

# Introduction

The last two decades have seen a dramatic rise in the number of informal day labor sites throughout the continental United States, to the point that they have become a ubiquitous presence in most of the country's urban areas. These *paradas* or *esquinas*—as day laborers call them in Spanish—are usually inhabited by migrant Latin American men, mostly recent “undocumented” migrants, who stand on the curbside of outlying traffic corridors or in the parking lots of mega retail stores, waiting for someone to stop and hire them. In California, which has one of the highest number of undocumented migrants in the country (Valenzuela 2003; Hofer, Rytina, and Campbell 2006), day laborers work on construction sites, paint or work on houses and offices, maintain gardens, move furniture, and do other odd jobs. Although historically grounded in much older socio-economic processes and labor relations, both in the United States and in Latin America (e.g., Vanackere 1988; Townsend 1997; Ngai 2004; De Genova 2005), day labor today is embedded in the post-9/11 political and social climate and shaped by increasing control over the criminalized status of “illegal immigrants” (Andreas 2003; Inda 2006; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Because day laborers literally stand in plain view—unlike other undocumented migrants who work behind the scenes in factories,

restaurants, or in domestic capacities—they have come to embody popular stereotypes of the “undesirable immigrant” who has entered the country illegally from Mexico, is unassimilated, and publicly engages in the shadow labor market in a way that is detrimental to the national economy (Esbenshade 2000; Chavez 2001). And while new sites seem to appear everywhere overnight and even make the news once in a while, day laborers are relatively absent from most studies on migration in this country.

This absence might have to do with a politics of representation in the social sciences, not only of migrants, but also of the poor in general. In an effort to demonstrate the social value of marginalized populations, researchers and activists alike tend to emphasize the organization and structure of these groups and to focus on their cultural, ethnic, and political links to social movements striving for inclusion. This, in part, is a response to earlier sociological approaches to poverty that centered on the idea of “aberrance” as a key factor of marginalization, effectively blaming the disenfranchised—usually racialized minorities—for their lot and politically constructing poverty as a product of chaos to be acted upon and ordered. Edward Banfield (1958), for example, addressed poverty in southern Italy as the effect of “amoral familism,” which, in conjunction with the particular form of the Italian state, rendered people unable to have economic and community-oriented behavior that would enable the development of financially progressive practices. Poverty, in this perspective, was a function of aberrant cultural practices that affected the social, psychological, and political development of the region.

The now classical “street corner” ethnographies like William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1993 [1943]), Elijah Anderson’s *A Place on the Corner* (2003 [1976]), and Elliot Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* (2003 [1967]) all set out, in part, to argue against notions related to “aberrance” and to demonstrate that there were internal rationalities that structured social interactions behind the behavior of the people—all members of the “underclass”—that they studied. Rationality as opposed to chaos was also the intent of Oscar Lewis’s (1966, 1961) concept of the “culture of poverty,” which suggested that the poor’s responses and attitudes toward the structures of inequality to which they were subjected were perpetuated through the socialization of children, thus constituting the development of particular subcultural traits. Tragically, perspectives like Lewis’s were also

used “against” the poor in policies that—like in the infamous Moynihan Report—took the disorganization of African American life as the result of self-perpetuating cultural practices, disputing the idea that they were only the effect of discrimination, unemployment, or poor living conditions. This meant that policy had to address the psychosocial conditions of individuals and not the structural constraints to which they were subjected (Parker and Kleiner 1970: 516–517). Many reactions to these blame-the-victim approaches tend to overdetermine the effectiveness of responses to poverty in daily life, thus centering on friendship, alternative ways of understanding family, political articulation, social movements, and participation in illegal activities as a form of subsistence and empowerment.

*Paradas*, on the other hand, are messy places frequented by men who are usually strangers to each other and who many times live in distant neighborhoods and only congregate where their labor might be needed. Informal day labor sites are, in other words, complex settings where it is hard to find processes of social organization that could result, for example, in political mobilization or even strong support networks among peers. The nature of day labor makes such processes virtually impossible because there is a constant tension between individual gain and peer support that, at least in Berkeley, destined all association between jornaleros to disintegration. It is thus hard to make arguments about social mobilization and political organization among the men, whose visibility on the street—dark, many times dirty and destitute men—also makes them somewhat shady characters.

