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## **Marking the Queue: Latino Day Laborers in New York's Street Corner Labor Markets**

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“Making the Queue: Latino Day Laborers in New York’s Street Corner Labor Markets”<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract

While there have been many studies researching the incorporation of immigrants in the general labor market, few studies highlight the immigrants’ understandings of their own participation as influenced by positions of race and ethnicity, particularly in the informal economy. This presentation concerns the social processes and organization of day labor among Latino and Eastern European immigrants and American citizens at an informal worksite in New York City. The overall research project challenges conventional perceptions about day laborers, explores the social construction of identity, and analyzes the impact race and ethnicity in New York City has on the life experiences of the men. More importantly, this paper explores the active role the men play in their own work experience and describes a “visual queue” frequently used by the “employers” and by the workers. The research highlights the shaping, negotiation, and presentation of identity as it relates to the employment experiences of the different groups of men working at this site and uncovers how these larger social processes are manifested in the visible and less visible everyday practices on a New York City street corner.

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## Introduction

Historically New York City has been a gateway for newly arrived immigrants. The focus of my research is a group of men, mostly immigrants without legal residency status, who are working as day laborers at an open street corner market site in Brooklyn, New York. The overall research project focuses on how the men interpret their work experience and how day labor intersects the study of work with the study of inequality, culture and identity in the local and global contexts. The end of this past fall marked the completion of two and a half years of qualitative fieldwork.

In 1999, Abel Valenzuela, Jr. conducted a random sample survey called the “Day Labor Survey” in southern California.<sup>2</sup> This was a comprehensive survey of 481 day laborers across 87 hiring sites that also included 45 in-depth interviews along with 10 case studies of the hiring sites. Later, Abel Valenzuela and Edwin Meléndez replicated this study in 2003 called the New York Day Labor Survey (NYDLS), the first of its kind in New York.<sup>3</sup> Survey data of this population is invaluable to understanding the descriptive characteristics of this population as well as an examination of the activities and processes shaping this situation. My research makes a complementary contribution to survey studies like these by utilizing qualitative methods of analysis to explore immigration, labor, identity, and culture in a social phenomenon that has only begun to be fully researched in New York City.

Studying day labor in New York City offers a unique opportunity to challenge the conventional perceptions we have about day labor and about the populations of persons who day labor. More and more, one sees a similar scene of street corner markets across the various

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<sup>2</sup> Valenzuela Jr., Abel. 2002. “Working on the Margins in Metropolitan Los Angeles: Immigrants in Day-Labor Work.” *Migraciones Internacionales*. Vol. 1 (2):5-28.

<sup>3</sup> Valenzuela, Jr., Abel and Edwin Meléndez. 2003. *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.

boroughs of New York City. The scenes may be similar, but the actors are different – men and women of different age, race, ethnicity, and class backgrounds who participate in this type of employment. The New York City context offers the opportunity to readdress day labor in studies that are not only limited to immigration and the informal economy, but to include day labor in studies of inequality, the working poor and in the changing nature of work in today’s society.

### Site Description

My fieldwork took place at one casual day labor site that covered the four corners of a street intersection in Brooklyn, NY. When my visits first began, the men occupied the four corners of one street intersection. One year following my first visits, the workspace extended across the avenue covering the four corners of three street intersections. Whatever these corners may have served for passersby or residents in the past, this space had changed from being a geographical space to a more human one.

The men patiently stand or sit while they wait for someone to pull up along the curb looking to hire “*un buen trabajador*” 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 them make good use of the spaces along the way – sitting on stoops near the laundromat or along the cement base enclosing the nearby cemetery, leaning on fences that surround the nearby train yard, or just sitting on the pavement outside of the corner bagel and deli shop. But when the men hear the beeps or honks of a truck or just of an ordinary car that is pulling up beside the curb, the men are at full attention. 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.

