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Precarity and Liminality among Jornaleros in Southern California: Structural Vulnerability, Porous Spaces and the Struggle for Being

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**Author**

Lopez, Zaith

**Publication Date**

2017-08-11

Undergraduate

Zaith Lopez

Anthropology Major

April 02, 2017

## Library Prize for Undergraduate Research

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#### **What drew you to the resources you used? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)**

I became drawn to the UCLA Library's services and personnel because I had to do work on a research proposal for my Anthropological Honors Program and for the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship. Even though I had as a requirement to take the *Research Today: Sources, Tools, and Strategies* with Professor Worsham and Nafpaktitis for my Mellon Mays Undergraduate Program, I had no experience in designing a research proposal. In addition, my anthropology course, which was taught by Professor Toyota, had scheduled a workshop with librarian Dr. Borovsky. This was my beginning in using the UCLA Library's services.

#### **How did you find the material? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)**

For my anthropology course, a link posted by Professor Toyota led us to Start on Your Own with a Research Guide or Tutorial, where we then had to watch the Mapping Your Research Question, which was also a requirement for the Research Today class. Moreover, in the workshop that we had in the library with Dr. Borovsky, she showed us how to use the Anthropology and Archaeology Database/Guide, and other resources, such as Zotero, Web of Science, the Library Catalog, and Melvyl.

**Did faculty, librarians, classmates, or others help you on your journey, and if so, who and how? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)**

Professor Worsham and Nafpaktitis helped me. For our course, we had a "Research Notebook" where we had scheduled each week different assignments to progress in our research proposal. On Week 1, we had to watch Mapping Your Research Question and map, as it is done in the video, our research topic and develop it. I also used Booth's book *Craft of Research* for the course to develop my research question. Also used was Crafting a Savvy Search Strategy video to learn how to do a search on databases and get good results. Aside from the above named, my advisor helped.

**In creating your project, how did you determine what materials were most suitable? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)**

All the materials presented to me were suitable. All materials allowed me to advance with my research proposal: how to brainstorm, how make good database research, how to work with sources, how to dissect sources, how to make a claim, and how to strengthen a claim. To decide what sources were most suitable, it depended on whether I needed books, articles, or needed to create a bibliography. The Library Catalog was used, for example, several times to search for books, as also the Myvyl to search for articles and books at another university.

**What strategies did you employ as you searched collections or gathered data? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)**

Zotero, which was both presented to me by Dr. Borovsky and the course on Research Today, was one of the most useful tools. As I searched for articles and books, I would upload them on Zotero. I would make tags depending on the specific topic. For example, if an article was on migration and memory (which was what I was first researching), I would make a tag and slide all articles under it. Same for books. But with Zotero you also have a platform similar to Word. There I would write my notes too.

**How did you winnow and refine the resources you found into a meaningful bibliography to support your work? (Please write a minimum of 100 words)**

Web of Science, Myvyl, as well as the Library Catalog allowed me to have a meaningful bibliography. When I would use the Library Catalog, I would not only search in the "search box" but also click on "subjects." On clicking, it would take me to a range of related topics. Myvyl allowed to borrow books from UC Irvine. Web of Science makes it easy to search for other related topics because of the citation links that they have. But Zotero facilitated my work because of how well you can organize the bibliography and make annotations to paraphrase and summarize sources.

**Precarity and Liminality among *Jornaleros* in Southern California: Structural  
Vulnerability, Porous Spaces and The Struggle for Being**

Zaith Lopez

Department of Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles

Senior Thesis for: Lemelson Anthropological Honors Program Senior/Mellon Mays

Undergraduate Fellowship

Faculty Advisor: Jason C. Throop

**Abstract**

Literature on day labor has predominantly focused on the objective characteristics (e.g. labor market, day labor practices, spatial/organizational configurations, hiring sites, etc.) than on the subjective processes of engaging with day labor work (e.g. how they perceive, feel). For this thesis, I have focused on the precarious nature and condition of being a day laborer and the effects on day laborers' subjective and intersubjective life. That is, how structurally vulnerable day laborers become subjected to precarious work that consequently and negatively influences their psychological well-being, but also how family, dreams, and hopes become entangled with the everyday life of a day laborer. More specifically, as analytics I use constructs as structural vulnerability, precarity, and liminality to understand what it means to be a day laborer and how day laborers are coping with their current condition. In a period of 12 weeks, I conducted participant-observation and contributed as an intern at a day labor center in Southern California. I have found that day laborers are channeled to day labor and consequently find themselves in a heightened condition of precariousness. In trying to overcome obstacles to continue the struggle for being, and finding the day labor center as a source of opportunity to deploy themselves, day laborers paradoxically enter a liminal space that both strengthens them but at times intensify their precariousness.

**Keywords:** Critical phenomenology, day labor/*jornalero*, (im)migrants, intersubjectivity, liminality, precarity, structural vulnerability, subjectivity, urban mobility, work

## Introduction

*Today was chaotic. Too much was going on at once. I wanted to provide a solution to a misunderstanding between an employer and the day laborers that had happened yesterday. An employer called soliciting two workers to move some boxes to a u-haul. The main coordinator, Carlos<sup>1</sup>, and I were absent when this happened. I found out about this news when the employer called around 9 am. He was waiting for the workers who had promised to be there at 9 am. Bewildered, I tried to have an understanding of the contract made, and tried to provide an explanation. I told him I would solve it and call back as soon as possible. I told the coordinator about the issue. He told me he was unaware of the call and the contract; he did not know what was happening. I wanted to figure it out. Aloud I asked who answered the phone yesterday, and that an employer had just called asking me what happened to the workers who promised to be there early morning. Diogenes answered. It was only two hours, he said. No one wanted to go. As I was trying to figure out whom to send, or who was willing to go for two hours, in the midst, everyone was having their own conversations. Especially I could hear El Cholo, who has a high voice, as if speaking through a microphone (for a reason sometimes the coordinator, jokingly, says to him to lower the volume to his microphone). Because I am frustrated in trying to solve the issue with the employer--and trying to not make the center look bad and to make the workers accountable--I hushed the loud conversation that is going on to my side. I received a look by a worker. I got nervous. But at the same time I was determined to send someone. After almost an hour two workers decided to go. I sent them with a printed paper with the directions to their destination. Later, in lunch I told the coordinator that I became frustrated because of the general ongoing noise; the workers having their loud conversations; us trying to give directions to other workers who were about to also leave; and trying to figure out who was willing to take the promised job. He told me he noticed, but that I was not alone: Carlos was also under stress and irritated.*

I wrote this in my field notes after a day of intense pressure and frustration. This example epitomizes a day of extreme irritation and chaos co-produced by both day laborers and the lack of resources at a day labor center. To understand why day laborers and the lack of resources co-produce an environment of stress, frustration, irritation, and *desesperación* (desperation), I will unravel the imposed space and paradoxical world in which day laborers and one staff of a non-

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<sup>1</sup> All people in discussion have pseudonyms.

governmental organization<sup>2</sup> coexist in. In a certain space and time, at a day labor center, a particular population attends to seek employment; and a non-governmental organization provides the services to operate not only that day labor center but three other day labor centers. In addition, the non-governmental organization shares the space with day laborers with the objective of providing community leadership development, allowing them to autonomously start running the day labor center, and dignified work. I was invited to share this space as an intern and researcher along with men day laborers from Mexico, Central America, and other marginalized US groups.

The question is: Who are these men day laborers from Mexico, Central America and the marginalized US? There is currently no history of day labor in the US, and definitional uses of day labor vary (Valenzuela 2003, 312). On the one hand, there is *informal* and *formal* day labor; and on the other hand, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has defined day labor as a sub-category of contingent work (Valenzuela 2003, 310)<sup>3</sup>. In Valenzuela's terms, my setting is *formal*, meaning how "The process of seeking work at formal hiring sites is highly structured with clear rules regarding participants and the requisite characteristics required for this line of work (2003, 318). However, it is not a "formal hiring agency." The center explicitly distanced and articulated their contradistinction with a "hiring agency." Because of the common knowledge of "for-profit formal hiring sites," on answering calls from people seeking work (or workers physically showing up) the center's staff member—and I also participated—clarified to the other receiver on the phone that the center was not an agency but a "community worker center where the coordinator mediates between employer and employee." The center also makes sure workers are treated with dignity, and prevents worker's exploitation by providing resources. In addition, the "highly structured clear rules" quoted above, are not determined by the staff but rather by the workers themselves, who participate democratically on decision-making, on activities called by the center *asambleas* (assemblies). There is no fee to workers, and the wage goes directly to the worker who should be paid by the end of the day's labor, preferable in cash. Another great and positive characteristic of the day labor center is how the center's members are made participants of the organization, for example, by opening and closing the center, thus achieving the organization's goal in fostering community leadership development. In addition, the center

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<sup>2</sup> I refrain from naming the non-governmental organization for security issues.

<sup>3</sup> See Valenzuela 2003 for an historical overview of day labor, informal/formal, contingent work and definitions.

provides workshops for educating the day laborers in English skills, health, and worker's right (See Valenzuela in regards to organizational structure 2003, 322).

In the US, day labor "mostly signifies men searching for work through informal or open-air markets such as street corners, storefronts, or parking lots, or through formal temp agencies" (Valenzuela 2003, 310). More specifically, however, I will be defining day labor as the *daily* search for employment because that is what many workers who attended the center did. Moreover, I will be using interchangeably *day laborer* and *jornalero* because these workers called themselves *jornaleros*, and the center also employed the term. But also *jornalero* is the closest translation to "day laborer" (Ordonez 2015, xx). Ordonez states how "*Jornalero* shares the same etymology as 'journey' and 'journeyman,' but of importance to emphasize is the term 'day,' which in terms of labor, in Spanish can be *jornal*, used both to describe 'a day's labor' and 'a day's wage'" (2015, xx). Yet, I would add that *jornalero* also indexes *jornada* which translates to a determined temporal period, meaning how it references either to a "day" (24 hours) or the hours a certain work takes. Thus, *jornalero* or day laborer means that the worker works for the day, or under a contract that dictates how many hours he will need to work or what will need to get done before the day laborer gets paid. After completing the contract, on the next day the worker searches once again for employment

Despite the growing numbers of day laborers within the US, it has largely been ignored by researchers or is little known about (Ordonez 2015; Valenzuela 2003). Moreover, the majority of studies done on the day labor community in the US has generally focused on the objective characteristics than on the subjective experience of workers engaging with day labor (Purser 2009, 119). Examples on the production of knowledge of the objective characteristics of day labor include studies of demographic characteristics, day labor earnings, day labor work, employers who hire day laborers, and why immigrant workers participate in day labor (Valenzuela 1999, 2002, 2003); the social practices of day laborers to (re)create meaning and a social life (Pinedo-Turnovsky 2006); the social organization of Latino migrants on street corners who wait for work (Melero Malpica 2002); discourses of anti-immigrant rhetoric that shape perception of day laborers (Quesada 1999) as well as public policies that then remove day laborers' informal sites (or street corners) of seeking employment (Esbenshade 2000).

