

LA PARADA: EXPLAINING IXIL DAY LABORERS IN VIRGINIA  
ILLEGALITY, LOSS, HOPE AND COMMUNITY

By

Esther Ibáñez-Holtermann

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree

of Doctor of Philosophy

In

Anthropology

Chair:



Brett Williams, Ph.D.



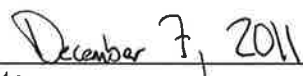
Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, Ph.D.



Alice Foltz



Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences



Date

2011  
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## DEDICATION

A Gabriella y Nicolás

LA PARADA: EXPLAINING IXIL DAY LABORERS IN VIRGINIA  
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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study looks at the lived experiences of Guatemalan indigenous day laborers meeting at *La Parada*, an informal corner in Virginia. Seen as transient, de-spatialized workers, it is easy to forget that they are human beings participating in our communities. In an increasingly anti-immigrant environment, this study explores the social, cultural, and economic links they develop with the communities they interact simultaneously: their own Ixil-speaking day labor community; the transnational community they left behind in the highlands of Guatemala; the Spanish-speaking community in Virginia and the wider English-speaking community. A focal point of this dissertation is the power and violence of illegality on their lived experiences. Illegality not only marginalizes these day laborers, it significantly affects their social life. Unable to imagine a future in the United States, predominantly as a consequence of their real or presumed illegality, the increased levels of violence in the communities they left behind in the highlands of Guatemala, make a return unthinkable for the majority. These workers are stuck in the presence. I see their migration as an act of agency, an expression of hope in the context of violence, discrimination and poverty in their homeland. Migration

however also entails loss and suffering. Despite the very difficult conditions and the social and economic violence they experience, day laborers find ways to resist their position in the neoliberal economic system.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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seeing Dr. Joan Gero in the pasillos and chat with her in Spanish. Her warm personality made me feel very comfortable in our academic spaces. Dra. Covadonga Fuertes guided me during my first year at AU and has since been a trusted friend. Her positive outlook on life and her pragmatic approach to solving all kinds of challenges will stay with me for a long time. If it were not for the late Dr. Jack Child in the Language and Foreign Studies Department, I probably would not have completed this dissertation. He believed in me, and as language instructors we always could count on his solidarity and support. He will be dearly missed in and outside of our university walls. I also thank Dr. Ana Serra for her friendship and confianza, and Dr. Olga Rojer whose humanity and dedication to her faculty has made her a caring friend to many instructors. I will not forget her committed effort to help me pursue this degree.

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## CHAPTER 1

### LA PARADA: EXPLAINING IXIL DAY LABORERS IN VIRGINIA

#### ILLEGALITY, LOSS, HOPE AND COMMUNITY

Many of you indicated to me that due to massive loitering, you were unwilling to use the Centreville library. . . . I introduced House Bill 2473, which aims to address these safety concerns. . . . With the passage of HB 2473, law enforcement will be able to prohibit the sometimes 20-30 people who habitually loiter outside on the Centreville library grounds.

—Tim Hugo, Delegate, Commonwealth of Virginia,  
*Letter dated March 13, 2009 sent to his constituents in the 40th district*

Obviously referring to a group of day laborers who are assembling in front of the Centreville Library, Tim Hugo's letter is just one local example of the security-immigration nexus that is invoked when dealing with day laborers. With no specifics about who complained about "massive" loitering, and with no specifics about activities that might create the "safety concerns," a local politician tried to gain political momentum by singling out the most vulnerable population in his district.

This is not uncommon in the Virginia suburbs, where a day labor center in Herndon and immigrant policies in Prince William County have made national news by stirring up a controversy. Fueled by the steep increase of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States, a 26% increase nationally between 2000-2006 (Aizenman 2007), the anti-immigrant discourse against Latinos has heated up over the last five years. The United States has always been ambivalent about immigration (Martin 2003): displaying

the “nation-of-immigrants” construct alongside a national discourse that has historically, and on a changing basis, marginalized and excluded different groups of immigrants, such as the Italians, Jews, and Chinese (Davis 2006).

An increase in nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment towards Latinos, buttressed and reinforced by nativist organizations such as the Minutemen Militia, right-wing radio talk shows, TV shows like CNN’s Lou Dobbs, MSNBC’s Pat Buchanan or Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly and even scholars like Harvard’s Samuel Huntington, has been instrumental in portraying immigrants as criminals and a threat to the supposedly homogenous social and cultural fabric that constitutes the nation’s identity. The state’s power to include and exclude immigrants into the national polity has contributed to the ‘othering’ of immigrants, de facto perpetuating the permanent alien in our society. (Chavez 2007; Coutin 2000; DeGenova 2005; Heyman 2007)

Day laborers in the United States are predominantly young undocumented Latino men. The largest concentration of day labor workers and hiring sites are in the western United States (Valenzuela 2006). Day laborers occupy a marginal position outside of United States society, outside of the law, and have been easy targets of the anti-immigrant discourse (Coutin 2000). A combination of low-income, illegal status, and limited English skills render many day laborers vulnerable to economic instability, social hostility and discrimination. Day laborers at La Parada are predominantly of indigenous Guatemalan origin. The Guatemalan population in the United States has grown by 180% in the last decade according to the 2010 Census (Lopez & Docktermann 2011) and now includes approximately 480,000 undocumented individuals, the third largest number of undocumented population in the U.S. after Mexico and El Salvador (Anderson

2010:108). Day laborers participate in the informal United States economy, occupying a public and contested space in their daily quest for work. They face daily economic uncertainty, as well as the social and structural violence that accompanies their prevalent condition of illegality. The visibility of their bodies on United States corners is in stark contrast with the invisibility of their human essence and experience. The corner in its most confined meaning is an informal physical public space where men and sometimes women gather searching for temporary work on a daily basis. It is also a place of encounter between day laborers and prospective employers who pick up workers for short term work. Starting at the corner, continuous direct contact with day laborers will help uncover the hidden and invisible facets of their lives. This study will bring to light the experiences, motivations and hopes that are invisible to the unconcerned onlooker or bystander.

This project proposes a local study of migrant day laborers' view of their lives in a capitalist system, and their interpretations of the social and physical spaces they inhabit. Rather than looking at their presence through the lens of outsiders, I choose to look at their presence through their eyes. In particular I am interested in their definition of self and community, their perception of the corner and their feelings about the future. This study will also look at the structural forces that affect migrants' lives, as these cannot be divorced from their experiences. The following questions will guide this research:

- Within the marginal position they occupy in United States society, how do day laborers perceive their identity and what kind of cultural, economic, and social links do they develop?

- How do they define the corner space they occupy? How does the condition of illegality impact their life?
- How do they see their future as workers, as family members, as members of the community? What are their motivations and concerns?

Immigrants, especially the undocumented, and particularly day laborers, inhabit a space of non-existence and irregularity, and have no ability to influence the national and local discourse. Unauthorized immigrants belong to the working poor in this country. Accounting for double the poverty rate of U.S.-born workers (Passel & Cohn 2009) only furthers their exclusion from mainstream America. Opening up spaces for the subaltern, marginalized day laborer is critical to this study. Their perspectives must be included in the local and national discourse on immigration and will fill a vacuum in contemporary immigration studies.

The study will be based in Northern Virginia, the suburbs of the nation's capital, where the exponential growth of immigrants in the last decade has increased the sensibilities of the host community. At odds with historic trends, rural areas and particularly suburbs have now become the place of choice for new immigrants (Frey, Berube, Singer and Wilson 2009; Singer 2007). In light of failed national immigration reform, localities are actively responding to immigration issues. Local economic changes and the lack of institutional structures to address the demographic shift of immigrants have left municipalities and counties grappling with the challenges. The crackdown on unauthorized immigration has made Northern Virginia's Prince William County, an outer suburb of the nation's capital, emblematic of such responses (Singer 2009). Local anti-



loitering ordinances and vigilante-style groups are forcefully opposing day laborers, while religious and social justice groups are being supportive on a humanitarian level.

Today, day laborers assembling daily on county corners are seen as “polluting” public spaces and are associated with illegal behavior (Turnovsky 2006). The late-capitalist understanding of day laborers depicts them as disposable and substitutable workers, marginal commodities in an economic market (Harvey 2005). This project attempts to bridge an experiential disconnect that exists between the host and the immigrants (Heyman 2007:200). These disconnects arise from a social and economic distance that undermines mutual connections and human empathy. I believe that this disconnect between day laborers and the local host society feeds the expressions and feelings of heterophobia, the unease, the anxiety about the unknown, about the ‘other’.

The corner or ‘La Parada’ is a social, economic, and political space for day laborers trying to build a presence in this country. Yet the corner is much more than just a space where the migrant ‘other’ interacts with the local community. On the corner, local and global intersects. Hence the corner becomes a logical space to study the consequences of globalization, capitalism, and neoliberal policies. This is a space where the microcosm of locality, the social, political, economic interactions between the host society and immigrants can be examined. It is a space that is permeated by inequality, poverty and marginalization.

### **Literature Review**

Contributions from political, social, economic and geographical sciences have informed the study of migration, giving it a multidisciplinary character. Social sciences in

particular have been preoccupied with historical, political, economic forces that affect migration, the consequences of neoliberal policies and globalization, questions of identity and belonging, incorporation of immigrants into host societies and transnational relationships, immigrants' transnational activities and agency of immigrants. More recently migration studies have tried to understand the impact of capitalism, globalization on migration, the second generation, immigrant networks, gender and the migration experience. (Brettell 2002, di Leonardo 1998, Foner 2003, Mahler 1995a, 1995b, Pessar 1995, Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Stephen 2007, Suarez-Orozco 2003, Zavella 1987, etc.). Increased mobility, technological advances in communication and the constant flow of newcomers keep migrants in touch with their communities of origin. Studies have looked at how these transnational relations affect the incorporation into society, but also how this has affected the home communities, for example the effect of remittances (Basch, Schiller and Blanc-Szanton 1994; Kearny 1995, Ong 1999; Smith 2003).

Far from new phenomena, day laborers and the informal economy have been part of the nation's economy for centuries: the Irish digging canals for the Potomac Company in Virginia in the 1700s, dock workers in New York in the 1800s, etc. (Skerry 2008; Theodore 2003; Valenzuela 2003). Today's day laborers are predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrants who assemble in urban and suburban areas (Valenzuela 2006). While there has been a myriad of research on immigration and some very well-known ethnographies that have contributed to the understanding of experiences, social practices and the stigmatization associated with street work (Whyte 1955; Liebow 2003; Anderson 1978; Duneier 2000), there is a lack of research exploring the complexities and experiences of today's Latino day laborers. Geographically, day labor studies have leaned

toward the west coast as the region with the largest numbers of these immigrants (Valenzuela 2006).

Over the last decade, research pertaining to day labor has focused on who day laborers are and the particular labor markets in which they operate (Esbenshade 2000; Poitevin 2005; Theodore 2000; Valenzuela, Theodore, Melendez and Gonzalez 2006). Scholars in this field have also paid attention to the formalization of day labor centers as a method to regulate day labor and community reaction to day laborers (Camou 2009; Crotty and Bosco 2008; Fine, 2006; Valenzuela et al. 2006). More recent studies have shifted focus from more broad-looking surveys to day laborers' experiences and understanding of their participation in the labor market (Turnovsky 2006), and the gendered meanings day laborers assign to their search for work (Purser 2009).

Structural forces and the reception of the host society influence immigrants' experience significantly. The impact of globalization and the exacerbation of economic and geographical inequalities have received special attention in migration studies (Akers 2006; Appadurai 2001; Inda 2000; Castles 2002; Coutin 2003; Harvey 1989; Sassen 2001). Hamilton and Chinchilla (1991) elucidate how United States foreign policy, the historic economic relationships with some of the sending countries, and the cultural penetration of the United States have advanced out-migration. However, the most recent increase in global migration is attributed to neoliberal policies that have encouraged labor migration. These policies have supported the flow of workers from capital-poor areas to capital-rich areas like the United States (Harvey 1989; Barker 2005; Menjivar 2000; Sassen 2001). This attraction of workers has been compounded by the inherent need of capitalism to maximize profits, necessitating a flexible workforce to fulfill the demands

of flexible markets and products. A system characterized by the deregulation of markets in a neoliberal system relies on low-wage flexible workers for its success (Harvey 2005; Barker 2005). Day laborers become commodities that can be called up when needed.

An abundance of literature deals with aspects of reception or incorporation of immigrants. Scholars have examined the characteristics of immigrants, labor markets, and the existence of ethnic networks as factors that can affect the incorporation of immigrants (Mahler 1995a, 1995b; Waldinger 2001). While some scholars (Alba and Nee 1997; Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Waldinger and Feliciano 2004) argue that assimilation may parallel the past and is consistent with earlier patterns, others (Alba 1999, Ong 1996; Fernandez-Kelly 1994; Portes and Zhou 1993; Suarez-Orozco and Paez 2002; Massey 1999) look at differential incorporation (segmented or downward). Increasingly scholars see the term ‘assimilation’ as problematic, as it assumes the existence of a mutually exclusive bounded category into which immigrants can assimilate (Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler 1994) and constantly renders migrant difference as a problem (DeGenova 2005).

Immigrants and particularly day laborers are confronting a hostile reception environment that might complicate their incorporation. An important aspect of current integration is the resurgence of nativism in the country. Higham (1955) explored nativism, the favoring of native-born citizens over immigrants, in his book *Strangers in the Land*, pinning nationalism as the driving force behind it. Further complicating the incorporation of immigrants, more contemporary literature (Brimelov 1995; Huntington 2004a, 2004b) makes the claim that immigration undermines the civic cohesion and cultural identity of the nation.

A recent study notes that three quarters (75%) of the estimated eleven million unauthorized immigrants who live in the United States come from Latin America (Passel and Cohn 2009). Despite the backlash on unauthorized migrants in some counties, Virginia's unauthorized population accounts for 3.9% of the total labor force, relatively low compared to California's 9.7% or Texas' 9% (Passel et al. 2011:21). The role of the state in forming categories of inclusion and exclusion, classifying, shaping migration flows, defining the immigrant as "other," and thus marginalizing a group of immigrants has been critically examined (Coutin 2003 & 2000; Foner 2003; DeGenova 2005; Ngai 2004).

The illegal status of some established and also incoming immigrants and their lack of English language knowledge further complicate their social and political incorporation. Bourdieu (1977) attributed to language a key function in acculturation. Linguistic difference marks the difference from the dominant English-speaking community and is a driving force for those arguing that immigrants will destroy the cultural fabric of this country. Upon their arrival, Spanish-speaking immigrants are categorized into a pre-existing racialized structure. In so much as the Spanish language creates cohesion between a very diverse immigrant population as a vector of exclusion, it also embodies the distance to power. A lack of English marks the racialization into a non-American, non-white society (Davila 2001; Darder and Torres 2004; De Genova 2005; Inda 2000; Vidal-Ortiz 2004).

Although some scholars argue that globalization was supposed to have weakened the state (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Massey 1999), others assert that the state still matters (Hytrek and Zentgraf 2008; Smith 2003). The increasing surveillance of immigrants and

the border makes the power of the state evident. Di Leonardo and Maskovsky (2006) observe that the search for security is generating new patterns of inequality. The language of invasion that has permeated the nationalist political discourse has revived the deep-rooted idea of immigrants as a threat to the nation, shifting the emphasis from a public health threat (Molina 2006) to a national security threat (Akers 2006; Faist 2002). The discourse of threat associated with immigrants after 9/11, and the militarization of the United States-Mexican border have buttressed an “othering” of the migrant, which is often supported by the role of the media in portraying immigrants. The impact of the military build-up on the United States-Mexican border has had dreadful consequences for migrants, forcing them to cross in more remote areas and thus increasing the likelihood of deaths (Lacey 2009). The higher costs and increasing risks of crossing have also reduced the number of migrants crossing back and forth (Brownell 2001). The role of the state in regulating flows of workers according to seasonal demand is critically examined by Gomberg-Muñoz (2011). Militarization has made the trip more dangerous; it has also become a profit-making endeavor for human smugglers (Anderson 2010; Baldwin-Edwards 2008; Coutin 2005a). Border militarization has also benefitted the industries of immigration control, private prison companies, and surveillance companies: “this insidious part of immigration control was designed to monitor and instill fear in immigrants for profit rather than actually remove them” (Koulish 2010:178).

The role of the media in creating a negative discourse, constructing the “wetback,” the illegal immigrant getting this back wet crossing the Rio Grande, as a dangerous and criminal social pathogen, as an abuser of the social welfare system, creating stereotypes of the Spanish-speaking immigrant, marketing the Latino as

foreign—undifferentiated by class, nationality, ethnic background, education—has also triggered some critical research. (Chavez 2001; Davila 2001; Keogan 2006; Nevins, Ngai 2004). Media is shaping the Latino identity from outside and reinforcing a separate identity for Latinos from mainstream society, recasting them as a foreign rather than intrinsic component of U.S. society. In particular, the portrayal of the Mexican border and the militarized discourse it has generated, shapes racist and violent responses towards the border crosser (Kil and Menjivar 2006). Associated with crime, gangs, and violence, the new discourse around the border deals with drug cartels, violence and illegality. Consciously or unconsciously, this will affect the identity formation of Mexicans in the United States, who constitute a majority of the Spanish-speaking population in the country.

The *laissez-faire* ambivalence or unwillingness or inability of the state (Chavez 2007) to deal with illegal immigration (Massey 1999; Portes 1999) has left many immigrants living in limbo. Scholars hold the nation-state accountable for the persistence of migrant illegality and explore the state's role in meeting the needs and interests of big business and the capital elite (Akers 2006; DeGenova 2005; Hytrek et al. 2008; Navarro 2009; Zolberg 1999). Policies that punish and criminalize immigrants, like the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) which was designed to stem the flow of immigrants to the United States (Chavez 2007) or the 2006 Proposal HR 4437 to make illegality a felony, serve to pacify the voter and are embedded in a nationalist political discourse. (Baldwin-Edwards 2008; Chavez 2007; Martin 2003).

A focal point of this study is to examine how the condition of illegality is affecting day laborers' lives. Illegality marginalizes migrants, positioning them outside of

society, excluding them from the community, keeping them vulnerable and punishable (Bacon 2008; Coutin 2000; Ngai 2004; Nevins 2002 and 2008). Scholars have stressed the constructedness of migrant illegality, contending that rather than just looking at illegality as a juridical-legal construction, illegality should be looked at as a social, cultural and political construction (Coutin 2003, Chavez 2007; DeGenova 2002, Heyman 2001; Ngai 2004). Illegality is not just produced and imposed on immigrants; illegality is experienced by immigrants (Willen 2007a, 2007b). Illegality produces structural violence, resulting in inequalities that have material consequences for immigrants. Inclusion and exclusion undermines their desire for belonging to an ‘imagined community’ (Chavez 1994).

Illegality, perceived belonging or non-belonging, affects the lives of day laborers. Day laborers participate simultaneously in multiple cultural arenas and inhabit communities that stretch beyond their local and national location, defying the boundaries of nation-states. Their connection and inclusion or exclusion in different communities make the processes that enable “community” a fundamental concept through which illegality can be explored. As a fluid process, belonging is produced through social relationships (Reed-Danahay 2008:19) and is crucial in understanding how illegality is constructed by the nation-state and experienced by day laborers. Ong (1996:756) looks at the dual process of cultural citizenship: the self-making and the being-made, recognizing hegemonic forces at work in the construction of belonging. The role of the nation-state in determining community, regulating social, economic and political inclusion and exclusion is increasingly powerful (Tanabe 2008).



Benedict Anderson (1991) theorized belonging through the concept of “imagined community.” The “imagined community” is based on the idea that one cannot know or interact with all the members in a greater unit and thus members imagine their connectedness, their communion. The nation thus becomes “a product of what people imagine and construct in their everyday life” (Tanabe 2008:3). While the “imagined community” explains the process of construction for a bounded homogeneous community, Tanabe (2008) theorizes the integration of those who are outsiders and do not fit into the bounded community. In contrast to the homogenous “imagined community,” the “imagining community” is an “arena of struggle, negotiation, and creation” (Tanabe 2008:1). Members of Tanabe’s “imagining community” live at the margins of the imagined nation-state. From this marginal position, members of the “imagining community” create their own sense of practice, knowledge, power, and identity, as opposed to the collective fictions or national narratives used to construct the nation-state as an “imagined community.” Chavez (1992) identifies immigrants outside the ‘imagined community’, at the same time (Chavez 1994: 68) believing in the power of the imagined community and its influence on other perceptions, desires and behaviors (Chavez 1994:68). Chavez (2001) contributes theoretically to the relationship between immigration and nation-building: immigrants are portrayed by the media as different and foreign, and are placed “outside the imagined community.” Day laborers are excluded from the imagined community of the nation-state, but are members of other communities they imagine. How day laborers describe and explain their “imagined communities” will give us insights into how they see their lives in the structural contexts of globalization and late capitalism.

Wenger's (1998) concept of "communities of practice" can also be useful in understanding membership in a community. Reed-Danahay (2008: 79) argues that it is "through communities of practice that are face-to-face, tangible units of sociality that immigrants come to experience a sense of belonging and citizenship." Its focus on social agency, social learning and lived experiences complements, in Reed-Danahay's view, the concept of Anderson's "imagined community." Reed-Danahay (2008:95) looks at communities as networks of resources, sites of knowledge and sites for acquiring social skills, knowledge and social capital. "People gain access to social capital through membership in interpersonal networks and social institutions and then convert it into other forms of capital to improve or maintain their position in society (Palloni, Massey, Ceballos, Espinosa and Spittel 2001:1263)." The significance of networks in promoting immigration and integration has been critically addressed in migration studies (Alba & Nee 2003; Massey et al. 1994; Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Waldinger 1999). Traditional network theory posits that interpersonal ties that connect migrants lower the cost of emigration and mitigate the risks, representing a valuable form of social capital (Massey et al. 1994: 728). Menjivar (2000), however, challenges the cohesive view of network and the belief in ethnic solidarity.

### **Methodology**

Day laborers and illegal immigrants have received a fairly disproportionate amount of negative attention, despite the fact that illegals only made up 5.2 % of the nation's labor force in March 2010 (Passel et al. 2011:1). Day laborers are a very small component of the illegal population—Valenzuela (2009) estimates the presence of

120,000 day laborers in the U.S. Virginia ranks as the 10th largest state with illegal immigration, and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population has provoked social tensions on both sides of the community. In March and April 2009, raids operated by the immigration authorities appear to be the largest in two years in the DC metro area (Constable 2008). According to Passel et al. (2011:10), deportations have more than doubled nationwide in the last decade, reaching 400,000 in 2009. The Northern Virginia counties of Prince William and Loudoun have passed laws to deny public services to illegal immigrants, and the city of Culpeper even adopted a resolution to declare English the county's official language (Aizenman 2007).

Terminology to describe the unauthorized status of some workers ranges from undocumented, unauthorized to illegal. Although the term "illegal" is controversial by the mere fact of making the person and not the activity illegal, I use the term throughout this dissertation with the intention to expose the material consequences, the level of inclusion and exclusion by the state and the law illegality connotes and to expose the criminalization of human beings. Most of the workers never use "illegal" to express their status, often using "no tengo papeles" (I am paperless) to indicate their legal status. 'Paperless' implies not recorded, but it also reveals their point of view: we are not here to hurt, we just have not been registered by the state.

In this environment, a major difficulty for research is establishing trust relationships with the day laborers and building rapport with them, particularly in light of their visibility and the negative public discourse around immigration. Local raids, deportation, and local chapters of nativist groups like the Minutemen have contributed to an increasingly anti-immigrant environment. As a researcher, I will have to overcome

their potential distrust of institutions, their suspicion of outsiders, and their guardedness and reticence to open up to outsiders. An additional hurdle to overcome as a researcher is their lack of contact with and social distance from research and academia.

One way of overcoming the potential distrust is being familiar with the community they inhabit and employing the appropriate research tools. Knowing and understanding the community is critical to work with undocumented immigrants (Cornelius 1982). My involvement over the years with the Spanish-speaking immigrant community in the Washington metropolitan area as a bilingual volunteer, translator and coordinator has undoubtedly informed my work and helped me interact with day laborers. Specifically, my experiences and interactions with many day laborers, community organizers, and faith-based service providers as a bilingual site coordinator and administrative helper at the Herndon Day Labor Center in Northern Virginia in 2005-2006 helped me interact with day laborers in the research site. Reading the local, national, and international press, and attending conferences and seminars on immigration-related topics at PAHO, MPI, local universities, as well as community-based meetings has helped me frame the complexities of day laborers in the United States and the local reactions to their presence.

Qualitative data has been most useful in grounding this project in day laborers' experiences. I have used participant observation and semi-structured interviews to address the principal questions examined in this study. Participant observation has not only enabled me to get to know this community, but has allowed me to focus on individuals' perspectives and interpretations of their own world (Bernard 1994; Foner 2003). The strength of firsthand and continual observation has been documented in other

ethnographies on people working on the street (Whyte 1955; Duneier 2001) and has helped me establish an environment of trust with the day laborers. Quantitative methods and structured research instruments are not conducive to understanding experiences and interpretations and not effective with undocumented populations (Cornelius 1982). Qualitative data, though, has the power to reveal complexities and locate meanings people assign to the circumstances of their lives (Bernard 1994; Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Continuous fieldwork in 2005/2006 as a volunteer with the Herndon Official Workers Center (HOW) and during the spring, summer and winter of 2009 and 2010 with day laborers in Virginia was used to find answers to the specific questions this study poses. Over the last years, I have volunteered in the HOW in Herndon, assisted and translated for a faith-based organization, helped with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and attended community meetings, and accompanied workers to various appointments. The personal contacts established through my volunteer work, native fluency in Spanish and my own immigrant identity have eased the initial contact process and have facilitated access to other day laborers in my research site. Participant observation in day laborer meetings, on the corner meeting site, in ESL classes, and other events that target local low-income immigrants, such as free community health clinics and food and cloth donation events, have provided fundamental information to this study and has helped build rapport and trust between myself and the day laborers. Conversations with workers in community-based events or immigrant events, or while going and waiting for appointments with some of the day laborers have been more profound than conversations on the corner. Workers on the corner seem more reticent to

talk about their feelings, possibly a result of group dynamics, being surrounded by other workers. At times, inquiries on the corner were countered with humor, a way to divert from answering the question without seeming disrespectful to me and a way to deal with group expectations.