## The Day Laborers

The Latino men comprised the major group of day laborers looking for work at this site.<sup>4</sup> They were mostly of Mexican national origin and the majority of the men were from Puebla. There were also many men from Ecuador, Colombia and Panama. From my observations, the average count of Latinos working at this site on any given day was thirty men. The other major constituent was Eastern European – Polish and Russian men. They were an obvious group in number as well with a strong presence of at least twenty men on the corner. Together, I called these two groups of men the “Regulars” since they came to look for work daily on these corners. Besides the Regulars, there was a third group of men who day labored who I called the “Temps”. The Temps were U.S. citizens, mostly African Americans but there were some Puerto Ricans, too. Their visits to the corner occurred less frequently and mostly during the summer months – June through August/September.

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 of age, but mostly 18 and 19 year olds. Age, race and ethnicity were some of the varying characteristics among the day laborers, while gender was not. All of the day laborers who came to these corners were men. I raise this distinction to add another benefit to studying day labor in New York. In the NYDLS, Valenzuela and Meléndez located two sites in New York City where women also day labor (2003). I had visited one of these sites in Brooklyn where Polish women look for work on a street corner and are usually hired by Hasidic families.<sup>5</sup> Much like in my research, New York City offers the opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup> “Latino” is used when referring to the men as one group. Otherwise, the specific national origin and/or ethnicity will be the reference. While even this reference remains broad as there are also distinctions within these categories, there is no universal term and distinctions in usage relate to geography as well as to politics.

<sup>5</sup> LeDuff, Charlie. 2001. “Brooklyn Poles and Jews Refashion Old World Ties.” *New York Times*, March 28. LeDuff writes 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.

carry out comparative studies of different populations who day labor challenging the current discourse. The interaction of gender in this setting, both among the participants who day labor and the field researcher, herself, introduced important methodological issues that were both advantageous and disadvantageous to the collection and interpretation of social meaning. I address these interactions and the implications of gender in this setting in a separate paper.

### Research Questions and Methodology

An important and less explored area on day laborers is the structure of operations involved in working on the corner, that is what I have called, “doing the corner”. One of the primary ambitions of my research was to map out the details of the organization of the work experience, including the population of workers and “employers”, the opportunities and drawbacks of this type of work, the parameters surrounding accepting/declining work and the informal system of wages set up by the men. The second and more significant research focus was to challenge the conventional perceptions we have about day labor and about the population of persons who day labor. My research answers the following three questions.

1. How and why do these men come to participate in this form of self-employment over traditional work in the general economy?
2. How and why do these men negotiate and shape their identity as it relates to employment, but also in the group organization of one’s peers, and in an understanding of culture?
3. What else does it mean to “do the corner”? What are the unexplored purposes of the corner that are secondary to finding work?

The “data” I collected focused on four areas, each addressing New York City *and* the native countries of my participants:

1. the circumstances of the migration experience,
2. the employment experience, both in formal and informal work,
3. living situation, including familial and non-familial relationships, and

4. expectations and concerns about their future.

The majority of the men in this project did not have legal residency status and thus they were out of touch with formal networks, particularly in employment. Only estimates can be approximated for the undocumented population living in New York City. Moreover, institutions like the Bureau of Labor Statistics do not have precise employment measures for work that is relegated to the informal economy. Thus, precise statistical information and extensive characteristics about this population is lacking.<sup>6</sup> However, significant and timely research endeavors, like Valenzuela and Melendez's NYDLS, are currently underway in providing a more extensive scrutiny of this population and the day labor market. My research is a qualitative analysis that is an efficient and effective method in achieving a more in-depth understanding about this community.<sup>7</sup>

The bulk of my research was collected through interviews and observations carried out at the site unless better circumstances were available. Sometimes I interviewed the men at home or in a neighborhood park near the field site. A flexible schedule of questions and key topics guided the in-depth interviews that lasted from two to three hours documenting personal histories. The selection of the participants in the project was made on a voluntary basis. I began my inquiries with a small group of the men and then expanded the number of participants through personal references. I also spoke with family members, nearby business owners and local residents, although these sessions were not as extensive as were the in-depth interviews

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<sup>6</sup> 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 Smith, Robert, "Mexicans: Social, Educational, Economic, and Political Problems and Prospects in New York," pgs. 275-300, in Nancy Foner's (ed.) *New Immigrants in New York*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

<sup>7</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).

with the men. I met with organizers and leaders of formal institutions. And finally, I gathered census data, state and federal government reports, i.e. Immigration and Naturalization Service, local newspaper articles, and observations from community events.