Thomas Ordonez's (2015) thoroughly study, however, on day laborers in the East Bay vacillates between the objective and the subjective. Following Latin American day laborers'

lives, Ordonez was able to give a glimpse of what it means to be a day laborer in the East Bay of the US by ambitiously exploring “everyday violence” as central to day laborers’ lives, and the “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. (2015, 4; 12-13). Moreover, studies on the subjective experience have focused on the gendered experience of labor, as for example on how day laborers exert their masculine and worker identity through the creation of “boundary work” between day laborers from a street corner and a day labor center (Purser 2009). Walter et. al have specifically studied how injured day laborer express themselves in gendered ways, or perceive themselves on a gendered basis given the Latino masculinist identity culture they embrace; day laborers feel threatened and unable to fulfill their paternal roles (2004). Another study by Walter et al. (2002) discloses how day laborers’ social context informs their decision to whether seek or not health services, and how in general their marginalized and impoverished condition as well as exploitation, violence, and competition, produce stress among them. Injured and unable to provide for their family, it has an emotional toll on them. Lastly, research done by Quesada (2011) and Quesada et. al (2014) attempt to explicate the day laborers’ internalization of structural forces and how they negotiate what to do and not to do and how to maneuver the structural constraints imposed by society.

The growth of day labor is linked to macro-processes and explains why a majority of Latinos occupy that niche<sup>4</sup>. According to Valenzuela, the three important links that explain the growth of day labor are: globalization, informality, and immigration. To quote Valenzuela: “Globalization and the restructuring of the regional economies, and the growth of informality, coupled with massive immigration, have resulted in unique labor markets where demand for part-time, low-skill, and flexible work such as day labor proliferate...” (Valenzuela 2003, 315). I will be contributing to the day labor and anthropological literature by investigating what is vastly missing in the literature: the day laborers’ subjective experience. Purser contends that, because researchers have been trying to grasp the “contours of how this market is organized,” researchers have failed to understand “how day laborers perceive, make sense of, and cope with the precarious labor market in which they take part” (Purser 2009, 119). The questions that I answer

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<sup>4</sup> For a quantitative analysis of day labor in Southern California and nationally, see Valenzuela 1999, 2003.



are: How is the precarious condition shaping day laborers' subjectivity? And, how are they experiencing the precarious condition? In doing so, I employ a critical phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of day laborers, and to understand the imposed paradoxical world they inhabit.

A critical phenomenological approach is used to understand how it is that day laborers' feel about their precarious condition and engagement with day labor work. In doing *critical* phenomenology, researchers, as Desjarlais explains "...describe what people feel, think, or experience but also grasp how the *process* of feeling or experiencing come through multiple, interlocking interactions." He goes on to say, that the approach is also critical "in that it tries to go beyond phenomenological description to understand why things are this way: to inquire, for instance, into what we mean by feeling, how it comes about, what it implies, and what broader cultural and political forces are involved." (1997, 25). I focus on the subjective experience and their everyday lives to understand (or to disentangle) the factors that shape their subjective and intersubjective life. Precarity becomes an ordinary affect (Stewart 2007), where the instability and unpredictability constantly shift and emerge due to the inherent nature of being a day laborer. To contextualize the world of a day laborer, I first provide a structural vulnerability analysis (Quesada et al. 2011, 2014; Quesada 2011) to understand the intensities of precariousness and their positionalities, to then engage with their subjective and intersubjective lives to better understand how feelings vary in intensities. To understand, in following Ghassan Hage and Michael Jackson, on the universal moral imperatives of the "struggle for being" or "recollect oneself" (Hage 2009 and Jackson 2013 cited in Willen 2014), I use liminality to position at the forefront the possibilities (Ghannam 2011) that day laborers search for or try to open for oneself to continue that universal struggle for being. Essentially, I am arguing that because of day laborers' structural vulnerability and hence their precarious lives, they seek a space of welcome and find the day labor center as a space of opportunity and possibility to deploy themselves; however, in seeking employment at the center, day laborers paradoxically enter a liminal space that both strengthens them but at times intensify their precariousness.

## Data Collection

My field site was at the heart of urban life—downtown. My ethnographic collection comes directly from my interactions and observations from the day labor center. I conducted participant-observation and volunteered with the organization that operates three other centers. For 12 weeks, and later intermittently, I was applying the anthropological technique of participant-observation, from Monday-Friday, from 7 am-4 pm. I would take raw notes on my phone device and notebook to wait until I arrived home to elaborate and write 6-7 pages of field notes. Because I wanted to gain their trust and not put the day laborers in a vulnerable and awkward situation, I decided not to interview them. Yet, with the *jornaleros* with whom I interacted the most and describe below, I did have conversations or informal interviews that would last around an hour and twenty minutes and more, conversing about previous occupations, family, home, childhood memories, food, street corners, substance use/abuse, traumas, future endeavors, among other themes. The conversations were casual and open-ended. By my latter part of fieldwork, I decided to go work with a group of three day laborers at a warehouse where we had to unload a container that came straight from China. Participating in day labor work at the end of my fieldwork, allowed me to gain much more of the day laborers' trust. Carlos, the day labor center's coordinator, told me the day laborers still talk about it and that he believes it made them proud to see a student working alongside with them<sup>5</sup>.

As an intern of the center, I completed administrative paperwork. I helped new workers register; I signed in workers every morning (which is always done); I would then transcribe the overall information into the paperwork that belongs to the organization and to the municipality. In addition, I helped to answer calls, as when workers called to ask for information on how to register and on what type of jobs were offered. I always had to clarify that we did not offer jobs, but “mediated between the employer and the employee<sup>6</sup>,” and that workers had to come to the center and wait for work. I also helped search for addresses and directions via google maps when workers did not know how to get to the destination. I also searched for jobs on craigslist, most of them under general labor. I closed and opened the center too. I accompanied workers to flyer advertisements about the center around two different areas. We also went to a protest, in support

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<sup>5</sup> After being absent from the center for almost two months, I went to update myself (04/27/2017). Upon entering the center, one of the day laborers joked that now they had an extra worker ready to unload a container.

<sup>6</sup> The coordinator would say this repeatedly over the phone.

of a labor union. On the anniversary of the organization, I helped, alongside the day laborers, setting up the tables, chairs, raffle prizes, and serving food to the attendees. In general, to help in any way I could, I would ask the coordinator what needed to get done. Lastly, I attended with the staff to a mental health workshop. I can say that many day laborers would first associate me with another staff member. Several times day laborers would refer to me as *el coordinador* (the coordinator).

On returning from fieldwork I decided to write about four day laborers. Even though I interacted with more than four day laborers, I have chosen Johnny, El Cholo, Juancho, and Pambazo as my case studies. However, I do draw from other day laborers that confided in me valuable information about the life of a day laborer. Other day laborers' lives inform and weave through the thesis. The four day laborers that I have chosen constantly sought employment at the center. Juancho, El Cholo and Pambazo were coming from Latin America (El Salvador, and Mexico, respectively) except for Johnny, who came from New Mexico. The only specific criteria I had for selecting participants for the study was for them to be day laborers and to regularly attend the center. This was so because I wanted to investigate the general day labor population. The most recent participant in day labor work is Johnny who might have been in between one to two years; but the other three have been day laborers for more than five years. Pambazo was the youngest worker, in his middle twenties. Juancho and El Cholo were in their forties, and Johnny was in his sixties. Most of the day laborers that attend the day labor center are in between forty to seventy years old. All notes were taken by me in Spanish.<sup>7</sup> I then transcribed the data that I wanted to use for analysis. While in fieldwork, certain themes made an impression on me. I revisited my field notes and searched for recurrent themes to then create categories. Observations and conversations recorded in my field notes were traced back to my interlocutors to then be analyzed by constructs such as structural vulnerability, precarity and liminality.

### **Structural Vulnerability: Jornaleros' Positionalities**

Vulnerability can be used as a concept to demonstrate human beings' inherent fragility. Indeed, we are all fragile and vulnerable to uncontrolled external forces. However, external forces impinging on human beings vary in intensities across the globe, and so too within societies, between social classes, and within social classes.

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<sup>7</sup> Spanish is my native language.

At a macro-scale, there is a neoliberal economic model that, because of globalization, is affecting a plurality of spaces around the globe. However, the degree to which it affects someone of a given society, the intensities that are felt by the economic fluctuations that happen from top to bottom, vary. This means, for example, that the center's staff member will not have the same anxiety and preoccupations as an immigrant working-class individual. Depending on which domain of the hierarchy you are situated in, the intensities of anxiety and preoccupation will manifest differently. Structural vulnerability speaks exactly to this: every individual will have different intensities of vulnerability. Yes, we are all vulnerable, but to what degree? This has been thoroughly demonstrated by Seth Holmes on a berry farm in Washington State (2013). Holmes finds structural vulnerability useful to think with because it allows to both address a "counterpoint to the common individualistic focus on risk behavior in medicine and public health," and also "the social structures that produce and organize suffering..." (Holmes 2011, 426), in a very hierarchical farm where ethnicity and citizenship dictate in what vertical position one will be placed: undocumented farmers, in his case, are in the lowest rung. "This hierarchy produces vulnerability to suffering through differential demands, pressures, and bodily practices in work" (Holmes 2011, 426). Structural vulnerability puts the blame on the social structures. I find this more useful than saying, for example, that a day laborer's age or education makes a worker more vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, or a reason for being unemployed, as it has happened with the *jornaleros* in question. For *jornaleros*, when they come into the US, there is a structure they come to embody in certain spaces. These spaces have already been prefigured in racialized and criminalized terms (De Genova 2002) that then affect how *jornaleros* experience and act in the world. Quesada (2011) notes how "They [Latino laborers] enter a world that already places them in the stigmatized position of interlopers, parasitically feeding off a generous welfare" (Quesada 2011, 387). What Quesada wants to highlight is the discourse revolving around Latino presence and the way in which it has shifted from "invisible mass" to "stigmatized horde," and that depends "on prevailing macro-structural and geopolitical forces influencing popular imagination, public debates, and domestic policy" (2011, 393). These discourses make *jornaleros* structurally vulnerable and come to shape them, influencing their actions and behaviors, constraining them from acting in a certain way, not seeking help when needed, and otherwise. In other words, structural vulnerability is lived and embodied (Quesada 2011).

In addition, structural vulnerability encompasses “the economic, material, and political insights of structural violence to encompass more explicitly not only political-economic but also cultural and idiosyncratic sources of physical and psychodynamic distress” (Quesada, Hart, Bourgois 2011, 340). Its broad conceptualization is useful because it allows one to focus on particularities of day laborers. Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois continue defining it as a positionality: “Experiences of vulnerability, however, are only partially shared across populations because they are shaped unevenly by specific status attributes (i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), conditions (i.e. legal status, economic and living conditions, etc.), and individual serendipity” (2011, 346). Relations of powers within an environment; and even a worker’s appearance might position him in a vulnerable situation and hence to structural violence because of the social, political, and economic conditions. Indeed, even though the day labor center welcomes other ethnicities than what would be consider the Latino minority, all of them are subjected to structural violence, and hence, structural vulnerability. The pervasiveness of anti-immigrant rhetoric, for instance, structurally inflicts violence on Latinos, but so do other conditions affect African-American and other US marginalized groups that are welcome to the center. This is the effectiveness of the concept structural vulnerability. Vulnerability, then, will vary among day laborers. Structural vulnerability will articulate how these day laborers end up in what I will develop below--a liminal and precarious condition. Describing their positionalities will expose the different intensities and degrees of vulnerability. In the following paragraphs, I will describe one theme that emerged in my field notes, that was brought up by several day laborers, regardless of their ethnicity: Aging.