Participant observation has allowed me to observe the social organization of this informal street corner. How do workers organize the geographical and social space where they assemble to find work? What attributes and behaviors are valued, which are condemned and why? Is there a visible hierarchy and if so, what are the traits of a leader? Who or what regulates the corner? Are differences visible between regular day laborers and those who only come irregularly? How are newcomers integrated? Why do conflicts in the corner arise? How does gender affect participation on the corner?

Work-related contacts with employers on the corner are the most apparent links with the host community. Observing the interactions on the corner between prospective employers and day laborers has provided insights into the strategies they use to obtain a successful match and allow me to observe a microcosm of capitalism at work.

Furthermore, it has given me an opportunity to study the response of workers. How do day laborers deal with competition within their ranks? Is there a sense of solidarity for the weaker, elderly or injured workers, or long-term unemployed workers? How do they define a “good” job? Why are some jobs rejected? What effect does their legal status have on their behavior in this public space? What impact does their legal status have on obtaining a job? Relationships with the close-by business community might be critical to the survival of la parada. How supportive or unaccommodating are local businesses? Observations at a very practical level have helped examine this relationship: Are day

laborers allowed to use local restrooms? Are they welcome on their properties when they seek refuge from inhospitable weather?

Parallel to the primary job-searching purpose, the corner also has a social function. Down time is unwanted but might fulfill other functions in the workers' lives. This down time has given me the opportunity to listen to and participate in conversations, thus providing me an insight into preoccupations and topics that concern them. How do day laborers employ their waiting time? What issues are frequently discussed? What strategies do they apply to tackle daily problems such as housing, access to health care, injuries or lack of job offers? How are distance, separation, and loneliness talked about? Is "illegality" an issue in their exchanges and in what contexts does this come up? These conversations also helped me gain knowledge about their ties with the community they left and the one they currently inhabit: how closely do they follow events in their home country? How aware are they about events and happenings in their current community?

Although direct participant observation has provided valuable information about the corner and the interaction with other co-workers and employers, it is through semi-structured interviews that I have been able to address personal views and interpretations. This has also allowed me to compare the information I obtain with my direct observations and clarify observations that I could not make sense of. Interview questions have addressed the initial decision process to migrate, their experiences and activities on the corner, their relations and interactions with the community, and their assessment and plans for the future.

In order to understand the structural and personal reasons for migration, I first raised questions about their school and skills level, their families, their opportunities to

make a living at home, their relationships back home, and the expectations they brought with them to their destination. It was also important to understand who supported this move emotionally and financially and the source of information pertaining to their trip and initial settlement in the United States. Intrinsic to this research project is to understand how day laborers themselves view the world they inhabit. Why do they think there are no opportunities to make a living back home?

Second, and to complement my observations on the corner, I asked them for an account of their experiences and activities on the corner, the strategies they employ to find work and their interactions with employers and co-workers. During the 2006 immigrant demonstrations in the United States, workers signs were displayed claiming “the right to work is a human right.” What does work mean to the day laborers? In light of their economic and legal vulnerability, when do they refuse a job offer? How is a “good” job defined? Have they experienced discrimination, disrespect or abuse? How do they feel about looking for a job on the street? In often inhospitable conditions, what keeps them going in periods of job scarcity? Does work provide for a good living?

In an extremely anti-immigrant atmosphere, particularly against undocumented day laborers, looking at relations with the community can provide insights into the level of integration or isolation these day laborers experience. Community here does not refer to Anderson’s imagined community, but to the day-to-day, face-to-face relationships these day laborers have in the United States or had in their place of origin. While interactions with the English-speaking American population occupy an important space in this ethnography, I will also examine interactions between day laborers and the non-day labor Spanish-speaking immigrant groups in the community. Ethnic solidarity, while



often assumed, is also questioned (Mahler 1995, Menjivar 2000), and Latino contractor abuse is often mentioned. Who are their friends and who do they trust? How do they find housing, from whom do they rent? Where do they go shopping? What are their activities outside the corner space and with whom do they share their spare time? What do they value about their present life in the United States, what do they miss? Considering that most day laborers are recent immigrants, their transnational relationships probably play an important role in their lives. Contacts and commitments to their community of origin will be examined. Did they migrate individually or as family? What kind of networks do they build and rely on? How critical are remittances? How are expectations of the community of origin negotiated in times of economic crisis? In line with the purpose of this study, interview questions will be geared to understand their lives, but equally important to value their perspective. What would you like your current community to know about you? What would you tell your community at home about your experiences in this country? Understanding the way day laborers seek to overcome exclusion and marginalization will give us insights into their political participation: how do they assert their rights? What kind of activities do they engage in to support social change?

Last of all, I asked questions about the future during the interviews, but also during down time at the corner. Is their current presence based on making a living and saving funds for a better life at home or are there non-economic considerations involved? Have they thought about the future? How does their illegal status affect their life? How different would their life be if they obtained “papers”? What type of work would they like to do? Do they want to return home? Are they bringing others over? Would they like their children to grow up in this country?

Participant observations on the corner, in ESL classes, during cultural events, religious services with immigrants and other events with day laborers were complemented with personal accounts and interpretations gathered through semi-structured interviews. During the summer of 2009 and 2010, I gathered critical information through fifteen semi-structured interviews and many contact hours with the day laborers in different settings. Arranging one-on-one interviews with day laborers has been more difficult than expected. Day laborers' irregular schedules and their dependence on the corner time for jobs, made it difficult for them to commit to a certain time. Interviews that were arranged were sometimes cancelled at the last minute when I called to confirm. On at least two occasions I could not find the worker in the arranged place. Although I have had no difficulties speaking with the workers during events and on the corner, I have the feeling that some workers were uncomfortable meeting with me individually. Their legal status might influence their "availability" for interviews, nevertheless I think that sometimes their religious orientation made them uncomfortable meeting individually with a woman. But more often their demanding work-life realities complicated their availabilities: tired after a long day at work, or otherwise waiting for work, their schedules were unpredictable. Through the semi-structured, five-to-eight hour long interviews that sometimes went over two days, through the many more informal unscheduled semi-structured interviews on the corner, and during events, driving to appointments, I gathered critical information to understand the individuals' motivations, perceptions, struggles and hopes. A core group of day laborers that were actively involved in many meetings and events were of enormous help in referring me to their friends on the corner. This snowball sampling is effective in small populations and helped

me contact other day laborers, but also establish rapport and credibility (Bernard 1994; Cornelius 1982). Despite the help of this core group, meeting with individual workers who did not attend ESL classes or community events relating to immigrants was a challenge: work schedules or the need to wait for work, their religious orientation and feeling uncomfortable meeting with a woman, their sense of risk and benefit of such conversations and their insecurities due to their low level of schooling and their legal status might very well be factors in their hesitations, cancellations, or recurrent promises to call me that were never fulfilled. At times workers lost my numbers (or at least said so) or had changed their telephone numbers, something that happens quite frequently. I should also note my limitations as a mother of two young children and my schedule working full-time with a three hour roundtrip commute. My academic schedule unfortunately allowed me to be more available during the summer months when workers are the busiest at work. In general, workers who were more interested in interacting with the wider community, be it by showcasing their local dances and culture, or organizing the workers for soccer games, English classes or the establishment of a local day labor center, were more available and open to individual interviews. It also seemed that the most educated workers were more willing to share their stories, while those with less education were reticent and probably embarrassed to talk to somebody from the university.

Explaining the reason and importance of this study to my research subjects in Spanish and assuring them of the highest level of confidentiality was a central aspect of my pre-interview phase. Aware of the risks that day laborers take by providing me with their personal information, it is a priority of this project to protect them from any negative

consequences their contributions might bring about. I informed the participant day laborers about the potential risk their participation entails, and asked them to sign a consent form for this project in their native language. I stressed their option to withdraw from the project at any time without any penalty. I have only used pseudonyms in my writings to protect their anonymity. I used manual notes rather than tape recordings, reducing the formality of the conversation, as this would have been too intrusive and might have caused the day laborers as research subjects to feel uncomfortable (Iosifides 2003). To avoid any direct link, I have not identified the spatial location of my research, other than locating it in the broad space of Northern Virginia. My research data has been safeguarded in a key-locked file cabinet in my home office, and is only accessible to me. My computer and electronic files on my computer are secured by a personal password. Furthermore, I have omitted any information too sensitive and that might jeopardize their well-being. Although workers spent a significant amount of time waiting for a potential employer, scheduled interviews were held in a neutral safe space, such as a public library study room, after the regular job-seeking hours and not in the work waiting area.

### **Data Analysis and Theory**

Data collected through participant observation, local newspapers, and semi-structured interviews was continuously compared to inform ongoing fieldwork. I used grounded theory methods to analyze the research data. A key component of grounded theory is the constant back and forth movement between ideas and data (Charmaz 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2008; O'Reilly 2009). Originally postulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory focuses on progressively generating theory from the

research data and thus uses an inductive mode of analysis. Concepts and theory emerge and are generated from the researcher's interaction with the field (Charmaz 2002), but can also be useful in elaborating or modifying existing theories (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Patton 2002).

The strength of ethnographic methods and their ability to generate theory within ongoing observations is emphasized by Mahler and Pessar (2006: 31), who argue the strength of ethnographic methods: "ethnography is thus especially useful for exploratory research, the kind that generates questions which later can be examined systematically, and in this way promotes new theorization." Data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the day laborers was continuously examined to find core variables and concepts. Constant retesting of the concepts that emerge against my observations in the field have informed and enriched ongoing data collection (Bernard 1994:360). Data has been categorized or 'coded', with the intent of finding patterns, regularities or concepts that might be significant to understand the specific experience of day laborers in Northern Virginia. Strauss and Corbin (1990) advocate a line by line review of the data, generating labels and categories. They suggest coding for conditions, interaction among actors, strategies and tactics and consequences. As an intermediate step between coding and writing, I wrote memos (memoing) to tie up different types of data, develop analytical ideas, and elaborate codes conceptually (Miles & Huberman 1994:72; O'Reilly 2009:96). Finding relationships of patterns and concepts that emerge from the research data served as the foundation for theory construction and/or theory elaboration.

One of the shortcomings of grounded theory methods is at the same time its strength. Focusing on micro-level “grounded” interactions does not take the social, political or historical context of the research into account. Thus, studied interactions are separated from their social, political, and historical contexts. Charmaz (2008) advocates for a constructivist grounded theory that takes the subjectivity of the researcher and the social and historical conditions into account: “too much of qualitative research today minimizes current social context, much less historical evolution. Relying on interview studies on focused topics may preclude attention to context—particularly when our research participants take the context of their lives for granted and do not speak of it” (Charmaz 2008:232). Using “situational analysis,” Clarke (2005) also proposes to take the framework of grounded theory methods beyond the mere interaction, and looking at the researched situation in all its social complexity.

Adhering to grounded theory methods implies not imposing concepts onto the data, rather letting concepts emerge from it. This, however, does not mean that researchers go into the field with a blank sheet. Rather than importing concepts, Charmaz (2008:210) advocates treating “them as sensitizing concepts, to be explored in the field setting.” Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 163) also believe that the process of analysis must rely on existing ideas and that rather than forcing existing concepts on the data, they should be used as resources to make sense of the data. Thus a researcher’s interpretative framework and theoretical orientation will affect the way in which he or she looks for patterns and codes in the data.

Migration theories tackle the need to understand why people move, why they return, but also how they are incorporated in the host society. The social complexity of

migration connects migration theory to a range of other conceptual fields and theories: economic theories, theories about identity, gender, citizenship, community, the nation-state and globalization. Theoretical concepts in migration studies such as transnationalism, community, identity formation, agency, network and social agency theory will inform my research. Grounded theory methods will enhance and elaborate existing concepts in migration theory, and have the potential to generate original and innovative theoretical understandings of undocumented immigrants.

From a political economy perspective in the late-capitalist organization, the neoclassical theory, for example, explains the reason for migration from an individual income maximization standpoint, while segmented market theory argues that migration stems from labor demand of receiving societies (Massey 1999). Particular attention has been given to understanding the incorporation of immigrants into their new social, political, cultural and economic environment and their transnational relationships with individuals and institutions in their home countries.

Community and social agency might be particularly useful concepts to understand lived experiences of day laborers, their strategies, agency and sense of belonging.

According to Chavez (1994: 55), undocumented immigrants can have multiple senses of community membership, developing social links, cultural sentiments and economic ties.

Understanding their sense of belonging and membership

- on the corner (gender, ethnic solidarity, etc.)
- with other Spanish-speaking immigrants (ethnic solidarity)
- with the local host community (integration, adaptation)
- with the community in their home country (transnationalism)

can extend or correct concepts and frameworks in migration theory. Data on their relationship with other Spanish-speaking immigrants can contribute to understanding ethnic solidarity and the stability / instability of social networks. Their interactions with the local host community can inform understanding of the processes of adaptation. Contacts and relationships with their home communities will enhance the insights and understanding of cross-border networks and transnational belonging.

Intrinsic to the understanding of community is the concept of social capital. Social capital theories have looked at the knowledge, experience, and resources immigrants have in their decision to migrate, and how immigrants mobilize funds of knowledge to integrate. Unlike human capital, social capital is not obtained through education; instead it originates from feelings of trust, belonging, and reciprocity (Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler 1994). Bourdieu (1977) expanded the concept of capital from the economic to include social, cultural and symbolic resources. According to Coleman (1998), social capital is defined by the resources people access through relationship, the obligations and expectations they have of each other, and the level of trustworthiness. He includes information channels as social capital, as well as norms and sanctions that serve as a form of social capital by facilitating desirable actions and limiting undesirable action. Data obtained from research at the corner will provide insights into how day laborers access and use social capital, how social capital is developed and shared, with whom and when, how decisions are taken, and how they negotiate membership in the imagined communities. Day laborers compete for jobs and economic survival on the corner. At the same time they engage in social relations building community. How is social capital used to bridge individual survival and belonging and solidarity with the community? The use



of social capital can shed light on immigrant agency “for it is in the everyday practice of asking for and receiving help that people construct, transform and build their social worlds (Menjivar 2000:117). Using Coleman’s definition of social capital can reveal important questions about the organization of the corner: how is behavior regulated on the corner? Who controls this behavior? How are norms and sanctions established?

Grounded theory methods will be instrumental in discovering links and relationships in the data collected, and help understand how day laborers experience illegality and how entry and belonging to the different “imagined communities” is negotiated, challenged, and maintained.

### **Significance of Research**

The condition of illegality that has branded Spanish-speaking immigrants in this country has a far-reaching weight on the lives of day laborers. Not only do they experience their illegality like so many other illegal migrants, but their social and political exclusion and economic vulnerability is also exacerbated by their daily face-to-face encounters with the American public. In contrast to most other illegal immigrants who have no clear social markers that distinguish them from the legal population, awareness and association of day laborers with illegality is high. Scapegoated for the social ills of this nation, their economic survival on the corner depends on making their bodies visible, despite the danger this entails. Risk and opportunity, economic connection and social and experiential disconnect between host society and day laborer, being needed but not wanted, all shape the inherent tensions of the corner. These tensions foreground the social violence present in this space.

In a discourse that is often driven by fear of the other and a sense of superiority by those who believe to be entitled to certain rights or protections, like the right to work, based on their race, insider citizenship status or other societal markers, this study aims to counteract the multitude of negativity with a moral approach that places the dignity of human beings at the forefront of this endeavor. An important purpose of this project is to demystify these immigrants, humanize them to the general public, and thus try to create bridges of communication with the community.

The exclusion of day laborers from the civic and political community precludes their legitimate participation in a national and local discourse on immigration. The central ambition of this research is to allow day laborers to be active participants in this discourse, rendering their own interpretations of who they are, why they are where they are and how they imagine their future. In a discourse driven by fear, imagination, economic interest, observation and experience, this study attempts to reflect the day laborers' fear, imagination, economic interest, observation and experience.

The local grounded approach of this project enhances the broader national analysis of immigration. I believe in the importance of locality as a space of identity formation. Looking at a recently established, non-organized day labor corner in the suburbs of Virginia, I will use the power of ethnography to draw attention to the consequences of illegality on individual human beings.

The suburbs of Virginia have experienced a significant growth of immigrants: seven out of the twenty-five counties with the fastest growing Hispanic population in the nation are in Northern Virginia (Miroff 2008). The illegal population in Virginia has quintupled since 1990 (Aizenman 2009). Local tensions, reactions to and from

immigrants, have permeated the landscape. The locally grounded approach and the in-depth individual inquiry in this project coupled with the emphasis on qualitative data will enrich the knowledge of prior large-scale surveys carried out in spaces with a longstanding history of immigration like California, New York and Chicago. This study will also fill a vacuum of Spanish-speaking day laborer studies in suburban areas and enhance the sparse labor studies on the East Coast, particularly in the Southeast.

It will also make a contribution to the studies of indigenous experiences of migration, their adaptation to new locations, their transnational understandings and the complex range of agency and strategies of resistance. Efforts by the U.S. census to distinguish indigenous people from broader categories of “Latinos” or “Hispanic” has resulted in a new ethno-racial census category of “Hispanic American Indian” (Delugan 2010:89) that is still too expansive to acknowledge the particular experiences of different indigenous group in Latin America. Indigenous people have often been grouped under national headings, reducing their identity to nation-state origins, thus obscuring the dynamics of indigeneity in global migration and their experiences within and outside national structures of belonging (Clifford 2007; Yescas 2010; Delugan 2010). Immigration of indigenous people remains understudied (Yescas 2010) and “challenges narrow definitions of indigeneity that require geographic or cultural fixity” (Delugan 2010:83). This study highlights the agency and strategies of these Ixil-speaking Maya migrants, challenging the depiction of indigenous people as victims of globalization and neoliberalism. It shows how Ixil-speaking day labors are challenging and resisting the inequalities inherent in capital, what del Valle Escalante (2009) defines as the “coloniality of power.” Del Valle Escalante (2009:166) sees the struggle for recognition

of difference in the recently emerging Maya movement organically attached to the resistance of neoliberal capitalist mode of production. The corner in this study is predominantly composed of Ixil Maya men. Their indigeneity shapes their identity, their reasons for migration, their behavior on the corner, and their relations within the multiple communities they inhabit. Of particular interest is their relationship with other Spanish-speaking migrant communities in the United States and the contributions of this research to exposing the complexities of ethnic solidarity.

Chapter 1 introduces the subject of day laborers in the United States, includes a literature review and the methodology used for this research. Reasons for migration and their experiences on the migration trail are discussed in Chapter 2. Migration is discussed as an act of agency in the historic context of violence, discrimination and poverty in Guatemala, their country of origin. Chapter 3 takes a close look at the symbolic meaning of the Corner before describing the physical corner where these men assemble. In this context I discuss the effects of immigration policy on their lived experiences at La Parada, the role of social capital and the consequences of illegality. Chapter 4 points to the limited view of day laborers as workers, and not as human beings that belong and interact with different communities. A detailed description of their relationships with the different communities they inhabit follows: their own Ixil-speaking community, their transnational links with the community left behind in the highlands of Guatemala, the complex relationship with the Spanish-speaking community, and the limited contact with the English-speaking community. Chapter 5 concludes with an analysis of the violence inflicted on these day laborers on a daily basis, predominantly as a consequence of their

real or presumed illegality and takes a closer look at the reaction to the social, physical, and economic violence they experience.

This work will be distributed to a broader public audience, bringing a grounded day laborer perspective into the public discussion. I will approach community service organizations, local government offices, immigrant services, local media outlets, public libraries and other organizations working with day laborers and illegal immigrants, with the results of this study. In particular, public officials on a local level should be made aware of the consequences ordinances and laws on paper have on human bodies and spirits. Public officials should be made aware of the sometimes-wanted sometimes-unwanted consequences of excluding people, the hardships, abuses, and violence they are subjected to, as well as their quest to live with dignity, and their longing to belong.

## CHAPTER 2

### DESTINATION U.S.: EXPLAINING INDIGENOUS MIGRATION FROM GUATEMALA TO THE UNITED STATES

Although this dissertation intends to look at day labor experiences on U.S. soil, it is imperative to contextualize their lives to understand why these particular migrants decide to go north. Where do they come from and what motivates them to begin this expensive and dangerous journey? What kind of opportunities were available to them? Did they consider other options? How does local and national history shape their decision-making process? How do economic structures and policies affect the lives of indigenous people in Guatemala? Who facilitates this trip? Do they travel with friends, family or on their own? How do they reach the United States? Do they choose their end destination before embarking on the trip or do they leave it up to destiny? The first part of this chapter looks at the push-factors for out-migration, namely poverty, limited access to land, discrimination and neoliberal economic policies. The second part looks at history to explain the situation of indigenous people in Guatemala, and their experiences with structural and military violence. The third part looks at workers' experiences on the journey itself.

The informal corner that sprouted a few years ago in this particular suburb of Northern Virginia is unique in some ways and very common or ordinary in others. Informal meeting places for workers are a familiar sight to see for drivers in Virginia.

The failure of some formal day labor centers, such as the Herndon Official Worker Center, and the economic recession the entire country is experiencing, have pushed more workers out on the street in search of work. Day laborers assemble close to main traffic arteries throughout the state, sometimes in small numbers, sometimes in significant numbers, such as the Annandale day labor corner where sometimes 300 workers are assembled in the early morning hours.

Workers that I have interviewed assemble all in an informal corner that I will refer to from here on “La Parada” (Spanish for “corner”). On a daily basis 30 to 50 workers gather in the early morning hours, and numbers fluctuate depending on the weather and seasonal job opportunities. As I walked in early morning hours (can we eliminate one or rephrase to not have 3 in a row?) on the sidewalks of the “La Parada,” workers responded with a curious look and a short greeting to my “Buenos días, ¿cómo están? Hace frío hoy” (Good morning, how are you? It’s cold today.) Most of the young men on the corner would counter with a quick response, then turn around and talk to their small group of two or three in an unintelligible language to me. Trying to pick up fragments of their conversations soon proved in vain. Not only were their conversations hushed, as if they were afraid of waking up the neighborhood, they were also speaking a different language. They definitely knew how to speak Spanish, but were certainly not speaking it on the corner. Who were these men?

Soon I learned that the majority of the workers were Ixil-speakers, an ethnolinguistic minority from the western highlands of Guatemala. They belong to the twenty-one academically defined Maya ethnolinguistic groups (French 2010:2). With the exception of two workers (a Mexican and a worker from El Salvador), the remaining men

that assembled on a continuous basis on the corner belonged to one of the minority indigenous Mayan groups in Guatemala. Having volunteered for over a year (2006-2007) at the Herndon Official Worker (HOW) Center where I had encountered workers from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, Guatemala and other Latin American countries, this was quite unexpected. It was also surprising considering the composition of the surrounding communities, where the majority of immigrants were of Salvadoran and Mexican origin. So why did a group of indigenous Mayan men end up looking for work in the suburbs of Northern Virginia? In order to understand the complexities of their particular migration experience, the historical, political, social, and structural conditions in their home communities need to be analyzed.

### **Poverty and Push-Factors for Out-Migration**

Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America and the one with the worst indices of poverty. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2010), the population in Guatemala has risen to 14.4 million, with almost half living in poverty, including 15% living in extreme poverty. The numbers worsen looking at the indigenous communities—76% live in poverty, 28% of indigenous people are living in extreme poverty (World Bank 2009). Children under five in Guatemala are within the worst nourished in the world—45% of children under five are malnourished. Half of the labor force works in agriculture. Inequality is structural in a country where the top quintile accounts for 54% of the total consumption (World Bank 2009). In 2010, Diego Santiago, a visiting priest from the parish of Nebaj which is home for most Centreville day laborers, said that 95% of his parish members live in “poverty or extreme



poverty.” (Diego Santiago, presentation at George Mason University- New Century College, October 2010).

Migration from rural to international areas has long been a strategy to alleviate poverty and find better opportunities. In 2006, according to an IOM estimate, approximately 11.2 % of 1.5 million Guatemalans lived abroad, with 97% residing in the United States (IOM 2010). The number of Guatemalans in the United States is presumably higher, as this number does not account for undocumented immigrants. Many Guatemalans are now predominantly using international migration and remittance transfer as a vehicle to alleviate poverty, enhance social status, and provide better opportunities for themselves and their children (Adams 2004, Taylor, Moran-Taylor, Rodman Ruiz 2006).

Remittances from migrants now account for 10.3% of GDP, almost equaling income from exports (IMF 2008). Although it is difficult to obtain exact numbers, approximately 500,000 Maya have migrated to the United States in the last decades (Brown and Odem 2011). In Guatemala, particularly for the indigenous poor, poverty coupled with a long civil war has often made the trip to El Norte the only alternative to their unpromising experience. Migration north has become an option of survival and, for young men in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, a rite of passage. For the younger generation, it has been difficult to replicate the subsistence strategies of previous generations, and as a result many opt to leave their homeland. (Moors 2000: 225). “There are so many opportunities here that we are almost obligated to come to the United States,” one Centreville laborer said in a summer 2010 interview.