The focus of this paper is on the second research question (see p.5) and particularly in one area of the employment experience – the implications of identity, specifically race and ethnicity, in the hiring process. While there have been many studies researching the incorporation of immigrants in the general labor market, few studies highlight the immigrants' understandings of their own participation as influenced by positions of race and ethnicity and particularly in the informal economy (Stoller, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, 2001; Waters, 2001; Menjivar, 2000; Kasinitz, 1992).

Roger Waldinger's research and 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 become the mechanism through which employers will categorically sort persons into different types of work (Lieberson, 1980; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Borjas, 1991; Waldinger, 1996; 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. 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; Lieberson, 1980; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Holzer, 1996; Bean, et al., 2000; Espenshade, 2000; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003).



My research uncovers a similar segmented work structure that follows what Waldinger and Lichter referred to as the hiring queue where persons are “ordered” by ethnicity and more significant, by race and nationality in the hiring process (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Waldinger, 1996; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Lieberson, 1980). Even though day labor is relegated to studies in the informal economy, and my particular research covered a site that was not a formal work setting i.e. day labor center, but rather an open street corner market, my research found similar organization processes and structures that were representative of formal work settings (Sassen and Smith, 1991; Sassen, 1998). While contributing to Waldinger’s work and similar studies of segmented labor markets (Piore, 1979; Reimers, 1985; Light, 1995; Waldinger, 1996), my research, however, focuses not on the employers, but on those who are hired, that is, the day laborers themselves.

My findings argue against the perception that these men are docile bodies working within these processes. This is a likely presumption given the undocumented status of the majority of the men working at this site. Rather, my research describes *how* the men participate and *why* the men participate in this hiring queue, including how the men have their own hiring queue for the potential employer. Thus, my research explores the active role the men play in their own work experience, i.e. the resources utilized and the strategies carried out in order to influence and manipulate their own participation in this market. Moreover, I will describe the centrality and relevance of a visual queue used by the employers *and* by the workers in the hiring process. As I do throughout the overall project, I want to emphasize the significance of the worker’s own agency – the practices and strategies the men employ in their own work experience.

## The Hiring Queue

First, I will explain the hiring queue that has been socially constructed according to a stigma about the men who day labor. I will explain how this social labeling of a “real” or “good” day laborer had varying implications on the different groups of men looking for work at this site. Then I will briefly describe the men’s own hiring queue for the employers and the implications of the visual queue used by both the employers and the day laborers.

### *Shifting Stigmas of Identity*

We often turn to Erving Goffman’s definition of a stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and that reduces the bearer “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. It is this social labeling that underlines the hiring queue at this site where persons are 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 men in my research are often considered a source of problems contributing to a sense of public disorder. These men become stigmatized in the public’s eye because of their visibility (Liebow, 1967; Anderson, 1988) – looking for work on the street corner, living in the open, like many of those who are homeless, or in constructed media images of men being led away by law enforcement. Even though these men are visible, their plight, specifically as members of the working poor, is practically invisible, especially since they, themselves, do not always address their needs publicly, i.e. to local officials or social services, because of their undocumented residency status. While underreported as a result of an undocumented 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). As a result, these men are both legally and socially on the margins of civil society.

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 negative 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 also with some of the more usual “employers”, I learned about the stigma of a “good worker” or “real day laborer”.

### *The “Real” Day Laborer*

A “good” or “real” day laborer is 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 described as “Mexican”. This stigma of the typical day laborer mostly translated as advantageous in securing work for the Mexican and for those mistaken as Mexican men at my site who were “the desirable” in the social order of day labor on the street corner. Ethnicity and more important nationality, along with residency status, became the organizing principle upon which the hiring queue was structured (Tienda, 1989).

Gerry, who turned twenty-four this past December, explained it best about how he and the other Mexican men were more sought after as workers than the other groups on the corner. This year marked his third year working at this site. During one of my early visits, I asked Gerry about his 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."

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."

