus native), race and ethnic status (Mexican versus American) and gender status (strong and respectful man versus inexperienced youth or delinquent) there was a social order that helped distinguish who was a good or bad worker and who was a moral diligent immigrant versus a mediocre native. As the men were struggling to find their "place" on the corner, even the fieldworker struggled, too. Like the men, the status of my own identity, which included a "nice woman" varied in

every interaction and even according to my place on the corner. Differences in nationality, class, and gender, among others, challenged all interactions on the corner.

Though the day labor market is embedded in structural conditions, I hope that I have illustrated how this market is grounded in the interactions of the persons participating in it and the constructs (conceptual/symbolic) they use in ultimately shaping it. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class, to name a few, influence people's perceptions and opposing identities cause conceptual and practical dilemmas. Thus, as in my own personal experiences and professional objectives, my research illustrates that individuals are not passive, powerless, neutral objects, but rather actors who can institute change, create knowledge and contribute in shaping their social world.

This project has examined and acquainted the reader with the intimate world of day laborers at *la parada*. Of great consequence was the understanding I would bring to the reader about these men's lives and the social processes in which they interacted throughout their day to day activities on the corner. The knowledge about this microcosm on a Brooklyn street corner would provide the tools the reader could take to other similar places to understand the social processes and actors in the particular social world. Looking ahead towards this endeavor, an equivalent study of informal labor activities in other gateway cities, like Los Angeles, but also in regional areas that have an increasing immigrant population, i.e. the Midwest, would be a substantive addition. Aside from exploring the changing migration patterns and incorporation of new immigrants, critical evaluations of the pathways that lead to a street corner and the situations that encourage their stay are insightful in proposing ways to meet the needs of the day labor population.

I found Compadre's statement most compelling: "The people who come here, with one look, they know everything." Though at first hidden to the casual observer, it became clear that this "one look" embodied discrete meanings that revealed the men's active efforts to negotiate their work and social experiences as they struggled to articulate their place in New York City. In a place where these men openly congregated and addressed their needs, they labored to attain public recognition of their self-ascribed identities as a "hardworking man" or "honest laborer" – a real day laborer.

## Appendix

### Crossing Borders

While Regulars and Temps labored on this corner, there was a third category of worker: *la profesora*. *La profesora* was one label the men assigned to me to identify the Latina whose research explained her regular presence on the street corner. Rather than replacing shingles on a roof, my work was to observe behavior and social relations in this setting. For two and a half years, I worked on the corner alongside these men and collected data about their work, and more significant, about their life experiences. Moving beyond the men's experiences, I also scrutinized my own work experience with the men at this site. As an important characteristic in life, work is a critical aspect of self-concept.<sup>85</sup>

The ethnographer learns to cross the various borders of the different social spaces in the fieldwork process and becomes more adept in her/his awareness and identification of the specific roles that are prevalent during particular circumstances of an ongoing situation. I attempted to identify as an insider although the extent to which this was accomplished often depended on the context of the situations. However, I emphasize that these were attempts that were sometime more or less successful than others, if at all entirely achieved. At all times throughout my fieldwork, I was both an insider and an outsider. In retrospect, I know that I was not the only one observing and interpreting social behavior. This task was not in fact unique, but rather a mutual undertaking with the men at this site and led me to reflect on the following questions: How did our interactions influence my own work at this site? What implications did our interactions

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Rabinow wrote in his reflections on fieldwork in Morocco, 'The fact that all cultural facts are interpretations, and multivocal ones at that, is true both for the anthropologist and for his informant, the Other with whom he works' (Rabinow, 1977: 151).

have in the men's everyday experiences? How did we understand the "other"? What self-presentations did we each manage in our interactions with each other?

While exploring displays of masculinity on the corner that were generally related to social activities, either in the treatment of women and in assumed roles of a father, husband or community leader, I learned about the status of a "nice" or "good" woman and a "decent" or "proper" man. Much like the integrity of the order that defined a "real day laborer" for the workers and employers, an underlying principle of decency in this gendered order defined a hardworking, decent man or a nice woman and guided our social interactions. Further details about this gendered order on the corner were covered in chapter six. These gendered roles both constrained and facilitated my fieldwork, particularly my capacity to learn about their personal lives. Topics like sexuality and marriage varied in appropriateness for public or private conversation. Though at times frustrating, this experience was vital in learning about the different categories and boundaries of social interactions with men and women (Horowitz, 1985).