Poverty in the indigenous communities is tied to the history of colonialism and an economic model that promoted agricultural export with a cheap or free labor force.

Poverty in these communities is also tied in modern times to neoliberalism, the opening of economic borders and free trade agreements that allow multinational companies to compete with small-plot farmers, driving them out of existence (Dardon 2005: 24). Many have felt compelled to leave due to the pervasive poverty caused by the shortage of land and the limited economic options. Loss of land due to political action or unaffordable pricing has contributed to poverty and has been a push factor for outmigration. Those who do not have land available for coffee or other cultivation, migrate. (Montejo 2004)

Over time, local political caciques eliminated communal land ownership, making land a commodity (Montejo 2004:245). Commodification as result of capitalist production is “linked to the replacement of use value by exchange value and the alienation of producers from the fruits of their labors (Fischer 2004: 275). Not only does the commodification of land curtail subsistence opportunities for many farmers who are unable to compete with increasing market prices for land, it also disenfranchises farmers from their source of livelihood and identity. Fischer (2004:275) argues that land is more than just a commodity for farmers, “land is endowed with effective relations, linked to the conventional moral codes and religious belief, as well as social status and material subsistence.” Once the coyote has been paid off, buying land and building a house is the first financial priority for many workers. It has created a vicious circle of outsourcing human beings to the north. Those who do not have access to remittance income must distance themselves from the principle of self-sufficiency, and instead join the working class in the city or abroad.

Negative consequences resulting from the limited access for farmers to land are being compounded by the threat of dislocation brought about by neoliberal policies. Free trade agreements like CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) open up borders to corporations but do not allow for free labor movement. CAFTA, for example, eliminates tariffs for U.S. imports, while local farmers have a difficult time competing with large corporations. Chumil (2009:355) describes the basis of CAFTA as an “ideology that attracts foreign investment and creates conditions advantageous for those investors; however this is done at the expense of indigenous people.” Farmers become workers and recently introduced maquiladoras take advantage of the oversupply of female labor force in land-poor communities (Nash 2004:195).

Limited access to land and neoliberal economic policies have changed the Maya economy in the Western and Eastern Highland. The proletarianization of farmers is distancing people from their traditional livelihood and making indigenous communities more and more dependent on outside capital. Meanwhile, the subsistence base for entire communities is disappearing. The emergence of maquiladoras in northern Guatemala, the influx of remittances, and the curiosity for new products awakened by media or by returning migrants are altering the economic system. Communities do not produce; they become consumers and are paying a high price for it: sending their men to work abroad. When migrants return, they invest in land and properties, ultimately changing the power structure of their communities. Some Maya migrants or families that receive remittances become economically more powerful than Ladinos (Montejo 2004:234).

## **Experiences with Discrimination**

Poverty is also tied to an inherent discrimination against the indigenous person by ladinos, the term used for non-indigenous persons in Guatemala. Essentialist constructs of the “indios” have marked indigenous people in Guatemala as “inherently backwards, uncivilized and ignorant” (French 2010:4). Often associated with poverty and sleaziness, they are viewed by the state as savage, and subversive. Calling somebody an “indio, campesino, natural” (Indian, farmer, natural) has a pejorative association in the Spanish-speaking world. For the Guatemalan state that strives for a modern society, indigenous communities slow down progress and are considered the “dark side” of the Guatemalan nation. Fabri (2000: 66).

When James was talking about his youth he addressed how language is used as a marker for discrimination: “como yo sufro..yo tengo un dialecto..no hablaba español, no tenía conocimiento” (how I suffer . . . I have a dialect..I did not speak Spanish, I did not have knowledge / consciousness). James grew up in a little hamlet outside of Nebaj with illiterate parents who do not speak Spanish. His father understands Spanish, but never speaks it. He himself did not speak in Spanish conversations until age 17, when he was basically a grown man. He suffered because he spoke with an accent and associated not speaking Spanish with not having “conocimiento,” which can be translated as knowledge or as consciousness. Thus the Spanish language becomes a marker for knowledge, while speaking Ixil becomes a marker for ignorance.

Their inferior positioning in Guatemalan society is perceptible in their behavior. One day after ESL class, one of the workers said that he had never had a teacher, never went to school and on that day in ESL classes he had two teachers for himself. He never

thought that somebody would teach him. He was very surprised that I was interested in his life and that I wanted to know what he thinks. Nobody in Guatemala ever wanted to know what he had to say.

### **Experiences with Poverty and Lack of Opportunities**

The lack of opportunities and the desire to “mejorar” (better oneself) was for all workers that I interviewed the main reason that impelled them to take the journey. Chris, one of the more educated workers, was eager to convey that he was not starving in his country, but that he did not see a way to improve in his rural area. Working on the milpa like his parents had done was hardly paying for the status quo. Besides the hard work in the fields, there were too many risk factors that he could not control, such as the weather and the quality of the land. Nor was there enough money to send his sisters out to study in the capital, in his view the only way to become something better. For other day laborers like Jaco, life in poverty was harsh, not eating every day, walking for miles in the mountains to get to ranchers’ farms to work where he would stay for weeks at a time without returning to his home. I could sense the pain of his poverty when he remembered not having enough money to pay for medicine for his mother.

**Samuel.** One afternoon I accompanied Samuel, a very timid worker, to the community clinic. He is diabetic and takes insulin. He did not know this until one day at work he got really sick and was hospitalized. He told me that medical care in his village was not available. Sometimes two American doctors would stop by to check people’s eyes and teeth. For emergencies however, people had to go down to the bigger town. Sometimes they got up at 5 AM and returned at midnight.

Y algunas veces hay tantas personas que no pueden atender a todas (And sometimes there are so many people they cannot treat everybody).

Having to leave the field and work unattended to get medical care was not easy, but evidently necessary in serious medical emergencies.

Solo a las mujeres que van a tener sus hijos las atienden más rápido (only women that are going to have children get faster attention).

The lack of infrastructure and migration to urban centers leave governments with little incentive to invest in medical and education infrastructure. Samuel, however, said that he was very lucky. He had worked for a company for more than 30 days and was entitled to the same insurance as the rich. This entitled him to go the 'Ixix' clinic and be treated there. Those who only worked for three or fifteen days did not have that benefit. Not being diagnosed early with diabetes almost cost him his life. Now, aware of the seriousness of his disease, he hoards medications and tries to check his blood sugar levels every two days.

**Chris.** Many come to provide more opportunities for their children or other family members. Chris' initial resistance to migration to the United States was broken when he could not afford his brother's education. He himself had tried to pass the university exam but failed because of the poor education he received in the sciences in his high school. Motivated to give his younger brother a better chance, he wanted him to get well prepared in high school. When he lost his job working in a local parish, he could only see el Norte as a way to pay for his brother.

**Paula.** Paula, an Ixil women who crossed the border a few years ago with her husband, keeps thinking about her children when she gets depressed or so homesick that

she spends the day crying. She wants her children to have a better life and a good education,

por eso lucho aquí, quiero que estudien (this is why I fight here, because I want them to study).

Both her children are staying with her mother in Guatemala and she misses them terribly.

Me regresaron 2 veces, me agarraba la migra, me costo pasar, casi a los dos meses (they returned me twice, immigration officers would get me, it was hard for me to cross, it took me almost two months).

People's perseverance despite the hurdles they have to cross coming to the United States indicates the strong desire and even necessity to come. Throughout my interview with her she kept saying

a veces lloro por mis niños (sometimes I cry for my children).

**James.** James is one of the youngest workers and does not mingle with the others. He never showed up to ESL classes or to the workers' meetings before. I met him at a religious service for the workers one Sunday afternoon and he agreed to be interviewed. Meticulously dressed in a suit, he had been to church already on Sunday. He used to stand on the corner, but at the time of the interview he had a steady boss and only looked for work on the corner when his boss was short of work. He lives away from the core housing area of other workers and seems to stay to himself. Attendance at his evangelical church is his first priority and although he would like to learn English, he wants to comply with his religious obligations. James decided to migrate because he lived in poverty.

Viviamos en pobreza grande (We lived in big poverty).

Dios me dio el deseo de salir, entró algo en mi corazón, no puedo vivir así sufriendo (God gave me the desire to leave, something came into my heart, I cannot live suffering like this).

As a devout evangelical he goes to church four days a week for a few hours. At home, his parents live from la milpa, planting corn.

Solo la sembramos para nosotros, para comer. Para ganar hay que ir a las fincas de café (We only plant for us, to eat. To make money / make a living you have to go the coffee plantations).

Thus agriculture feeds them, but it does not allow them to make a living—his father did not have money for the doctor, and he started working at age nine. I asked him if they sold milpa and he answered “a veces se vendía, pero es muy barato y no da” (Sometimes we sold it, but it is very cheap and it does not go further).

Yo sé pobreza. La persona que creció aquí no cree lo que digo (I know poverty [almost saying I know how to do poverty due to the incorrect use of the verb ‘to know’ in Spanish]. The person that grew up here does not believe what I am saying).

He is aware that his poverty level and experiences are so far from everyday experience in the United States that people can’t conceive what he has experienced.

Aquí yo no veo pobreza (Here I do not see poverty).

Seeing the people who migrated getting ahead, while his siblings were stuck in the same poverty as his parents with seemingly no chance to improve, motivated him to take up the journey north.

Yo veo el cambio, construyen casas los que se van (I see the ones who leave build houses).

Cuando vi que mis hermanos vivían en esa misma pobreza que mis padres—eso me dio la . . . el deseo (When I saw that my siblings were living in the same poverty as my parents—that gave me the . . . the desire).



James is the fourth sibling of six. He has been working in the fields since he was nine years old.

Desde pequeño a trabajar en las fincas. Mi fuerza no lo aguantaba, se malogró mi estómago desnutrido y matado en el trabajo (I worked in the fincas since I was little. My strength could not take it; my undernourished stomach got ruined and killed at work).

He believes that his stomach problems that he suffers from so much were caused by picking up a heavier load than he could carry. At age nine, he would go with his father and sleep for a month in the place the ranchero (farm owner) had for the workers and then maybe he would come home for one weekend. Once he was thirteen, his father did not accompany him anymore. It is interesting that he assumes that his stomach problems come from carrying things, although he mentions his “undernourished” stomach. I heard one of the day laborers explain the traditional Ixil outfit—they wear a long decorated band called “faja” wrapped very tightly around the waist a few times, apparently to “protect the stomach” and “help carry weights.”

Me enfermé del estómago, necesitaba ir al especialista, pero mi padre no podía ( I got sick with my stomach, I needed to go to the specialist, but my father could not).

James’s goal was to build a better house for his parents and build his own house. After five years in Virginia, he has reached his goal, but

al llegar a la meta, no tengo deseo de regresar (after reaching the goal, I have no desire to return).

Uno no se gana lo que se gana aquí. Se acostumbra uno a estar. Aquí se puede ganar \$80 o \$100 por día, allí trabajando duro bajo el sol se gana 30 quetzales (You can’t earn what you earn here. One gets used to being. Here you can make \$80 or \$100 per day, there working hard under the sun you make 30 quetzales).

I asked him how much 30 quetzales were, and he answered “como 5 dólares” (like 5 dollars). The differential in opportunities for making a living, even as a day laborer with

inconsistent work, are so high that workers after reaching their “financial” goal, cannot see themselves going back.

**Anthony.** “Curiosity”—Anthony responded without hesitation when asked about his reasons for migrating to the United States. My first reaction was: come on, you are not endangering your life just for curiosity; you are not spending all this money on a coyotes just for curiosity. I asked him again—“what kind of curiosity?” Anthony never intended to move to the U.S. His friend had asked him to accompany him on his journey north a few years before Anthony decided to come, and it was clear to him then that he would never move north like so many others he knew. He tried to make his life by moving to the city. His “curiosity” emerged from an unsuccessful attempt in Guatemala City over years to make a good living, to further educate himself in the city, and ultimately help his siblings go to college. Other migrants to the north had returned with money, and were investing in building new house in their local villages. Despite his hard work, long commuting time and best efforts, Guatemala City had not provided the opportunity to fulfill his desire for a better education, and to be of help to his family. Decisions to migrate are thus not just based on the structural and political conditions of the place of destination. Migrants are conditioned by the political and economic situation at home. Communication with migrants already in the United States—stories about the easy access to work and money, the modernity, the luxury, their investments in land and buildings in local villages—spark the imagination and the “curiosity” of many who stay behind. When Anthony arrived in Northern Virginia, he was not sure if he had arrived in the United States capital area. He had imagined big buildings, “skyscrapers like they show in the movies” and instead he saw low built strip malls, trees and residential areas.

Unlike a few decades ago, movies, TV, cinema, music videos and YouTube move the U.S. and its culture close to future migrants.

### **Double Burned: Structural and Political Violence in the Highlands**

Migration, however, is not a new concept in Mayan history. Maya migrated thousands of years ago from north to south until they settled in today's Guatemala and surrounding countries. Foxen (2007: xxi) underscores the centrality of migration in Mayan survival strategies "even an organizing principle, despite the fact that indigenous identity has also been characterized by a strong attachment to land and place." Reasons for migrating have varied over time: famines, political troubles, epidemics, personal conflicts and cultural preferences (Foxen 2007:26). Migration of workers has been an integral part of the development model in Guatemala during colonial, liberal and neoliberal times, a development program that reaps success by excluding a section of the Guatemalan population (Dardon 2005:25).

During colonial times, indigenous workers were forced to move to satisfy Spanish colonial economic needs, but they also moved to escape domination, tributary or labor obligations by the Spaniards (Lutz and Lovell 2000). Maya communities were incorporated into colonial society in the lower echelons, as laborers and agricultural workers. The 19th century saw temporary labor migrations from indigenous people to big plantations (coffee, banana, and other products) - a type of migration that continues till today. According to Loucky and Moors (2000), the main role of the Guatemalan military in the 19th century consisted in securing a Maya labor force needed for the plantations, and fighting any resistance towards their economic incorporation into the Guatemalan

state. Whole families engaged in annual migrations during the harvest season (Lucky and Moors 2000). These migrations were temporary and allowed men and women to plant their fields in their home community. The plantation economy thus allowed some Indians to acquire more land; others, however, lost wealth during their absence, furthering class differentiation in the community (Foxen 2007:34). The 19th century also saw the emergence of land reforms that facilitated the transfer of communal land into private ladino hands. Indian communities might have lost half of their land at the beginning of the 19th century, destroying the material basis for the corporate community. (McCreery 1994; Smith 1993).

The 1950s saw high population growth and was characterized by a wave of modernization. During this decade, Guatemala City saw an upsurge in industrial development, and migrants, discouraged by the lack of work in rural areas, turned up in the city to try their luck. Rural peasants settled in the city working in both formal and informal sectors of a growing urban economy (Foxen 2007: 42). Under President J.J. Arevalo and the Revolution of 1944, agrarian and labor reforms alleviated the political and economic situation of the Maya. This would not last. Within a decade, advances were rendered void, when the CIA-sponsored coup overthrew Jacobo Arbenz, Arevalo's successor in 1954 (Smith 1990; Jonas 1991). It was in this same decade that many social leaders who opposed the US- orchestrated intervention had to go into exile to avoid political repression. This was the start of a new, politically generated migration. The closure of political spaces and the brutal repression during the 36-year-long civil war produced thousands of internal refugees and external refugees fleeing over the Mexican border.

The 1970s saw the outset of voices claiming change in Maya communities, only to see them targeted for repression from the state. When oil was discovered in 1975 and Getty Oil, Texaco, Amoco and Shenandoah Oil extended their drilling, promises to indigenous migrants to the titles of these lands were not respected. Indigenous migrants to the Ixcán resisted the deterritorialization, only to see the army and paramilitary forces back the oil companies against the settlers' demands (Sinclair 1995: 85-87). The northern border and western highlands were subsequently militarized. Members of the community who worked for change or were associated with resistance to the state, such as peasant organizers, priests, teachers, cooperative leaders, development workers, were persecuted, killed, disappeared or forced to flee. In the context of the Cold War they were marked as subversive communists (Loucky and Moors 2000:3). Those who were targeted by the state either fled or joined peasant organizations or guerrillas. Some joined the CUC (Comité de Unidad Campesina/Committee of Campesino Unity), others joined guerrilla groups such as the EGP (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres/Guerrilla Army of the Poor). The massacre of Rio Negro in 1982 is only one example of the terror of the state in Mayan communities. The Guatemalan army killed around 5,000 indigenous people between 1980 and 1982 for opposing the damming of a river for an international hydroelectric company (Amnesty International web accessed 2/21/2011). The 1980s and 1990s saw a particularly violent period. "No previous period however triggered such widespread slaughter, displacement and destruction of long-established ways of life as in the past 2 decades" (Hanlon & Lovell 2000:35) and saw an increase in attacks towards Maya communities, who were accused of harboring guerrilla supports and marked as

allies of the insurgents. The CEH (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999) estimates that 626 villages were destroyed by the army and 150,000 were killed.

Loucky and Moors (2000:3) write:

The horror of the massacres, the brutality of the torture and murder, the pervasive fear that engulfed Maya communities in the Department of Huehuetenango, El Quiché. . . .remains vivid to this day among those who lived through that time. From these Maya communities came the survivors, seeking physical safety for themselves and their children. Thousands and thousands sought refuge in Guatemala cities or by crossing the borders to Belize, Mexico, and beyond.

Violence levels were particularly high in the department of Quiché, the home for many day labor workers from La Parada. Many Maya left due to the terror of the war during the Guatemalan civil war, also known as the years of the “violencia” that predominantly targeted Maya communities in the highlands of Guatemala. Current conditions in the country cannot be disassociated from the last two decades, characterized by repression and ethnocide. The 36-year long civil war in Guatemala ended in 1996 and was a catalyst for internal and international out-migration from the country. According to the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH 1999), during the years of heightened violence (1981-1983), more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared (CEH 1999, IOM 2002, Montejo 1987; Carmak 1988, Sanford 2003). From late 1981 to 1983, eighty percent of the population of the Departments of El Quiché (does this has an accent? You used one above), Alta Verapaz, Huehuetenango, and Chimaltenango were displaced (CEH 1999). Fabri (2000: 70) sees migration not just as a consequence of a military strategy of ethnic genocide, but arising as an intended mechanism of repression by military leaders. The correlation between violence and migration is substantiated by the

fact that communities with a high profile in the internal armed conflict have the highest numbers of migrants to the U.S. (Dardon 2005:37).

**Experience with violence.** Violence disproportionately affected the Quiché area, the home of Ixil-speakers. Most workers were children and teenagers during the years of high violence, but they all have a story to tell. I did not anticipate the workers' willingness and openness to talk about their experiences with war and violence. One of the day laborers told me that he could not talk to his parents about what happened because it made him very sad. To my astonishment, he proceeded to share his feeling and memories.

Breaking the silence about one's experience can have a natural cathartic effect. According to Fabri (2000:63), recounting one's story is a form of transgression or rebellion against the code of silence. Living in circumstances where silence was and is often their only form of defense, opening up to an almost stranger as an undocumented laborer unmask a deeper purpose. Are they rebelling against a code of silence? Is this a new consciousness and desire to let people know what happened? If vocalization of experiences entails healing, it also shows their loss of fear, their strength, and determination. Vocalization of memories is also part of a process of "concientización" or "awareness." Vocalizing their experiences makes them visible.

**Chumi.** Chumi has been in Northern Virginia for four years. She is the wife of a day laborer and works mostly in housecleaning. Compared to other Ixil women who tend to be very shy, she is outgoing and likes to speak. Chumi's partner suffered a lot during the war years. His father and mother were killed by the military in front of him when he was around four years old, inside the house. They also killed his pregnant sister—shot her

in the heart. Her father was killed when she was three years old and she has grown up with her mother and grandmother. The mother left Chumi and her sister with the grandmother and went to work in the capital. She worked as a “doméstica” (housekeeper) and would come to see them once a month and bring them things. Her father was killed by the guerrilla.

A mi papá lo mataron, lo mataron la guerrilla y a un hermano, un tío (My father was killed, the guerrilla killed him, and a brother, an uncle).

**El norte: The journey north.** Migration patterns have changed in the last two decades, past the traditional boundaries to venturing up to El Norte (Montejo 2004:35). The armed conflict of the 1980s resulted in massive out-migration of Maya people to Mexico. Migration to the United States had already started slowly in 1976, the year a major earthquake killed 25,000 people and displaced thousands (IOM 2002). Compared with migration patterns to Mexico, Guatemala’s migration to the United States is still relatively young (Davis and Lopez-Carr 2010:218). Environmental degradation, natural disasters like the earthquake in 1976, hurricane Stan in 2005, and climate change coupled with the level of violence and persistent poverty, increased the pressures of out-migration (IOM 2002). Individual stories of workers substantiate what Wellmeier (2000:150) states: “either the most ambitious and adventurous or the most desperate . . . migrate.” For the ambitious ones, the status quo was not enough, and migration was the option to find more opportunities. Moves to the capital or to coastal plantations, looking for ways to improve their lives or even their education, ended in deep disappointments. They looked outside their country to satisfy their pursuit for a better existence. The slow trickle of migrants to the United States has soared in the last two decades due to the structural and political



conditions of the country, but also fueled by the social networks of those already living and working in the United States, and the demand for cheap labor in the receiving country.

In the summer of 2010, 70 Central and South American migrants crossing Mexico on their way to the United States were brutally murdered by Mexican cartel thugs (Archibold 2010). In May 2011, 27 people working in a cattle ranch were decapitated, allegedly by the Zetas (Beaubien 2011). The passage to el Norte has not only become an expensive endeavor for most Central American migrants, it has become a journey of life and death. Coyotes and criminal elements in Mexico have made a business of people's desperation for a better life. A few years ago, the dangerous part of the trip for many migrants was the passage of el Rio Bravo, the US-Mexican border. Today, the border has come down from the Rio Bravo to the Rio Suchiate between Mexico and Guatemala (Durand 2009). The border is not static, but rather shifts in response to policies and human drive. In-transit migration to the United States is today being stopped by Mexican security forces, often trained by border agents in the United States (Palma and Dardon 2008). In order to make up for the negative consequences neoliberal policies had on the subsistence of indigenous people, they had to extend their migrations past their local destinations (i.e. coastal plantations and capital city) to international destinations (Mexico, but mainly the United States). Thus while migrants are forced to travel farther and farther to make a living, the controlling arm of the capitalist world is getting closer and closer to their native land.

Migrants recount with pain the difficulties of their journeys: their fear, their hunger, the not-knowing, the waiting, the walking through the desert without food or water, the abuse of women, even being left behind to die.

**Chumi.**

Sufrí demasiado. Nos asaltaron los ladrones en el desierto, veíamos culebras, dormíamos bajo los palos [asked for clarification . . . trees] con el frío, la espigas me espuncharon mis pies y mi agua. (I suffered too much. The robbers assaulted us in the desert, we would see snakes, we slept under the trees with the cold, the thorns pinched my feet and my water.)

Chumi had mentioned how she had to get rid of her sandals and walk barefoot through the desert. She was in so much pain that the coyotes gave her a powder in a liquid. She does not know what it was, but it would take away the pain.

Tres días sin comer ni beber . . . Mis compañeros me dejaron tirada en el desierto a la 1 de la mañana. Yo no podía seguir. Cuando me desperté por la mañana solo veía monte, monte, monte. (pause). Luego vi como una cosita que se movía lejos lejos . . . pienso que era un coche y andé todo el día hasta las 6 de la tarde y llegué a la carretera..allí me dormí y cuando me desperté me estaba recogiendo la migra . . . (Three days without anything to eat or drink..,My companions left me behind in the desert at one in the morning. I could not continue. When I woke up in the morning I could only see forest, forest, forest. (pause). Then I saw a little thing that moved far away. I think it was a car and I walked the whole day until 6 in the evening and I made it to the street . . . there I fell asleep and when I woke up the Migra (immigration) was picking me up . . . )

Mira como me quiere Dios (look how God loves me).

She said a few times that she thought she was going to die and that God must love her to help her come here and not let her die. She draws strength from her relationship with God. After going through hell, being left to die and picked up by immigration, she tried two more times and finally succeeded on her third try. Her perseverance and resilience show through her story. Despite her hardship, she feels special—God must love her to have helped her.

Women were particularly vulnerable during the trip.

Las pasamos más rápido, pero nos acostemos. (We pass you (plural) faster, but let's go to bed together).

Chumi said that although they were travelling in a group, the coyotes would ask for sexual favors and promised to get them faster through immigration.

**Chris.** Chris told me that he had not experienced any direct violence from the coyotes, although they were rough and not friendly, but he could hear women scream when they were waiting overnight and in the collection houses on route to the United States.

**Roberto.**

Estando con ella dije: tenemos que pensar en algo y se nos metió el sueño americano. Primero fue como una aventura, pero después fue muy triste. Vimos a gente ahogarse, como trataban a las chicas y a mí y a un compañero nos daba tanto coraje—eran mala gente los que nos llevaban.

(Being with her I said: we have to think of something and the American dream got into us. First it was like an adventure, but then it was very sad. We saw people drown, we saw how they treated the girls and it enraged me and a trip mate—the people that were taking us were bad people).

For Roberto the trip started like an adventure, but left a very bitter aftertaste.

When immigration officers caught the group in Texas, he was able to escape.