***Structural Vulnerability: Aging exacerbating the Precarious Life of Johnny***

Johnny recently arrived to the center, about one to two years ago because a friend of him, who was a crack addict, invited him to the worker center. Born in New Mexico but raised in Los Angeles, Johnny never learned Spanish because of the pervasive discrimination against many Spanish-speaking people, even though he grew up with Latino parents. At school it was prohibited to speak Spanish, and his mother never taught him Spanish. Johnny learned Spanish by interacting with Latino people, when he became homeless and by frequenting the worker center.

A homeless man in his mid-sixties, Johnny had a strong work ethic. However, because of the need for young, “hard,” and “strong” workers, Johnny would be discriminated. He was hyperconscious of his age, and of the incompatibility of his age and the structure of work. His future, in other words, was uncertain, unstable and unpredictable because he was being discriminated by the inherent structure of day labor work. Employers wanted young workers because of the demanding physical labor that is required by *jornaleros*, especially in lifting heavy boxes. So, not only is the market precarious; but it is also prone to discriminate.

Aging indubitably was affecting Johnny’s options and actions. “They won’t hire me anymore,” he said to me. To which I asked why, naively at first. “My age.” To demonstrate that he is still able to do the job, he would get into arguments with the employers about how he is capable of doing the work--loading and unloading containers. “I have done this my whole life,” he explained to me. Indeed, Johnny did seem physically able; tall and looking physically robust, just like the young day laborers at the center. One day, as he was heading out of the center, I asked him if he was going to attend a free workshop on construction and electricity. “Naaah...it is not worth it,” he answered. Knowing why he had answered that way, I probed:

Z: “Why?”

J: “No one is going to hire me.”

Z: “Why do you say that?”

J: “My age”

Z: “Where do you think you’ll get hired?”

J: “That is what I am trying to figure out, I am trying to see my options”

Even though Johnny was discriminated many times because of his age, he continued attending the center to wait for work. Often times he was hopeless, as that conversation clearly demonstrates. Johnny knows that he does not have that many options. He is aging, he is homeless, and he has no support network other than the center. He is alone. On top of that, Johnny sells his labor to a market that is inherently precarious; he does not know when he will get hired while in wait at the center. Johnny’s income does not exponentially increase. In addition, he is hyperconscious of his age because he knows employers discriminate. Johnny’s previous discrimination experiences with employers, shapes how he navigates his world. For instance, one day an employer called for a day laborer who was needed to organize boxes inside a warehouse. Johnny was next on the list. It was his turn to go to work, but Johnny decided to

skip because he personally knew the employer and knew the employer did not want Johnny there working. “They say I am too old to be working there,” he said to me when I asked him why he skipped. When I asked Carlos, the main coordinator, why Johnny would not take other better employments, he would shrug his shoulders, and then say he does not understand why Johnny does not take other work opportunities. Leaving the possibility aside that Johnny might be “lazy,” his precarious condition might render him hopeless to the point where he does not seek work opportunities.

A certain productivity is needed to unload and load containers; to do gardening; to aid in a moving. And because these workers do not have a union, because day laborers do not have an underlying support system, they cannot be protected from employers’ discriminatory acts. Consequently, Johnny’s being in the world is altered by his age and discriminatory acts by employers, influencing Johnny’s decisions and actions. Johnny knows the junction between his age and the market is hindering his possibility to deploy and flourish as a worker. Johnny knows he will not get hired in construction work or in an electrical position. So he decides to not attend the workshop.

Older day laborers are not being hired because they are thought to be unproductive, or not generating the productivity that is needed. For this reason, on several occasions, day laborers were returned by employers for their inability to meet the required tasks. Our common sense of day labor work is that physical strength is important. Young workers are always wanted to complete any type of physical labor. And even though we could objectively determine that Johnny is in fact aging, what he tried to emphasize to me is that skills and technique are needed to complete any type of job (or mana). Johnny does not only become frustrated to the idea the day labor work is limiting his job opportunities, but also to how employers perceive Johnny as unskilled and inexperienced. Johnny explained to me how he would get into arguments with them, telling them that he has done the job before, and that he has done this his whole life.

This speaks to what Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois describe to how vulnerability is shaped by specific status attributes. Johnny’s subjectivity is being produced at the intersection of his age and the inherent precarious structure of the market. A precarious subjectivity is the product. Instability and unpredictability are both exacerbated by his age and the market’s nature. For the lack of space, I cannot go in detail with the various intersectional factors that contribute to Johnny’s subjective experience, acts, options and decisions. Suffice to say that he is a substance

abuser, undergoes “anger management,<sup>8</sup>” and constantly brings his past to the fore, especially the event of his mother’s death.

***El Cholo’s Structural Vulnerability: Ethnic Discrimination and the Scarred Body and Consciousness***

El Cholo could be considered a “veterano.” El Cholo is a *jornalero* who has been a day laborer more than a decade. He has crazy stories to tell, as for example when he used to cross the border back and forth to have his “borracheras.” “It was very easy to cross the border back then,” he told me. El Cholo was speaking of the 1980s. He would cross to go drinking, because it was cheap, and return to the US either on the night or the next day. El Cholo is from Mexico, Tepic. Born to an Indigenous mother and a “White” father, he was abandoned at an early age when his mother passed away. His father never took responsibility, and so his uncles took him. But because of his uncle’s verbal abuses, he decided to run away. At an early age, he was put in foster care, what in Mexico is called, DIF (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia). Through the National System for Integral Family Development, he found adopted parents. He grew up with them and considered them as “mamá” and “papá.”

Since he was 19 years old, he has been leaving and returning to the US. Until recently, he decided to settle in the US to return home only when enough money earned will allow him to establish himself with a new house. However, El Cholo constantly sends money back home for his son, and for his savings.

El Cholo used to seek employment in corners. He has been part of various street corners. About three day laborers from the center, knew each other from those past times, when they would seek employment at the corners. “Puro borrachitos,” (all alcoholics) he would say about those who go to the corners. In fact, many from the corner would at times pass through the center, and say hello to him. Or throw mean jokes at each other, such as “that is why we do not progress, because of people like you who come to these places,” or, “you have been here all your life and have gotten nothing.” One time a day laborer came to the center, preoccupied, asking if El Cholo was alright. The day laborer found out that El Cholo was hospitalized; the day laborer came to the center twice, asking for him.

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<sup>8</sup> Carlos thinks he has anger management problems. But I did witness how easily he would explode.



I learned that El Cholo was constantly harassed and discriminated. Scholars have discussed how Latino migrants are socially disdained and thus leading to discrimination and racial profiling (Romero 2006). James Quesada discusses the impact of discrimination on mental health for Latino day laborers, and the small practices enacted to negotiate discrimination (2014). And yet other scholars have focused on the policies/ordinances that discriminate or have as an objective to keep the “streets clean” from day laborers because house owners and business owners complain, such as “not in my backyard” (Esbenshade 2000; Valenzuela 2003, 323-326). In this context, I would like to share an example that El Cholo shared and links to structural vulnerability.

El Cholo is hyper-conscious of his body, and his presentation of self because he knows he is structural vulnerable to discrimination and racism. One day as we were chatting, he randomly asked me. “Isai have you been to a Denny’s before?” Surprised by his questions and in my naivete, I said yes, thinking and realizing to myself that a Denny’s is not where everyone can afford to go. “I want to take my daughters to have breakfast there. Do you know if they allow people like me going there? Do they discriminate if they see someone dressed like this, *todo chichiquiloto*<sup>9</sup>?” El Cholo wants to avoid any shaming, especially since he was planning on taking his daughters. “Is it expensive there? How much are the plates?” he asked. As Quesada notes, “Experiences of discrimination draw attention to the body and mark the consciousness...” (2014, 30). Because of El Cholo’s previous discrimination experiences, he is hyperconscious of himself as a *jornalero*. His working-class clothing is subject to scrutiny by society, and because he has been discriminated, his clothes becomes a mnemonic device; however, his remembering is negative: it constrains him from acting and making certain decisions. It has marked his consciousness, and he is constantly aware of it. His clothes, his previous experiences, and the perception of Latino day laborers, or migrants in general, make El Cholo structural vulnerable to discrimination. His clothes remind him that he is not wanted in US society, that there are boundaries. Not only is his clothes reminding him that he does not belong, but also his lack of resources. El Cholo is scarred both in his body and consciousness.

El Cholo has encountered other more explicit and violent forms of discrimination. At the street corners he has been harassed by business owners. Business owners have insulted him,

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<sup>9</sup> It is hard to translate *chichiquiloto*. I have never heard that term before. But here it is clear that El Cholo is referring to his working-class clothing.

telling him to keep away from the area because he is dirty and scaring their customers away. Once, he got in a heated confrontation with the business owner. But he has also been violently confronted in the streets. Even other day laborers would joke about how he is constantly harassed, “*todo te pasa*” (Everything happens to you).

Structural vulnerability however manifests in other ways. The environment many day laborers inhabit and navigate, constrain their decision-making, behavior, and opportunities. In this instance, I mean the area where they live (the mission), where the day labor center is located, and the many other places they have to navigate. For instance, many of the day laborers avoid certain areas of the city because of its dangers. On one occasion, a day laborer decided not to attend a free workshop on carpentry because the workshop was at night. Because of the potential dangers in the area with gang members, he decided not to go. “Is not that bad. I have walked around that area at night” Carlos said to them. Two other day laborers swear that the area is dangerous because of gang members. The day laborer ended up not going to the free workshop.

“I do not understand why they treat us slaves,” Juancho said. Juancho was explaining to me how racist and discriminatory employers could be to *jornaleros*. To attest to the discriminatory and racist attacks upon them, a Juancho wanted me to go work with them. He would argue that only then I would understand what it means to be a day laborer, and how I would witness their treatment in the work setting. Especially, he mentioned, because you are white-skinned and fluent in English. Juancho told me that I would get a raise right away, and treated better than them. “You will see” he said. Preconceived ideas of Latino workers shape vastly how day laborers will be treated in the work setting. Day laborers are structurally susceptible to racism and discrimination: a worker’s skin color and clothes makes him consequently susceptible to not only structural vulnerability but violence. “...any distinguishing characteristic, whether social or biological, can serve as pretext for discrimination, and thus as a cause of suffering” writes Paul Farmer (1997, 278). Indeed, I have tried to elucidate how structurally vulnerable are *jornaleros* and how this leads to discrimination and racism. This in turn shapes their subjective experience, in becoming hopeless as was demonstrated with Johnny, or hyperconscious of the body, as it happened with El Cholo. But structural vulnerability also entails the larger city, its dangers, and the way day laborers are susceptible to its dangers.