As significant as are the people and social action that are the focus of this study, there are also the participants' own interpretations of the fieldworker.<sup>86</sup> The understanding that the fieldworker and participant are both observers and informants is significant in learning and understanding the 'local properties' of the patterns of social structures and meaning in a particular setting (2002: 92). The theoretical premise for this query has its origin in the works of Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman.<sup>87</sup> I corroborate

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<sup>86</sup> This dilemma was recently examined by Sudhir Venkatesh in his own fieldwork in the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. Venkatesh examined the 'social production' of the ethnographer and explored the relations and interactions between the fieldworker and those observed.

<sup>87</sup> Blumer tells us, 'The entire act of scientific study is oriented and shaped by the underlying picture of the empirical world that is used.... The unavoidable task of genuine methodological treatment is to identify and assess these premises' (1969). In *Encounters*, Goffman (1961: 132) then tells us that, 'It is common in

their arguments by considering the participants' conceptions and thus, their social construction of 'the other', the ethnographer, and then reflect on how this informed and contributed to the interpretation of social meaning in the field.

My role, and not solely identified as ethnographer, was distinctive in this setting. I was the only woman present on the corners, except for the women walking by or working in the nearby businesses. While many of the men often called me '*mi paisana*' and I identified myself as ethnically and culturally Latina, I also recognized that my Latino background was in conversation with an Americanized upbringing. This complex history created opportunities for stimulating breaks throughout the fieldwork that yielded rich understandings and interpretations of social behavior and relations in this setting.

As the only woman, I was careful about my interactions with the men on and outside of the corner. For instance, I felt a little ambivalent about accepting my first lunch invitation from Ronaldo, a young man from Ecuador whom I met early on in my fieldwork. I respectfully declined the offer. My primary reservations were personal and the uncertainty was reflective of my association as an outsider to those whom I observed. Perhaps Ronaldo just wanted to have a friend outside of the setting where the men on the corner were his only friends. A likely response is that perhaps he just wanted to have some company for lunch. As these various explanations were relevant, so were the various consequences. Visiting with Ronaldo outside of the corner offered the chance for a different engagement. But in the eyes of the other men on this corner, how would this be perceived? If the other men saw me leave with Ronaldo from the corner or if he were to simply tell the others about our "outside" meeting, the context of my relationship with

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sociology to study the individual in terms of the conception he and others have of him and to argue that these conceptions are made available to him through the role that he plays'.

the other men could change instantly. Their various interpretations of this one meeting would alter my place in the situation and could likely be damaging.

At the time, Ronaldo told me that he understood and would try again another time. I believe that there was a promising opportunity to have become more informed about Ronaldo's experiences had I engaged him in a different setting in the beginning of my fieldwork. As I learned later on in my fieldwork, many of the men did not feel comfortable speaking to me about particular parts of their lives in front of the other men on the corner. At the start of my fieldwork, it was rare that I would be allowed to speak with the men as a group. Many would move away, almost out of respect for each other's privacy whenever I would direct my questions to any one in particular. My attempts to hold group conversations violated a cultural norm and my behavior was negatively sanctioned as inappropriate for a "nice" or "good" woman.

I often imagined how different our interactions would have been had I been a man? Would it have mattered as a woman or man, if I was not Latina? The appropriate response is yes, in disclosing these and other distinctions that show how my positionality was both advantageous and disadvantageous in collecting data and in becoming more familiar with the men and their lives. Would they have allowed just anyone to stand or sit with them? Would they have shared with me all that they did? What might have they refrained from telling me?

Initially, my goals were to understand the day labor work experience and to challenge perceptions and stereotypes about the persons who participate in this form of self-employment. However, the men were not simply incorporated into my fieldwork and the overall endeavor of the larger project. Our relationship was very much a

reciprocal one so that I, too, became quickly involved in their world. Besides my own role assignments, the men assigned meanings and roles to me to explain my presence in this setting that at times, reflected the resources I brought to the corners (gendered social interaction, English instruction, counsel, news informant, etc.).