Me escondí por 3 días y yo lloraba y lloraba porque no sabía lo que le había pasado a mi esposa. Las lágrimas se me caían por las rodillas.

(I hid for 3 days and I cried and cried because I did not know what had happened to my wife. The tears were falling down my knees).

Roberto's eyes started to tear up while remembering this passage, his pain and suffering still very much present in him.

Both violence and economic need still inform decisions of many young and old Guatemalan to leave their village or their country. Today's violence, as brutal and

inhumane as during the civil war, is different in nature. Violence never left the country after the peace agreements of 1996, but has now returned with a vengeance to the northern Guatemala-Mexican border. At the core of this problem is drug and human trafficking. Violent deaths in 2009 reached 6,451 in comparison to a 5,500 yearly average during the armed conflict (Lopez 2010:34). This new violence is perpetrated by drug cartels and armed gangs, but is rooted ultimately in an inability or unwillingness of governments on the drug supply and drug demand side to tackle the problem. Reacting to the massacre in Tamaulipas where 72 migrants were shot by drug smugglers, an editorial in the New York Times (8-29-2010) contextualizes the event and denounces the role of the United States:

But such things do not exist in isolation. Mexico's drug cartels are nourished from outside, by American cash, heavy weapons and addiction; the northward pull of immigrants is fueled by our demand for low-wage labor...(.) Drug cartels, opportunistic capitalists, have leaped into the business of smuggling people. Illegal immigrants, known as *pollos*, or chickens, are in some ways better than cocaine bricks because they can be forced to pay ransom and be drug mules.

Denouncing the militarization of the border, the editorial asserts:

Without a system tied to labor demand, illegality, disorder and death proliferate. Current temporary-worker programs are so cumbersome and bureaucratic they are almost unusable by employers . . . (.) We have delegated to drug lords the job of managing our immigrant supply, just as they manage our supply of narcotics. The results are clear. (Editorial NYT, 2010)

Mexican government offensives against their infamous cartels in the last few years have pushed criminal networks into other countries of Central America, hitting Guatemala especially hard. The brutal Zeta cartel controls the transit routes for drugs, migrants and contraband, "intimidating the populace and committing gruesome murders" (Beaubien 2011). Guatemalan president Colom recently extended a 'toque de queda' (state of siege)

in Coban, Alta Verapaz to beat the Zeta's invasion. Coban is at the crossroad of smuggling corridors from South America to the United States. According to Booth and Miroff (2011), the community seems powerless "to confront rapacious outsiders riding through the streets in shiny SUV's, brandishing automatic weapons and looking for local talent with fat wads of dollar bills." For young men the options seem clear: earn a living the honest way and leave the area, or join the criminal networks. Chris mentioned the killing of somebody in the village: "la violencia ha llegado al pueblo" (violence has arrived at the village). He did not know the background of the killing,

es cuestión política . . . es hermano del alcalde de otra aldea, tal vez para vengarse, por asustar . . . (it is a political issue, he is the brother of the mayor from another village, maybe for revenge, maybe just to scare . . . ).

Talking about violence Chris said:

Sabemos que hay 6 cabecillas de narcotraficantes. Uno se hizo una casa de 3 niveles y basement de un día a otro. Otro compra 7 casas y 2 ferreterías. Le encontraron el carro con droga, pero él dijo que se lo habían robado. (We know there are 2 heads of drug traffickers. One got a hold of a 3-level house and a basement overnight. Another buys 7 houses and 2 hardware stores. They found his car with drugs, but he said that somebody had stolen it.)

**Destination USA.** It is not a coincidence that the majority of Guatemalan migrants choose the United States as a destination. There is general awareness of what the U.S. represents, fostered by transnational contact with migrants and the exposure to images and information in the media. Furthermore, the ties that link both countries go back for decades. The beginning of the 20th century marked the onset of U.S. influence on Guatemala's economy through the United Fruit Company (UFC). This American-owned company, now Chiquita, received favorable treatment in the 1930s and 1940s. It controlled almost 50% of Guatemalan land and was exempted from taxes and import

duties. United Fruit and business allies controlled the telephone system and railroad tracks in the country (Watanabe 2004).

When President Ubico left office, United Fruit “owned more than a million acres of banana fields in Central America; it had a bigger annual budget than any nation in the region. (Gonzalez 2000:135). From 1950-1954, Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz implemented liberal agrarian reform to redistribute land from large estates into individually owned land, a radical redistribution affecting the lands owned by the UFC. Convinced that Arbenz threatened U.S. national security because of his alleged communist sympathies, Eisenhower approved the first-ever military action in Latin America. In an effort to combat communism and protect U.S. economic interests, the CIA established training camps in Honduras and Nicaragua for the opposition army, equipped the Guatemalan military with arms and planes, devised propaganda campaigns for the country, conducted psychological intimidation against Arbenz supporters, and with US-backed troops, overthrew Arbenz in a coup (Chumil 2009: 356). After the coup in 1956, the new US-friendly government protected U.S. interests. Bank loans for export crops changed land tenure even further and increased the need for an agricultural labor force. Pressure on indigenous Maya to work on coffee, cotton, and sugar fincas on the Pacific coastal plains increased (Loucky and Moors 2000).

From a historical perspective, U.S. policy over time has been geared towards helping the power and business elites in Guatemala, but has impaired the growth of the rural and farming communities that the La Parada day laborers called home. Gonzalez (2000:135) states: “The tragedy of modern Guatemala owes its origins to US foreign policy.” Big hopes and expectations that the election of President Obama would bring the

long awaited immigration reform have been quelled. To the contrary, under the Obama administration, U.S. immigration policy has actively pursued a securitization of the border and the repatriation of undocumented immigrants. In 2004, the United States repatriated 7,029 persons; in 2009 the number of U.S. repatriations to Guatemala jumped to 25,051 (OIM n.d.).

Migration to the United States might be rooted in ambition or in desperation, but no matter the reason for it, both require courage, determination, and the power of the human spirit. Embarking on this journey is for indigenous Maya a strategy of survival and for many Central American workers, a rite of passage. The strength of their spirit should not detract from the fact that it is a pain-filled journey. Fabri (2000:65) considers migration a form of mutilation that creates an experience of exclusion and absence. Migration for the Ixil-speaking day laborers is equivalent to hope, to advancement, to opportunity. Migration is also a continuation of the anguish and the agony that is rooted in the inability to make ends meet in their communities—the pain, the hurt that is very much alive in their passage to their end destination, and the sorrow of homesickness, loss, marginalization and exclusion they feel after a long day on the corner.

## CHAPTER 3

### LA PARADA: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CORNER

The increased visibility of immigrant day labor bodies in our suburbs has fueled an already highly charged anti-immigrant public discourse about immigration in this country. Their visibility has made them the poster children of illegal immigration, but more significantly this heightened visibility might obscure larger issues that converge on a few feet of American public space. By no means a new phenomenon, day labor today is essentially a result of labor informalization due to global economic restructuring. Supply and demand structure in today's economy demands landscapers, construction workers, movers, and general helpers on the go. Increased immigration in the last decade is feeding the day labor market with more and more newcomers. However, this traditional entry point into the US labor market for new immigrants is becoming a long-term way of making a living for many (Dziembowska 2010:28).

Nativist groups and members of the community that see their way of life threatened and the racial composition of their neighborhoods changed have targeted immigrant day laborers as scapegoats for all the economic and social ills the country is experiencing. Predominantly undocumented and immigrant (Heyek 2008:427), day laborers are seen as problematic, dangerous, if not a threat to native-born workers (Wakin 2008; Turnovsky 2006). The presence of predominantly undocumented men on street corners is an indicator of failed immigration policy and "the state's failure to enforce



even minimal regulations at the bottom of the labor market (Purser 2009:17)." The inability or unwillingness of the nation-state to satisfy the needs of the labor market with an adequate immigration policy has created a pool of illegal migrants. These migrants provide cheap labor in an increasingly competitive business environment. Undocumented flexible day laborers thus are the fitting solution to circumvent high wage cost in an era of increased deregulation. According to Baldwin-Edwards (2008), governments have lost their control over capital and currency flows, and have seized upon immigration policy as one of the domains still in their sphere of influence. Rather than dealing with economic need and pragmatic solutions, immigration policy is now attached to nationalist discourses, and homeland security concerns. Illegal migration and employment have become a fundamental structural component in late capitalism. (Baldwin-Edwards 2008:1456-1457). Needed-but-not-wanted immigration policies show the tension between politics of identity and politics of economic interest (Wong 2005). Immigration policy not only affects the economic integration of the day laborers, it also shapes their inclusion and exclusion from national membership.

Day labor has long existed in this country. During the Ford-era in Chicago, fluctuations in production needs were covered by casual labor, so called "labor-corners" at plant gates (Theodore 2003:1812). Dock workers in New York in the 1800s or Irish day laborers digging canals for the Potomac Company in Virginia a century earlier, show that casual labor has been a by-product of the capitalist production model for centuries. What is new to the day labor scene is the increase of formal and informal sites sprouting up in wealthier corners of the country and the predominantly immigrant nature of day laborers. Fueled by a NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) philosophy and a rising anti-

immigrant sentiment, day laborers are the object of vicious rhetoric in a heated national and local immigration debate.

Day laborers nowadays are predominantly young unauthorized Latino men. They are a continual presence on street corners, in parking lots in front of home improvement stores like Home Depot or Lowe's, or convenience stores such as 7/11. On a regular commute to Washington, D.C. from the suburbs of Fairfax County, I encounter three informal corners: in front of a 7/11, a Home Depot and in a residential area. The sites are small and at 9 AM only 10-20 men are waiting for work. Day labor is by definition temporary, precarious labor. For the majority of day laborers, waiting for a job on the corner is the only source of income, and for many recently arrived immigrants, the corner is often their first contact with the US labor market. The focus of this dissertation is the lived experiences of day laborers. Thus at the center of this inquiry is the space where they make their livelihood, the corner where they assemble. What is the significance of this corner? Why do they assemble where they do? Who belongs to this corner? Is the corner space organized and if so, how? Is behavior regulated? What does this corner mean for the workers?

The corner is much more than just a physical space. This political, social, and economic space encloses emotions of hope and failure. It embodies contradictions: exclusion and inclusion, global and local, capital and labor, humanity and violence, tolerance and intolerance. It is space for human encounters: an intersection between local community and immigrants, legal and undocumented individuals, and also a space where global forces and human agency convene. The corner is also a mirror of society, abuser and bread-giver side by side interacting with the day laborers. The corner displays

attributes of raw capitalism, poverty and inequality, in clear sight of the observer. Moreover, outside observers are witness to the exceptional strength of human willingness and human agency.

### **The Corner**

La Parada is in many ways a regular day labor corner, but is in many ways also exceptional. Located in Northern Virginia, it is one of many hiring sites that have emerged in the suburbs of the capital, Washington, D.C. In recent years immigrants have increasingly chosen suburbs as their first entrance point. Changes in suburban areas reflect major changes in post-industrial U.S. cities, where former bedroom communities have emerged as growth places for employment, and have attracted the relatively new phenomenon of direct immigration to the suburbs (Brettell 2003:172). The country as a whole has experienced a steep increase in the Hispanic population, a 43% rise in the last decade according to the 2010 Census (U S Census 2010). Day laborers in the United States are predominantly young undocumented Latino men (Valenzuela 2003). An estimated 11.2 million people are living without authorization in the U.S., 8 million of whom are active in the workforce (Passel et al. 2011:17). Despite the visibility of Latino immigrants in the commonwealth of Virginia, actual numbers of undocumented immigrants have declined from 2007 to 2010—210,000 unauthorized immigrants in Virginia in 2010, down from 325,000 in 2007. (Passel et al. 2011:2). Reasons for the decline cannot be pinpointed with exactitude. The changes in levels of immigration enforcement and the downturn in the economy could possibly explain the lower numbers. Virginia's unauthorized immigrant population is well below the national average of

5.2%: in Virginia 3.9% of the workforce is unauthorized, compared to 9.7% in California, 9% in Texas, and 8.6 % in New Jersey. (Passel et al. 2011:21).

It is not uncommon in Northern Virginia to see men congregating in search of work in front of Home Depots, 7/11 or other major thoroughfares. Valenzuela (2003) distinguishes formal and informal day labor hiring sites. The metropolitan DC area has a few formal sites run by non-profit organizations like CASA de Maryland, an immigrant advocacy organization that manages five centers in the metro area (CASA n.d.). The closing of the Herndon Official Worker (HOW) Center in 2007, a Center supported with Fairfax County public tax money, came after a long struggle to find a solution to the growing day labor community in Herndon.

### **Formal Day Labor Centers**

Formal day labor centers like the HOW are seen by many as practical solutions for the communities involved, and a comprehensive solution for the day labor community. “The aim of worker centers is to formalize the informal; in other words, to better integrate day laborers into the mainstream economy and to bring this employment arrangement under the logics and conventions governing mainstream employment relations (Theodore et al. 2007:263).” Formal centers are generally connected with non-profit organizations and include immigrants and non-immigrants, women and the homeless. The main objective of worker centers is to facilitate the connection of worker and employer, and provide meaningful activities during waiting times (Wakin 2008: 426). Worker centers provide valuable services such as ESL classes, health check-ups, and restroom facilities. As a volunteer at the HOW Center in Herndon, I observed many

community members sharing food, clothing and ESL classes in a trailer that housed the main office for the center. Social service representatives from the county stopped by, nurses came to check blood pressure and even to provide voluntary HIV tests. Centers thus have also become the contact point for social service providers (Theodore et al. 2007: 263).

A representative from the Mexican Embassy came to offer support services to the workers and pass on information about the “Cédula Consular,” an identification card the local consulate started to issue for their nationals. For many of the undocumented, holding the cédula consular was significant. The lack of papers meant not being able to open a bank account, get a phone, etc. Even the identification card that workers were receiving as steady members of the HOW was a sought-after document for many day laborers. This card gave the worker some type of legitimacy. Regular visits from a Herndon police officer gave workers a sense of legality and protection. The officer came in his official capacity to check in with management and the workers about potential problems and ensuring that all was running smoothly. This was particularly significant in the context of protesting Minutemen outside the official site area. The Center thus also provided a safe and quiet place for workers. A local Boy Scout from the community decided to improve the bike rack area and give the little garden area a face-lift. For Valenzuela, the foremost expert on day labor centers, worker centers play a role in resolving neighborhood conflicts and play a crucial role as intermediaries. In Herndon, workers participated in clean-up efforts on Herndon Day, and showed their willingness to be part of community life in and outside the limits of the center. Worker centers

essentially help coordinate and oversee the hiring process, monitor employers, increase transparency and curb exploitation. (Purser 2009; Valenzuela 2002).

Formal day labor centers, such as the HOW, also promote and set the framework for worker leadership and decision making (Wakin 2008: 426). At the HOW, workers participated in patrolling the hiring site, and facilitating traffic flow. They also were actively engaged in writing the behavior rules for themselves and making management decisions at the center. According to Purser (2009:123), centers “promote a sense of collective empowerment” by encouraging workers to take leadership positions. One of the value-added benefits was the shelter of a big tent that would protect workers from the heat in summer and the cold in winter. Benches were set up so workers could sit, rather than stand for hours. Workers played chess, chatted, drank coffee, listened to speeches or listened to a talented Mexican worker sing typical rancheras (traditional Mexican music). Another advantage of the Center was the presence of La Chaparrita. This little food truck would come on a daily basis, serve hot coffee and breakfast for a very reasonable price.

Centers play an important role in safeguarding basic worker rights and reducing workers’ rights violations, like the right to be paid and to be treated respectfully (Heyek 2008:449). Centers are instrumental in reducing violations against worker rights. The HOW, for example, established a minimum of \$10 per hour for general jobs and \$15 for specialized jobs. This rule safeguarded a minimum wage for all the workers, and no one was allowed to underbid this amount. Workers voted for the establishment of a four-hour minimum per job, to avoid being hauled off for half an hour and losing the opportunity to make a full day’s wage. Workers also insisted on being reimbursed for long commutes to and from the work place to the center. Monitoring employers by having them sign an

agreement and recording their license plates ensured compliance in most cases. Bilingual coordinators like me translated employers' requests, a desk coordinator found suitable workers for the job based on a lottery system, and bilingual coordinators explained the requirements and conditions of the job to the worker and gave both parties the chance to clarify any questions before leaving. Compared to many intentional or unintentional misunderstandings on the informal corner between employer and employee, this process allowed little room for misinterpretations.

Formal centers thus create a safe environment for workers, help them use their waiting time in a more productive manner, ease the physical suffering and provide opportunities for workers to develop. Local formal centers can by themselves, however, not stand up to the global, national, and local forces that make day labor a necessity for the poor immigrants (Theodore et al. 2007:263).

### **Informal Day Labor Sites**

Informal day labor sites are probably more common than formal centers and provide—in contrast to the formal sites—no protection for workers. Valenzuela (2003:307) defines an informal site as a place where men congregate in a highly visible part of the urban landscape. Most day laborers in informal sites are foreign-born, recently arrived, unauthorized, with low levels of education and poor command of English. As a result they are highly vulnerable and exploited. (Valenzuela 2003:307).

It is not difficult to understand why local policy responses and migrant civil society advocate the establishment of formal day labor centers (Esbenshade 2000; Fine 2006). The potential and real abuse of day labor workers cannot be completely eliminated

in the formal sites, but it can be limited. On informal hiring sites, each worker competes with other co-workers for his daily livelihood. Cars of contractors that approach the sites are almost immediately surrounded by multiple workers, often—and depending on the general availability of jobs—underbidding their own colleagues. Suffice it to say that creating an environment of solidarity is difficult in these circumstances.

### **La Parada: More than a Space**

La Parada is an informal hiring site. In very close proximity to a major east-west highway to the capital and a main corridor connecting the state in a north-south axis, it is a very convenient pick-up place for contractors. In less than five minutes contractors are en route in a major through-fare, saving time and money. It is not accidental that most workers live very close to the La Parada. Lack of transportation makes the closeness to the corner—workers walk to the waiting space—crucial to obtain work and make a livelihood.

Nor is it by chance that this site is located within the boundaries of Fairfax County, one of most affluent in the country with an average family income of \$122,651 in 2009 (Fairfax County Government 2011). Compared to the neighboring jurisdictions of Prince William County and Loudon County, Fairfax County has a fairly neutral political stance towards immigration, often supporting immigrants. Unlike Prince William County, Fairfax County has not requested federal authorization under program 287g to pursue federal immigration law on the local level. Fairfax County does, however, participate in the Safe Communities Program, which involves sharing data on arrested persons with the FBI/ICE databank.



According to the United States Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE), 287g allows state and local law enforcement to enter into participation with ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement n.d.). It delegates authority and expands enforcing civil immigration violations from the federal to the local government. Matt Coleman (2007b) calls this expansion into local and state areas a “newly materializing spaces of immigration politics,” (Coleman 2007b: 56), moving from border areas to within the United States and increasingly controlling people and reaching deeper into people’s lives. The 287g program reinforces prior moves/strategies to associate the undocumented with a threat to the country’s security. ICE describes the need for the 287g as follows:

Terrorism and criminal activity are most effectively combated through a multi-agency/multi-authority approach that encompasses federal, state and local resources, skills and expertise. State and local law enforcement play a critical role in protecting our homeland because they are often the first responders on the scene when there is an incident or attack against the United States. During the course of daily duties, they will often encounter foreign-born criminals and immigration violators who pose a threat to national security or public safety. (ICE <http://www.ice.gov/news/library/factsheets/287g.htm>, accessed 1 April 2011)

Placing ICE under the newly-created DHS (Department of Homeland Security) clearly underlined this concept. The expansion of immigration law enforcement to local areas is a continuum of this philosophy. In the name of national security, undocumented immigrants are portrayed as threats to our security, resulting in concrete material consequences for these individuals. Fairfax County law enforcement has not to this day pursued a 287g authorization. During a recent community meeting, Supervisor Michael Frey of Sully District stated that Fairfax County is not interested in pursuing the 287g program and enforcing federal immigration law. According to Frey, Fairfax County

police has enough work chasing criminals. (Supervisor Frey, Meeting at Centreville Library on March 22, 2011).

Set-back from the main artery crossing this suburb, thirty to forty workers assemble every morning at a corner in Northern Virginia. With the exception of two or three workers, most men are indigenous Maya from Guatemala. For many men, standing on the corner is their only access to work and their sole source of income (Heyek 2008:427). Some have been here for two years, and the majority of workers have been in Virginia for four to six years. When one observes day laborers in this community, women are out of sight, almost in hiding, and are completely absent from the corner. Most indigenous migrants are men; however, a growing number of women are starting to migrate or join family members (Yescas 2010). The danger of the trip and the expense associated with it have discouraged family trips or family reunification. Despite this fact, some Maya women have made it to Virginia, but never to the corner. Women find work through social networks, and often are employed on a call-basis by Latino-owned cleaning services in the area. Women are also absent from many community-based migrant events: ESL classes, day labor meetings, faith-based events. Their invisibility in the community is striking when compared with the visibility of the men. Women have cooked traditional Mayan meals on special occasions for the community, but are otherwise shy and very private. When I visited some families with a Mayan friend, they came across as withdrawn, distancing themselves, timid, and very reserved. Even with my daughter in tow, women were not engaged. What a difference from visiting friends in Peruvian or Mexican households in the area, where women are outgoing, sociable and gregarious, hug and kiss us, especially when I arrive with my children. My inquiry into

the experiences of day laborers in this corner will limit this work to examining only male migrants. A study of indigenous migrant women and their lived experiences in the Virginia suburbs would give us an insight into differential gendered experiences. This, however, goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

### **Social Capital**

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital and Massey's network theory can explain the accumulation of Ixil speakers in the Parada neighborhood. The concept of social capital looks at the value of social relationships, and Bourdieu expands it to include social, capital, and symbolic resources (Dominguez and Watkins 2003:113). Social capital is here understood as the value of people's relationships in their destination, but also those relationships with members of the home community (Gabarrot and Clarke 2010:190). Structural links emerge to connect home and destination community. Access to resources such as information on employers, job opportunities, healthcare, etc., are critical at the corner. Waldinger and Lichter (2003:10) explain how social networks and the social support for moving, and the links of expatriates with the home society, lower the costs and risks of movement. Migrants share information with their home community about the current state of the economy, discouraging or encouraging people to come depending on the local economy. I have heard many day laborers say that they discouraged friends or family members from coming, because the economy was so bad. Often friends and family members don't believe them and attempt the trip anyway. The current downturn in undocumented immigration is partly due to increased surveillance at the border, but information about the lack of jobs is also heard

in their home communities. Pat Zavella argues that it is also demographics—the aging and decrease of the most active cohort of young men. Once in the country of destination, similar network hiring by veteran migrant connections produces a mono-ethnic workforce (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Then, again, although networks might provide certain starting capital for most migrants, they are embedded in the social and economic reality of the newcomers and are often not as unified and altruistic as they seem. Menjivar (2000:17) argues that contextual forces at the place of reception are critical to informal migrant networks, and with Mahler (1995b) takes a critical look at ethnic solidarity and social networks. Networks are not monolithic and individual responses are influenced by broader structural forces (Menjivar 2000: 36).

Network theory is useful when it comes to explaining the concentration of Ixil-speakers in one space. Transnational migrant networks share information and link origin and destination communities. New immigrants thus choose certain destinations based on prior settlement. (Massey, Alarcon, Durand and González 1990; Menjivar 2000). Often newcomers have a place to stay when they arrive and more established migrants ease their transition by showing them how to survive in a new culture and labor market. Destination and origin communities are linked through transnational networks. When I asked Henry why only Ixil-speakers would assemble on the corner (with the exception of one Mexican and one Salvadoran), I was told that Mexican workers tend to assemble at a local 7/11 and would stay close to where they live. Henry: “es muy caro vivir cerca de La Parada.” (it is too expensive to live close to the corner). I asked him why the Ixil-community assembled here despite the expensive housing costs.

Prince William tiene malas leyes para inmigrantes y vivir donde viven los mexicanos es barato ahora, porque mucha gente se marchó. Nosotros preferimos vivir aquí hasta que alguien se queje y empiecen a sacarnos. (Prince William has bad laws for immigrants and it is cheap now to live where the Mexicans live, because a lot of people have left. We prefer to live here until somebody complains and starts pushing us out).

Henry is obviously aware of the liminal space they occupy, and the instability and temporality of the space. I had not expected, however, that workers were so aware of their surroundings and although he could not tell me the content of the law, he knew it was bad for migrants. In 2007, the Prince William Board of Supervisors passed a controversial Rule of Law Resolution, policies targeting unauthorized immigrants (Singer, DeRenzis and Wilson 2009). The County had also requested and obtained the 287g authorization that ordered police to check residency status for lawbreakers. In a clearly anti-immigrant, anti-Hispanic atmosphere, many Latino immigrants left the county. Anecdotal information reported many Latino students leaving Prince William County (PWC) and showing up in Fairfax County schools. Indeed the PWC Policy Report (2010) reports declining numbers in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) enrolment:

In the 8 years before fall 2008, ESOL enrollments in Prince William County had been steadily rising by an average of 1,450 students a year, an almost twelve-fold increase. In fall 2008, the number of ESOL students dropped by 247 (PWC Police 2010: 73)

While at the same time ESOL enrolments in Fairfax County were increasing:

In contrast, the Hispanic percentage of pupils in Fairfax County, which had experienced several years of declining Hispanic percentages in its schools, suddenly saw an increase after 2007-2008, when the PWC policy was implemented (PWC Police 2010:73).