Jornaleros’ inability to develop steady working conditions that provide economic and emotional stability and increase agency to act in the worlds they inhabit make them more likely than other migrants to end up on the street without any form of protection and at the mercy of “the whole domain of infelicities and excuses on the part of the state” (Das 2004: 227). Yet some of the few ethnographic texts on day laborers spend a great deal of time and energy linking the sites to social organization (Malpica 2002), community formation (Pinedo Turnovsky 2006), and resistance to externally managed labor centers (Purser 2009). That these insipient forms of association lack any political or social clout explains why elsewhere in the literature on migration, day laborers seem to appear only tangentially, as members of a more general category of migrant—the

undocumented Hispanic or Latino migrant, for example—in more community- or even neighborhood-oriented studies (e.g., Dohan 2003).

This book takes a very different perspective. By choosing—rather finding—a site where migrants were not closely related and where national and regional origins varied, I offer a scenario that is closer to most contemporary urban settings; that is, an array of people living and working in a world they inhabit as individuals and whose understanding of the social, political, and economic conditions that affect them is compartmentalized and fractured (Ferguson 1999: 21). I follow the daily lives of two dozen Latin American day laborers working on the streets of Berkeley and present a more disjointed picture of what it means to live as an undocumented migrant, one in which social and political organization, and even friendship, are trumped by the very intense structures of exclusion to which jornaleros in Northern California—not the worst place to be undocumented in the United States—are subordinate. In doing so, I explore various spheres of experience—labor, exploitation, urban living, family life, gender, sexuality, and the ambiguous nature of being undocumented—linking them to debates about immigration, poverty, violence, and citizenship.

This ethnography offers a glimpse into the experience and daily lives of migrant Latin American men in the shifting political and social arena of immigration in the United States. I explore the ways in which this particular population can effectively live and work in Northern California without having access—or even the interest or will to gain access—to forms of organization that might help improve their lot. It is not too often that anthropologists and other academics stop to look at the mechanism through which people are unable to come together in any recognizable form. Harsh competition among peers, real and imagined state persecution, and the structural constraints implied in being *solo un mojado*, or “just a wetback,” come together, collude even, to shape the experience of men whose efforts to sustain themselves and their families inevitably fracture their relations to loved ones and disarticulate their self-image. With this I hope to push migration studies to consider the darker sides of some of the issues they tend to focus on. To wit: interconnection, resilience, agency, contestation, even social organization. To redeem the image of “migrants” we produce through our studies can hide the fact that not all

social groups are offered redemption, even in liberal Northern California where “everyone is welcome,” as well as in other less cosmopolitan regions of the United States and elsewhere. In the bastions of democracy and enlightenment that so often like to preach to others about the right way to do things, there are very effective, violently efficient in fact, articulations of labor, law, and social sanction of inequality (often hidden as tolerance of diversity) that generate an expendable labor force that is easily kept on the margins of inclusion, in part through its own agency.

Jornaleros must compete with each other. No matter how supportive they appear, they are, by the nature of their labor and living conditions, always at odds with one another, or at least trying to maintain some fiction of stability in a tense and fragile system of social relations that can shatter easily. The environment in which they live and work is one where even men with enough interest in and sense of justice find themselves drowning in the dangerous waters of bureaucracy, where the banality of the “run around” they get comes together with the fears of making themselves too visible. Finally, there is an argument about the role of rumor in the governance of this population that emerges toward the end of this account but that is latent throughout the chapters. Living the situations I describe—what the men in fact refer to as their *situación*—implies making decisions, some banal, others life changing, based on information that travels strange paths of uncertainty and shape-shifts constantly, to the point that the “reality” of an event can become so distorted that it loses its original content. This is made worse by the fact that such realities—shaped by rumors—seem to find validation in the men’s interpretations of their own experiences and in the feedback and confirmation they receive from others’ interpretation of similar events.

Rumors are set aside by immigration agents, the police, and other institutions as the product of misinformation: “We were looking for a particular person we knew was in the building, it’s not our fault people thought we were coming for them and their children,” to succinctly paraphrase some reactions to the *migra* panic I describe in chapter 7. But it is actually the very real certainty that immigration officers can appear anywhere, even potentially come into schools and take minors—“disappear them” as jornaleros used to refer to it on the corner—that keeps people in place and ultimately enables the relations and discrimination I describe. After all,

undocumented migrants continue to be seen as transgressors—*they* came here uninvited, *they* crossed the border, *they* broke the law—in a way that ignores the greater context within which these men come to and live in this country.