***“El Centro”: A Non-Governmental Organization under Structural Vulnerability, Precarity and Anxiety due to Understaffing and Gentrification***

Now, in order to put everything into perspective, I think the day labor center should be also thought of as an entity that is structural vulnerable--because the municipality is gradually reducing resources to the day labor center. The lack of economic resources that are by now being reduced by the municipality makes the center vulnerable as an entity, but also its staff and day laborers because they all co-inhabit a space that becomes insecure due to the lack of funding; it becomes porous and, at times, dangerous. The effects manifests in Carlos's experience as a coordinator, and among the day laborers.

“El Centro.” A day labor center located at the heart of the downtown area. Immigrant and marginalized members of society attend the day labor center to seek employment. Outside the center, on the sidewalk, around three to ten laborers gather every day to wait for an employer to hire them. And on the center's west side, approximately one block from the center, therein lies two street corners where many other gather from 9 am to 4 pm to seek employment. As mentioned above, some day laborers from the center used to hang out there before settling in the center. Between the two street corners, they do not interact because one side of the street is known to have laborers who drink in public. “We don't go there, and we don't let them come here,” a day laborer explained to me. “We kick them out if one of them comes close.”

Many warehouses, businesses, and multi-ethnic restaurants are located around the center. Central American, Mexican, Persian, and Korean are only some restaurants that I got to see surrounding the area. Hot-Dog stands also are almost in every street corner. Mannequins decorate the front-side of some businesses, reading everywhere “wholesale and retail.” But also many businesses are closing; many curtains on days were closed. On our walks to lunch, the coordinator, Carlos, confirmed many were closing. Rent was increasing. Several blocks to the west of the center, luxury apartment complexes are being erected. On my last visit I was amazed by how imposing the luxury apartments look; I wished I had taken pictures of the before and after. The area looked different, felt different. I wondered at that moment how, and if the new apartment structures, will have a positive or negative impact on the day laborers' life.

The organization worries about both the future of day laborers from the corner and the center's. On the one hand, it is uncertain if the day labor center will be able to offer their services to the workers because of the gradual increments of rent and the City Council's underfunding.

On the other hand, it is uncertain and unpredictable how exactly it will result having new inhabitants coming into the area. Incoming renters might complain of the day laborers from the street corner, and possibly of day labor centers, as has historically happened between business and home owners. As of now, the center is mostly struggling to have enough resources. The municipality, which funds the non-governmental organization, has decided to give equal funds to all centers under operation. Before, the municipality would accommodate the necessary resources to every center to meet their needs. For example, if a center needed X amount, and another center needed less or more, it would be given. Now, the same amount of money is given equally to every center. This puts the organization in a disadvantage for a major reason: they have under operation four centers. Hence they need more money than the other centers to meet the necessary demands. Carlos saw this unjustly.

As a result of the defunding of the center by the municipality, there are negative consequences trickling down: an understaffed center that leaves Carlos as the only member present to preserve order. This makes it hard for him to do his job. On many occasions day laborers asked for a case manager, which was beyond Carlos job. Providing a case manager was impossible given the lack of resources. When I was first introduced to the group, and throughout my fieldwork, many asked me personal questions, thinking that I would serve as a case manager. Another day laborer also suggested having a case manager in the day labor center. Day laborers wanted to be listened and have someone attend to their particular needs. I have the following in my field notes that illustrates this point:

*After introducing myself and discussing what I would be doing for the rest of the two and/or three months, a day laborer raised his hand to ask a question. The day laborer wanted me to help him find a job, and to clarify for him the process behind it. He mentioned some paperwork. Because I had no knowledge of the specificities of what he was asking, I stood there nervously anticipating to answer him with a simple "I have no idea." Before I could utter a word, Carlos interjected by saying how that would be tomorrow's discussion. Carlos ended my introduction to the group by stating how it might be necessary for me to have a one on one with every day laborer and attend to their particular necessities.*

Under-staffing is a huge issue at the center. This excerpt and my opening vignette of fieldwork demonstrate how one coordinator is insufficient. The coordinator could not handle everything. He was alone at the center. Indeed, he confessed how at times he felt isolated because other staff members do go to the other three centers, but not where Carlos is at, which according to him needs the most aid. Several times he shared with me how stressful he becomes, and the impossibility to pay particular attention to every single day laborer; many things go unnoticed because of that. Carlos needed to do several jobs in the center: answer phones, answer/send emails, write reports, handle all day laborers which is the hardest task for him when the center is full; print directions for day laborers; give workshops/assemblies; attend workshops outside the center, such as the one we both attended on a mental health first aid treatment. When he needs to get work done outside the center, the center is left to the *jornaleros*' responsibility. Not always, but usually, this is when problems emerge.

The problems in the center however also extend beyond the center's parameters, to follow and affect Carlos even when he is off work. Day laborers have a good relationship with Carlos. Because of this, they feel comfortable to contact him if they have an emergency, or need any type of help. Carlos does want to help them. But at times it becomes too much; it puts him under too much stress. As for example, when a day laborer calls him in the middle of the night and say unintelligible things because the laborer is under the influence or having a mental breakdown. Or when a day laborer is in need of money and asks him for some financial help. Or an employer might call him on a Saturday morning because a day laborer did not show up, and so he has to find out what happened. Or a day laborer might get in trouble and so Carlos is called because he is the only contact the day laborer has. Many things can unexpectedly emerge and Carlos has to take care of it. Although he wishes to ignore the issues and draw a line between work and his private life, he cannot because he is committed to the cause. One weekend Carlos got called by an employer because a day laborer did not show up. Carlos ended up taking the job because he did not want the center to have a bad impression and thus affect the day laborers.

The lack of resources makes the non-governmental organization a vulnerable entity. The vulnerability trickles down to Carlos, who becomes vulnerable to undesirable stress. His vulnerability heightens his stress. Because of the center's insecurity, Carlos cannot predict when a problem will arise and when he will have to take care of it. Even though unpredictability is pervasive at the center, having at least an extra staff member could reduce Carlos's heightened

stress. Having more funds could potentially serve to hire another staff member and have someone else in charge of emergent problems like the ones described above, and not only have Carlos as the sole responsible staff member.

However, there is yet another problem emerging: it is uncertain if the center will remain where it is located. The lack of resources not only affects staff members and the organization in general; right now there is a gentrifying process that will affect the day labor center and the day laborers. Rent is gradually increasing. On my first interaction and dialogue with Carlos, he told me how he only gives the center five more years because of the gentrification process in the area. “In fact, my first day of work, when I was first hired, I had to move my desk to our current place. Before we used to be across the street, in the second floor. It was much bigger, much more space than we have now. The day laborers have lived through the constant moving. They know what is happening, they are aware of it.” The non-governmental organization has gone through various movings. The center has been moved at least four times; and in between those movings there was a period where the insufficiency of funds put them in a parking lot, where, as I then asked the day laborers and what Carlos also distantly knows of, was one of the most chaotic phases the organization ever had. Now, they do not know if they will have to move again, or if the center will definitely close due to both the lack of funds, and now the gentrification process in the area. “Within five years,” Carlos confessed, “the center will be non-existent.” The center’s existence has been becoming more uncertain.

Day laborers who have been constant with the day labor center know how drastic the changes have been for the center. More than anything, what they point at and talk about the most is how space has been shrinking as they move from one place to another. Carlos mentioned to me the first thing he noticed when moving into their new place, was the size of the space. Compared to the old place, it was huge: it had a bigger waiting room. Other day laborers told me that even before Carlos started working with them, at another center, they had two bathrooms and a kitchen. Everyone would hang out in the kitchen, having conversations about life, and as usual, joking. “Around 50 day laborers could be at the center,” a day laborer told me. Now, if there are 12 day laborers assisting, it becomes crowded and chaotic. With more people waiting for work at the center, the more stress for Carlos.

The day laborers see, however, the gentrification process in a positive view because it will bring new jobs to them. Because many incoming residents will have to move their furniture

to their new apartments, day laborers desire and are waiting for them to be called in. In this sense, it does not create among the day laborers the worry and anxiousness that is being produced to Carlos and the organization. Carlos does get worried and anxious because of the historical knowledge he has of gentrification. Also, because he is witnessing, as a staff member, the rent's augmentation and the defunding by the municipality. That is why Carlos gives the center only five more years to be in operation. Even though the day laborers have been through the moving, I do not think they feel the same intensity of stress and vulnerability as Carlos and the organization. Having in mind the new incomers to the area, the day laborers are imagining new job opportunities.

### **Thinking with Precarity**

Work fundamentally shapes our way of being in the world. In focusing on work, Sociologist Arne L. Kalleberg mentions how work becomes “central to individual identity, links individuals to each other, and locates people within the stratification system” (2009, 1). Work also “reveals much about the social order, how it is changing, and the kinds of problems and issues that people (and their government) must address” (2009, 1). Work encompasses the social, economic, legal, political, and consequently, the existential realm. An occupation thus raises important questions. Such as: how is subjectivity constituted by a *precarious work* in which many Mexican, Central American and US marginalized men are channeled to--that is, being day laborers? How does a *precarious work* affect the intersubjective life? And how are these day laboring men experiencing a precarious life?

Kalleberg delineates the course of precarious work by focusing both on employers and on workers and how both respond to the macroeconomy produced by globalization, price competition, and technological changes in the United States (2009). Precarity, he says, “is not necessarily new or novel in the current era; it has existed since the launch of paid employment as a primary source of sustenance” (2009, 2). However, it is contemporaneously being intensified. The US, then, has had certain periods of heightened precarity. What I want to show is that the case for the day laborer, and the US marginalized, has always been of an intensified precariousness. There is a “differential vulnerability to precarious work,” as reviewed by Kalleberg (2009, 10) that needs to be exposed and attended. The case I want to make, as Kalleberg's asserts, is that the minority and the older working-class population, are more

vulnerable to suffer from discrimination. The structure of day labor work already in place, needs a certain type of worker. If the worker does not meet the demands by the structure, or the employer's, then the worker is discriminated, unemployed, or fired. I want to emphasize the structure in place that makes them susceptible to vulnerability and hence to precarity.

Thus, I will argue how the day labor community is inherently in a perpetual state of precarity because of the structural forces that impinge upon them. Indeed, the precariousness varies in intensities and degrees among day laborers. This precariousness emerges at the junction of a myriad of factors, some of which I hope to make transparent in this thesis. The convergence of the objective and subjective precariousness will be teased out.