The decline of Hispanic immigrants, leaving the county and leaving rental properties unoccupied weakened the already fragile housing market. This situation and the severe downturn in the economy that left many jobless and unable to pay their mortgages, contributed to high numbers of foreclosures (PWC Police 2010:79). Henry was probably right: housing had become cheaper in PWC, but at a high price for Hispanic immigrants. For the Ixil-speakers, an environment where they do not feel persecuted seems to outweigh the lower costs of housing across county lines.

Chento (Jacinto) only moved close to the corner a year ago. He was living in the same townhouse as his boss farther away from the corner, but when he had to sell his house in a “short sale,” they all had to move out within ten days. He now lives with a few other migrants closer to the corner. His contacts with other Ixil-speakers helped him find a place almost immediately, in what otherwise could have been a tricky situation. His undocumented status and his lack of a bank account make it very difficult to sign a lease. The corner was Luis’ first encounter with the U.S. labor market. His friend, who comes from the same Guatemalan indigenous village, showed him the place, and he stayed with him when he first arrived.

### **La Parada: Physical Description**

On one side, the corner faces a long strip mall with a big supermarket and its adjacent parking lot. On another side, workers face newly-constructed townhomes and a public building. In the last two years, workers have been dispersed into the four corners of this intersection and have been forced to spread out by new fencing that was installed by the shopping mall management. Fairfax County Police has a general policy of only

intervening at the corner if public safety is at risk. According to Fairfax County police officers (Meeting in Baptist Church 2010), officers will ticket if contractors picking up workers hinder traffic from flowing, but are otherwise only seen patrolling the area. Thus workers do not cramp a particular area, and are almost lined up facing the street. This allows contractors to keep moving, avoiding a ticket, but it has also brought about a probably inadvertent but distressing consequence: workers are lined up like meat in a meat counter, while contractors drive by the corner “checking out the best product.” The desire and need to work is stronger than the prospect of humiliation in such a setting. Workers know why they are here and almost nothing will derail their determination and sense of purpose.

At the HOW center, a formal hiring site, workers were assigned work based on a lottery system. Workers would assemble in the early morning hours and wait as a group under a big tent. “La Parada” had quite a different feel. Workers position themselves every morning in an elongated way alongside the main street and across the intersection. Men are aware that standing in big groups will only hinder their chances of getting work, but also they understand that they will draw more attention to the rest of the community members if the area is crowded. In an effort to keep the day laborers away from their stores and the parking lot, the strip owner set up a fancy black iron fence around the property on one side, to avoid day laborers sitting or stepping into the grass and tree area that separates the walkway from the parking lot and the stores. The purpose of this fence has symbolic and material consequences for the waiting day laborers. On a daily basis this fence shouts into their faces: “we don’t want you here and we want you out.”

How little the strip mall owner that paid for the construction of this fence understood about these men is emblematic of the little understanding and information the community has about the day laborers. The fence will and is definitely keeping the day laborers six feet further out from the parking lot and closer to the street. However, if the idea was to get rid of them, this was a failed project from the beginning. All the workers live close to the corner where they assemble, and have no real ability to move to a different area. Workers are now pushed closer to the streets, basically spending their waiting time in the frontline. Gone is the possibility to make waiting time a little more bearable, to be able to sit on the grass and above all in summer under the hot sun, be able to find some refuge under the shade of the few trees. On that side of the intersection, workers only have five feet of cement to stand on, and no possibility of sitting as this would block other pedestrians from passing. The shopping mall owner also hired a part-time, then a full-time security guard, whose job was to push out the workers from the parking lot onto the walkway. One of the store owners was very unhappy with the securitization of the mall. Besides charging him monthly contributions to pay the guard, it gave clients the perception of being in an unsafe area, a perception the mall and business owners were not interested in presenting. Interestingly enough, I never observed many pedestrians in that area. Most of the pedestrians walking with shopping bags seem to be immigrant men and women walking with groceries from the local supermarket chain. Obviously, immigrants are clients and consumers as well, something overlooked by those store owners who want them as far away as possible when they are waiting for a job, but are happy to take their money as customers. Other “Americans” don’t seem to walk any more. They drive up to the front of the store with their cars. Mitchell Duneier



(2001) also makes this observation in his ethnography *Sidewalk*: most errands in the U.S. are made by car, but on his sidewalk where he observes the invisible structure that vendors, scavengers, have created, people do most of the errands walking. In a way the sidewalks in suburbia have become spaces for the marginalized—day laborers, homeless, immigrants, people who cannot afford a car and walk from work to the next bus station. Some areas in suburban residential Northern Virginia do not even have sidewalks. People have to walk on the street to get from one place to another in some residential areas.

Public transportation is almost non-existent in some middle-class to upper-middle-class areas. The lack of sidewalks and public buses in certain areas makes one wonder if it is assumed that wealthy residents of those areas must by the nature of their social and economic standing have a car. In these neighborhoods, the exclusion of people who do not own a car and depend on public transportation is triggered by city planners and contributes to the spatial segregation of rich and poor. After all, life in the suburbs means leaving the city and everything the city entails—chaos, noise, traffic, homelessness, the violent face of poverty. We flee the city to the suburbs to find sanitized, healthy, peaceful surroundings, gang-free public schools. A home in the suburbs is an escape into a clean, peaceful, individual existence. We park our car in our driveway, not to be bothered by neighbors unless we look for the interaction. We do not mind the occasional African-American, Arab or Hispanic homebuyer in the residential area because everybody assumes that in order to “be here with us,” this person must be at least economically and professionally speaking one of us.

Although the city has traditionally been the first stop for immigrants, the suburbs have replaced the city. Many newcomers have moved into the suburbs of Northern

Virginia, drawn by other immigrants or by the demand for construction workers, landscapers, cleaners, babysitters, etc. This has fueled a nativist, anti-immigrant response by some members of the community and is being exploited by some political groups.

Socio-economic differences divide communities and often those socio-economic differences reflect the racial / ethnic composition of the community. While Clifton is rich, mainly white middle-class, neighboring Manassas and Manassas Park are poorer and have a high percentage of Latinos. In recent efforts by the Fairfax County School System to draw new boundaries for the public schools, some of my neighbors were incensed about the fact that “kids from that xx neighborhood or from the townhouse areas” were going to attend our school (mainly attended by families living in single-family homes). Are these children different just because they live in a smaller house? Does this affect their character, their right to be educated? If discrimination in the community is based on socio-economic factors (“we don’t want the poor kids in our schools”), one can only imagine what people think about day laborers on our streets who do not speak our language, who are adult men and as such much more threatening than “poor kids.” Tim Hugo, a local politician, skillfully exploits the fear of the unknown, the discrimination of those who do not have what we have. He seems to make political gains by constructing day laborers as criminals and as a threat.

In recent months, my office has received numerous e-mails and phone calls regarding safety concerns . . . In this year’s session of the General Assembly, I introduce House Bill 2473, which aims to address these safety concerns. . . . With the passage of HB 2473, law enforcement will be able to prohibit the—sometimes 20-30—people who habitually loiter . . . (Tim Hugo—Letter to constituents March 13, 2009).

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Race and class are so closely tied to one another in the USA that much of the way that Americans identify a place as safe, dangerous, friendly or hostile is based on personal associations with elements of the landscape that indicate the racial composition of the area. It is through this racialized understanding of landscapes that day laborers are often found to be “out of place” (Creswell 1996) and therefore problematic (Crotty and Bosco 2008:226)

Socialization on the street is the cultural norm in many Hispanic countries. People sit in front of their house on little benches, meet in public plazas, or just go for walks in the street. It is an acceptable practice of socializing that is frowned upon in many segments of American society. People socialize at home, in organized groups, or meet within buildings and/or in a structured way. As evidenced in a few Spanish-speaking countries, young people and men meet unstructured on corners, in front of bars, in central places like plazas and discuss daily events, news, smoking, chatting. My impression as an

immigrant in this country is that public unstructured meetings are not normal in Virginia suburban communities—people meet in Starbucks, in libraries, in a bar or restaurant or at sports events. People make appointments to meet. During my yearly stays in Spain or my eight-month period in Costa Rica, I see men and young people going out on the street to talk to whoever is there. “Vamos a salir” (we are going out) with no destination or time frame in mind. Maybe life is too busy in the suburbs to have this type of lifestyle—but socialization in open spaces seems to be abnormal. As Turnovsky (2006) describes, the stigmatization of informal work and the socialization in public spaces identify spaces like La Parada as the site of troublemaking and loitering on the street.

Fairfax County is a diverse place: 140 different languages and 200 (are there this many??? I thought there were only 195 countries in the world!) countries are represented in Fairfax County Public Schools. (Dale 2010). To the outside eye, Northern Virginia seems like a well-integrated place. Socio-economic differences divide communities and often those socio-economic differences reflect the racial / ethnic composition of the community. While Clifton is rich, mainly white middle-class, neighboring Manassas and Manassas Park are poorer and have a high percentage of Latinos. In recent efforts by the Fairfax County School System to draw new boundaries for the public schools, some of my neighbors were incensed about the fact that “kids from that xx neighborhood or from the townhouse areas” were going to attend our school (mainly attended by families living in single-family homes). Are these children different just because they live in a smaller house? Does this affect their character, their right to be educated? If discrimination in the community is based on socio-economic factors (“we don’t want the poor kids in our schools”), one can only imagine what people think about day laborers on our streets who

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Smaller groups also seem to be less threatening to the community. Workers are aware of this and the long-line distribution of human bodies along the street is clearly a strategy of self-preservation. Lining up on along the sidewalk rather than bunching up eases the process of choosing and picking for the employer. Employers can drive down the street and literally pick their “body.” Most workers live very close to La Parada and without transportation, the closeness of the corner—workers walk to the corner—is crucial to obtain work and make a livelihood.

In contrast to day labor gatherings in front of 7/11 or Home Depot, competitive tensions on the street are not as palpable. Workers do not run to contractor vans, do not scream or draw attention to themselves. Workers try to maximize their chances of obtaining work by appearing the cleanest, the strongest and the most assertive. Crotty and Bosco (2008:232) state that “inherent in these spot judgments are each employer’s racial stereotype,” racial assumptions regarding citizenship, drug abuse, honesty and work attitude, which can lead to discriminatory hiring practices. (Crotty and Bosco 2008).

Workers assemble every day of the week on the corner, although there always seem to be fewer workers on Sunday. Some workers like Pedro are very religious and attend services on Sunday. Other workers have told me that they can attend ESL classes on Sunday as there is not much work. At the HOW in Herndon, weekends were by and large the busiest days of the week. This might also have something to do with the different type of employer at each site. While in Herndon many homeowners picked up workers on the weekends, at La Parada there are more contractors who have a Monday through Friday business schedule.

### **La Parada Interpreted**

At first glance, La Parada is simply a meeting point for workers. A deeper look brings the symbolic meaning of this corner to the surface. This space talks about inequality, poverty, and marginalization. It is also a space of symbolic violence for the marginalized and vulnerable day labor population. (Nevins 2008) Space is political. La Parada is not the dream driveway in front of a two-car garage five- bedroom single family house. La Parada literally takes a turn; it is a corner and does not belong in the

imaginary of suburbia. It is a space where raw capitalism reveals itself and the consequences of neoliberal policies are tangible. Suburban communities are grappling with the increased settlement of immigrants in the suburbs. The reactions range from rejection and hate-mongering exemplified by local Minutemen chapters to the creation of sanctuary cities. Cities like Herndon that experienced a fast and numerous influx of immigrants were divided in their reactions: from anti-solicitation and trespassing ordinances to open support of a day labor center. Immigration and the changing face of the town divided the community.

Meanwhile, what is not evident is that demand and neoliberal policies have “created” the day laborer. While anti-immigrant groups blame illegal immigration for the increase in day labor sites, demand is employer-driven (Copper 2005; Heyek 2008). In “Contesting Neoliberalism,” Theodore (2007) sees unauthorized migration as symptomatic of neoliberalizing political and economic processes. Neoliberal policies create inequalities that encourage labor migration (Barker 2005). Neoliberalism argues for open trade borders, and while capital barriers are being dismantled, migrants are encountering the build-up and militarization of borders that obstruct the flow of labor and people. While states have lost their grip on capital, the nation-state has seized its control over borders. Immigration policy, however, is tied to national security concerns, rather than a pragmatic approach to the economic needs of the country (Baldwin-Edwards 2008:1456-1457). This acute mismatch between demand for cheap labor and the closing of borders is a contradiction that enables the existence of “unauthorized” human beings. The condition of illegality more than ever marks the migrant, as a neoliberal subject. (Varsanyi 2009; Massey et al.2003, Coleman 2007a). Varsanyi asserts the power of the



state: “Immigration policy, the power of the state to exclude, admit and expel, is productively deployed not only as a tool of statecraft but as a tool for neoliberal capital accumulation via the construction of neoliberal subject” (Varsanyi 2009:883).

A closer look at the corner requires a discussion of capitalism, class struggle, and labor markets. Neoliberal policies and the resulting restructuring of the economy have increased the demand for part-time, low-skilled, flexible labor. Businesses facing heightened price competition seek low-wage, contingent labor (Ness 2005). This flexibilization in the low-skilled labor market is tied to conditions of low pay and precarious employment. “These are labor markets that are defined and shaped by (formalized) precariousness, maintained by segmentation and constructed in the image of commodity markets, where workers are seen as reliable, stable and organized source of underemployed worker (Theodore 2003:1824).” The need to cut costs in an increasingly competitive business environment has led to a preference of informal or casual labor. The casualization of work allows employers to cut costs and have workers “on call.” (Massey et al. 2003). Within this context, the reemergence of day laborers on street corners is tied to the increasing informalization of labor markets in the United States. The need for employment and the limited ability of challenging work conditions make unauthorized immigrants who enter the U.S. labor market ideal and wanted candidates (something’s missing here?) (Theodore et al. 2007:270). “In the beginning of the 21st century, the phenomenon of illegal immigration can be reasonably described as structurally embedded” (Baldwin-Edwards 2008:1457). Informal hiring sites in front of Home Depot or Lowe’s are a result of the growing demand for contingent workers in landscaping and construction (Valenzuela 2002).

## **Illegality**

The condition of illegality is a fundamental element affecting the day laborer. Without the condition of illegality, some corners in the county would probably not exist. Businesses searching for flexible, docile, and available workers have found the ideal solution for their problems in the illegal day laborer. Unable or limited in their ability to fight working conditions, today's immigrant is seen by the contractor as a replaceable commodity. Day labor corners emerge as commodity markets, where bodies of workers are disposable and substitutable (Theodore 2003; Juffer 2009). Yet, at the same time as day labor tells a story of exploitation, it also embodies the struggle and agency of workers. (Poivitin 2005:11). Humiliation and dignity stand side by side in the fast lanes that display labor lining up commensurate to our "to go" way of life.

Legal status determines fundamentally the membership of an immigrant in U.S. society. As Hirsch notes (Menjivar 2006:1003), "it can be said that documented and undocumented immigrants have such different experiences that they can be regarded as two different social classes." Legal status goes beyond inclusion in the labor market, it has material and emotional consequences: "in conjunction with race, legal status becomes particularly important to consider as an indicator of qualitative delineators . . . (Newton 2008:31)." Illegality shapes the immigrants' identity, how they relate to others, and their relations with their new community and their homeland (Menjivar 2006:1000). Undocumented status affects all spheres of life, from wages and working conditions (Massey 2001, Massey et al. 2003), to access to health services (Menjivar 2006; Willen 2007b), and leads to greater discrimination (Heyman 1998).

Illegality guarantees a steady supply of cheap, almost unproblematic labor to U.S. business. “Employers can and do capitalize on this “voiceless” condition of undocumented laborers” (Heyek 2008:437). Taking into consideration that the condition of illegality is imposed on immigrants by the nation-state, it is only logical to question the motives and aims of the state. DeGenova (2005) argues that capitalist economic and nation-state interests are at stake in the construction and persistence of migrant illegality. The condition of illegality is socially, culturally, and politically constructed. In a Foucauldian sense, the government can use this strategy of inclusion and excluding to classify people who in turn are easier to control (Inda 2006). This created illegality stems from unwillingness by the state to recognize the conditions at home that create demand. (Chavez 2007).

Illegality also shapes the experiences of day laborers on the corner where they experience their marginality and otherness on a daily basis. Illegality shapes their experiences in the spaces they inhabit. Starting with lining up in the early morning hours, to the wages and work conditions they are offered, the insecurity and randomness of their work, the lack of benefits or safety package for rainy days, the condition of illegality goes beyond the corner space.

One of the biggest constraints workers face in finding employment is their lack of mobility. Some know how to drive and have driven pick-up trucks at home. On occasions driving them home from worker meetings, some of the workers have joked about helping me drive, making it obvious that their lack of authorization hinders them from driving. Workers do not speak openly about their legal status; they instead mask the seriousness of their legal status with a joke. This has created awkward moments for me. Aware of the

context in which the workers joke, I had to tread a fine line: participating in the joke with the risk of taking their situation too lightly; not participating would bring a sobering effect into the conversation that I certainly did not intend. One of the workers who used to drive without a U.S. drivers license stopped driving when he understood that he could be deported if caught driving without a license. Not possessing a car not only limits their chances of better paying work and more work, it also makes them completely dependent on the corner and surrounding areas where they live. They have to purchase food in the stores that are openly trying to push them away, and do not have the ability to comparison shop. Lack of transportation also makes them dependent on those who have cars. When I accompanied J. to a doctor's appointment to check on his diabetes, his first reaction walking into the waiting room was relief that the clinic was not overcrowded. Initially I did not understand why it mattered so much to him, until he told me that the driver he usually hires charges him for the waiting time. A doctor's appointment not only means a day without pay, it also can be an expensive event. Illegality marks their job, work, healthcare access, and housing mobility.

Not having a car also means that living quarters need to be within walking distance of the corner. Overcrowding in close-by apartments is the only solution to the rising rent costs in the area. Workers pay much higher rates to the landlord compared to the going market rent. They share basement apartments with three to four other workers, at \$600 each. One worker described how difficult it would be to sign a new lease without legal documentation, confining them to their old location where the landlord is happy to get the amount. Driving home two day laborers on a very humid and hot summer evening last year, I discovered that their apartment building had a pool. I asked the two if they had

used the pool. They said it would be great after work in the heat to cool off, but they did not have pool passes. Anthony said that they were supposedly entitled to pool passes, but he had never asked the landlord. The undertones of this conversation made it quite clear that they did not want to disclose their undocumented status, and rather went without using the pool. Overcrowding also affects the quality of life of the workers. Chris, who is very open about his passion for painting, can't paint because there is no space in the apartment to leave his paintings standing. He is hoping for the summer when more of his cohabitants might spend time outside or at work.

Illegality makes day laborers live in a constant state of fear. If employers do not pay at the end of the day, most day laborers lose their salary and will not report out of fear of being deported. Their docility might also be attributed to their condition as illegals. This condition permeates their daily lives, from looking for work, to living in the apartments, to their relations with others. Afraid their earnings might be taken away if police raided their apartment, Ernesto, a day labor in Herndon, was asking me for advice on how to safeguard his savings. He did not want to send everything to his mother in Mexico, as this was tantamount to losing control over the money, but he felt unsafe keeping the money in the house. A local Bank of America branch had started opening up accounts accepting Mexican consular identification cards, but Ernesto did not trust them either.

In the corner, workers are painfully aware of their exclusion and otherness. Their undocumented status conditions their behavior on the street. Daniel, for example, got upset about the attention-drawing gesturing of a Mexican day laborer: “no estamos permitidos aqui” (we are not permitted here). Me enoja, me enoja (he makes me upset, he

makes me upset). Daniel, who is usually very calm, was visibly agitated when talking about the Mexican. Businesses push day laborers further and further out to the streets, be it with fences or with security guards that patrol the parking lots. Their “docile” bodies pushed closer and closer to the pick-up line facilitate the contractor’s scrutiny and inspection. Laborers, aware that their presence can be a provocation for the community, find a muted way to line up on the street, alone, in groups of two or sometimes three or four, never more. Smaller groups seemed to be less threatening to the community. Workers were aware of this and the long-line distribution of human bodies along the street was a strategy of self-preservation. Too much attention from the outside community would be self-destructive. The workers’ use of the space in an elongated line also eased the choosing and picking process for employers. Employers can drive down the street, and pick from the lined up workers. I was astonished at how “naked” workers were on the corner: just working clothes, and nothing more. I asked one of the workers why they did not bring something to read, drink, eat while they were waiting. Manuel replied:

Employers want to see you clean—they don’t like you to come with baggage attached ( Los patrones quieren verte limpio—no les gustan que carguemos bolsas).

The worker is aware that all the patrón (boss) wants is his body’s labor; the rest is superfluous and not desired. During the hot summer months, I saw quite a few workers sipping from bottles of water and in winter sipping on cardboard cups of coffee they would acquire at a close-by Russian convenience corner store. However, once an employer would pick them, they would always leave the bottle of water with one of the companions. In a society that has sophisticated the idea of carrying water at all times—

just note the diversity of stainless steel and plastic water bottles on the shelves in any store—the idea that these workers are afraid of not being picked up for work because they have food or a drink with them is inconceivable. Workers do not take lunches or coolers with them because they think employers will not approve. During informal conversations with the workers, some, however, complain about not getting lunch the entire day or not having enough water. Sometimes the workplaces are too far from a lunch place and although they get a break, they are unable to purchase food. On the other hand, workers have described how the boss drives them to the nearest McDonalds for lunch and sometimes even pays for their food. Employers are not a monolithic group and generalizations would be unfair.

Then again, while teaching ESL for some day laborers, one of the first requests I had from an illiterate worker is to teach him how to say “I need water” and “I need a break.” It is beyond belief that in our developed society profit would blind some human beings to the extent of not allowing somebody to eat or drink. With no protection and the need to survive, day laborers would rather spend the day waiting without a magazine, a radio, anything, than risk the possibility of not getting hired. One of the workers noted that contractors do not like their cars to get dirty. One of the most apparent observations on the corner is that men experience a great deal of material deprivation. Like other hiring sites, attempts to remove the day laborers from the streets are voiced in community meetings and by local politicians. Tim Hugo, a local delegate, has proposed an anti-solicitation ordinance for La Parada, basing his request on issues of safety. Yet there is more to it than the mere use of public space. These men do not fit into the clean imaginary of suburbia—they are different and therefore do not belong:

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La Parada is a liminal space, where structural violence and inequality are the symptoms of neoliberal, unregulated markets. It is a space of encounters between the native and the immigrant, the legal and the illegal, the deserving and the unworthy, between dignity and exploitation. The corner is also ground for reflection on the role of the nation-state and the responsibility of business. As Heyek (2008:438) puts it:

Hierarchy of values and the profound meaning of work itself, requires that capital should be at the service of labor and not labor at the service of capital.

Foremost, La Parada is for the workers a space of hope, a space that feeds, and provides opportunities for their families. Despite the adversity they encounter, work means providing for their loved ones and it fills them with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.



## CHAPTER 4

### COMMUNITY AND RELATIONS WITH DIFFERENT AGENTS OF COMMUNITY

The relatively small Guatemalan day labor community has settled in the northern suburbs of the U.S. capital, where a highly diverse group of immigrants have settled and are still settling down (Singer 2009). Although this is not an area unaccustomed to immigrants, by no means a new gateway area, the Ixil-speaking day labor community does stand out and has not blended in. The steady flow of immigrants is changing the composition of the suburban ring of the wider metro Washington, D.C. area. Northern Virginia prides itself on being a multicultural, multiethnic and highly educated region. In the last decade immigrants from India, Korea, Central America and Europe have established their homes in Fairfax County. The Guatemalan day labor community has spatially settled close to La Parada, clustered in a highly heterolocal neighborhood. Heterolocalism “refers to situations in which immigrant groups are dispersed, with residences and workplaces widely separated, but where ethnic community ties are maintained, in part through modern technology” (Anderson 2010:6). The spatial concentration and their strategies of looking for work in public sets them apart from the rest of the community.

Studies of day laborers have focused on their role as members of the informal economy, often overlooking that they are also members of their communities and have a

life beyond the corner. Day laborers are not temporary, uprooted human beings. They belong and are connected to different communities through their various social and economic activities. It is important to locate them as members of communities, and not as a short-lived phenomenon on our streets. Looking at the day laborer as a transient and temporary existence on our landscape, rather than a member of the community, contributes to the commodification and de-humanizing of day laborers. Why are they perceived as different and temporary? What are their ties to the different communities they belong to? How do they see themselves fitting in?

An outside superficial perception is that day laborers or jornaleros do not belong to the space, do not take root. Day laborers are perceived in the same way as their work, as a temporary occurrence. Work determines their whereabouts, rather than community ties. They are loose figures who move around our mapped community, but never seem to fit in the puzzle. The common perception of day laborers as de-spatialized, transient beings, contrasts with the common perception of indigenous people who have a special attachment to their land. For indigenous Maya, settlement and community usually coincide and they traditionally maintain strong bonds with their land (Gabbarot et al. 2010; Moran-Taylor 2008; Montejo 2004). Despite traditional views of indigenous people's lives and identities as intrinsically tied to their land, and therefore highly "spatialized," Mayan people have moved for centuries. Pressures of globalization are forcing indigenous people in the 21st century to move well beyond their borders to make a living. The growing numbers of indigenous farm workers migrating are an "indication that economic dislocation has reached far into the most remote part of the countryside" (Bacon 2008:72)

But are day laborers really transient and disconnected from the rest of the community? Workers at La Parada have been living and working in the same community for over six years now. Establishing a sense of community and integration is commonly a function of time spent in the place (Hombrados-Mendieta, Gomez-Jacinto and Dominguez-Fuentes 2009:672). Returning to Guatemala is not a viable option at the moment and a future in the United States is riddled with uncertainty. High violence levels in their home country and the exorbitant costs of crossing multiple borders have discouraged most day laborers from returning home. The result is longer stays and an emotional and physical entrapment in the present. Is it possible to live and work in a community and not be functionally/ emotionally a part of it? Day laborers are by means of their economic function members of this community: they rent, shop, play soccer, and have friends. Day laborers are not merely workers; they are neighbors, friends, and consumers. Why then is it difficult to see them as members of our community? Why are they seen as the “other”? What do day laborers consider their “imagined community” to be?