### My Entrée

My own workday began differently where I found myself searching for reasons to be present on the corners. Taking advantage of the laundromat that was located just a few storefronts past the corner was an opportune site for early observations. My presence never replicated that of a voiceless and invisible person in their midst. From the onset of my fieldwork, we had already achieved a basic level of familiarity with one another. Many of the Regulars greeted me with '*holas*' and '*buenas*' and wished me '*buen dia*' (have a good day) as I walked to and from the corner. At the start of each visit, they greeted me in the same way with '*hola amiga*' (hello friend). (Later on when my visits became less frequent, I often received greetings of '*hola perdida*' - 'hello, lost one'.)

On the other hand, the Temps had a tendency of showing me an upwards shake of their head while continuing their conversation, though at times the nod coincided with a "hey." Even after receiving an invitation to stand with the Temps, I always felt that I was trespassing on some conversation since a formal acknowledgement was not a frequent occurrence at the start of my visits with them. However, this changed as my visits continued and our interactions became friendly such that I, too, could bump fists with a few of them, like Richie and William, though the majority warmly greeted with me, "hey C" or "hey little C" and made no physical contact.

Since my visits began in late summer, the weather was quite pleasant and so I often *joined* the men on the corner. That is, we shared the space. While the men stood on the corner looking for work, I sat on a building stoop or on the steps of the entrance to the laundromat waiting to fold my clothes. And so I was near the men, but never standing or sitting with them. In fact, it was almost expected that I would take the usual places on the corner. These places were often vacant and whenever occupied by one of the men, he would kindly offer it to me upon my arrival. It was from this place, my place, where I made my first observations.

The scene was familiar and routine, except for the time of day. I had arrived at 10 a.m. According to the typical work-day schedule, ten o'clock was a late hour to make a first appearance. Yet it was 10 a.m. and I was late. It was also Friday, the second to last day of the work-week. Most of the men had told me that Fridays were considered days of '*trabajo pero tambien diversión*' (days for work and play) compared to busier workdays like Monday. In all, I was certain I would see only a few men standing on the corner.

I turned onto the corner and saw a big group of men - some sitting, some standing - in front of the laundromat. I was happy to see them, especially since I recognized a smaller group of men with whom I was already on friendly terms. A game was in session. I saw one man stand behind *la línea* - really just a break in the sidewalk - who flipped a coin towards another coin or perhaps past a second *línea* in the sidewalk. As he did this, everyone else roared with laughter. Meanwhile I started my usual routine and loaded my clothes into a washing machine. Only this time when I left the laundromat, I did not sit alone to watch the men play. Instead, I asked the men if I could sit down with them to watch the game. A few seconds of silent thoughts and curious faces met my

unexpected request, but they soon agreed and scooted over to allow me a seat on the stoop.

I sat down to watch the game when one of the younger players quickly approached me after taking his turn. Staring up at him, I hardly got a good look since my vision was blurred from the sunshine that bounced off his bright white t-shirt that was obviously two sizes too big since it dressed him to the knees of his gray sweat pants. My only study of his face left a slight impression only because it was partly hidden by the black baseball cap on his head. His name was Octavio. Our conversation did not begin quite as I had expected and my proposal for an exploration of their lives was not the initial topic that was brought up. Rather, Octavio's inquiry of me governed this initial meeting.

Where are you from?

Well, I was born here, but my parents are from South America.

Are you Venezuelan? (I shook my head saying no) Where are you from then?

Well, my father came from Peru and my mother from Ecuador.

Oh, I thought you were...And how old are you?

27.

No! That's a lie. 27? I thought you were 20, no more than that. No! 27?

You look young, you're short. Are you married?

Yes.

Really?

Yes, why?

No, because I see you here alone and you look so young.

Well, at 27, I'm not an old lady, am I?

(He laughs). No. Is he here? I don't want any problems, you know?

No, no, he knows I'm here. It's okay, really. And you, where are you from?

Colombia. Is it true that you are from South America?

Well, my family, yes.

What are you doing here?

I'm a student. I go to the city university...

Oh yes? So what are you doing *here*, besides washing clothes?

Oh, excuse me. Yes, well, I would like to write a paper about all of you and what happens here.

Really? It's interesting. You're not a reporter? Or do you work for *la Migra*? No, you look like a nice person...

No, no. I'm a student (I show him my student identification card.)

Oh, good. Well, you see...

Do you think the others will talk to me?

Honestly, I don't know, but I'll speak to you.

That would be nice. Thank you... So how long ...