The notion of precarity needs to be explored because different workers around the globe are experiencing precariousness in different, radical, and particular ways. Thus, to understand precarity and its effects on people it is not sufficient to bound precarity in a certain space and time. Precarity has indeed affected the majority of the population around the globe. In Europe it first gained momentum when secure employment became the exception, and secondly, when workers were cognizant of the precarious condition and using the term politically. Indeed, scholars and the European population sympathize with the term precarity because, to a degree, it creates a type of class-consciousness among the workers: "the precariat class" (Standing 2011). In 1997, Bourdieu called it the "collective thinking," "an original undertaking" that has "...brought together people who have little opportunity to meet and exchange their views..." (Bourdieu 1998, 81). Because of the global and pervasive job insecurity, Bourdieu visualized precarity as the opportunity to "mobilize on an international scale". In other words, it produced a new mode of resistance because of the global scale insecurity that was being produced by "political will" (Bourdieu 1998, 84). Neilson and Rossiter follow Bourdieu's footsteps: they want to think of precarity as a political concept that has the "potential to contribute to a political composition of the common" (2008, 55). Even though precarity is indeed happening at a global scale, some countries are said to have distinct and unique ways of experiencing precarity. Noelle J. Mole, for instance, discusses how Italian workers anticipate the neoliberal policies (and identify with the precariat class) and how that anticipation is explicitly impacting worker's interiority (2010). In contradistinction, the day labor community does not explicitly address their situation as precarious, but in the broader sense, index insecurity and unpredictability, as one day laborer told me referring to their condition, "así es como es esto de los jornaleros" (This is what



it means to be a day laborer). From other geographic areas we understand how precarity has solidified a community of workers. But with the day labor community in the United States, particularly in California, is not happening (Ordonez 2015). This raises questions: Why is precarity not mobilizing day labor workers in the US? And, how useful is the concept of precarity to mobilize day laborers?

I want to focus on how the day labor community inhabits, contends, and experiences the precarious condition in certain microspaces of their everyday lives. Although precarity has been distinguished from precariousness, I will engage with both terms interchangeably because both intersect at a point where both suggests the unpredictability, uncertainty, and vulnerability of the human condition whereby it is produced by material conditions and then spreads to other domains. For instance, Judith Butler speaks of how the “corporeal vulnerability” is unequally distributed across space and time. Butler states: “This vulnerability, however, becomes especially exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited” (Butler 2009, 29). As I have demonstrated above, the structural forces affect in different ways all day laborers. Each day laborer has a certain positionality in relation to the structure, to the employers, the society at large, that produce a certain subjectivity. In general, I am exploring how the structural produce a precarious subjectivity given the positionality of the day laborer within a set of relations of power.

Precarious work can mean the “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kallenberg 2009, 2). Because some workers can always perceive work in that manner, Anne Allison intervenes in trying to demonstrate the way in which “...insecurity or precariousness registers on the senses in the first place--as a sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected--that I take to be the sign, and symptom, of a widespread precarity in twenty-first century Japan” (2013, 14). Moreover, Nancy Ettliger wants to address the “context-specific variation both in the processes that give rise to precarity and how precarity is engaged” (2007, 321). Ettliger argues how we need to not essentialize precarity, or keep it bounded, as in for example, in thinking of precarious labor epochs. Precarity, then, has been the norm but as Butler argues, unequally distributed.

Thus, following Ettliger, at a more micro-level precarity manifests in different domains. Structural vulnerability helps us understand how is it that day laborers become vulnerable to

discrimination, decision-making, and stress as was the case with Carlos, the coordinator. In addition, it has helped us understand how is it that they get stuck: Johnny cannot get new jobs because of his age, for example. In thinking with precarity, the day laborers' everyday lives and subjective experience is explored more in depth. In this vein, I follow Kathleen Millar who has recognized how precarity has been recently used in the anthropological literature: "...the concept of precarity has emerged as a way to capture both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labor as well as states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers (2014, 34). In this sense, for the day labor population, precarity has ever been present due to their positionality. Sympathizing with Millar, precarity becomes useful to conceptualize the "labor condition as inseparable from issues of subjectivity, affect, sociality, and desire" (2014:35). Thus, I will describe the everyday lives of day laborers.

Furthermore, by precarity I will mean to encompass not only labor work that is unpredictable, unstable, uncertain, and risky, but also the general spaces that day laborers come to inhabit in certain microspaces. In this sense, I will engage with precarity as an ordinary affect (Stewart 2014), and as a "...life without the promise of stability" (Tsing 2015, 2). Spaces that day laborers come to inhabit become porous, destabilizing their everyday lives because of the structural forces described above. The examination of day laborers livelihoods entails minute everyday interactions that go beyond their control, almost as if those interactions and mode of being in the world, had scripts of how the essence of being a day laborer comes with instability and unpredictability. Having that in mind, then, I would also like to posit how being a day laborer means to be in a precarious subjectivity. Instability, insecurity, unpredictability, becomes something ordinary for the day laborer: labor is precarious because of the structural but it also affects the ordinary in other unforeseeable ways.

### **Precarious Subjectivities: Porous Spaces and the Everyday lives of *Jornaleros***

#### ***Waiting at the center***

Waiting essentially becomes integral to *jornaleros* everyday lives. Waiting becomes an expression of precarity. In waiting, day laborers become desperate, anxious, and hopeless; their instability and unpredictable lives become manifests in the process of waiting for an employer to call. At times I would find them, while waiting for work, joking, laughing; at other times I would see the exhaustion on their face, boredom. Anything was sought to occupy their minds, from the

television to their cell phones; to the magazines and books provided by Carlos to the board games. Waiting at the center meant waiting for a future to arrive. The object of waiting was employment. Waiting meant not knowing when an employment would call and take them to work. Vincent Crapanzano captures what I witnessed at the center:

Waiting produces in us feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and vulnerability--infantile feelings--and all the rage that these feelings evoke. We seek release from these feelings, from the tension and suspense of waiting, from the anxiety of contingency, in many, often magical ways. We tell stories. We lose ourselves in the swirl of everyday activity (1985, 45).

Day laborers wanted employment to secure their all-too common unpredictable lives. To have money for food, was the minimum several wanted. While in fieldwork, I would hear how many of the day laborers had been waiting for days for work to arrive. One particular day laborer told me he would now take any job to earn money for his food. Day laborers usually do not take a job below the minimum wage, which is 10.50 an hour. The center enforces the minimum wage, and so does not let the day laborers go to a job that will not pay the minimum. However, Carlos needs to be flexible. If a day laborer urgently and desperately needs employment, Carlos leaves the decision to them. This particular day laborer, even though it was ten dollars for two hours, took a job that arrived almost at closing time. Before leaving for the job, he confessed to me how he had not had all his meals in the previous days. This day laborer did not have the opportunity that other day laborers had. That is, he did not have access to the meals provided by homeless shelters, such as how the mission did for other day laborers who lived there, that provide breakfast and dinner. Many other times there was a *cooperacha* (a collection of money) to buy food for everyone. Sometimes we would collect money to buy pizza from Little Caesar Pizza. At other times it would be chicken.

Yet to return to day laborers' positionalities and the analysis done above, it is important to understand how waiting varies among the *jornaleros*. For instance, El Cholo would not grow as desperate because he had other jobs on the side. He could go and distribute newspapers, or flyers for a pizza store. He would also get called for a job directly by a warehouse. Yet, Juancho, a day laborer from Central America, would grow desperate when no job was landed, and the

month's rent was due. Even though he lived with his uncle, the few jobs he had were still not enough.

### *Homelessness and the streets*

Many day laborers were homeless. The majority of the day laborers that I got to meet lived either in a homeless shelter or at a mission. "La mision," was a recurrent term tossed around. "Vienes de la misión?" (Do you come from the mission?); "me estoy quedando en la misión" (I am staying at the mission); "no puedo ir porque me estoy quedando en la misión" (I can't go because I am staying at the mission); these are only some utterances that I heard from day laborers. The mission provides shelter for three months and two meals a day. By 6 am day laborer need to head out. Many day laborers take advantage of the fact that the mission collaborates with the day labor center. So, every morning, they get a ride in a van to the center. This allows the day laborers to save transportation money. They are allowed back into the mission by 4 pm. The mission supports them until they are able to get permanent housing. However, if the mission evaluates them as not doing enough, they are kicked out as soon as possible. Some day laborers were able to prove that they needed a few more weeks to have the support and get into permanent housing. To these people the mission was flexible. For those who could not provide evidence, they were removed.

I met one day laborer that lived at a homeless shelter. He hated it because, as he mentioned, one could not do anything there without expecting an aggressive attitude from the others ("no puedes hacer nada porque muchos reaccionan). In this particular microspaces and interactions with others that shared a space with him in the homeless shelter, unexpected and violent behaviors can emerge. For this reason, he tried to keep to himself, and avoid as much as possible any interactions with the other people. One never knew when something could erupt when interacting with them.

Day laborers' self-awareness of being a homeless have many effects on them, but it is also acknowledged differently between them. I started believing after a while that this particular day labor was ashamed of disclosing he was homeless. As opposed to other day laborers, he did not disclose his homeless social positioning openly. In fact, he admitted to me that he was living a homeless shelter when we were closing the center. "Pues te voy a decir la verdad..." (I am going to tell you the truth), started as we were walking towards the public transportation. But

other day laborers freely accepted they were living either at the mission, or in the streets, in a camping tent. An exemplary case is Pambazo. Pambazo who will be thoroughly introduced below, embraced his status as homeless, and told others to not be ashamed of it. Another example is Johnny. He recounted his “homeless adventures.” Johnny actually enjoyed being homeless because he was not subjected to anyone. He could do anything he wanted; he had freedom. But Johnny really wanted to stay away from the streets. Once, he told me he did not want to go back to the streets, which I first misunderstood its meaning<sup>10</sup>. Of course, no one ones to live in the streets because it is risky, dangerous and violent. But days after, he confessed: there is a lot of freedom in the streets.

Moreover, being homeless affects their relationships with family members. To a certain extent, their relationships become precarious. Juancho, who came from Central America to achieve his ‘American Dream,’ had family members here in the US. Juancho’s familial ties were broken when his uncle found out that Juancho was homeless. Juancho’s uncle did not want him around, around his daughters. In general, to have contact with them. Unexpectedly, Juancho lost a family member because of his homelessness. And even though, nowadays he is not homeless, he told he does not talk to them because of what happened when he was homeless. “They do not want to talk to me,” he said. Precariousness affects other domains. Here we see how it affected family relationships. Below, I will go in detail how precarity becomes entangled with interrelationships and in return affects day laborers’ subjectivity.

Moreover, being homeless brings upon the day laborers instability. Because jornaleros are seeking employment on a daily basis, and do not know if they will get an employment, it is hard for them to know with certitude if they will be able to move to a permanent place. Day laborers do get anxious when the removable date from the mission is soon approaching. They start searching for options. I once helped a day laborer search for options. His time at the mission was about to end, and so he wanted me to search new places via google. All my searches were to no avail: rent was too expensive.

Aside from uncertain employment contributing to their instability, violence becomes another factor. Above I described how El Cholo has been discriminated against in certain spaces. There is violence inflicted to some day laborers by disparaging them with discriminatory acts.

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<sup>10</sup> At first, I thought understood because I associated the streets with danger, violence; in general, a deplorable condition. But after several days, I discovered that he actually did not want to return to the streets because he enjoyed it. There, no one says to him how he is to behave, comport himself.