For me, while on the street, it became absurd to hear immigration debates on the news or to discuss the issue with people who engaged me in conversation off the corner. I saw no reason to address the “What should we do about immigration?” or “How should we control it?” questions that were, and still are, central to much of US politics. A week on the corner would show anyone that immigration is perfectly under control. What is being done is effective in keeping a needed and very cheap labor force on the margins of US society..

#### IMMIGRATION USA

Immigration, both as a national narrative and as part of the juridical political order, has always been central to the production of notions of US citizenship and has defined the parameters that distinguish “legal” and “illegal” aliens (Rosaldo 1994; Flores 1997; De Genova 2005; Inda 2006). Such distinctions are—not surprisingly—also tied to the country’s distribution of labor and production as they are inscribed through foreign and domestic policy into the greater context of global capitalism. Migrant fluctuations in the twentieth century have thus been linked to the distribution of low-wage and high-wage jobs. The two world wars, the Great Depression, and other political and economic junctures can all be linked to shifting tendencies in migration patterns; both legal and illegal, depending on the need for different types labor (Heyman 1990; Ngai 2004). These events can also, of course, be tied to particular immigration laws and politics that fluctuate in an ongoing dance off between migrant-friendly policies—including guest worker programs—and political environments that mobilize anti-immigration sentiments and encourage the stigmatization of migrants as social pariahs (Sacks 1994; Esbenshade 2000; Sayad 2004).

From the 1950s to early 1960s, the United States saw a shift from a predominantly European and high-wage-earning legal migrant popula-

tion to low-wage-earning migrants from countries of the so called Third World. Sassen (1988: 83–96) ties this change to fluctuations in global capitalism and a US labor market depleted by the reduction of domestic rural to urban migration within the country and the politicization of traditional low-wage workers such as African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and the like. During the same period, Latin America and other regions went through a process of proletarianization, which led a great number of people into wage labor in ways that reconfigured structures of production and social organization—like feminizing the workforce in many settings—that also set the stage for migration to the United States.

Globalization has rearticulated the relations of production, the flow of capital, and migration patterns throughout the world, outsourcing certain types of unskilled labor from the industrialized centers of the North Atlantic (Sassen 1988; Trouillot 2003; Ong 2006), while at the same time concentrating vast populations of service sector and informal workers in its urban centers (Sassen 1999; Zolniski 2006). Thus, along with the concentration of financial, management, and service sector industries in some of the world's main urban areas, these global cities attract an increasing number of unskilled and marginalized laborers—many times migrants—who enter the labor market through the subsequent process of urban expansion and gentrification. The building industry, specialty markets and restaurants, and cleaning and servicing sectors all expand and require vast amounts of workers whose language skills and know-how need not be elaborate (Sassen 1988: 145). Zolniski (2006) has analyzed this phenomenon in the links between Silicon Valley and the expanding informal labor market that must inevitably sustain its infrastructure. In his rendering, low-skilled service sector jobs tied to the technology industry—those that cannot be exported, such as janitorial work—open up work settings for unskilled migrant populations, which in Northern California have been mainly Mexicans and other Latin Americans. He looks at the various aspects of this articulation of labor and the political and social mobilizations it makes possible. Globalization and its flows of capital and technology have thus restructured labor relations at a local level, where migrants and their descendants emerge as a particular version of the labor force that to some degree goes hand in hand with the lumpenization of other

parts of the region's one-time proletarian African American and white laborers (Bourgeois and Schonberg 2009).

The effects of the rise of urban centers of finance and power, however, are diverse and contradictory. While global cities have provided spaces of political mobilization for the disenfranchised and marginal, they have also reshaped the structural reproduction of inequality in ways that ultimately tie social exclusion back into the world economy (De Genova 2005). Migration studies, again, seems to counterweigh poverty and exclusion with emergent political organization and the restructuring of traditional household, gender, and kinship ties that enable the inscription of migrants into an increasingly multicultural configuration of politics and culture (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; González-López 2005; Smith 2005). While I acknowledge the importance of these perspectives, my own experience on the street led me to wonder about much of the optimism, sometimes overt, many times tacit, that can be read between the lines of these studies, even in light of their critical perspectives. During the financial crisis of 2007–2008, within which this ethnography is set, many of the migrants I met “looked” different from what other scholars have described. *Jornaleros* were part of a particularly gendered cohort of migrants, all men among men; “households” were not common and were limited to a few brothers or cousins living together; and political organization was not only nonexistent but talked about as undesirable. Furthermore, this gendered cohort of workers was not concentrated geographically in bounded labor camps that would explain such characteristics (e.g., Ramphele 1993; Benson 2008). The men, in fact, were “free” to choose their places of residence, the corners they stood on, and neighborhoods they lived in, and they had access—theoretically—to certain services. While labor centers, legal aid, and medical and other services were available to *jornaleros*, the very conditions of these men's lives structured the impossibility of effectively using them in most cases.