As we talked, another game started. Octavio stood up and decided to play in this game.

'Quarters on the wall' was the clever name of the game or at least what I had called it. I was curious to know about the rules and so I asked the closest man beside me. Actually, he looked more like a boy, compared to some of the other men. His baby face was

accentuated by the large cap on his head that shadowed his grin. He took my interest in learning about the game as an invitation to sit down beside me. That was when I met Santiago. He seemed only too happy to explain the rules, which he did enthusiastically. Following the game, my first conversation with Santiago followed the same Q&A format, in content and style, much like my first conversation was with Octavio.

These early encounters were representative of the majority of my initial conversations with the men. Following this day, I was all too eager to learn more details about the men. Did they have wives, children, girlfriends, or other relatives in New York City and/or in their native countries? What did they think about the United States and New York City before they arrived and how have their thoughts now changed? I wanted to know more about their work experiences, but I was also intrigued to learn more about their everyday life experiences.

#### Making Sense of My Role as a “Nice Woman”

The above description about my entry into the field illustrated that these and all of my subsequent introductions with the men followed almost in formulaic fashion. After exchanging our names and handshakes, the men were curious about where I grew up and where my parents came from. Next they would always inquire about my age to which many reacted in disbelief, often assuming that I was in my late teens or in my early twenties. But the next likely question was whether or not I was married. Learning that I was married, each man was usually curious to know if my husband was *celoso* - the jealous type - and from time to time the men asked if they should “worry about speaking with me.”

On the day I met Jerome, our conversation began in a similar way. Feeling a bit exasperated, I asked him why he, like the others, reacted in such disbelief about my age and then about my marriage. Jerome explained to me that my actions and behavior were uncommon for a woman in their culture, especially for a married woman.

“You don’t look married. You look too young. You always come here by yourself. We never see your husband come to help you with the laundry. We never see you with children. And so many of us believe that you are not really married. It’s a lie, isn’t it? You are lying to us, but we understand.”

He went on to tell me that with the exception of the women who worked nearby, the women who passed them on the corner never talked to them. Basically, he spoke about four women who worked nearby - three women who worked in the laundromat and one young woman who worked in the corner deli shop. He explained,

“In Mexico, a woman doesn’t go outside to talk to a bunch of men. And by herself? No, no! Your parents will tell you the same. The women that come here don’t talk to us. Some of us know why you are here, but not everyone. They have the wrong idea. Where we come from, a woman by herself doesn’t stand with a lot of men to talk. You don’t see that unless you’re that kind of woman. Well excuse me, I am not saying that you are. But that’s why we say that you are lying to us. A man would never let his wife stand with strange men outside in public. But it’s different here in this country.”

The rules of conduct that I followed in my own personal life were ones I had to consciously recognize, modify and perhaps even at times disregard in order to engage in a more meaningful interaction with these men. Since only men looked for work at this particular site, it was obvious from my first visit that I, as a woman, did not belong in the context of this situation. Rather the men explained my presence on the corner by assigning me the role of a single woman or prostitute, despite knowing my explanation or the details of my personal life. My efforts fell short in dissuading them from these initial conceptions about me. This did not mean that my role as a university student or married woman was not accepted or taken seriously by some of the men. Most of the men believed these identities, although not from the onset of my fieldwork. The status of being a single woman, a married woman, a university student, and a prostitute, among others described later on, were roles that were sustained identities throughout the fieldwork process.<sup>88</sup> The above conversation with Jerome illustrated this and was representative of numerous opinions I received from the men who advised me to be aware of this cultural distinction in my conduct and behavior, then and in my future visits to the corner.

Following our introductions, a familiarity replaced some of the initial awkwardness and I felt more at ease hanging out with the men. Once a level of comfort was in place, I was not wary of speaking with the men, either individually or in groups, much like how I would behave with any group of male colleagues or friends. However, this level of comfort was neither expected nor accepted at first in this setting and

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<sup>88</sup> Goffman wrote, "As long as the dominion of the situated role is not challenged, other role identities, ones different from but not necessarily opposed to the officially available self, can be sustained, too." (1961: 133).

therefore was a constraint in my data collection. My engagement with the men was not necessarily an easy interaction for them to understand and follow.