Aside from this, though, there are also gangs and other day laborers that become a threat, particularly where the mission is located. Day laborers told me they were scared to walk at night around the mission. In fact, one day a discussion ensued about the dangerous area in which the mission is located because Carlos had announced about a free workshop on carpentry. However, some did not want to attend because it was at night, and were going to be returning to the mission when gang members roam around. “It’s not that bad. I have walked around that area at night,” Carlos claimed. Two other day laborer swore that it was a dangerous place at night. They ended up not attending the workshop.

Yet, when day laborers get to permanently get housing, it comes at a cost. With little capital, day laborers move to “ghettos,” where rent is low. The surrounding area might not be what they are looking for; but they have no choice. Carlos told me how El Cholo got stuck at his new permanent housing because of the violence in the surrounding area. Apparently, drug distribution was hot in the area. Police came after the drug distributors. El Cholo happened to recount what he saw and heard to some random people. Somehow, after that El Cholo became a target. The drug dealers were looking for him. He could not escape his home. He could not go to work, could not leave in the morning because he would see a group of people hanging around the area. El Cholo had to eventually leave the area. El Cholo had other stories of places he used to live, and other day laborers also told me how they do not go to live to certain areas because of the dangers. Day laborers, aside from being in the streets for years, avoid infamous places.

Below I will discuss how day laborers become a threat to each other at the center, and consequently in the streets too. What is important to emphasize is how many of the day laborers know each other. And because many day laborers spend their time at street corners, worker’s centers, and in homeless shelters/missions, they could potentially see each other. For this reason, because day laborers are almost always in stressful conditions, if a heated disagreement transpires between two or more day laborers, the consequences could be high: their behavior can turn violent. Thus, many day laborers avoid heated discussions and confrontations with other day laborers. “What if later they want to beat me up,” was something that I commonly heard.

### ***“Precarious Space of Welcome”***

I treat the center as a precarious space of welcome (2007, Willen 26). However, in general, I am arguing for the precariousness and thus porousness of the spaces that day laborers

come to inhabit. The spaces become unpredictable, unstable and risky and hence penetrable by danger. These spaces become emergent and precarious. Yet these spaces leave a mark on day laborers' subjective experience. Violence is a constant emergent phenomenon that manifest in manifold ways because of the structural forces discussed above. Be it discriminatory acts, exploitation, threats, inaccessibility to health care, etcetera; the emergent forms of violence and otherwise, affect day laborers in unprecedented ways. The structural forces constrain their decisions, or influence on how they move and act in the world. In the structural vulnerability section, I gave examples of how actions are taken based upon previous experiences, and what are these forces that create vulnerability. Now, I will focus on where and how these ordinary forms of precariousness emerge.

The day labor center wants to provide a platform for workers to move up the social ladder. The objective is to find them a permanent job and to provide the necessary support to achieve it. Because this population is marginalized and susceptible to exploitation, the center provides the necessary resources to combat this. If the employer does not want to pay, for example, Carlos's job is to make sure day laborers get paid. In addition, anyone is welcome to the center: migrants, non-migrants, Latinos, Afro-Americans, Filipinos, all ethnicities.

The center tries to do everything possible to make the center feel welcoming. Rules are established to make sure everyone feels safe, to maintain the center in order, to make it feel as if going in "progress"<sup>11</sup>, a term that was thrown around a lot while I was there. Every day laborer that attends the center is subjected to the rules. The rules are made by the workers themselves. To establish the rules, a voting process takes place. When an important issue needs to be addressed, or when there is a need for more rules and a consensus, there is an announcement made ahead of time to let the day laborers know that an assembly will take place on a certain day. In this manner, no one can complain of the established rules. By becoming a member of the center, active participation is needed on behalf of members. Moreover, Carlos's job is also to make sure that everything runs smoothly, and that rules are not broken. To reiterate, the objective of the day labor center is to bring autonomy to the marginalized community of day laborers, and find for them a dignified employment. Yet, at times, the space of welcome can become porous and things can go unexpectedly bad.

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<sup>11</sup> "In progress," usually meant that day laborers are getting jobs, and advancing to positions of permanent jobs. It also meant that they were getting permanent housing.

Sarah S. Willen discusses how migrants in Israel, despite the odds, are able to maintain composure, to persevere. Willen argues that migrants find an “inhabitable space of welcome” (2014, 56). She defines them as “a small zone of familiarity, comfort, meaning, and safety in the shadow of laws, policies, and practices explicitly designed to make people...feel unwelcome” (2014, 56). She describes Marlene, a Filipina woman that, despite her abjectivity and illegality condition, is able to pull herself together and choose how to live life in the midst of her tumultuous lifeworld. Willen argues that Marlene finds an “inhabitable space of welcome” in a “grounded relationship,” that is, in her case, “a young, dependent child”—her daughter Leah (2014, 86). Moreover, Willen proposes to think with “existential imperatives” to understand how Marlene is able to self-persevere and deploy herself in the world. In a nutshell, Marlene is able to continue because she finds a “space of relative groundness, comfort, and intimacy” in caring and upbringing her daughter. Because of her daughter, Marlene is able to carry on and invest in life (2014, 93).

Spaces of welcome at the center, however, are fleeting moments because of its penetrability. The zone of familiarity, comfort, meaning and safety that Willen speaks of are at times found in the center. However, because of the various spaces that day laborers navigate, such as explained above—the streets, homeless shelters/missions—these spaces position day laborers in an extremely unpredictable state. These dangers and insecurities that emerge within the center are, first, produced by a lack of funding leading to an under-staffed center; and secondly, become an outcome of other day laborers’ actions under stressful conditions. The precarious space within the center causes day laborers to become hyper-conscious of their decisions, and what they express about someone else. *Jornaleros* refrain from saying anything negative about another day laborer. They are aware of the potential dangers of encountering a disgruntled day laborer in the streets. Thus, to avoid any problems they stay quiet. They are in a very ambiguous situation, even within the center, which purports to provide a sense of belonging, stability and security. This only makes their life more unstable and unpredictable. This was the case with Pambazo, a young day laborer, who got expelled from the center by the latter period of my fieldwork. Pambazo constantly showed up for work. Gradually, however, Pambazo started behaving out of the ordinary. Carlos and everyone else suspected he was on crack. When he got expelled, and the reason as to why was shared to the day laborers, the day laborers mentioned how they knew he smoked crack in the bathroom but stayed silent because



they were avoiding problems. In addition to that, Carlos, the coordinator, has even been menaced: a day laborer threatened to stab him. Carlos was later attacked by Pambazo. Pambazo showed up but Carlos had to lead him out of the center; a fight ensued. At another time, a day laborer exploded because Carlos told him to lower his voice. The day laborer came after Carlos, walking behind him raising his voice with insults. To me, that was unexpected. But these types of phenomena happen at the center. They are uncontrolled, unanticipated, sudden. These are events that emerge unexpectedly, in a second, and yet leave a mark on day laborers. The rumors spread fast of what happens.

### ***Precariousness as Ordinary***

Precariousness is lived on a daily basis. It becomes ordinary and unexpected. Precarity becomes pervasive, ubiquitous. In the following, I will provide a short example of how precarity becomes ordinary, to the extent where at times it becomes extraordinary, almost surreal.

Four day laborers were employed to work at a house. In speaking to the employer over the phone, Carlos could tell it was an old lady. She needed several jobs to be taken care of within her home. Four day laborers were sent. After a few hours, they called Carlos. Something was weird. The old lady's behavior towards them was strange. One of the day laborers, first told us that the old lady received them to what appeared to him a see-through nightgown. That was the first strange encounter they had with her. When later she put them to work, she would tell them to be quiet. The type of work required noise. Yet she told them to be quiet. They continued working but the old lady would not stop telling them to be quiet. Classical music was playing in the background too. The old lady wanted to listen to her classical music. But the noise occasioned by the day laborers continued. They ended up returning to the center to tell us the crazy adventure they went through. Many were confused, or what Stewart would call, “(dis)oriented” (2007, 63). The day laborers could not exactly describe what had happened. The house, they said, was almost like in a hill. To get to their destination, they had to climb some stairs. “She was crazy,” many said. “She was a racist,” another remarked. Carlos agreed with the latter. Two of the day laborers wanted to stay; the other two wanted to leave. But they all returned to the center. One of the day laborers was afraid to leave anyone behind. He wanted everyone to return with him.

Aside from the precarious ordinariness of going through events like what I have described above, this event also illustrates how day laborers will not tolerate anything and risk intensifying their precariousness. Despite them being in huge need of the money, this event demonstrates that if anything bizarre in the employment twists like that, they will return to the center. As one of the day laborers told me, “you never know what could happen when you encounter bizarre and strange things like that. What if she calls the cops and say we stole something or wanted to sexually abuse her?” The day laborers decided to instead return to their “space of welcome,” the center. There they feel secure by recounting to Carlos what happened, and getting the acknowledgement by Carlos that they acted well in returning to the center.

### ***Precarity entangling with the intersubjective Life***

The precarious ordinariness affects not only day laborers’ subjectivities; precarity becomes entangled with the intersubjective life. In other words, sociality becomes implicated. Interrelationships become impacted. In exchange, those interrelationships dramatically impact or shape day laborers’ subjectivities. Desjarlais and Throop define intersubjectivity as “the existential organization, recognition, and constitution of relations between subjects” (2011,88). Adhering to this definition, I will demonstrate how El Cholo’s precarious subjectivity is shaped by precarious work and how his family is implicated.

Day labor work enmeshes with El Cholo’s intersubjective life. The ordinary precariousness spreads to other domains, to El Cholo’s relationship with the family. Because El Cholo is intersubjectively in the world, emotionally invested to his family, precarious work causes him anxiety, stress, and most importantly, impacts his role as a father. El Cholo, as a father, has to meet familial responsibilities. Even if El Cholo is able to meet the necessities, he still needs to meet his daughter’s expectations. This becomes an issue when the employment is precarious, unstable, and unpredictable; and his daughters asks him for ‘gifts.’

El Cholo is one of the few *jornaleros* who has a family to care for. Even though El Cholo has separated from his wife, he still sees his daughters every weekend (or when he can) and provides whatever they need for their well-being, and other desires his daughters have. For this reason, his family is a big part of his everyday life. The example below will demonstrate how the presence of his family is indispensable to address because precarious work has rippling effects

on him. The example above in the structural analysis, about El Cholo asking me if Denny's discriminate, is only but one example.

One day, as we closed the center and were walking to the metro station to go to our respective places, El Cholo confessed to me how he would get irritated with his older daughter because she would ask him for money, or expect him to buy her expensive gifts. El Cholo illustrated his case by telling me the story of the camera. His daughter, who is in high school, had started to grow an interest in photography. El Cholo believes his daughter grew an interest in photography because of the milieu in which she is in--other students also having an interest in photography. So, El Cholo's daughter started requesting a camera. But it is not any camera; for El Cholo it is one of those expensive cameras. "Estan bien caras esas mierdas" (That shit is expensive), El Cholo said to me, annoyed as we were walking to the metro station. It is not that El Cholo did not want to buy the camera but, fulfilling his daughter's desire, was difficult given the precarious work he engages in. The camera is not the only expensive commodity. As the school year was about to commence, El Cholo had to buy school uniforms and school supplies. He could not believe how expensive school uniforms were, let alone school supplies. The backpack he bought was very expensive. His money would go away in a blink. And because of the unpredictability of work, he never knew when he would be able to provide the necessities.