#### THE SANCTITY OF SANCTUARY IN THE POST-9/11 ERA

That I see *jornaleros* as inherently devoid of political or social recognition does not mean they exist within a social vacuum. The configurations of

urban living described above, in the United States, have given rise to social movements for migrant recognition and protection that affect some aspects of everyday life for the men I studied. The Bay Area's generally liberal outlook on most political issues set it at the heart of the sanctuary movement that in the 1980s sought to counteract the federal government's reticence to grant asylum or other protected status to Guatemalan and Salvadoran migrants fleeing US-sponsored civil wars (Coutin 1993; Loescher 1993; Bilke 2009). Cities like San Francisco and Berkeley passed local resolutions explicitly aimed at providing safe haven for people who otherwise might be deported back to a war zone. These resolutions grew into citywide policies that generally dissuaded local law enforcement and government officials from asking any person about immigration status, thus guaranteeing, to some extent, that migrants would feel confident about reporting crime to the police and, in general, feel free from persecution based on their degree of documentation. Sanctuary cities have also promoted policies that destabilize the social exclusion of undocumented migrants. Some US cities have proposed issuing the undocumented municipal IDs, including driver's licenses in some places, like New York City (Bilke 2009); more recently, California passed laws to help integrate foreign nationals of all kinds (Medina 2013), including providing an as yet undefined driving permit for undocumented migrants (Hurtado and Shoiche 2013). Under the argument that formally identifying this population regularizes their activities, facilitating their life—like allowing them to open bank accounts, as I discuss in chapter 6—these IDs contest the general move in the country to disallow the use of official IDs to people who are “illegal.”

While these practices fit into arguments about how rights, citizenship, and the political representation of marginalized minorities have become rearranged, especially within cities (Holston and Appadurai 1999; Sassen 2000; Holston 2008), they also serve to “confuse” the situation. In the Bay Area, sanctuary policies lead some people to believe that “undocumented” migrants are not harassed or sought by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE), the enforcement branch of the US Department of Homeland Security that for the most part Latin American migrants call *la migra*. The assumption that migrants are free from ICE or any other federal agencies aiming to control immigration, however, is not true in

any sense. For *la migra* conducts targeted raids in factories, restaurants, and other places, even within the boundaries of sanctuary cities where police officers are still required by law to inform any warrant-issuing institutions if they come across somebody whose name is in the system (Bilke 2009: 177). It is not surprising, then, that in the May 2006, 2007, and 2008 immigration marches in Oakland and San Francisco, both sanctuary cities, one of the most common chants was “*La migra, la policía, la misma porquería*,” that is, “*La migra and the police are the same filth*.”

This conflation of federal and local institutions into one hegemonic entity of surveillance and control is not simply a perception migrants have, but rather the effect of the hypercriminalization of migrants in the last decades. Especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, “illegal” immigration mutated in political discourse from a problem of labor and social resources to one of national security. The 9/11 Commission Report concluded, among other things, that to keep the country safe, control over the borders had to be achieved, and the report thus summoned local authorities to aid in the enforcement of immigration law (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004). Enforcement and surveillance were stepped up almost immediately after the attacks, and in 2002 the Department of Homeland Security made internal control of “undocumented immigrants” a priority (Aldana 2008: 1084). New policies effectively increased the problematization of the United States/Mexico and United States/Canada borders and generated an unprecedented increase in border policing. Since 9/11 the geography of the border has effectively shifted from relatively safe passages to dangerous dessert crossings ruled by drug- and migrant-smuggling mafias. Death on the border due to harsh conditions and violence thus increased dramatically (Inda 2006; Andreas 2003). People not only die abandoned in the dessert, or in the crossfire of gang and drug violence; they are now the victims of more elaborate crimes, like kidnapping and being held for ransom—usually demanded of family in the United States (Lacey 2009). Finally, as any middle-aged *jornalero* can attest, the price of crossing has increased exponentially, making the investment of migrating—with money borrowed from family, friends, loan sharks, or banks—an uncertain endeavor with no guarantee of returns and many possibilities of economic and personal loss.