A sense of community involves a sense of belonging (Hombrados-Mendieta et al. 2009). Day laborers, like most human beings, are members of a community, and as a result of migration, belong simultaneously and to different degrees to several communities. Despite the tight spatial concentration of these Ixil-speaking Mayan immigrants in this suburban community in Northern Virginia, members of this community engage daily in social interactions with others. De Genova (2002:423) states that “there are no hermetically sealed communities of undocumented migrants.” Understanding the experiences of these particular day laborers goes beyond their job-

seeking life at La Parada, although La Parada constitutes an important connection point to the non-Ixil speaking communities.

When asked where they come from, day laborers at la Parada always use their community in the Ixil-Triangle as a reference point for their identity and their origins. Community identification seems to be much stronger than national attachment: Nebaj first, then Guatemala. How do members from this tight community interrelate with members of the communities they migrate to? With the increased securitization of the border, undocumented day laborers cannot engage in circular migration, resulting in years-long stays in the United States.(Marchand 2011:1377; Nuñez and Heyman 2007: 355). How do social interactions change over time? Discussions over the impossibility or refusal of Latinos to assimilate to the “American way of life,” what Chavez (2007) describes as the “Latino threat,” have created much anxiety and xenophobia in the country. The undocumented status of many day laborers adds to the rejection of these newcomers in established communities. Coupled with a rapid increase of immigrants into the Virginia suburbs, long-established residents in these communities have voiced their discontent, or even sometimes their categorical disapproval of these new members. What is the relation between established residents (immigrants and non-immigrants) with the Ixil-community? The contentious local debates and public hearings about day laborers and the space they occupy, and the highly charged anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, are indicators of the complexity of community relations.

Community is conceptualized in terms of belonging, support, connection, safety, and membership. Maya-Jarieto and Armitage (2007) defines the community as “belonging to a group or a community based upon the perception of similarity among

members and where reciprocal relations facilitate the satisfaction of individual needs.” Socializing, trusting each other, but also shared experiences, and shared history are essential to make emotional connections. (Maya-Jarieto et al. 2007; Hombrados-Mendieta et al. 2009). Which are the communities day laborers have emotional connections to? With whom do they engage in reciprocal relations?

Belonging to different, interconnected communities and despite existing in multiple places at the same time, “migrants may be unable to be fully present anywhere. As a result, much like a picture with a low resolution, migrants may come in out of focus” (Coutin 2005a:200). Day laborers have strong social ties with their home community in the highlands of Guatemala and are physically and socially active in their Ixil expatriate community. In daily life, they also relate to the Spanish-speaking Latino community with whom they share a second language and the migrant experience. On a larger scale they are inserted into a broader Northern Virginia suburban community, an extension of the DC metro area. Invariably they live in the midst of English-speaking, longer-established suburban communities. With this community, they share economic and living spaces. In order of social closeness, this study examines the relations with the four communities. These are not separate, closed communities, and many members belong and interact simultaneously in a spatial and temporal dimension. Communities overlap and interact in different spheres of the day laborers’ daily existence as migrants.

### **The Ixil-Speaking Community at La Parada**

For the small Guatemalan immigrant community that has settled close to La Parada, the immediate social reference is the Ixil-speaking day labor community. It is this

community that connects them with the home community they left behind in Guatemala. From an outsider's view, the day labor community is a very tightly knit community. As a group, their sense of community is based on shared experiences. They share a language, a familiar upbringing, reference points, celebrations, cultural understandings, symbols, tastes, and food—familiarities that make them feel comfortable with their “own” people. They share the decision-making process of leaving their Mayan community—a history of leaving, of crossing and of new beginnings. The common knowledge they share binds them into a community, gives them comfort and makes them feel at ease with each other. It is also a community that is bounded through the way they intersect with the local labor market.

Membership in this community provides emotional security and a means of identification. These shared emotional connections “refer to the fact that members share significant experiences within the community, be they positive or negative, and these experiences are part of the community's shared biography that help unite existing members and socialize new ones “ (Maya-Jariego et al. 2007:744). In this environment they can relax; other members understand where they come from, what they like to eat, how they celebrate special days and how to help them overcome their loneliness and their longing for home. It is a zone of comfort, a healing space. The desire for community is “as important and necessary to survival as the need to find work, or to escape hunger and state violence. Community lies at the heart of the question posed by migration” Bacon (2008:253-254). Migration entails leaving and joining new communities, while trying to keep some of the traditions that emotionally ground their identity.

As a community they share a past and a present and through their non-existence in the eyes of the law, they share an uncertain and unimaginable future. The future is always unsettled and uncertain, but for this community in particular, long-term planning is impractical and not viable (Coutin 1993; Chavez 1992; De Genova 2002). They live day to day, not daring to imagine a life in the new country and reluctant to see themselves back in the Guatemalan highlands. No alternative is celebrated. The desire to return, see familiar places is repressed / stifled by the thought of material deprivation, the inability to help loved ones, and the level of violence. On May 15, 2011, 28 farmers were decapitated in the northern Guatemala region of Peten by one the most violent gangs in Central America, the Mexican Los Zetas gang (El Mundo 2011). Over the last years, the dense rainforests of Peten have been used by international drug traffickers. According to the Spanish newspaper El Mundo, the decapitated farmers worked for the brother of the farm's owner, who prior to this event had been assassinated by the Zetas.

With deportation always looming, a future here is too farfetched, too unreachable to imagine, although glimmers of hope light up in conversations about immigration reform. With the economic downturn in the economy, most workers are aware that immigration reform will not come soon, and all that is left for them is to live in the present and the satisfaction that they are helping family and friends at home. De Genova (2002:427) calls this the "enforced orientation of the present," that results from their condition of nonexistence.

## **Future**

Their entrapment in the present is very different from other immigrant communities that I have experienced. Growing up in a guest worker family in Germany, I knew that the majority of guest workers had one goal in mind: their financially stable return to their home country. They could imagine a return, lived their lives through that hope (and were also disappointed at their return as the world they had built in their imagination had changed). They saw their future and created a life around that goal, whether it materialized or not. For the Ixil day labor community the future is unclear, and elusive. Not here, not there.

Their legal status not only shapes their view of the future, but also how they invest in the vitality of their community. According to Bacon (2008:259), “healthy communities need employed workers, but they also need students, old and young people, caregivers, artists, the disabled, and those who don’t have traditional jobs.” The particularly high prevalence of unaccompanied men and the lack of children, create an unusual composition that has a bearing on the natural development of this community. Communities need to be able to imagine the future. Children are thought to be the main reason for the inter-community contact and the exposure of immigrant families to the mainstream culture. It is through school, sports activities and afternoon programs that immigrant families get in touch with the mainstream lifestyle. Children force parents to speak to teachers, to other parents, to participate in school events, etc. Schools also put parents in touch with soccer leagues, girl or boy scouts, etc. The absence of children tells the story of this community: children are not being born because the existing couples can’t imagine a presence with them in this country, much less a future; and the



unaccompanied men either left a wife and children behind or have a very difficult time finding partners outside their communities. Most Ixil women who live in the community have migrated with their partners. The day labor community derived primarily from a male labor migration. The migration process does not just distance members from their home community; it creates atypical forms of new communities.

Most of the workers I have spoken with have a very unclear notion of what their future will be like. Paula, a wife of a day laborer, was depressed about not seeing her two boys. She would break down in tears while eating dinner with her husband, because she did not know what her children were eating. I remember her crying inconsolably after ESL classes on Mother's Day last year: understandably, she wanted to be with her children. While accompanying the Nebaj priest to the airport, she started crying and said: "quisiera ser una mosca para volar y ver a mis hijos" (I wish I could be a fly to take off and see my children).

Her husband told me that she was so emotionally upset about not seeing her children, that he finally gave up trying to convince her to stay and told her to go back if she wanted. All he wanted is to stay another year to have enough financial security. When I spoke with him recently, he told me again that she was very distraught. It was affecting their marriage and he did not know how to handle it. I said to him that if she is so unhappy maybe she should consider the idea of returning.

Si ya no se quiere ir seño Esther, ya no se quiere ir. Se acostumbró aquí..ella quiere divertirse..ella no era así, ella no era así . . . (but she does not want to go anymore Mrs. Esther, she does not want to go anymore. She got used to being here . . . she wants to enjoy herself . . . she was not like this, she was not like this...)

I could hear his worry and his pain as he spoke. Their plans for a future for their children made him stay a few years ago when she wanted to leave, and now she had become so detached from her life in Guatemala, that she changed her plans for the future. Migration changes people and changes people's imagination about their future.

Many day laborers had plans to stay for a few years and then return. But it seems that for most day laborers that timeframe has passed and they have no clear sense of where their future will be. This is not unusual for migrants. Growing up, I heard countless stories of Spanish and Italian guest workers in Germany recalling their plans of returning after one, two, three, then five years and finally getting to retirement age and having to make the decision of returning "home" or staying in the country where they have worked for 30 or 40 years. For the majority of guest workers who left their families behind, the choice of return was easier. For those like my parents who had children in the country that had received them as "guests," the decision was more complex. By the time most guest workers from Italy and Spain reached retirement age, both Spain and Italy had closed the economic gap, were thriving economies and members of the European Union along with Germany. The situation for migrants from Guatemala is very different: opportunities to make a good living in Guatemala are sparse, the level of violence and insecurity makes a decision difficult to say the least, and the obstacles of return to the United States a second time seem overwhelming. Florencio's goal was to help his parents build a better house and to build a house for himself. At the time of the interview he had been in the Virginia for five years and had reached both goals:

Al llegar a la meta no tengo deseo de regresar (when I reached the goal, I do not have the desire to return).

When asked why he had changed his mind, he said very calmly and with no emotion:

Hay amigos que se regresan y se regresan aquí. Aquí se puede ganar \$80 o \$100 por día, allí trabajando duro bajo el sol se gana 30 quetzales, como \$ 5 dólares (There are friends that return and they come back here. Here you can make \$80 or \$100 a day, there working hard under the sun, you make 30 quetzales, like \$5).

Later, while recalling his difficult youth working with his father in the ranches since he was nine years old and not going home for a month, Florencio said:

Aquí dio un cambio. Lo que no tenía en Guatemala aquí lo tengo. Yo no puedo hablar mal de este país. Hay leyes. Allí hay violencia. En nuestros países hay mucha violencia. No podemos ir tranquilos. Si uno no se cuida . . . (Here things changed. What I did not have in Guatemala, I have here. There are laws here. Over there, there is violence. In our countries there is a lot of violence. We cannot go at ease. If you are not careful . . . ).

Aware of the levels of violence and lawlessness in Guatemala, coupled with his ability to make more money here, his plans to return have stalled. Others like Antonio are hoping for immigration reform. If that does not happen, he plans to return in two years.

At the time of the interview he had been in the country for six years.

Mi idea era quedarme 3 años, pero un amigo me dijo que tal vez hay oportunidad de legalizar (My plan was to stay for 3 years, but a friend told me that maybe there was an opportunity to become legal).

He started paying taxes in 2006 and is hoping for the best. When I asked him how his life would change if he were to become legal, he said:

Estaba pensando que si estaría legal empezaría a hacer mi vida, tener mi esposa, mis hijos (I was thinking that if I were legal, I could start making my life, having a spouse, my children).

His undocumented status puts his future on hold. If being legal means he could “make his life,” being undocumented implies that he does not have a life right now. His life, his future is on hold, his existence severely limited by his undocumented status. Like

Fernando and Chris, a small number of workers have plans to return and set up their business over there. They have learned some skills here or have a higher level of education. Chris, for example, has been looking into opening a business in Guatemala, but when asked about returning, he does not seem convinced:

Es posible, es más difícil aquí, inscribir la empresa, . . . (no tener papeles) es el primer reto que tenemos aquí (It is possible, it is more difficult here to register a business . . . (not having papers) is the first challenge we have here).

Workers' orientation is clearly in the present. Unable to plan for a future here in Virginia or in this nation, they look at their return as a possibility at best. The economic and political situation in Guatemala and their needed-but-not-wanted status here leaves their lives up in the air.

### **Cultural Preservation and Language Use**

Ixil Maya base their identity on their common language. For indigenous communities, migration to the United States threatens the survival of their cultural practices, and languages (Bacon 2008:252). All in all around 70,000 people speak one of the three varieties of the Ixil language (Lewis 2009). This regional language is more than just a way to communicate—it conveys customs, practice, and feeling. In my observations, most day laborers use Ixil and not Spanish as their primary language. For an older day laborer, speaking Spanish does not come effortlessly. Although direct communications with me always were held in Spanish (not without the frequent teasing at my strong “th” sound, which is typically associated with Spanish-speakers from Spain), workers would almost unconsciously slip into the Ixil language and only revert to Spanish to be polite to me. The Ixil language carries a strong symbolism for this

community and is the keystone for their indigenous identity. When Roberto tried to tell me that he is not part of them, he said “you know I did not speak their language growing up.” Although indigenous Maya, Roberto comes from the Kich’e speaking areas and is thus considered an outsider. His wife’s family clearly did not accept him, partly because of his poverty, but also because he was not one of them.

### **Composition of the Community**

Ixil families are few in number and very under-represented in the migrant Ixil community. Most members are young men of working-age. Some have left families at home which they are supporting, and others have not started families yet and are hesitant to do so. Antonio, one of the workers, told me that he would probably have to return home to find a wife and start a family. Separation of families during the migration process and the gendered male migration is typical in this community. This has not always been the case with other immigrant groups to the DC metro area: in the 1960s and 1970s, women pioneered migration as nannies and housekeepers for wealthy diplomatic families (Repak 1995; Cary 1996). De Genova criticizes the fact that profit of male-driven migration “has relied upon exploiting the separation of the (migrant) working man from the women (and children) who remained “in his native land” in order to defray the costs of reproduction of labor power.” (De Genova 2020:435-436). I have not met any Ixil-families who brought children along. Many have left them behind with family members not willing to risk the dangers of the trip or the expenses associated with it. The few children in the community have been born post-migration and are just starting to be of preschool age. This will probably intensify some of the interactions with the main

community. Participation in local communities will impact the integration and contact level between community members, although from a subordinate position due to their economic and legal situation. A married couple left their two children behind in Guatemala and after years of being in the United States finds the idea of having children here an impossibility for their lives. They worry what would happen if they are deported, but also worry about how to feed their child here, the difficulties of renting as undocumented with children, and how to survive with one salary if the mother has to stay with the child.

La vida con hijos es muy difícil aquí. Allí tengo a mi suegra y a mi madre, aquí no tengo a nadie. (Life with children is too difficult here. There I have my mother-in-law and my mother, here I don't have anybody. (Paula)

### **Mobility**

Migrant mobility has been overstressed in migration studies and much attention has been given to studies of transnationalism. Yet not enough emphasis has been placed on the lack of movement and mobility many undocumented people experience once they settle in the country of destination. Nuñez et al. (2007:361) find that “freedom and accessibility of movement is fundamental to people’s well-being in the contemporary world.” The lack of mobility explains partially their spatial concentration within a few blocks of each other. Workers walk to the closest Latino market, to La Parada, to get pizza, and to see friends and neighbors. Some workers have access to bicycles and it is not uncommon to see them cruising in the neighborhood with their bikes. However, riding bikes marks them as individuals without or with revoked drivers’ licenses. (De Genova 2002:438). What type of citizen does not own a car in the suburbs? Living so close to each other makes life easier and guarantees some company in the long winter

months when work is scarce. Women, although in the minority, can easily visit with other women. For special events, like the time a Guatemalan Catholic priest from the Nebaj community in Guatemala came to visit, women get together to plan and cook the food for the celebration. Their undocumented status alone though does not explain their lack of mobility. Other undocumented immigrants have obtained drivers' licenses and have been able to find better paying jobs, despite their legal status. In the last years, the increased clamping down on immigration has curtailed immigrants' options to participate in the regular job market and has increased their subordination. Such measures are holding back migrants from getting better jobs. New requirements to show documented status in the country before obtaining a drivers' license in Virginia have had two consequences for undocumented immigrants. First, an increase in clustering, a high dependency on work on the corner, and the near impossibility of obtaining a steady job in the regular market unless a contractor or business owner finds the worker of extreme value and decides to pick up him on a daily basis. This usually comes at a price: very low earnings and a high dependency on the particular job. The second consequence of the new regulation is that for some undocumented immigrants (recent arrivals and immigrants who have been in the country for twenty years), mobility is critical to keeping their jobs and thus providing for their families. These immigrants have continued driving, knowingly increasing their risk of deportation, but with no alternative to make an honest living. The inadequate transportation system (consequence of increasingly underfunded government services) in Northern Virginia (expensive and incomplete) is a notably ineffective car substitute. "Smaller communities provide more seclusion, but the trapping processes are also exacerbated by the limited source of transportation," conclude Nuñez et al. (2007:356).

A little over a year ago, one of the Herndon day laborers called me to see if I knew of anybody who needed help. He told me that transportation was not a problem (obviously aware that this was a big asset), that he had purchased a white contractor van from an old boss and had all the tools to do home improvement jobs, even long ladders to do outside painting. This was the same worker who was so worried about potential deportation a few years ago that he asked me what he could do with his saved money which he did not want to leave at home. He shared his apartment with his wife and other workers and did not want ICE to find the money in case they came to the apartment. Neither did he have papers to open a bank account. He was wary about sending the money to his home in El Salvador, as he did not trust his brothers either. Religion and God seemed to have a special place in his life. He used to read the Bible while waiting at the HOW Center in Herndon and seemed to be the one who always wanted to do the right thing. Surprised by the fact that he had ventured out to purchase a van, I said something like..”ahh se ha comprado un van” (ooh you bought a van).and he responded saying that there is no other way to make a good living here. The fact that he had to take this less than ideal approach to make a living, also speaks to the consequences of the dismantling of the Herndon Center and to the resourcefulness and agency of workers.

Minor changes in the law have criminalized the undocumented for trying to make a living. The majority of undocumented, despite the general perception, have lower criminality rates than the native population. Incarceration rates for the 18-39 year old native born was five times higher in 2000 than that of the foreign born (3.5% for native born vs. 0.7% for foreign born) (Anderson 2010:195). With the exception of being in the country undocumented (which for some is the biggest crime on earth), undocumented



migrants respect the law—they wear bike helmets, use seat belts, stop for red lights, and yes, pay taxes. Writing about Maya migrants from the town of Todos Santos Cuchumatán to the United States, Burrell states : “Upright and law-abiding Todosanteros find themselves in peculiarly right-less situations, guilty of the crime (under new securitized post-9/11 regimes) of wishing for a better life and crossing borders without documentation to achieve it.” (Burrell 2010:94). Now they live under constant fear of being stopped, of having a fender-bender: a minor change in the law has made them potential criminals. This weighs on their general well-being and is another example of how increased surveillance is dehumanizing the undocumented migrant.

Lack of mobility also weighs on the social life of workers, even resulting in what De Genova (2002:427) describes as social death. According to Nuñez and Heyman (2007:354) “. . . political-legal forces are only among many elements leading to entrapment and immobilization; other factors include transportation constraints, poor health, lack of geographic knowledge, gender roles, restrictions, etc..” Unlike in Latino communities, where young men often go out on weekends to dance halls, most of the day laborers stay home and do not venture out.

The self-imposed reclusion in turn reifies the fear of movement while increasing the immigrants’ spatial isolation and alienation. They remain invisible to the dominant society, while maintaining visibility (and audibility) within their small support circle. (Nuñez 2007:358)

Roberto said a few times that he is alone at home and is bored. Sometimes he and his roommates walk to a little restaurant, but most of the times he is home watching TV. The guys he lives with bought a billiard table and they play at home. When it is nice

weather he just walks to the “campo” (field). He really likes being outside. They also go to the soccer field and play soccer.

The day laborer neighborhood borders communities with high numbers of Latinos, some with undocumented status. An underground taxi service has flourished in these areas, where local private cars from the Latino community charge individuals money to transport them—this service is usually available on weekends, when men and women look for safe and inexpensive rides to socialize. Thus being mobile and having a car is of immense value. It can even become a niche weekend business for some entrepreneurial-minded Latinos. Avoiding expensive taxis, undocumented immigrants find ways to participate in public life. It is not completely clear to me if the Ixil-speaking day laborers do not like to go out or if their economic situation forces them to stay in. What is clear is that the lack of mobility has material consequence for them—from lack of better job opportunities to paying other Latino drivers to get them to the doctor’s office (remember the worker who was glad to find few people in the waiting room, as usually he has to pay the driver by the hour). Lack of community also affects building community.

In one of the weekly ESL meetings, workers were asked about the one thing they would like to do during their time in the United States. Workers gave some expected answers: make money to provide for my family, earn enough to build my house, learn English, and travel more. The travelling answer was a surprise to me. Having heard some of the difficult crossing stories, it never occurred to me that these workers were eager to travel. They wanted to see more of the state, go to Washington, D.C., travel to the Shenandoah Valley, and see Richmond. De Genova (2002:247) makes an interesting

observation when he juxtaposes the restricted mobility in the present with their initial mobility, crossing different borders to get to their destination. There is a feeling of captivity in their lack of mobility. “The personal cost of entrapment is enormous” (Nuñez et al. 2007:361). One of my first interviews with a day laborer, Primero, from Guatemala happened weeks before he had decided to return home. He was not an Ixil-speaker and his home was in Jutiapa. He had helped his daughter to go to university in Guatemala and had just recently helped his son financially to cross the border. Now that his son was living in the United States, he felt he had fulfilled his responsibilities and it was time for him to return to his wife. His daughter had asked him about the capital, the White House and other things she would see on TV in Guatemala. Primero said:

No tienen ni idea de mi vida aquí. Yo nunca he visto la Casa Blanca. Piensan que estoy aquí como un turista, visitando lugares. (They have no idea about my life here. I have never seen the White House. They think I am here like a tourist, visiting places).

This is the first time it occurred to me that although workers live so close to Washington for years and years, they never get a chance to visit the nation’s capital. Following up with some day laborers about their wish to travel and “see more,” people in the community have offered trips to Washington and Richmond, and they have shown strong interest in going, despite the fact that they would lose an opportunity to make some money that day.

Mobility thus does not only affect the workplace, it also has a bearing on their social life. While some day laborers in Herndon owned cars and only came to the HOW Center to make extra money when work was slow or on weekends, day laborers at La Parada do not own cars and are basically full-time at the corner. The question is why day

laborers at La Parada do not take it upon themselves—like others in the undocumented community do—to use a car. Are they more law-abiding, more afraid of the authorities? Do the consequences of deportation weigh more on them? Is it a function of the time spent in the country or can they just not afford a car due to their very limited income? What differentiates them from others?

### **Housing**

The high price day laborers pay for their undocumented status goes beyond the cost of transportation or job opportunities. Day laborers live in close proximity and often share the same apartment or townhouse building with many others. Their inability to obtain credit and consequently a mortgage only leaves them the option of renting. The lack of individual credit reports raises the suspicion of landlords and some prey on the needs of the undocumented for housing. All day laborers that I have visited—families, couples, and single workers—share their apartments with others. This is a conscious strategy that allows friends and family members to share the burden of high rents and allows day laborers to minimize the risk of becoming homeless in the winter months. It also serves a social function of curbing loneliness and isolation. When asked what he did not like about being in this country, Antonio responded slightly hesitating (almost not daring to complain):

En este país la mayoría del tiempo uno está solo, en casa hay más armonía, si uno está enfermo está la mamá. Uno extraña a su familia, la necesidad no permite este sueño. (In this country one is alone for the majority of time, at home there is more harmony, if one is sick mother is there. One misses family, necessity does not allow for this dream).

On the other hand, these housing configurations do not allow for much privacy or independence. Last winter, I accompanied Chris, a painter, to purchase a canvas, his specialty paints and brushes. A few weeks later I asked him if he had started to create something, but he told me that he would not be able to start till the spring. His answer puzzled me, as by and large in the winter months calls for work were few and far between compared to the busy spring months. Winter months were “down months” and a perfect time for a pastime. In winter, however, all of the workers would sit around the apartment and Chris did not have enough space to leave his paintings on an easel to dry. All spaces were shared spaces. In spring workers would be in outside spaces and only return home to sleep. The reality of living in tight quarters encroaches on the social life of workers. The social dimension to being undocumented impacts day laborers’ lives outside La Parada, and is fundamentally important for their emotional well-being.

The cost of living in Fairfax County, in particular housing and rents, has risen exponentially until the recession hit the area at the end of 2009. Rent is the biggest financial pressure for workers—they can go hungry, they can reduce the remittances they send home, but losing a roof over their heads is a major concern. In conversations workers have mentioned how the income of spring, summer, and fall months has to be rationed to pay rent in the winter when there is no work.