Moreover, El Cholo's precarious work dictated when and how he would see his daughters, which in turn affected the social relationship with them. The unpredictability of work did not allow him to have a "free time." Because day labor work means that you are constantly seeking work on a daily basis, it also means that you have to be present, in El Cholo's case, at a worker center until an employer solicits you. To provide, then, to his daughters the necessities, he not only needs to be at the worker center but look for employment opportunities in other places. This why it affects when and how he sees his daughters. At times, work does not allow El Cholo to see his daughters. As mentioned, he is separated from his wife, and so he only gets the weekend to see his daughters. But then work gets in the way. Understandably, on the weekends (when he meets with his daughters) he takes any employment if there happens to be one. He thus misses the opportunity to catch up with them. This is a clear example of how the unpredictability of employment affects his relationship with his family.

One day I said to El Cholo that I noticed that he forgets lots of things. For example, up to this day he cannot remember my name, and is always changing it. Even though I would see him

Monday through Friday, he could still not recall my name. Thus, when he was mentioning to me how he forgets stuff, I took the opportunity to ask him, “Por qué crees que se te olvida todo?” (Why do you think you forget a lot of things?). “El alzheimer’s,” he joked. Earlier in the day a volunteer gave a talk about alzheimer’s. But then he proceeded: “Por tanta mierda que uno tiene en la cabeza” (Because of all the shit I have in my head). He explained how caring for his family is a major concern. Plus, “other stuff” he has to take care of. He did not specify what the “other stuff” was. It is not difficult to understand, though, that the instability of his condition and all the precarious spaces that he has to navigate could be a cause of his forgetting. Stress might be intensified and thus leading to forgetfulness. Waiting several days for work; after attaining a job but getting exploited, discriminated; after all the violence, dangers and preoccupations, it is not difficult to understand his “alzheimer’s.”

### **Liminality: The Paradoxical World of Opening and Foreclosing Possibilities**

Not differentiating between precarity and liminality becomes a conceptual problem. The stage of the liminal, in which the individual is separated from society to later become re-incorporated into society and gain a new social symbolic meaning, and as it is explained by Van Gennep and Victor Turner, by nature can implicate an ambiguous and precarious process (1961;1995). For this matter, migration/immigration scholars have found useful to use liminality to understand the perennial in-betweenness in which many new immigrants endure in the destination country (Chavez 1992). Another scholar has explored how adolescents transition into liminality as they are becoming adults and start navigating society post-high school, but maintains how certain immigrants are always in a legal limbo (Gonzales 9, 2015).

The person in liminality enters into uncertainty, unpredictability, and instability. From the person’s lived experience, it is unknown when the transition into the third phase will occur, that of integration. Hence its precariousness. Conceiving liminality in the same manner as previous immigration scholars have, I think, can lead us to solely focus on the negative repercussions, and to some sense of immobility, where one is “stuck,” one is in “limbo.” With liminality, however, I want to conceptualize it with the set of possibilities, in those ordinary and micro-spaces in which possibilities open. As Stoller has argued, “The liminal, then, can be a space of creative imagination, of provocative linkages, or barzakh, of personal empowerment” (2009, 6). But how

does one gain that “space of enormous growth, a space of power and creativity” (2009, 4)? Stoller invites us to find strength in the “creative air of indeterminacy” (2009, 4).

Yet how are day laborers to find that strength and creativity in the in-between, when wherever they go, day laborers find emergent forms of precariousness that destabilize and create insecurity? Even the center, which is a space of welcome, becomes precarious, porous, penetrable by violence and danger. How can they find the strength when constantly there is discrimination, racism, exploitation? As I posited above, day laborers become “(dis)oriented” (Stewart 2007) in their everyday lives when events like the above happen. Because they cannot comprehend what is happening, they become paralyzed and disoriented. The structural forces are at fault because they potentiate, heighten, and intensify their precariousness to the point of causing immobility.

The liminal could become an oppressive force upon the day laborers or it could open possibilities. *Jornaleros* can become imprisoned to liminality, with fleeting moments of exit. There are layers to liminality, always fluctuating. Day laborers suffer from an intense precarious condition: And for this reason, they look for possibilities to open up, because the instability negatively scars their lived experience, and so wish to assuage their sense of precariousness. In other words, they try to find, within the precarious condition, which at times annuls possibilities, the liminal condition that opens up possibilities. This was the case when the four day laborers went to the old lady’s house, stumbled with an emergent form of precariousness, and had no option but to return to the center without a payment. Another example is how they attend the center to position themselves in-between unemployment and employment. They opened a possibility in finding themselves in a liminal space. At the center, however, they then have to wait. In waiting, the precarious liminal condition manifests. But liminality is not necessarily precariousness.

Thus, I wish to follow Farha Ghannam when thinking with liminality. Because I want to engage with possibilities that become opened or annulled, I think Ghannam conceptualization of liminality becomes useful, especially when relating liminality to mobility. Liminality offers the opportunity to engage with, “...a state of in-betweenness” that “has the spatial and temporal aspects that generate possibilities for the transformation of bodies and identities” (2011, 792). Citing Victor Turner, Ghannam emphasizes how liminality offers the “realm of pure possibility” (2011, 792). Being in-between opens up possibilities. Stoller engages with liminality in the same

way, and wants to incite people to, being in the midst of liminality, gain strength to empower oneself.

Relying on my data to make my point, I think that precarity means how there is no possibility of knowing what's to happen, when in contrast, liminality, offers the known or possible possibility that something can potentially happen. "Work will arrive" (Ahorita llega trabajo), was a common phrase I would hear. Or "ya llego trabajo" (work is here) was a common phrase when the phone would ring. In the center, the possibility of attaining work was there. Sure, there was always uncertainty whether employment would arrive that day, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. But the possible possibility of employment was still there. Only by attending the center, the possibility opened up. In attending the center, men jornaleros wanted to move into a new structure that would open possibilities—the liminal space of possible possibilities.

Moreover, liminality can serve "to conceptualize moments where the relationship between structure and agency is not easily resolved or even understood within the, by now classical, 'structuration theories...'" (Thomassen 2009, 5). This is another reason why I think liminality is helpful to engage with: in order to not fall in dichotomizing the jornaleros' experience as agency versus structure and to not think in terms of either/or. As a processual concept, it allows space, I think, with dialectics. Jornaleros' are being channeled to precarity and searching for a liminal space to cope with precarity. Day laborers are in a constant struggle yet to be resolved, a dialectic. The dialectic manifests in the struggle to be, in the liminal condition and precariousness that never culminates—the oppressed self-struggling to become recognized.

### ***Pambazo's Presentation of Self: The Struggle for Being***

Pambazo is a day laborer who is relatively young, only thirty-three, in comparison to the rest of the day laborers. At eighteen years-old he left behind his whole family to migrate to the United States to have a secure life. Pambazo was fleeing the dangers that were ubiquitous in his city; he was particularly averting gang violence. Once in Southern California, Pambazo initiated a new life, having a new family. He got married, and gave birth to two daughters with his partner. When I met him at the community job center, however, he was in calamity. He was immersed in a huge tragedy. Not only was he homeless and was constantly struggling to overcome his crack addiction; his family purposely avoided him because of previous conflicts they have had. Pambazo last saw his family, and his youngest daughter last June, when Carlos

lent him money to buy a gift for his daughter. “I only saw her for five minutes.” Since then, he has not seen her. Now he was on his own, living on a tent close to a plaza, and desiring to communicate again with his family back in Oaxaca. Pambazo did not try to reach them because he was ashamed of reporting his situation: he was homeless. Yet, despite the obstacles he was facing, Pambazo would always arrive early morning to seek employment. “But here I am *chingandole*,” (working-hard) he said when he explained to me his current situation. Aspiring to have his own home, to provide a place for his “*chamaca*,” (his girlfriend) and have her cook for him; Pambazo, always with good humor, enters the center at 7 am to direct himself straight to the bathroom, which stands on the back side of the small day labor center. With a plastic bag in hand, wearing slacks and a plain white shirt with dark stains, enters the bathroom to transform himself into a white-collar worker. With a dress-shirt and dress shoes, and a tie, Pambazo exits the bathroom ready to work. He is professionally dressed, ready to work.

On several occasions I would catch Pambazo’s neat and professional way of presenting himself. “Since I have been here, I have always seen him in slacks, dress shoes, and his tie. Every morning he goes to the bathroom to change,” Carlos responded when I inquired about Pambazo’s habit. One day, as we were heading to a *panaderia* to ask for donations for the center’s anniversary, I took the opportunity to ask Pambazo why he transforms himself or changes his attire every morning at the center. “Siempre me ha gustado vestir así,” (I have always liked to dress like this). Even though I tried to elicit more answers, he would simply state that from immemorial times, he has always liked to dress like that.

In general, I want to treat the center as a liminal space, as a space of opportunity. However, in this instance we can see how the center’s bathroom’s frame becomes the threshold, converting the bathroom into the space of opportunity. It is too, in Goffman’s terms, the backstage (Goffman 1956). Literally, it is the backstage where Pambazo self-transforms himself, to then exit, and present his work ethic to the public. Going to the center positions Pambazo in a liminal space, where he becomes in-between employment and unemployment. His liminal position allows him to enter into a “space of enormous growth, a space of power and creativity” (Stoller 2009). His position of being in-between unemployment and employment allows him to dream, imagine, and aspire to become that which was once achieved by him: a stable life with his family. His liminal position allows Pambazo to feel closer to employment, to not feel distant his desires, and to imaginative feel closer the materially and empirically new apartment with his

family. In addition, in being in-between and gaining that space of empowerment, the liminal space allows Pambazo to break the stigma attached to a homeless person. By self-transforming, he breaks, for fleeting moments, the social perception of a homeless person. For a reason, when Pambazo noticed that a day laborer would always attend the center with the same dirty clothes, and his face a bit dirty, he told him to change his appearance; Pambazo told him to embrace his homelessness, the struggle that comes with being homeless. But it need not to mean that he had to be dirty. Dirtiness is socially despicable, and becomes a problem for the homeless, or the day laborers, because they cannot find the resources to clean themselves. Cleaning themselves becomes a struggle. Pambazo overcame that struggle by self-transforming himself. And he motivated others to do the same thing. Pambazo exerts agency, in this manner, by transforming himself and hence turning society sideways. Only for fleeting moments, though.

### ***The Day Labor Center as a Space to Recollect Oneself***

In conceptualizing the center as the “realm of pure possibilities,” it means treating the center as a liminal space that provides the avenue for change. Every day laborer that attends the center wants change. Day laborers want to leave behind a structure that has been constraining them, hindering their opportunities. The condition in which many day laborers find themselves, however, at times leads them to hopelessness, depression, and immobility, to the point where Carlos has even thought that many day laborers go to the center without the aspiration to work. I ended up believing that many of them do want to work, do want change; but their precariousness at times strongly intervenes that ends up drastically affecting their mood and leaves them paralyzed, immobile.