But within the country, this new era of migrant surveillance has had the confounding effect of destabilizing the role and activities of different institutions that come into contact with migrant populations. Calling the police when in need might land a person in jail, some people say, and they can never be sure if the officers in the particular place are “racist” or not. This is in fact the rationale many men use to navigate the puzzling geography in the Bay Area, where they might not notice a change in the urban landscape while crossing from a sanctuary-rich environment to one without any such policies. In this brave new world of uncertainty, migrants come to doubt any and every institution they encounter, from the police to NGO staff, social workers, banks, pro bono legal aid, and—at least on the streets of Berkeley—even university students who take pictures or interview people. All such encounters can potentially result in a visit from *la migra*, because people on the corner explain unwarranted interactions with police and ICE as the results of giving out personal information of any kind. “Reality” on the corner thrives on rumor, and multiple stories about arrest, deportation, and disappearance abound on the street. These perceptions set the stage for how jornaleros understand their experience. *La situación*—the situation or the current state of things—is a function of how these men’s conditions of labor become inscribed in ambiguous practices of doubt and fear.

#### *LA SITUACIÓN: EVERYDAY VIOLENCE ON THE CORNER*

Jornaleros are thus integrated into the labor system in that they respond to market demands as a cheap alternative to legal and responsibly hired manual labor. They are, in other words, cost effective from the perspective of a society that has done little to train or provide them with social, economic, and political rights (Burawoy 1976; De Genova 2005). Their marginality assures their inability to access legalization processes and/or to effectively contest the effects of changing perceptions about migrant workers in times of economic stagnation. As will become clear in these pages, jornaleros also find themselves “on the edge,” so to speak, closer in many ways to becoming lumpenized (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), as the destitute alcoholic *borrachitos* they share the street with can attest.

On the corner a person can have a good month and make quite a bit of money—enough to send some home and still buy clothes and pay cell phone and other bills—and then, only a few weeks later, literally be out on the street. This precariousness is a function not only of the economy but of the ways the men handle money, their inability to effectively counter employer abuse, their state of mind—all elements that come under the sphere of experience jornaleros refer to as *la situación*. Although this term literally means “the [economic, labor] situation” in most cases, it is used ambiguously to describe the current state of a person’s life—the accumulated result of all the things he must deal with. *La situación* points to the combination of structural and intimate constraints that day laborers must navigate in day-to-day life, the petty violence of everyday existence as marginal subjects in US society. Day laborers’ *situación* can include the lack of work opportunities, low wages, employer abuse, health problems, family life, and political aspects like police control over public space and the proximity of the state’s repression machinery, embodied in *la migra*. *La situación* is a naturalized condition, to a certain degree external to the men’s ideas about the reach of their own agency, and thus paradoxically constitutes an internalized expression of their social exclusion, what Pierre Bourdieu has called symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004). For jornaleros in the Bay Area, symbolic violence articulates the reproduction of greater societal structures of exclusion through the men’s own agency in ways that relate to the racialization of the poor and their relation to state and local social services (Quesada 2011).

The central theme of my work follows the *everyday violence* that life on the corner entails. Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes have attempted to distinguish types of violence—political, structural, symbolic, and everyday violence—to discern the nuance and complexity inherent in any approach to marginalization and oppression, and to avoid “blaming the victim” and grand-scale assumptions about their structural production (Scheper-Hughes 1997; Bourgois 2004; Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes 2004). Political violence is set up as physical violence and terror administered by official (state) authorities and those opposing them (Bourgois 2004: 426). Structural violence relates to the structural effects of poverty; it constitutes political-economic oppression and inequality as

they are deployed in historical contexts (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bourgois 2003). Symbolic violence is taken from Bourdieu as internalized legitimations of inequality related to class power; it is coercion and oppression that are not recognized as such but are actually consented to by the dominated (Bourdieu 2000: 170). This stems from the fact that dominated and dominating groups are incorporated forms of the general structure of relations of power and hence use the same framework of understandings in order to perceive and evaluate life. Symbolic violence is the internalization of gender, ethnic, and class differences that become “natural.” Finally, everyday violence is an elaboration of how the other three types interrelate in the day-to-day, intimate experience of marginalization (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1996). For the day laborers in these pages, labor problems, employer abuse, state repression, and estrangement and isolation from friends and family come together in a single sphere of experience and give rise to a particular version of reality where exaggeration, fear, rumor, hearsay, and threats set the pace for everyday life.