So on the one hand, a Mexican man, like Gerry or Louis, or a Mexican-looking man, like Ronaldo who is from Ecuador, is assigned a top spot in the hiring queue at the street corner. However, this does not mean that they will advance in other areas and thus they remain at the bottom of society's larger social order. Moreover, they also remain at the bottom of the economic order since finding adequate employment for long periods of time is more difficult to secure than for what we would presume to be the advantage for the U.S. citizens looking for work at my field site.

This brings me to the Americans, the Temps, and where they fit in the hiring queue at my site. The Temps have a different self-presentation for their potential "employers". Their words and dress resemble the latest trends of an urban youth culture. Often the Regulars pass the time reading the newspaper or speaking with one another. The Temps on the other hand pass the time in a more animated way. Wanting to work, they yell at the cars and trucks that drive by. Their voices are loud and their bodies are jumping. They mimic each other, but mostly others. And they speak in English, something you rarely hear from the men who stand on these corners.

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

As mentioned, the Regulars distinguished themselves from the Temps and were intolerant of these “young Americans” looking for work on the corner (Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996). Ronaldo, 27 at the time, is from Cuenca, Ecuador. 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 anywhere. Hes visto lo que paso? Did you see what happened? I lost maybe 80, 100 dollars. Bueno, me voy a parar alla. 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.*

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 25 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?

Richie, a twenty-year old Puerto Rican man was also one of the Temps on the corner. He often wore a handkerchief of the Puerto Rican flag wrapped around his head. The patriotic colors matched the waistband patch of his low-rise Tommy Hilfiger jeans. 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.

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 (Borjas and Tienda, eds., 1985). My fieldwork supports Reimers' findings since the lack of English fluency did present a barrier to the successful management of the men's everyday lives. However, my fieldwork also reveals the paradox of

*native* English fluency where the Temps experience a handicap in acquiring jobs *because* of their fluency – a discernible symbol of their nationality (Kasinitz, 1992; Waldinger, 1996; Waters, 2001; Stoller, 2002). Much like 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, my study also shows how and why immigrants were favored over U.S. citizens as “desirable workers” (Tienda, 1989; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Newman, 1999; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Kasinitz and Rosenberg found that black immigrants were favored over African Americans and non-Puerto Rican Latinos were favored over Puerto Ricans. Beyond immigrant and native status at my site, potential employers stopped their cars in front of those men they labeled as “desirable workers”, who were the Regulars, and avoided the Temps because of lacking the status of a “real day laborer”.

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 (7) were Panamanian, Colombian or 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.”

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 seek work on this street corner alongside immigrant men or "illegal aliens," must mean that they are undesirable as workers in the general population (Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Newman, 1999). If they cannot find work, even work in McDonald's like Danny said, something must be 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 particular occupations (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977).

Thus, the Temps are marginalized seeing as "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 other immigrant men who looked for work at this site (Liebow, 1967, Anderson, 1988; Duneier, 1992). 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 standing on the corner. This is not to say that the Temps were never hired. However, they were not considered as model or ideal workers. In fact, the Temps were mostly considered appropriate or "right" for certain types of jobs (Lieberson, 1980; Tienda, 1989; Reskin and Roos, 1990). The Temps were overlooked as a population of persons who are part of the working poor and who also day labor.



Katherine Newman's study of fast-food workers in Harlem shows just how employers' preferences for hiring according to group-specific preferences can yield results like these (1999). Employers were less likely to hire blacks than others and were more likely to hire immigrants than U.S. citizens (Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Waldinger, 1996; Newman, 1999; Waters, 2001; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). In my research, the stigma of who is 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 (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Lieberman, 1980; Tienda, 1989; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Holzer, 1996; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Bean, 2000; Waters, 2001; Waldinger, 1996). However, this hiring queue also worked against the Latino immigrants who were also black which brings me to the visual queue that I referred to earlier. There was a visual queue that also played an integral role in the hiring process (Goffman, 1959).