Johnny, several times made it clear to me how he wanted change. But because he is aging, and because of his addiction to alcohol, it becomes difficult for him to transform into that change. Johnny is making change happening by gradually substituting little habits. When he said to me, “I don’t want to go to the streets. I want to change my life,” he then continued with how he was no longer drinking, that he stopped, but substituted his drinking problem with cigarettes and candy. Aging and his alcoholism was constraining him from getting any new jobs. The reason he attended the center was to not only seek employment, but to keep himself under a rule. That was what Johnny to a certain extent needed to go after the transformation. Through the center, he practiced a discipline that was leading him to a transformation. In one of my latest



returns to the center, I learned that Johnny was enrolled in school. The center, then, served Johnny as a platform to recollect himself and strive for transformation and change.

I also consider the assemblies (*asambleas*), which took place at least once a month, as a space where day laborers could recollect themselves. The assemblies took place to discuss future plans for the center; to update day laborers on how the organization in general is doing; to make them voice their opinions on issues related to the day labor center; to make new rules; etcetera. At times, however, assemblies had the indirect and unintentional function to let day laborers vent. “Almost every time we have an assembly, they [day laborers] get off topic. They start discussing things that happened two years ago.” Carlos had to always bring back to the current issues, and told them to forget about what happened to years later. I found this space as a way where day laborers could recollect themselves and reflect on the past.

Jokes also served as a means to recollect oneself. To joke, was the norm. Because of the precarious condition they were in, I think jokes served as a coping mechanism. Aside from the fact that *carilla* (teasing others/making fun of) is common in Mexico and other regions of Latin America, jokes against another day laborer were used to alleviate the precarious feeling. Laughter was triggered every time someone made *carrilla* out of someone. However, there is the danger of making too much *carrilla* and make a day laborer mad. Yet it always had everyone laughing. In this way, I think, that jokes served as a way to forget and resist the oppression on the day laborers. It was a space where laughter helped to recollect oneself.

“Parece un pinche cine,” (The center appears to be a theater), Carlos once said to me. Indeed, at times you could feel that day laborers went to the day labor center to spend the day, to meet other day laborers and chat, than to seek employment. “I don’t know how many times we have watched Captain America.” Movies were always being played. Everyone would vote on the movie to be played next. Movies seemed to function as a way to forget about their condition-- their precarious positionality that many of the day laborers find themselves in. To endure their current condition, they found movies as way to distract themselves from it. Cell-phones were also used, where music was being played. El Cholo watched documentaries. In these small actions, a resistance towards the external forces oppressing them were exerted. That is the function of the day labor center, and many found other small niche in which to resist, and cope with their precarious condition. The center is a space of refuge. Without the center, there would be a more heightened mode of precarity.

The day labor center, with its assemblies, the social justice posters, and Carlos's discussions on political, social, and racial issues, becomes an attempt to bring class-consciousness among the *jornaleros*. The space that the center offers ultimately functions as a way to bring opportunities, growth, change, and agency. The center's objective is to also mobilize the day laborers, and join them in their struggle for a more dignified labor. The center, and the non-governmental organization, in general, become central to day laborers' lives. In addition, the center takes the role of a carer. Not having kin to care for the day laborers, or even the State's insufficient protection, the center is left to be the protector, the carer. Unfortunately, it becomes very difficult to be a carer with few resources. For this reason, even though the center serves as a mechanism to push them forward, to serve as a "stepping stone," to bring them together and help them recollect themselves; the center becomes porous, insecure, penetrable, and unpredictable of emerging dangers.

## **Conclusion**

Investigations on the day labor community is almost non-existent within the discipline of anthropology. In addition, knowledge produced on the day labor community is mostly based in Northern California. My research took place in Southern California. Aside from the geographic differences, I have dealt with an older population. Scholars investigating the day labor community always address how young the population is, or how recent day laborers are to the US. Because the majority of the day labor community comprises of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, the popular understanding is that day laboring is a transitional stage. That is not the case for the population that I dealt with; many of the day laborers that I collaborated with have been day laborers for more than 10 years.

I do not find perplexing the fact that many day laborers have been in that occupation for more than 10 years. In fact, that is why I have first done a structural analysis of the day labor community. In understanding their positionalities, it is feasible to comprehend why many day laborers have been part of the day labor community for more than 10 years. Although there are scholars who have paid attention to the structural aspect of the day labor community, what is further lacking is an understanding of day laborers' lived experience. I have proposed a critical phenomenology to get at the subjective experience of day laborers. In doing so, for this thesis I have explored how the structural makes day laborers vulnerable to discrimination, and how they

are experiencing their vulnerability. Moreover, in trying to understand the emergent forms of precarity and how this gives shape to a precarious subjectivity, I have drawn from Stewart's "ordinary affects" to understand how in certain micro-spaces precarity emerges. In addition, to understand how precarity is shaping day laborers' subjectivity, sociality was explored. The presence of other humans has an impact on day laborers' lived experience. For this thesis, I examined how fatherhood and the failure to meet a daughter's demands can have an impact on one's experience. However, it would also be interesting how the absence of other humans also shape day laborers' subjectivity, especially because many of them lack kin members. In order to not only focus on the suffering of day laborers, I have also portrayed that ways in which many day laborers continue a struggle, ways in which they become agentive.

"We feel like guinea pigs," Juancho told me when I started my fieldwork, as we discussed what I was researching. He explained to me that many researchers have gone to the day labor center, finished their research, and have never returned to share with them the results. On top of that, he becomes cautious of researchers because they belong to institutions, and does not know what can be done with that information. Fortunately, they gave me their trust. Now, even though I believe I have not done justice to the community with the results I have, it is my turn to give something back to the day labor community, and the organization that also opened their doors to me. As Carlos told the day laborers when I first arrived there "It is always good to reciprocate favors: He [Zaith] will be helping us here while he does his research, and you guys will share your experiences." But I want to try to go beyond that and put forward some suggestions. Aside from future avenues of research that can serve to institutions, I want to suggest practical matters to the day labor center.

First, the analyses above lead me to question the following: If *jornaleros* are structurally vulnerable to discrimination, and if the structure strips them of any security, who then is responsible for taking care of them? As they are aging and violence is being intensified, where can these *Jornaleros* find a space of welcome? If the State will not protect them and resources are lacking, who will help them out?

Moreover, if insecurity and the unpredictability of *Jornaleros*' everyday lives is the norm, how is this impacting their well-being, their mental health? How is structural vulnerability making *Jornaleros* more susceptible to mental illnesses? As Juancho explained to me, "A *jornaleros* life is full of frustration." This would explain why many times day laborers' behavior

seem explosive. Anything could tick them off. They seemed irritated, annoyed. Many of them responded violently to Carlos, when he would enforce the rules or try to make suggestions on how to behave. “Who are you to tell me how to behave!” It is understandable, however, because their social, political, and economic life are extremely insecure. They are in “survival mode.” On another note, it is important to note, actually, how substance abuse is ubiquitous among this community.

In the day labor literature what is also lacking is a contrast between the street corners and the day labor centers. Most research on the day labor community has focused on the street corners. How do we know if day labor centers are being efficient in dignifying day laborers’ jobs if we do not have a comparison? Are day labor centers reducing violence and exploitation? In what ways are street corners and day labor communities different? In addition, because there are several day labor communities across the US, it would also be useful to compare all of them. From what I heard from Carlos, there is a day labor center in Seattle that succeeded in mobilizing the day labor community. Day laborers are now running the center, autonomously. Carlos sees that organization as an example of what could be done with the *jornaleros* from the center. But Carlos does not believe that can happen at the center for two reasons. First, because there are not resources. And secondly, because he does not see the aspirations and commitment by the day laborers. “In Seattle, there is stability, and over here they [day laborers] first need stability to make something possible.” Carlos continued explaining to me how their condition of “survival mode” impedes them because they are fighting, struggling, to survive every day (*dia a dia*). So, what could be useful is to begin research among the *jornaleros* of Seattle to better understand how they did it, and how others could follow. Carlos might be right with his hypothesis but I think there could be more to it.

Solving the lack of resources is probably the most urgent and the most difficult to accomplish. As has been described above, the center is understaffed. This creates stress for Carlos, and makes the center difficult to manage with so many day laborers coming in and out with their peculiar and idiosyncratic problems. In addition, without the necessary funding the center cannot provide a case manager, which is highly required at the center. Moreover, the center does not have a prepared staff for day laborers that go to the center with depression and other mental health problems. Even though they do get mental health first aid training, it is not enough. I witnessed this when I was registering a day laborer who told me he was under severe

depression. In addition, many day laborers abuse substances, predominantly alcohol and/or crack because they are easy access. And these substances are causing turmoil to the day labor community and within the center. I also witnessed this when Pambazo went on a crack delusion by the latter part of fieldwork. As I was about to close the center, Pambazo did not want to leave even though he knew the center closes by 4 pm. Pambazo started saying to what was to me nonsense, incoherent talk. Fortunately, nothing severe happened. When I called other staff members reporting the issue, they arrived and convinced Pambazo to leave the center.

From the variety of workshops that are offered at the center, from English classes to education about mental health to immigration rights and workers' rights, another workshop that could be added to the list is on how to manage expenses. Juancho insisted how not being able to manage money is a constant problem. Day laborers start making money and spend it as soon as they have it. Juancho believes day laborers do not know how to save money, how to manage it. Another day laborer said that *jornaleros* are "*consumidores compulsivos*" (compulsive consumers). He echoed Juancho: day laborers do not know how to spend/save their money. He thinks the center needs to provide more *talleres* (workshops) about how to manage money ("*de cómo administrar uno su dinero*"). This would be helpful to day laborers who are homeless and are prone to compulsively consume items. A workshop on budgeting expenses will benefit all day laborer. Only then will day laborers save themselves from emergencies.

"*Estamos destinados a ser lo que somos*" (we are destined to be day laborers). Juancho told me this when he was describing to me his many attempts to get out of his day labor situation. "I have seen other people that do not make an effort and they make it. I, who make an effort, stumble upon a wall: I go up, and stumble; go up, and stumble." I hope I have demonstrated how *jornaleros* are not destined to be day laborers. It is important to understand that immigrants are channeled to day labor work. Day laborers then become structurally vulnerable to all kinds of things. The day labor center operates to help them in their struggle, and to help day laborers realize that day labor work is a dignified occupation. Because there are not many people dedicating time to this population, the organization operating the center puts a lot of effort and sacrifice to run the day labor centers. Many day laborers think that they are not doing sufficient work; but day laborers do not see how much work they have to do. Even to get funding for the center, becomes very difficult. Constants visits to the City Council has simply not worked, even when day laborers go and testify that more resources are needed. The day labor

center and the day laborers want change. They all want something to happen, change. The day labor center works as a medium. The center serves as the threshold to start a change, as a space where opportunities become possible.

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