I thus draw on jornaleros’ conditions of poverty and exclusion to provide an account of what it means to be a migrant Latin American man working on the streets in Northern California. I address the ways in which the labor site, and the work with which it is associated, determine the social relations that jornaleros establish with one another, their employers, and other people with whom they share the same urban space. The above forms of violence interrelate, blend into each other, and ultimately shape the experience of the people I studied. And yet jornaleros’ experiences do not seem violent enough to warrant such a framework, unless we consider the links between day laborers and what Taussig (1986) has called the “culture of terror.” Here the normative mediums of experience lie in the precarious condition in which day labor is embedded, where at any given moment life can come crumbling down, where reality and illusion are mediated by rumors that make hearsay fact and vice versa. Representations and experience are the vehicles of an indirect form of domination from which migrants cannot escape. Within this landscape lie their personal relations, work, health, masculinity, and sense of belonging—both in the United States and at home with the families they have left behind. Everyday life for the jornaleros is embedded in activities that threaten their health, emotional stability, and ability to

survive and support their families. This vulnerability, coupled with the tensions inherent in long-term separation from loved ones, inevitably results in the fracture of identity for men who must provide for people that depend on their absence.

#### WHY NOT TRANSNATIONALISM?

Over the last thirty years or so, studies of migration to the United States and elsewhere have emphasized the transnational links that migrants maintain with their countries and regions of origin (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995; Kearney 1995; Levitt 2001; Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004; Fog Olwig 2007; Stephen 2007). These studies have provided nuanced analyses of the multiple and variegated ways in which people's movements across national, regional, and also social and ethnic boundaries come to shape both the experience of migrant communities and the physical and social space they inhabit. My objective here is not to question the degree to which transnational, transborder, and other such categories exist, but rather to offer a scenario where the flows in these relations have become stagnant. For the jornaleros I studied, the transnational has in many ways become a fiction of relations they can no longer sustain. Post-9/11 immigration policies, border surveillance, and the border's effective conversion into a war zone, along with the economic downturn of the first decade of the twenty-first century, have made the back and forth that "transnational" physically implies in terms of movement very dangerous, expensive, and almost impossible from the perspectives of the people migrating. When I met them on the corner in Berkeley, men who used to travel seasonally or for short periods of time to work in the Bay Area—what others have called "sojourn immigrants" (Massey 1986; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994)—were entering their fourth to seventh year without returning to their home countries. Interconnectedness for them was limited to timed phone calls, bimonthly remittances, and the highly problematic perceptions held by all those involved of what life in the United States really entailed. While these relations to the men's home countries make the men part of something "transnational," the feeling on the street was one of loss and increasing estrangement. Globalization, for the jornaleros,

has consolidated them into cosmopolitan subjects of sorts, transnational migrants in theory, while it has simultaneously trapped them within the boundaries of the United States and subjected them to both real and imagined practices of state repression and social isolation.

#### RACE ON THE CORNER

Some readers of early drafts of this book commented on the problematic portrayal of race relations in it. They feel I have not done enough to address the fact that the jornaleros in these pages are openly and vocally biased in their assessment of the racial hierarchy of employers they use to measure risk and in their general racism toward *morenos* (African Americans and anyone considered black), *chinos* (anyone considered Asian), and *árabes* (anyone considered Middle Eastern). I hope even a cursory reading will illustrate the structural position these men find themselves in, where their own notions about race and ethnicity become entangled with the violent and many times incomprehensible racialization all migrants undergo when they cross the border into the United States (see also De Genova 2005). Maybe the most difficult thing for me personally, at least half a US citizen but raised abroad, was coming to terms with being equated—as a Hispanic or Latino—to a variety of people whose history, national origin, ethnicity, social class, and education were so different from my own that I could not even imagine the worlds they came from. Readers will notice I do not use the terms “Hispanic” or “Latino” except in reference to someone who actually speaks these words; for the most part, these terms are not how I and the people I studied speak about ourselves.