At the start of my visits, the men did not entertain my questions in groups. Rather, whenever I directed a question to one of the men, the others would step aside, sometimes moving by several feet, so as to allow us some privacy. As Octavio told me, “*Bueno*, we all have our problems. And maybe he doesn’t want him or him (pointing to others) or me to know about them.” However, Jerome, Luis and others reminded me, ‘It doesn’t look right,’ thereby revealing to me how the men were also abiding by the cultural norms regarding negative sanctions towards a woman hanging out with a group of men in public. However, as friendships matured among certain groups of men, as did a level of trust in me and in my research, a level of comfort developed between us, so that it was eventually acceptable for me to speak with the men individually and in small groups.

There were times when my status was vulnerable, even though most of us will agree that often researchers hold more power in relation to the positions of others. My vulnerability often occurred during situations when the men withheld information and refused to answer questions. This mostly involved conversations concerning sexuality and sexual relations with women and/or men. The men wanted to present themselves to me as “good” men, thereby obscuring aspects of their lives that I might have perceived as poor or corrupt, thus labeling them as “bad” men.

One example followed conversation I had with Santiago during which a friend walked up to him and an exchange was made. I did not see what the exchange involved since Santiago’s back was turned to me and I concluded that I was not welcome to

observe the transaction. Returning to me, Santiago quickly resumed our conversation only I interrupted asking to know what had happened. He told me, "It's nothing." I persisted in asking him to trust me when he replied, "Nothing important. Something you don't tell a nice woman." At the time, the status of a "nice woman" was welcome since it apparently placed me in a respectful role among the men on the corner. However, I soon learned that this role would also result in social interactions that were both rewarding and disappointing.

Later, I learned from one of Santiago's roommates who was standing nearby that the exchange involved a woman's phone number. I inquired for more information and received a lot of bashful sighs and laughs which were all reactions aimed at averting my questions. The roommate was concerned about Santiago's reputation and about discrediting him in front of me, "If I tell you, you won't like him anymore." Finally, I asked him if the woman was a prostitute. His roommate answered, "Well, not really." Like Santiago, his roommate was quick to inform me that my gender and my role as a respected woman among the majority of the men at the site prevented him from sharing the details with me.

By sharing details with me about sexual relationships, Santiago's roommate and others thought I would be offended and thus discouraged from speaking with him and with Santiago in future visits. No matter how much I assured them that our friendships would not be affected, I was unable to convince him and Santiago that I valued their honesty, regardless of details. Even though I eventually received their nods of understanding, I could not whole-heartedly trust them to feel comfortable with me in discussing sexuality and relationships with men and women. Much like what Ruth

Horowitz discovered in her research of male youth gangs in Chicago, being a woman controlled and influenced my observations, activities and interpretations in the field.<sup>89</sup>

While this event was frustrating and even disappointing, the situation also indicated the extent to which it was important for the men to make me believe their self-presentation as “good” men. In analyzing the representations and practices of the various men, I decided that their accounts were both factual and, at the same time, constructed to include or leave out details they felt were either appropriate or inappropriate for me to know. The role of a “nice woman” that was constructed for me and the role of the “good man” that they had constructed for themselves placed me in both a respected position, but also kept me at a distance from the men.

However, the marginal position of a ‘nice woman’ was not entirely disadvantageous. This assigned role allowed me to participate in activities on the corner, but also in their personal lives. Many of the men told me that they felt less threatened by a woman hanging out with them, once they established that I wasn’t working for the police or *la Migra*. My female companionship was even inviting to the men, especially since their own interactions with women in the wider society were limited and few. I was often invited to their homes to meet their families and my role even allowed an assumed, though basic level of trust among family members, especially with the women. Some of the men lived with their wives, sisters or nieces, in New York, although this was not prevalent in the living arrangements or in the migration experience of the majority of the men at my site. These women described feelings of loneliness and timidity about

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<sup>89</sup> Horowitz, Ruth (1985) *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicago Neighborhood*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

meeting people in the neighborhood and they welcomed my visits and the men were grateful for my company.

The role of a “nice woman” allowed a closeness with the men particularly because my presence and identity as a woman was perceived as unthreatening but instead supportive and comforting. In fact, some of the men thought of me as an extended relative and accordingly were invested in maintaining a respectful and proper status for me on the corner. The men who labeled me a “nice woman” became my friends and in time they were engaged in helping me with my project. They also considered themselves “decent, hardworking, proper” men who were different from the “bad, lazy or *malcriados* (spoiled or poorly brought up)” who only came to the corner to “find trouble” and were not diligent about finding work.