### *The Practice of Stigma and Identity*

So far, we have seen that the immigrants were given the top spot in the hiring queue while the 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 have called the Regulars. However, they did not receive the top spot in the hiring queue along with the Mexican and even the Polish immigrants. These men were black Latinos and often fell to the bottom of the queue along with the African Americans (Kasinitz, 1992; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Waters, 1999; Waters, 2001). 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 standing on these corners were Latino immigrants. However, this all-encompassing label broke down into two major groups at this site. The Mexican and Ecuadorans made up the first group and the Panamanians and Colombians, who were mostly black men, comprised the second group. Race was decisive, but more significant was the juxtaposition of nationality and skin color 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 (Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; Romero, et al., 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). 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)". At my field site, the black Latinos lost social status by being identified as African Americans, who were the undesirable workers at this site.

One of the older Latinos, Michael or *Compadre*, as I called him, was thirty-five years old and born in Panama. *Compadre* was considered the foreman of the group of young black Latinos and was even a surrogate father figure for them. During a visit, *Compadre* told me,

I stay with these boys. They need 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*. And that's not good. *No importa el idioma* (language doesn't matter). Just this (points to the skin on the back of his 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. Moreover, this picture clearly depicted how the negotiation of space on the corner located ethnicity 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 (Anderson, 1990).

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. And so in addition to possessing the desirable traits of “good workers”, the Mexican 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 Latino immigrants and those who were African American U.S. citizens.

*Compadre* and the other black 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 (Anderson, 1990). 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 (Gans, 1979).

As described earlier, the immigrant men, particularly the Latino men, were favored by potential “employers”. And so Octavio or *Compadre* who were both 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 Louis 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 (Gans, 1979) and were significant in facilitating the process of distinguishing the men as either the desirable or the undesirable workers for the potential employers. The above illustrated the efforts of *Compadre* and the other black Latinos to minimize the chance that potential “employers” would miss this difference, their immigrant and Latino status, among the American men 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.

Lastly, the literature on job placement also includes a considerable emphasis on the role of social networks (Massey, et al., 1987; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). In addition to what I have described in the hiring process as selecting workers according to a constructed image of the “real” or “good” day laborer, employers also relied on kinship groups in the hiring process. This preference resulted in a dependence on ethnic networks (Massey, et al., 1987; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Light and Rosenstein, 1995; Waldinger, 1996; Kim, 1999; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). 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 houses he owned in the Borough Park neighborhood, home to a large Hasidic

community. Mr. Kaplan told me that he had hired two men from the corner in the previous summer – who were both from México. When he needed more work done, he hired the same two men along with a couple of their friends on 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.”

When I asked him about the African Americans on 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 the Jerome and Louis] what to do. But these young men are 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.”

Similar scenarios involving the men 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. Many of the men expressed a tendency to compete for certain jobs, not only based on pay or task, but also based on the recommendations from other day laborers and sometimes this was also only based on the race or ethnicity of the potential “employer”.

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

Latinos gathered on the corner. 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 men in company. Disappointing sighs and the dismissive waving of arms of frustration followed from the others.

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 slight 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 men 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. Later, I learned from the Mexican men who were standing beside me that the Hasidic man was a dishonest man. They heard from one of the others that he had cheated three men out of money and so they agreed not to work for him since he couldn’t be trusted.

Much like on this 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. However, such an incident varies according to circumstance, if for instance, the men can afford on that day to decline a work opportunity. Sometimes, responses like this one were not always predictable. 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 the employers, the day laborers’ hiring queue relied on previous experiences, stereotypes and cultural beliefs that resulted in a constructed “taste” or preference for a specific accepted and desired *jefe*, much like the real or good day laborer (Bourdieu, ).

## Conclusion

This paper has raised three challenges in the study of new immigration to New York City and also in the work activities that are relegated to the informal economy, specifically, day labor.

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.

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. And race can no longer be considered the essential characteristic of blacks living in the United States. This was obvious 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.

This street intersection was a physical space, but it was also a space that contained and communicated meaning in its purpose, function, and perception. In this project, the action that took place at this intersection was visibly economic, but all of the practices, seen and unseen, carried out at this site, were all social in nature. Identity is a constant process of negotiation composed of the dictating situations of race, ethnicity, culture, and the experiences of these circumstances. My research enables an understanding of the social practices on the corner uncovering these tensions. 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.

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