Racialization, for the mostly recent migrants in these pages, is furthermore exacerbated by the fact that these migrants share echelons of US society with inner-city African Americans and other migrant and ethnic groups that inevitably compete with them for resources and labor. US racial politics thus become a central frame of reference in relation to which Latin Americans must learn to position themselves. The term *moreno*, which in Mexico and other Latin American countries is generally used ambiguously to describe a great part of the ethnically diverse mestizo

population (De Genova 2005), thus becomes anathema to their own identity and encompasses an archetypical opposite; that is, anyone considered black. Migrants quickly learn to differentiate themselves in these ways and learn the programmatic stereotypes that have marked US racial politics: African Americans are lazy, *they* abuse the system, *they* want everything for free (Quesada 2011). *Morenos* moreover are also perceived as “out to get” the jornaleros; *they* are the worst employers; *they* are the most dangerous people on the streets. In the worldview of the men in these pages, *morenos* are, overall, the bad guys they encounter the most. Only *tongas*—a vague ascription relating to Tongans, other Pacific Islanders, but also heavysset, foreign-sounding blacks—come close to competing with *morenos* as the worst employers, but in Berkeley they were not as prevalent as in Oakland and other parts of the Bay Area.

I do not think that African American employers are all that much worse than white employers, but many African American employers in Berkeley differed greatly from the upper middle-class white *patrones* who came to the corner. While contractors and subcontractors from both groups (as well as other ethnicities) were common on the street and had been more present before the economic crisis, white homeowners were more prevalent than any others during the crisis. These men and women, well educated and politically liberal, were more likely to pay better wages and offer tips. So the reason for a preference for white employers—*patrones*—is pretty clear to me. Whereas all African Americans had to compete with the representations of *morenos* as inner-city thugs that almost all the jornaleros had been victims of at some point, white *patrones* had no ethnic equivalents in the neighborhoods where the men lived.

Whatever the reasons, I choose to let the reader assess these issues as part of the exercise of ethnographic reading. Antipathy toward *morenos* was prevalent on the street, but so were exceptions, as with the person I have called Luis, who openly referred to African Americans as “damned pieces of coal” and yet in a visit I made to him in 2012 said he had left the street and gotten two jobs thanks to a *moreno* friend he made washing dishes in a restaurant in San Francisco. All in all, I do not think the day laborers are any more racist than other people in the United States, but rather their world is not informed by US cultural politics and the essentialized political correctness that leads most middle-class cosmopolitan

“Americans”—and here is another problematic term I use sparingly—to think they are colorblind. On the street, color is part of the game and learning to be racist “American style” is essential for survival.

#### ON FIELDWORK AND WRITING

In rewriting some of the material for this book, I have tried think through the effects ethnography should have on readers, academics, and the general public alike. I have thus attempted to avoid weighing the text down with too much theoretical analysis, instead framing my interactions on the street so that most informed readers can follow along. I have divided the book into three parts that I think constitute specific elements of daily life that can be addressed under the same heading. Each of these sections is preceded by a brief introduction where I contextualize the chapters theoretically or thematically. My hope is that the material in the chapters speaks for itself as much as possible.

My rather synchronic approach to the labor site is probably the most questionable aspect here. Readers will not find a typical “historical context” chapter, where I attempt to account for why the men I studied migrate, or a chapter that tries to set contemporary migration in the United States and other industrialized nations into a political and social framework. Readers interested in a more historical or politically informed analysis of Latin American migration to the United States can turn to scholars such as Ngai (2004), Coutin (1993, 2000), Smith (2005), and many others. This is also not a “multisited” ethnography where the anthropologist—as omnipresent narrator—can jump from one place to another, talk to wives and children back in the countries of origin, and then masterfully weave their stories together. On the street, I encountered a world of isolation and estrangement from families and social networks, and the day laborers I came to know as friends had mixed feelings and diffused images about the people they left behind and supported. I thus leave these families, especially wives and children, as faceless characters—distant images of people whose very nature, feelings, and intent shift in the obscure realm of jornaleros’ experience.