Winter can be a very difficult time for day laborers. Job offers only come intermittently and for short periods of time. Last year a worker called me concerned about the wellbeing of another worker. He had not shown up for a few meetings and was not answering his cell phone. At their last encounter the worker had asked to borrow \$50, a very unusual request that alerted his friend to trouble. He had lost weight and

apparently did not look good. The concerned worker called me to see if we could help. He speculated that his friend was probably not answering the phone because it had been disconnected by the company for not keeping up with payments. He was afraid his friend was suffering from hunger and with no job, might lose his housing arrangement and become homeless.

When winter came last year, the concern for some day laborers who had become homeless was raised at community meetings. To my knowledge, less than a handful of workers were sleeping in a close-by forested area near La Parada. A Fairfax County social worker addressed the issue and explained how the hypothermia shelters in the county worked. One of the homeless workers seemed to be hesitant. Going to one of the shelters meant that the workers would be too far from La Parada and lose the ability to make money. One of the workers was also adamant about not sleeping in a shelter because as he expressed it:

Esos negros me roban todo (Those black people steal everything from me).

The undocumented status of workers allows landlords to prey on these migrants. Unfurnished basements go for as much as US\$2,000 to \$3,000—amounts they can only afford by pooling their resources. Roberto, who had recently moved closer to La Parada with his wife, was recalling his experiences with his new apartment. He had signed the lease for the apartment in an older townhouse that belonged to a Hispanic woman.

Sabe seño Esther, nosotros no podemos pagar , tenemos que vivir juntos (You know Mrs. Esther, we cannot pay, we have to live together).

After signing the lease, the other workers who were to move in with him to share the costs backed out and he was stuck with the apartment. After being stuck with the rent

for two weeks, he was able to fill the apartment: two in the small bedroom, three in the master bedroom, two in another room and one in the main room (probably the living room). They were paying \$1800 for the two top levels of the townhouse.

Another costly consequence of living in tight quarters, particularly in winter, is the effect on relations with each other. One of the workers said that it was not easy to live with family:

He visto familias aquí que no sé si será porque no tienen trabajo, pero prefieren tomar y se agarran a golpes siendo hermanos (I have seen family here that I don't know if it is because they do not have a job, but prefer to drink and they take it out on each other being brothers).

Lack of mobility and financial liquidity force most workers to spend hours and days at a time with little privacy and under financial stress—a recipe for strains in their relationships. Although alcohol does not seem to be as significant an issue as in other day labor communities, stress will affect their psychological well-being and perhaps their sense of solidarity with each other. (Negi 2008)

## **Religion**

Evangelical churches have become very influential in the highlands of Guatemala (Stoll 1993). Co-existing with traditional Maya beliefs and the Catholic Church, evangelical groups have gained ground since or before the years of violence. General Montt is described as an evangelical and many Bible-translation groups have settled down in Guatemala. Religion plays an important role in the migrant community and references to God are frequent in conversations. While social isolation, the hostile anti-immigrant environment, and stigmatization affect day laborers' mental wellbeing in a negative way, religiosity seems to protect them from psychological distress (Negi 2008).

For the evangelical day laborer, life on weekends is dedicated to God's service. Some day laborers, like Florencio, join their fellow believers three, even four times a week. These loyal followers have a very strong commitment to their religion. Attending church and joining their religious community becomes a higher priority than making a living. Florencio was very eager to study English and was asking me to find out where and when classes were offered. He could not attend Sunday ESL classes because of his obligation to go to church. He spent four days a week, for hours at a time, with his congregation. Local evangelical churches have very strong outreach programs to immigrants. They provide free shuttle services to the day laborers a few days a week. On Sundays, pick-up time is early in the morning and drop-off only late in the afternoon. Thus, they spent a good part of the time of their weekends within their religious communities which might not just break the workers' isolation and boredom, but also provide an opportunity to expand their social ties and develop their social network (Negi 2008:103). A few non-evangelical churches engage with the day laborer community through their outreach programs. Workers find emotional support, but also very practical support in these religious communities: people to drive them to doctor's appointments, find them shelter if they become homeless, etc. Florencio said that once he arrived in this country, the church went looking for them:

Ellos me han ayudado mucho con consejos, no con lo económico (They have helped me a lot with advice, not with the economic stuff).

Florencio, in his religiosity, attributes his desire to migrate to God:

Dios me dio el deseo de salir, entró algo en mi corazón, no puedo vivir así sufriendo (God gave me the desire to leave, something entered my heart, I cannot continue living like this suffering).



My interview with Florencio was full of references to God and his beliefs. When I asked him who helped him find his first job once he arrived in Virginia, he said:

Conocía a Dios, el me guiaba (I knew God, he was leading me).

Or when asking him about his reasons for leaving the country:

En Guatemala la vida es muy difícil. Es señor nos quiere mucho, el señor obra en nuestra vida, el señor nunca nos abandona. Yo no siento el sufrimiento (In Guatemala life is very difficult. The Lord loves us very much, the Lord works through our life, the Lord never abandons us. I do not feel the suffering).

Daniel joined the evangelicals back in Guatemala. He had been in charge of communion and confirmation “charlas” (meetings, talks) in the Catholic church, but was disappointed by some of his colleagues’ behavior. They would go out and drink and he told them that such behavior was not appropriate. When he uttered his concerns, the priest did not side with Daniel but told him to stay out of their lives. This made him very mad and he started going to the evangelical groups. In Virginia, every Saturday at 7PM a van picks him up to go to church. He wants to study the Bible; he likes studying. His move to the Evangelical church seems to be more motivated by his disappointment with the Catholic Church than a change in his general belief system. I have seen Daniel pray during celebrations with other denominations (Methodist, Unitarian) and he has no problem participating in celebrating God wherever he is. Speaking about Catholics and Evangelicals, he said to me:

Dios nos hace diferentes a todos, algunos buenos, algunos malos (God makes us all different, some good, some bad).

I think he was trying to say that the “religious label” is not important; there are good and bad people in each denomination. He was definitely not as closed-minded as other

Evangelicals I have encountered, who try to convince others that their way of believing is the only way accepted by God.

Day laborers' religious commitments affect their integration into the wider community and the interaction with non-evangelical day laborers. Non-evangelical day laborers dismiss them as "son los evangélicos," meaning you can't count on them when it comes to organizing community events. Tensions within the day labor community are to be expected based on their human condition and on the financial, emotional, and legal stress they undergo on a daily basis. Tensions or feelings of disapproval were noticeable during the preparation of a multicultural celebration. In an effort to reach out to the wider community, a group of younger day laborers wanted to participate in a local celebration showcasing a few traditional dances. This particular group stood out as they purposefully engaged with the wider community. Actively participating in meeting and organizing events, they were eager and interested to contribute their time, energy, and knowledge. This group of single workers was enthusiastically trying to represent some of their local dances in this community event. Sharing their music and their cultural traditions was a way of reaching out to the wider community. During the preparation phase, many doors were knocked on to help with the costumes, the make-up, the food, etc. One of the main problems they encountered was the lack of women participating in their dances. In all the dances women and men portrayed daily life, courtship, food preparation. Workers had asked around the Ixil community and they had given up hope of finding female participants. Although some of the dances included the use of masks, some workers were clearly uncomfortable dancing female roles. Their sense of masculinity was at stake and worries about being recognized under the masks were serious. Dances with masks are

common in the western highlands of Guatemala. Stemming from a Spanish tradition that portrays the battles of the Christian and the Moors during the Spanish Reconquista, in Guatemala these dances reenact the conquest of their land (Taylor-Moran 2003). This tradition is a center piece of their local festivities. Why would women not participate in preserving their culture? Maybe they were too shy to dance for others, or maybe too afraid to perform in public due to their legal status. I asked the workers a few times why they thought none of the women was willing to participate. Their first responses were clearly avoiding the main reason: we don't know, they work, don't have time to practice with us, etc. Sensing that there was more behind it, I asked them about some specific women I had encountered with them. Finally, one of the workers said it probably had more to do with the women's husbands. Why would the husbands not participate if they are from the same communities? This was a family event and probably had nothing to do with the traditional understanding of women belonging to the private sphere. Women, write Taylor et al. (2006:55) are usually limited to a "narrow domestic realm of cleaning, cooking, and caring for children." Then one of the workers said that some of the men are evangelicals and find music and dancing offensive to their beliefs. Although some of the women apparently wanted to participate, their husbands' religious devotion and allegiance did not permit them to participate in cultural events as such. Their non-participation was frustrating for the workers who were trying to share some of their cultural expressions with the wider community. Proud of their heritage, this was an opportunity for day laborers to render a performance of themselves, not as workers, but as members of a community.

According to some non-evangelical workers, the majority of day laborers become involved with the evangelical churches after arriving in the United States. They estimated that almost half of the day labor workers were to a greater or lesser degree involved with these evangelical groups. To a major extent, the more community-active workers blame the evangelical groups for their members' inactivity and low participation in community events. Critical of the evangelical churches, they assert that workers have to pay a percentage of their paycheck without seeing any good in the community as a result of it, almost scamming the workers. One of the workers even mentioned that a pastor would give members of the congregation his car plates, attracting members with this kind of incentives. The biggest challenge workers face in organizing the day laborers at la Parada is their inactivity in community-related matters using the constant excuse of having to attend meetings for the church.

### **Women**

In the end, three of the women danced on the floor with their compatriotas (fellow nationals). It would be interesting to look at gender relations in this community and how gender roles, religion, and integration are negotiated. Two of the women who came to dance have young children who soon will have to start their schooling in the American system. One of the married women was not accompanied by her husband on the night of the dance, but received a phone call towards the end of the event apparently (according to the reaction of Ixil-speakers surrounding her) urging her to return home. Despite the transformative power of transnational migration that undoubtedly will change gender

relations over time, the “continued persistence of patriarchal . . . rule” (Hain 2006:173) is very much alive.

Women and families are by far a minority in this community. Migration from the Ixil-speaking areas in Guatemala has been male-led and contributes to an almost artificial community of worker bees that are here “just to work.” The few women in the community are surprisingly absent from community events, ESL courses, bilingual religious services, immigration forums, etc. Their invisibility is also due to their particular insertion in the local job market. Almost exclusively, these women work in the multitude of maid and housekeeping companies that serve the local middle and upper class in Northern Virginia and even drive to Montgomery County, Maryland, to clean houses. Latino patronas (female bosses) pick them up with a van in the early morning hours and return them home when the job is done. Women in the day laborer community thus only interact with the wider community while cleaning their houses. In my few visits to their homes, Ixil women appear to be shy and withdrawn. During a recent religious service, led by a Catholic priest of their home parish, women prepared the typical horchata (a corn-based drink) and chuchitos (chicken cooked in corn leaves) for the event. I was surprised to see them laughing, chatting with each other in Ixil and remarkably lively. The shyness that in my eye had set them apart had completely vanished. They were obviously enjoying each other’s company. It is difficult to get close to them, partly because their job does not allow for much free time. One of the women that I have had a few exchanges with here and there works six days a week, Tuesday to Sunday. Her only day off on Monday is a time to rest, prepare for the rest of the week, cook and clean, spend time with her young daughter. (Understandably interviews with a

semi-stranger were not at the top of her priority list, and I never dared ask her directly for an interview. I had to engage another member of the community to bridge the trust divide.) Most are accompanied by their husbands and once they return home from work, they stay in the private sphere of the household. Social life in Guatemala remains largely governed by traditional patriarchal norms. Women are usually shunted to the private sphere. In other words, women's activities largely become limited to a narrow domestic realm of cleaning, cooking, and caring for children (Taylor et al. 2006:55). Although migration might empower some women to become more independent (Pessar 2003), it is only vaguely apparent in this community and might be a slow process.

Access to women has been much more difficult than to men. Men have to use a public space to look for work and are sometimes themselves engaged in participating outside of their community. Learning how influential husbands or family members are on women's public participation requires a level of trust that I have not been able to obtain. Questions of power distribution in the household are too intimate to ask about without a grounded trust relationship. Slowly and through questions pertaining to their children's future schooling or the interaction of their children with my children in some events, I have been able to increase the contact points and hope in the future to be in a better position to ask them more personal questions. My role as a mother and a Spanish-speaker allows me to get a little closer to them, but not yet close enough.

Migration changes gender roles and although women seem to become more independent and empowered through the migration process, men also undergo changes. Day laborers often share an apartment and without mothers, daughters or sisters, face taking on traditional female chores and basic household activities like washing, cleaning,

and cooking. Antonio has often said that one thing he misses is having “home-cooked” meals. After long days of work, these men often eat quickly prepared food at home. Transnational migration might empower women and give them the financial tools to become more independent. It seems, however, that by large, women on their return home are not able to sustain the change in gender roles: “yes, we can point to individual Latina and Maya women who resist and fight for change, however, we must temper these isolated cases of resistance with the observation that most females in Guatemala still remain largely dominated by traditional patriarchal norms.” (Taylor et al. 2006:57).

Maya women “adhere strongly to cultural traditions” (Moran-Taylor 2003:166; also Manz, Castañeda, Davenport, Perry-Houts and Mazzacurati 2000). Women are often the bearer of culture and in this community it seems that this function has been shared between men and women. Although it is the men who actively organize events in the community that showcase their cultural expressions, it is the women who cook traditional food and who wear their traje (long typically red skirt) and their huipiles (hand woven blouses) in public. Men wear similar clothes to other young men, jeans, t-shirts and obviously functional clothes for work. Both men and women speak primarily in Ixil, although most are fluent in Spanish. Language is a key element of their identity and despite the potential for discrimination as *indios* (often used in a pejorative way to describe indigenous people, although it also can mean just Indian), the day laborer community communicates exclusively in Ixil with each other. Only when other, non-Ixil speakers like me are around, do the conversations switch into Spanish. Nonetheless Ixil is frequently inserted into these conversations, a defensive mechanism that allows them to have their own space and control the conversation. Ethnic revitalization politics in

Guatemala have recently encouraged the learning and use of indigenous languages.

Writing about people in the city of San Cristobal, in the western highlands, Moran-Taylor (2008:119) states that they

realize the great value of holding and passing on their native language to the next generation, especially given the current ethos and Maya activism in Guatemala. In spite of the recent ethnic cultural organizing and nationwide calls for the teaching of indigenous languages in public schools, many youngsters are losing their ability to speak their native language.

The political dominance of the Spanish language in the nation's government and in higher education, threatens a healthy invigoration of the more than twenty indigenous languages in the country. Moran-Taylor (2008:120) also describes how in U.S. cities with large Guatemalan populations like Los Angeles, "it is not just less desirable to speak an indigenous language, but it drops out very quickly too." In this community of day laborers, languages seem to be almost a protective shield against the outsider and Ixil language use has not diminished over the years.

### **Community Tensions**

Despite the semblance of a tight-knit community, tensions are unavoidable when dealing with human beings. Menjivar (2000) and Mahler (1995a; 1995b) both analyzed the fragmented ties and solidarity within the Latino community, debunking the general and romanticized conception of a brotherly community in solidarity. Struggles and tensions arise on a daily basis, side by side with acts of solidarity and generosity. Tensions might be handled differently because day laborers know who they are and where they come from.



The frustration workers felt with the disengagement of other members of their indigenous community when it came to participation and organizing events in the broader community has also revealed itself in other settings. Some workers are eager to actively engage with the “outside,” attending workers’ meetings, participating in ESL classes, going to bilingual church services, organizing singing groups, soccer teams, and generally looking for opportunities to expand, to develop, to relate to others in and outside the Maya Ixil-community. Tired after long working hours, this small group of workers takes charge of planning events, practicing songs and dances in their basement apartment, etc. The lack of participation and absence of other members of the community is reason for frustration. When attendance is low at ESL classes or workers’ meetings, they express their irritation and disappointment with those absent. Meetings, ESL classes, etc. are seen as venues to improve their standing in the community, to improve their future and have an impact on their presence in this area. Despite the tight community profile, differences in approaches within the community cause anxieties and stress on the community. Despite the pressures, I have observed something different in this community of day laborers. Their lack of aggressive style at the Parada has always confounded me. Based on the sometimes dire financial situation of some day laborers, it would be natural to expect them to be running for a contractor’s job and trying to out compete those vying for the same job. One of the typical images from informal gatherings in front of 7/11 or Home Depots is that of a contractor van or pick-up being swarmed by workers trying to get the job. In Herndon, a regulated day labor site, rules and regulations conditioned workers’ participation. Still, some workers tried to show the contractors that they spoke English, etc., and tried to get their attention and fought for the

job. At La Parada nobody enforces any regulations and workers seem to “behave.” There is incredibly little shoving and a withdrawal when the contractor has chosen somebody. Only workers close to the employer’s car approach it. I have witnessed workers in front of the 7/11 fighting to get closer to the employer, trying to get the employer’s attention yelling and outcompeting the others. It is a rough job market and the strongest, loudest, has an advantage. This seems very different at La Parada. When I asked Roberto why he had not gone to the corner today, he said that he had worked the entire week and wanted to give others an opportunity to go out. Not knowing him too well, I am not sure if that is the whole truth, but the fact that he is thinking about it is interesting. Solidarity is not in the minds of every worker. Antonio said during an interview:

Hay que ser equitativos, si has trabajado todos los días. Conozco a gente que dice que no ha trabajado y vienen a la Parada. (You have to be equitable if you have worked every day. I know people who say they have not worked and come to the Corner).

Being more educated and speaking better English, it might be easier for Antonio to be more generous. A few days before the interview somebody was looking for a painter and he chose somebody to go with him that had not worked the entire week:

Me gustaría que todos serían conscientes, para que el grupo vaya en orden. Cuesta convencer a la gente. (I would like for all to be conscious, so that the group functions. It’s hard to convince people.)

From his statements, I gather that not everybody is on board with giving away job opportunities to those less lucky workers. At the HOW Center in Herndon, solidarity was institutionalized in the form of center rules: those workers who had been unsuccessfully waiting for a job during the entire week had automatic priority on weekends. Thus, conditioned on enough job offers, everybody had a chance to make some money.

Although the system worked on a lottery basis, workers were given an opportunity to go out to work, independently of their lucky or unlucky streak during the week. In an informal day labor site like La Parada, these gestures of solidarity are individual decisions and cannot be enforced. However, despite the poverty and need most of the workers live in, some still forgo making more money for the good of others and for the good of the little corner community. Although difficult, these individual decisions show that despite the deprivation and hardship, some workers are able to find comfort in the common good and overcome greed and selfishness.

In another demonstration of solidarity, workers pooled together funds to support the repatriation of a young day laborer, Pedro Ceto Chavez, who had been killed more than ten miles away from La Parada while crossing a busy multi-lane street at night. None of the workers knew exactly why the deceased was where he was at the time of death. He had only been at the corner for a few weeks and most of the workers did not know him well. An article in the local newspaper announced his premature death. Why was he so far from La Parada? Was he purposefully dropped off by a contractor? This is one of the strategies contractors use to avoid paying the workers: dropping them off along the way or far from their usual pick-up location. In order to eliminate this type of abuse, coordinators at the HOW Center in Herndon would get the contractor's name, phone number and write down their car plates. The limited English skills and the lack of mobility (friends with cars are rare, particularly for newcomers), converts a usually harmless situation into a difficult one. The cost of repatriation from the United States to Guatemala is in the thousands of dollars, in this particular case US\$5,000. Although the Guatemalan Consulate in Washington, D.C. agreed to contribute US\$1,500, this was not

enough. The family in Guatemala was not able to pay the difference and for a few days the repatriation of his body was in limbo. The funeral home in Virginia was starting to get apprehensive about the body. One evening Roberto called to inform me that the workers were meeting and worship for the deceased had been arranged. He was asking for general collaboration

estamos pidiendo colaboración, nosotros lo conocemos (We are asking for collaboration, we know him”).

Aware of the difference in cost that they were trying to raise, Roberto inferred his trust in God when talking about “la colecta” (the drive):

La colecta, lo que Dios ponga (The drive, whatever God supplies).

In solidarity with “one of them,” workers and others in the community met and donated enough money to pay the difference and help the family this worker had left behind in Guatemala.

In their study of Guatemalan indigenous communities in California, Manz et al. (2000:21) also conclude: “In the case of the Guatemalans we interviewed, we found the networks to be stronger and more resilient than other researchers had concluded in the context of Salvadoran immigrants.” It would be premature to conclude that the indigenous migrant community in Northern Virginia is a more solid, less individualistic community than other migrant communities. I have, however, been surprised by the level of solidarity and caring for each other, despite their own suffering. It may be that their political and human suffering and the experiences of racism and marginalization in their homeland of Guatemala have provided them a deeper sense of community as a tool of

survival and protection. This does not mean, however, that the community is a nirvana of peace and happiness.

Nonetheless it is easy to understand why frictions would arise over time. The conditions of overcrowding generate a lack of physical space that in times of personal or economic stress can easily lead to conflict. During the winter, workers spend hours on end in their apartments waiting for a potential call and with not many opportunities to “escape.” When I asked Roberto why he had left his old apartment to live closer to la Parada, he told me how other people had come to live with them and his wife did not get along with one of the ladies. She always brought men and one day his wife told her that the house was not a hotel. One day when she came in drunk, she told him that he was not the boss in his own marriage and he lost control and attacked her. After that he decided to move close to La Parada. While getting the new apartment, he put the deposit down for eight people who then backed down at the last minute, leaving him with the payment for the entire apartment. He indicated that some might have thought he was going to make money out of it, but this was not the case. Some in the community wonder why he has money, almost implying that he is involved in irregular activities. He vehemently said that he had earned his money working hard under the sun for many hours. Now that he has filled the apartment, he had to let a worker go. Upset after breaking up with his girlfriend, xxx broke the mirror door in his bedroom and indented the wall throwing things. Personal ups and downs affect the relationship with others in any group of people. Living so close to each other makes “venting” very difficult.

Roberto has recently been at odds with some of the workers. Being a very outspoken and active worker, it has been obvious that he has retreated from the main

stage in recent months. When I expressed surprise at his absence at a multicultural event with a heavy Ixil-speaking representation, he said that he is staying away and it is better that way. He is having some problems with a few workers and feels unhappy about his general situation. The leasing of the apartment did not go well, the doctor recently gave him bad news, and he was attacked and lost all his identification cards. The other workers made him feel bad because he does not know how to write well in his language and he felt humiliated by them. The others think they are “professionals” and know more, but that does not give them the right to make him feel like this. He trusted those other workers, they have been to his house and now they pretend not to see him on the street. After spending so much time together he does not understand their behavior. They are even related to his wife and she is very upset as well. But this gave him even more “ganas” (desire, motivation) to learn how to write and he is even writing in English now.

¿Se acuerda señor Esther ?— hace unos años yo ni sabía escribir mi nombre en español. Ahora estoy escribiendo en inglés (Do you remember, Mrs. Esther? A few years ago I did not even know how to write my name in Spanish. Now I am writing in English).

Obviously very proud of his accomplishments, the fall-out with the other workers motivated him to prove himself, but it has clearly had an impact on his and his wife’s relationships with them. His strategy to avoid them has also distanced himself and his wife from ESL classes, cultural celebrations and other meetings, thus isolating him from the wider community.

His relationship with his wife had also suffered in the last years. His wife was exposed to a different lifestyle here and he blames a Latina friend of his wife for his wife’s character change.

En casa ella era una chica humilde, buena, ahora ella me contesta, me habla mal y hace lo que quiere (At home she was a humble, good girl, now she talks back, she curses and does what she wants).

His relationship with her has deteriorated to such an extent that he is convinced that things are not workable at home anymore. He wiped his tears a few times and it was difficult for me to watch the pain this was causing him. After all he had been through as a young child when he lost his parents and was adopted by another family, after the abuse he has encountered at work here and there, after making his way up north from Guatemala, he said:

Esto es lo peor que me ha pasado en mi vida. Gracias por el paseíto por sacarme de casa. Ella se va y no me dice adónde va, que hace. Yo no sé que hacer en casa. Antes compartíamos los dolores. En malos días veníamos y nos tomábamos una ducha, yo hago los frijoles y ella las salchichas, comemos juntos. (This is the worst thing that has happened in my life. Thank you for the little walk for taking me out of the house. She leaves and does not tell me where she goes, what she does. I don't know what to do at home. Before, we used to share our pain. In bad days we arrived, took a shower, I was making the beans, she made the hot dogs, we eat together.)

The lack of company and trust, the changes in his wife's behavior have deeply hurt Roberto. Combined with the problems with some other community members, he is at a low point in his life and very pessimistic. His message to me was that after all the sacrifices he has made, living at odds with the people he trusts is a major blow to his well-being. (I could relate much more about their relationship and although I have a signed form from him, I do not want to write about the situation as it would affect her as well . . . in this small community, she would know) Suffice it to say that the basic tenets of trust have been violated to such an extent that he spent a night in jail . . .

In their confinement, members of the day labor community give each other strength and a sense of worth. It is against the backdrop of their social and economic

exclusion from the wider community that a support system develops and functions as a protective shield. Gomber-Muñoz (2011) describes her observations with a few undocumented men, “the Lions,” working in a restaurant as follows:

Lions’ social and political circumscription from wider society also increases reliance on one another for both material and emotional resources. . . . in response, lions have created a social community with norms of mutuality and helpfulness; within these communities, they buffer themselves from disdain and promote values that uphold their sense of self-worth. In particular, work and relationships provide social space in which the lions emphasize some normative beliefs . . . such as hard work is a virtue and real men take care of their families. This selective process allows the lions to attain a sense of dignity in spite of being some of the most marginalized and vilified members of US society” (Gomber-Muñoz 2011:122).