This second group of men, who were often labeled as *malcriados* also doubted the substance of my project and my motivations for hanging out on the corner. In turn, they explained my presence on the corner by identifying me as a prostitute. However, this was also true about men with whom I had only a brief acquaintance. As a result, the topic of sex and relationships with women or men was easier to approach with this particular group of men.

“*Te invito para una aventura?*”<sup>90</sup> This proposition for an affair was the start of my first conversation with Ricardo. At age twenty-three, Ricardo moved from Panama to New York City, amidst the tense post-September 11 climate. There was a slight stagger in my step towards Ricardo, not because of his proposition, but rather because I was unsure of what I would say or do next. My thoughts fell behind my pace and soon we were shaking hands and making our introductions.

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<sup>90</sup> *Aventura* is a Spanish expression for a fling or brief affair.

“You have to be careful here. Not everyone knows what you are doing. I didn’t know you were a student. You know, not all of these men are good. They’ll try to get inside your head, especially if they don’t see your husband with you. Don’t tell them... Aren’t you curious to be with another man? You want to know more about us? Don’t fall in love with us. We’re trouble... Seriously, you are lucky to have a good marriage. But, if you’re interested? I’ll pay you well if you go with me.”

When I asked my friends on the corner to explain Ricardo’s behavior and proposition, they were amazed and even shocked that I did not reach this understanding on my own. Amused at my naiveté, men like Gerry explained and concluded to me that,

Yes, you’re hispana but you don’t understand because you are also americana. Understand... Life is different here... Ask your parents, they understand.

Much like Paul Rabinow’s reflections of his fieldwork in Morocco, I discovered that the men in my study were interpreting their own culture and that of the fieldworker, too (Rabinow, 1977). A common ethnicity and language was substantive in our engagement and in the development of our friendships, but it was not all that mattered in closing the insider-outsider divide between us. In this case, it was clear that culture played a powerful role in defining the situation. This is corroborated in studies like Carol Stack’s research of kinship networks in black communities in the city of Jackson Harbor. Stack found that the researcher is always defined as an outsider among those observed regardless of ties to the community or shared cultural background. The onus is on the researcher to learn how to navigate within their everyday world (Stack, 1974).

The above provides an interesting twist in the stranger/intimacy model discussed in qualitative methodology. Duneier writes in *Sidewalk* (1999: 338), “participant observers need not be fully trusted in order to have their presence at least accepted.” The understanding and presumption is that trust and familiarity opens up pathways for communication and detailed knowledge about the persons one is studying. However, paradoxically, I also found the opposite occurring and as a result, my familiarity also limited discussion and constrained some of the information I was learning about the men. While there were greater prospects in learning more about the men as I got to know them better, there were also limitations on what we could discuss. The men did not want to discuss their sex lives with me, regardless of whether or not they had sexual encounters and/or relationships with women or men in this country. This was especially true if the men had wives or girlfriends in their home countries. Events like a club or restaurant outing with women who were not their wives or girlfriends were not the slices of life they wanted me to know about, at least not in great detail. Their desire was to uphold my role in the field as a “nice woman” and to maintain a quality image of themselves as good, hardworking, respectable, and honorable men.

All the distinct positions of my identity interacted and contradicted each other, changing over time in differing circumstances. They affected the way I represented myself, my work, and the meanings I accorded to the social situation. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class, to name a few, also influenced the way people perceived me. The opposing identities of an “outsider” and an “insider” caused certain conceptual and practical dilemmas. To some extent, I considered myself an “outsider”. Fellow colleagues and I, even some of the day laborers, placed me in a powerful position

compared to the men in my research because I was a United States citizen and had been socialized in the American context, despite having immigrant parents and relatives. Still, as someone whose parents are of South American nationality, having a familiarity with a particular Latino culture and having grown up speaking both English and Spanish, I was also considered, to some extent, an “insider.”

As demonstrated throughout this text, the men at *la parada* were not passive, powerless, gender-neutral objects, but rather actors who instituted change, created knowledge, and contributed in shaping the social worlds around them. As another participant in the fieldwork process, I was compelled to recognize the multiple realities and shifting identities of the various actors, and in this setting this included the researcher herself.

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