In a similar vein, I have done little to contextualize the characters on the street whom I present throughout the book. I suppose I risk painting

a stereotypical picture of the undocumented day laborer by creating faceless individuals that seem like ideal types of migrants. However, on the corner people do not know each other well, and it was only after many months that I became familiar with some of the day laborers and their personal histories. In fact, by the end of the first year I think I knew some men, and they me, better than they knew their peers on the corner. To stop and give brief outlines of them would seem artificial, and I have opted to let them appear on the corner as I saw them and, in many ways, as they see each other, diffuse and distant. As the chapters progress, the men I considered my friends, about six of the main group, will come into better focus. One thing that can be noted, though, is that most of the jornaleros in my “inner” circle were over thirty years old and had established homes in their countries of origin, which they supported with the little money they made. There were a few younger guys, such as Chucho, Hernado, and Iván, all in their twenties and single, whom I got to know well, but my closest friends—Luis, Francisco, Sindi, and Eduardo—were men nearer to my own age (early thirties). I also became very close to two men in their fifties, Lorenzo and Adolfo, who were not really part of the Fifth Street crowd but stood there and other places every once in a while.

I spent almost every day between June 2007 and August 2008 on the Berkeley *esquina*, diminishing my visits to two or three times a week until August 2009, when I effectively managed to pull myself out of the field, at least to a geographical extent. Until the day I returned to Colombia in June 2010, I continued to talk to my friends from the corner, go out for drinks, and visit some of them in their homes. Fieldwork among jornaleros is both easy and difficult in the sense that the men are apt to talk extensively about everything they are experiencing—they do it among themselves every day—and yet they obsessively mistrust all strangers to the corner and assume them to be trouble. Once I became a fixture on a particular street corner, my presence was mostly acknowledged, even welcomed as novelty by many people along the strip. However, mistrust and misinformation ruled the site, and I mostly refrained from using cameras and recorders on the street. Using either while among friends who had no problem with the devices simultaneously caused distress and panic up and down the corridor, where other jornaleros immediately assumed the worst no matter how many times they had seen me. This was in part an effect of

the many college students from up the hill who liked to come down to talk to people and take pictures for class projects and who many times inadvertently became associated with rumors about immigration raids, Minutemen—*los minut*—and other such misfortunes.

The information herein is thus the product of extensive field notes I took after every visit to the corner. My little notebook became well known among the men, who took to pulling it out of my pocket to write down slang or expressions they used to tease me and others in an effort to “teach” me to speak in *albures*—double entendres—and different vernaculars of Spanish. I also took walks around the nearby shops and recorded notes and reconstructed snippets of conversation during the normal comings and goings of the men at the site. I conducted semistructured interviews with some of my close acquaintances, usually in their homes or in coffee shops. These interviews never seemed as rich as my field notes, though, and with few exceptions I came to rely on what I could obtain on the corner. One exception consists of a few conversations I taped in the afternoons during the second shift with outliers Eduardo, William, and Bicho, who played around with phones, a Discman, and later an iPod. These three loved to take my digital recorder out of its case, turn it on, and, speaking loudly, start long discussions with, “Man have I got a story for you,” or “Listen to this, this is something to tell the people at the university.” After they grew tired of speaking into the machine, they would lay it down beside them, with the result that I have a few spontaneous focus groups directed by Eduardo and William that appear in chapter 4.

I was also invited by a few of my close acquaintances to their homes, and I went out drinking with Lorenzo and a few others every once in a while. The man I have called Luis lived with two brothers and two uncles, and he invited me home at least once a month. I also joined him for building parties and other get-togethers in Oakland. While the lack of community seemed prevalent on the street, at least in Luis’s case life with his male relatives was stable. Most of the other men lived in crowded dwellings with strangers—I also visited several of these—and invitations were less forthcoming, since cohorts of roommates were often at odds with each other and people preferred to drink in their rooms with a few friends.

For the most part, the main characters in this book represent real people I met and talked with during my time at *la parada*. I have changed

names, countries of origin, and home states in Mexico in some cases, a somewhat programmatic effort to jumble the identifying information, even though I consider these men's identities protected by way of the structural violence I describe herein. After all, finding any of these jornaleros after only a few years would prove difficult even for me or other men from the corner. In certain cases, composites of several men form ancillary characters, in order to maintain some of the narratives and reduce the "noise" of too many secondary characters making onetime appearances. I have done nothing to hide the fact that this research was undertaken in Berkeley or to hide the labor site itself. This is not only because *la parada* is well known to its residents, the police force, and so on, and so hiding it would be somewhat absurd, but also because the location should speak to the politically correct smokescreen I lived in for six years. The fact that the state and society in general know where the action in these pages takes place is part of the point I am trying to make.