### **The Transnational Community: Relations with Those Left Behind**

Despite the exorbitant costs associated with the repatriation of a worker’s body, there was no discussion of whether the body should be repatriated or buried in the U.S. Could the money not have helped the family sustain themselves over a period of time and make up for the loss of income due to their son’s death? According to conversations with the workers, the mother of the deceased in Guatemala, distraught about her son’s death, was disturbed and eager to see her son’s body in her hometown. Moran-Taylor (2008:18) stresses the importance of organizing burials and funerals in Guatemala in reinforcing the transnational ties: “in addition to fortifying transnational ties, the practice of organizing burials and funerals back home for deceased migrants demonstrates how Guatemalan migrants continue to maintain their orientation towards the homeland.”

The transnational community, and by that I mean the people left behind in Nebaj and the surrounding municipios in the western highlands of Guatemala, is as present in



the workers' minds as their bodies are present in Northern Virginia. The strong relationship with this community over the years is based on solid family relations, and unwavering support to those left behind, but also on their lack of clear future in this country. Parents, sisters, sons, and daughters that have been left behind embody the worker's motivation and *raison d'être*. One worker after another validated and vindicated their decision to leave, their hard work, their suffering and sacrifices, through the fact that they were providing for their family's material needs.

Lewis like many others came to help his family. A recurrent theme in their motivation to come here is their own deprivation and their desire for their children to have what they did not have, sometimes to the extent of wanting to provide them with gadgets and toys children in the United States desire. Lewis mentioned how he purchased Nintendos for his two boys, a rather expensive toy in any country. It serves his desire to make up for his absence and provide proof to himself and his family that their separation is worthwhile. It also increases the difference between children with migrant parents and those with non-migrant ones. Globalization and television are certainly exposing people in Guatemala to a consumer world, but it is the migrants themselves who are exposed to a high-consumption society and to these items in the United States, and they desire them for their own children.

Vinimos para darle lo mejor a los niños, uno no tuvo esa dicha (We came to give our children the best, I myself did not have that good fortune).

Antonio said he is here to help his parents and sisters. He sends money home to help when he can, but when things are tough he does not send anything. His sister this week turned fifteen and only had a small family party (the quinceañeras celebrations in

Central America are big events; it is the coming of age celebration for 15 year olds).

Antonio asked her what she wanted and she requested a motor scooter. He is thinking about it; because he does not have his own family (his own children), he wants his sisters to have what he never had.

Chris started helping one of his younger brothers while still in Guatemala. He brought him to the capital, against the desires of his father:

“Si se queda allí se pierde.” (If he stays there he gets lost).

His father, who wanted the brother to stay and help with the family land and cattle, turned over the responsibility for his son to Chris:

Yo me compretí . . . mi padre me dijo: si tú lo llevas es cosa tuya (I took responsibility . . . My father said to me: if you take him with you he is yours).

I asked him why it was so important for him to help his brother and go against his father's wishes. In a resigned tone, he explained:

Porque era lo mismo de siempre (Because it was the same story repeating itself).

Chris was not happy with the status quo; he was hoping for more and looking for change. He had experienced his own failure to pass the entrance exams for a technical undergraduate degree due to his poor high school preparation. Helping his brother was a way to break that cycle. In later conversations with him, he spoke about the confrontation with his father. His father looks at the status quo and accepts it. He does not see that things have changed. This is his main point of contention with his father who does not understand that in order to go to university you need a good high school education that his brother was not going to get in Nebaj. Having some older siblings I wondered why he took it upon himself to help this younger sibling.

El primero termina y mi hermano mayor tiene aspiraciones, no puede trabajar y no puede ayudar al siguiente (The first one finishes and my oldest brother has aspiration, is not able to work and cannot help the next in line).

Only later did I find out the oldest brother studied theology and was thus unable to make money and help the other siblings. His decision to migrate to the United States only came after he lost his job and was unable to fulfill his promise to his younger brother:

Aquí ya empieza la idea a venir. Yo me quedé 6 meses después del despido y no encontraba espacio y me vine (This is when the idea starts coming. I stayed for 6 months after the lay-off and I could not find space and I came).

It is interesting that Chris said he “did not find space,” as if the country did not have space for his physical presence and was forcing him out.

This sense of purpose overrides many hours of loneliness, thirst, sacrifice, and even humiliation. One was helping his daughter go to college; another was sending remittances to his mother so she could buy her medicine; yet another was building his parents their first real home. Studies have shown that sending remittances to family members has a similar effect on day laborers as their religiosity: it serves as a protective factor against psychological distress (Negi 2008)

Latino day laborers often worry that they are not fulfilling their duty as fathers, husbands, or sons. Consequently, sending remittances positively impacts Latino Day Laborers’ well-being, because their monetary contributions make them active contributors to the sustenance and well-being of their family and allow them to fulfill their gender role as breadwinners and providers (Negi 2008:103).

Studies addressing the effects of material and social remittances abound in the literature. From the effect of remittances to development and poverty reduction (Adam 2004), to the effect on consumption and environmental changes (Davis et al. 2010), to social transformations and inequality creation in sending communities (Marchand 2011), to gender relations (Hain 2006; Hirsch 2003; Stephen 2007), to the effects of social

capital (Grim-Feinberg 2007), to the differential effects on Ladino and Maya sending communities (Moran-Taylor 2008).

While it seems that remittances have positive and negative outcomes in the sending communities, these revenues are increasingly a vital component for the nation's finances. Remittances represent 11% of Guatemala's GDP, stemming mainly from immigrants in the United States. The downturn of the economy influenced the level of remittances, and after a drop in 2009, they rose 5.5% in 2010, reaching \$4.13 billion. (Reuters 2011). Remittance senders to Guatemala come predominantly from the United States, with 40% in Los Angeles, California. They are young males, with more than half at primary or below primary education, working mostly in unskilled jobs such as construction in the U.S. Remittances flow regularly to support primarily household expenses and are intended for family members: 55% to children and parents, 14% to brothers and sisters and 13% to spouses (World Bank 2006:7).

### **Remittances and Consequences for Local Communities**

Economic remittances tend to be used by family members for consumption or to cover household expenses (Moran-Taylor 2008:120; World Bank 2006), rather than local development. They are also used to pay the coyote, a significant expense in the first year of arrival. This economic growth without development is detrimental to long-term development of the community and the nation. Although in the short-term, Guatemala's economy might be tackling immediate poverty issues with these funds, it is not creating a sustainable economic future for the nation.

Actualmente los dólares que llegan a la comunidad tienen una dinámica de rebote vertical, a través del consumo y la inversión no productiva fuera de la comunidad

(Dardon 2005:64) (Currently dollars that arrive in the community have a vertical rebound dynamic, through the consumption and non-productive investment outside the community).

As a nation, Guatemala cannot morally be content with an economy that is based on sending its own citizens to participate in the lowest echelons of other nations' economies, such as Mexico and the U.S. The volume of income lacking a productive base is stimulating imports of consumer goods to the detriment of national products (Dardon 2005:63). Left-behind families are becoming remittance-dependent and the state of Guatemala is relieved from responsibility of caring for their poor. Families have taken these resources for granted and have grown largely dependent on them; in general they have not developed further skills, not created small businesses to generate additional income (World Bank 2006:36). The majority of remittance-receiving individuals are poor, rural farmers, who use these funds to pay back debts, food, education and better housing. Remittances go primarily to cover food expenses, attesting to the existing poverty in remittance-receiving areas. Dardon (2005:63) contends that remittances function as a "seguro social informal" (a social informal insurance) for the government. He critiques the limited governmental and business attitudes towards the increase of foreign currency (divisas), without looking at the causes or the social costs these remittances entail for families and communities. (Dardon 2005:64)

Those who do not participate in this migrant economy are ever more excluded. Marchand (2011:1384) discusses how the "emergence of so-called migrant elite in small rural towns result in many tensions at the community level." The creation of new inequalities is, according to Durand (2009), the fundamental cause of social differentiation and only one symptom of the social transformation the sending

communities are experiencing. In line with Marchand, Dardon (2005) looks at the accelerated process of internal differentiation, but is also worried about the damage this is doing to communities:

Esta diferenciación ha llevado a las comunidades a experimentar tensiones internas, tendientes a romper largas tradiciones como la organización comunitaria (Dardon 2005: 64). (This differentiation has made communities experience internal tension, which tends to break long traditions such as community organization.).

Those families who send their sons, brothers, and fathers up north pay a high price for the absence of their loved ones. Marchand (2011:1383) describes some of the symptoms in the community after their loved ones depart north: depression and anxiety in people left behind, and children acting up in school. These are the signs of the emotional anguish they endure. Those who do not send their loved ones pay a high price due to their exclusion from the market and the increasing consumption disparities between them and their migrant-sending neighbors. Another problem for those families who have sent out migrants is the increasing dependency on those remittances for the local household. Transnational migration is changing the local economy. Montejo (2004:235) describes how subsistence milpa agriculture is becoming a supplementary practice, while family members rely on remittances as the major source of income. Remittances have also the perverse consequence of increasing inequalities. They create more expectations and thus push even more people into the migration circle. Young people drop out of school to follow the path north (World Bank 2006). Male-led migration and the absence of men in the community affect gender relations in the sending communities, changing the role of women (Hirsch 2003; Stephen 2007).

The ambivalent and differential impact on sending communities (from individual prosperity to dependence), is discussed in Durand (2009): remittances are generating intense urbanization processes and the development of local infrastructure, while in other areas migration has been the principal cause of depopulation, a gradual abandonment of investments. New concrete multistoried houses are popping up in sending communities, a far cry from the adobe houses they lived in. The housing construction boom with remittance monies brings up the question of potential environmental outcomes. Florencio, one of the workers, said he decided to come, because

Cuando estaba allí, yo veo el cambio, construyen casas los que se van (When I was there, I saw the change, those who left were building houses).

Davis et al. (2006:232) conclude that “most Guatemalans strive to achieve US living standards by increasing consumption immediately although less inclined to reduce fertility.” The effect of remittances on the environment and the effects on a sustainable economy in Guatemala that could thrive without sending their workforce up north warrants future research. On a community level, remittances are bringing about many changes, contributing to some development, but also encouraging individualism (Durand 2009). One of the more obvious consequences is the absence of young men in the community and the cyclical international migration (Dardon 2005). Despite many studies stating that remittances are not resulting in local or nation-wide development (Taylor et al. 2006), they allow many individuals to fulfill their personal aspirations of owning their own cement home and helping their children receive some education.

The negative effects of remittances do not stop at the level of intra-community inequalities that are being created. Taylor et al. (2006:45) describe some of the effects the

transnationalization of communities have on the local ecology: loss of knowledge about the land, use of non-traditional crops and fertilizers, and the accumulation of land in a few hands. The growing ecological impoverishment is indeed a worry for the long term development of those migrant-sending areas. Remittance money is converting the rainforest into cattle pasture. The new purchasing power of indigenous migrant families is transforming traditional ownership patterns, creating tensions between Ladinos and indigenous members of the community. While social structures, and particularly the migration-induced gender relations changes, are slow-moving, Taylor et al. (2006:58) report a rapid change in land use and land ownership.

### **Transnational Community and Day Laborers in Virginia**

Workers frame their existence in Northern Virginia in more than just their physical space. They are grounded in their transnational identities, with a very strong focus on their local identities. “Hometown is both a real and symbolic site that draws people back repeatedly in many senses” (Stephen 2007:9). Strong ties with their home community are materialized through many of their daily tasks.

Communication with friends and families back in Nebaj is an important component of their lives in Virginia. The purchase of a cell phone is a “must” investment as day laborers. I have not seen a single day laborer without a phone. Work often depends on last minute calls from colleagues or former employers who need a job vacancy filled. Cell phones have become an intrinsic part of the day laborers’ social and economic participation. Cell phones are also crucial for communication with their loved ones at home. Talk of purchasing phone cards or needing phone cards comes up many times in



conversations with the workers. The purchase of phone cards seems as important as the purchase of food. A convenience store close to La Parada, as well as a local dollar store, has a variety of phone cards. Workers are very familiar with the technical details of some of the cards: charges too high for a connection fee, does not work well, only lasts for seven minutes, etc. I have also observed that workers sell phone cards to others. The lack of mobility, lack of time after a long working day and the financial inability to buy many cards at the same time might make this a profitable business for some individuals.

Standing outside an apartment housing day laborers, I observed men stopping by to obtain phone cards from one of the day laborers. Their emotional orientation is unequivocally directed to their native country. Communication lines with home and work are crucial and workers have become communication savvy. They know how to text and a few workers, probably those with above-average education, have purchased computers and are using SKYPE to keep connections alive. Interactions with their family members seem to be thriving.

Modern communication technology has brought new methods of participation, both opening new social spaces of interaction, and enabling easier maintenance of existing social spaces. . . . An individual physical presence is no longer a prerequisite to participate in and develop a sense of community for a particular social space (Maya-Jariego et al. 2007:746).

Workers are very aware of village news and although only a few have access to the electronic version of the press, there is enough time on the corner to transmit information to others. Workers that attend the ESL courses in one of the public libraries were interested in learning basic computer skills to access the Guatemalan press online. On the morning after the Guatemalan first lady publicly spoke about her intention to divorce the president in order to get her own name on the ballot for president, workers knew all the

details. The Guatemalan constitution does not allow the president's wife to run for election (Ordaz 2011). A few workers that have online access at home are well aware of international news. On the day Spain won the Soccer World Cup in South Africa, two of the workers called me to congratulate me (not sure I had anything to do with the Spanish team winning the cup, but I assume they thought my nationality made me co-deserving of this title). Mike and other workers seem better informed about the Spanish soccer league and individual players than I am—always teasing me when my favorite team loses. Workers are well informed about Guatemala, but also show keen interest in international and U.S. national news. For the majority who cannot afford a computer but have the skills to use one, the public library offered some relief. Unfortunately, the computer use in the public library is now limited to 30 minutes and, at least on weekends, is in constant demand. The severe reduction of opening hours in the county's public libraries due to the economic recession has impacted the workers' opportunities to learn and get information. Nonetheless, the day labor community finds ways to access and share news and information. Many of the day laborers who usually do not attend public meetings joined the visiting Guatemalan priest during his mass. Word about his visit and the mass celebrated in a local firehouse had spread in the community.

Migrants are also connected to their home communities through the sponsorship system that gives new potential migrants the opportunity to consider the trip north. "This system of sponsorship adds an economic dimension to familial and friendship ties, as undocumented workers incur and repay financial and social debts to each other" (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011:53). After their arrival, many workers are indebted to family members and close friends and spend most of their first year working trying to pay back

the costs for a coyote. Florencio, who migrated when he was only 18, said it took him nine months to repay the trip debt, “la deuda.” His brother came six months after he had left his town, but he could not help him as he was still repaying his own debt. He paid US\$ 6,000 five years ago, and first went to Ohio. A typical trip north with the help of typically more than one coyote can cost from US\$ 7,000 to US\$ 10,000—an outrageous amount considering the cost of a regular commercial flight to the United States (under US\$1,000) and considering the income opportunities of day laborer workers in the United States or in Guatemala. The tightening of the U.S.-Mexican border has increased the vulnerability of the workers travelling through, and has set the conditions for an increasingly more sophisticated and violent underground criminal structure that preys on the needs of workers to support their loved ones.

The sponsorship system works in both directions and sustains a continuous flow of people who see migration as a daunting but potentially only available way out of poverty. The fact that the day labor community at La Parada is made up of many extended family members explains their closeness, and is a direct result of the exchange of social, economic, and emotional support both sides of the community make available to each other. No matter the location, family ties, language, and familiarity with a shared cultural reference frame substantiate their bonding. Once debts are repaid, migrants that settle in the United States become valuable assets for their home community. Workers become information brokers for those left behind: they share travelling experiences and knowledge about the local job and housing market. Moreover, they become cultural brokers, taking some of the mental pressures off the migration decision. The foreign, unknown land gets a little closer and familiar through the stories they hear and images

they see. Knowing where to go and having somebody at the end of the trip clearly eases the process and facilitates the decision to move.

Felipe came to Virginia in 2004 when he was 29 years old. As a bodyguard, he drove the car for the Meli Novela family and had a good job. He worked for them for eight years and did not pay rent, as his boss provided a room. Compared to some of the young Maya women that help in houses or work in factories, he considered himself lucky. He was able to see his family every weekend—it took 5 hours on the bus to cover the 230 km. Despite considering himself lucky, when his brother-in-law asked him if he wanted to come over here, Felipe said:

Yo le dije: no sé como está el trabajo. Uno allá y si no tiene como venirse . . . Si alguien le ayuda, si. Mi cuñado me ayudó. . .”(I said to him: I don’t know how work is over there. One is over there and if you don’t have a way to come . . . if somebody helps you, then yes. My brother-in-law helped me . . . ).

He returned to Guatemala after a few years and then came back again to Virginia, this time with his wife. When I asked why he returned, he commented:

Esa era la idea (de quedarse en Guatemala). Yo me retiro de aquí, me pongo mi negocio. Tenía dinero ahorrado, pero antes de llegar allí una conocida, también es vecina, me pidió prestado un dinerito . . . Yo pensaba, me devuelven el dinero justo cuando regrese, la fecha se llega..y hasta ahora no me reconoce los US \$ 6,000...mejor me voy a trabajar a la ciudad. La señora necesitaba el dinero para dar a traer a sus 2 hijos a Estados Unidos. Ahora la señora dice que sus hijos no tienen trabajo. Me costó trabajo reunir el dinero. Yo pensaba que era una persona de confianza. Mi esposa se confió...ella tiene una supertienda pero le dijo que no tenía la plata para venir sus 2 hijos. No le hemos podido sacar ni 1000 pesos, le hemos amenazado y nada . . . Yo nunca creí que me iba a fallar. Hablé con mi esposa y le dije que iba a regresar y ella hablo con su hermana y su hermano le dijo que podía ayudarle.” (That was the idea (staying in Guatemala)). I retire/ get away from here, start my business. I had money saved, but before getting there an acquaintance; she is also a neighbor, asked me for some borrowed money . . . I thought, I will get the money back just when I return, the date arrives . . . and till now she does not recognize the US\$6,000 . . . I better go work in the city. The lady needed the money to arrange for her two sons to be taken to the United States. Now the lady says her sons do not have work. It was hard to get the money

together. I thought she was a person I could trust. My spouse trusted her . . . she has a superstore but said that she did not have money for her two sons to come. We have not been able to even get 1,000 pesos out of her, we have threatened her and nothing . . . I never thought that she was going to deceive me. I spoke to my wife and told her that I was going back (to U.S.) and she spoke to her sister and brother and they told her (the wife) that they could help her).

Felipe's story shows how important friend and family members are as sponsors of trips.

Family members often put their land or the house as a security for their family members.

The sponsorship system is not without flaws and risks for those left behind or for those sponsoring the trip. In Felipe's case, the owner of the supermarket that borrowed the money has acquired a bad reputation and is on very unfriendly terms with Felipe's family. Living in small communities, the strain in relationships has affected their daily existence. It is not clear if this lady's sons, whose trip she needed money for, successfully made their way up to the U.S., and if they are unwilling or unable to repay their debt. In either case, it is creating stress for the mother in Guatemala and if they are unable to repay it must be a constant burden for them. For Felipe's family, however, this was a life changer. Felipe's dream of setting up his own business back home and making a living close to his family was shattered. Disappointed and angry about the deceit, he was forced to return to the United States and ask for help himself. This time, he is travelling with his wife, leaving his children with his mother-in-law. His wife is cleaning houses and has almost repaid her sister. The inability to get his money back is also a major cause for frustration:

Yo nunca creí que me iba a fallar, yo le dije—si usted no me paga la demandando..pero nada, allí no hay ley...” (I never thought she was going to fail me, I said to her—if you do not pay I will sue you, but nothing, there is no law over there).

Thus, the need for sponsors due to the high costs of the trip creates a system of dependency, risk, and trust. At times this trust can be betrayed, debunking the idea of community solidarity and putting relationships at risk. Incidents like this also make bystanders and others in the community more wary of lending money and make trusting each other more difficult. However, many day laborers relied on the help of family members to get here and generally complain about the coyotes' abusive overcharging or kidnapping to get more funds from family members.

After repaying their own debts, migrants also become financial brokers to the new migrant generation. No longer do family members have to sell their earthly possessions to sponsor a son or a husband. Unlike migrants who nowadays travel uni-directionally, capital travels in circular form with no borders to cross. Thus money coming from the north is indirectly stimulating and making new migration possible—effectively undermining U.S. efforts to keep the undocumented out (although I question the effort to keep them out—their cheap labor is too valuable for the U.S. economy). On the other hand, monies travelling north-south also might facilitate and encourage people to stay. Antonio is sponsoring his younger brother's education in Guatemala. It remains to be seen if education is enough to keep his younger brother from desiring and imagining a life outside his national borders.

Like Oaxacan indigenous migrants in Stephen's study, Ixil-speaking Maya day laborers have the "ability to construct space, time and social relations in more than one place simultaneously is a part of the daily framing of life in this extended family" (Stephen 2007:5). Transnational ties are the source of energy that sustain workers and

their community in this country. This energy translates into endurance, patience, and a sense of direction. It keeps them going.

### **The Spanish-Speaking / Latino Community in Northern Virginia**

The Ixil-speaking day laborers in Northern Virginia have all arrived within the last decade and have settled in a region and a nation with a visible presence of Latinos. From Mexican, Salvadoran, Peruvian, Bolivian restaurants, to smaller stop-and-go stores, to financial service organizations ranging from bigger banks like Banco Popular to small corner places offering Vigo money-sending services, to transportation services to countries in Central America, to Spanish-speaking notary services and/ or immigration /tax services, the range of Spanish-speaking businesses attests to the presence of a diverse and significant Spanish-speaking community. According to the U.S. Census, the Hispanic population has increased 43% in the last decade, more than 50 million Hispanics living in the country or 16.3% of the total population. Although Hispanics make up only 13% of the population in Virginia, their numbers have increased by 91.7% in one decade (U.S. Census 2011).

Links between the Ixil community and the wider Latino community are established through the job market, housing arrangements, and the wider services Ixil-speakers access. Day laborers rent from other Hispanics, work for them, shop in Latino markets and go to church with other Spanish-speakers. Their foremost contact outside their own group of co-nationals is the Hispanic community. The diversity in class, race, origin, educational attainment, time of migration, and religious orientation of the Hispanic population in the United States makes this a highly heterogeneous group (Portes

and Rumbaut 2001). The complexity of this group makes locality an important factor when studying how indigenous communities interact with the Mexican and Salvadoran Latino majority in the area. What most Hispanics in Virginia share with the recent arrivals from Guatemala is a migration experience, often a similar religious orientation (Christian), and an ability to communicate in the same language. A common language eases communication with other Hispanics and is a major roadblock for interaction with the majority English-speaking population. However, it is also language that separates these indigenous day laborers from their Latino neighbors. Their self-ascribed identity as indigenous Maya, speaking Ixil, affects their insertion into this community. For the wider community in this area, these day laborers are identified as Hispanic, often “Mexican,” and more than one person has been surprised to hear that their main language has little similarity with the Spanish language.

Migrating to the U.S. also means undergoing a re-evaluation of the person’s position in the racial/social/economic hierarchies of the new country. Migrants undergo a process of re-classification and racialization. For indigenous workers from Guatemala the economic, racial, social and political experiences they bring with them do not change drastically from their subordinate position in Guatemala, but become more complex and textured in the racial and ethnic landscape of the United States. Racialized into the Hispanic community, they encounter a vicious anti-Latino sentiment. Mexicans constitute the largest Hispanic group in the country and according to Newton (2008:26) “currently the word ‘Mexican’ in the United States is pejorative, it automatically conjures a vision of something un-American, even menacing.”



Recent arrivals, as well as Hispanics that have been in the country for generations, have encountered a wave of nativist and xenophobic attitudes in the United States, intensified after the 9/11 attacks and the depiction of immigrants as a national security threat. Harvard scholar Thomas Huntington (2004a; 2004 b) viewed Hispanics as an internal threat to the country, based on what he thought was an inability and unwillingness to assimilate the ethical, moral, and cultural values of the main society. Meanwhile, groups like the Minutemen, or SOS Save Virginia, and right wing commentators like Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck, see Hispanics as outside invaders. Calls for new border construction and increased surveillance and militarization on the border try to rein in the criminal invader/ trespasser. Within the Hispanic community, and as a continuation of racial politics and colonial legacy in their countries of origin, indigenous migrants end up socially, racially and economically at the bottom. However, a more encouraging development, their redefinition in the racial/ethnic U.S. context and the increasing strength of pan-Mayan indigenous groups, might allow indigenous Maya to carve out their own space. "Guatemala's history of economic and social marginalization of the indigenous population has contributed to the lack of connection of indigenous Guatemalans to the nation and the subsequent focus on the local" (Manz et al. 2000:3). Clearly not interested in being identified as another Spanish-speaking Hispanic, their fearless and strong use of their own indigenous language and their self-identification with their home region, rather than with the country of Guatemala, might give them the tools to create a new identity as indigenous Maya, rather than Guatemalan immigrants. Nash (2004) describes the importance of indigenous

language and culture to promote self-awareness as a basis for self-governance, and a tool to overcome racist biases in the dominant culture (Nash 2004:193).

In a highly polarized and extremely anti-Latino political environment, the workers are blended into the “Hispanic immigrant category,” which is often negatively associated with a lack of desire to assimilate, criminal behavior, illegality, and a cultural invasion in our midst. State policies after the attacks on 9/11 have equated the foreigner, the immigrant, with the “terrorist mind.” This is the sad reality that awaits Hispanic immigrants arriving in this country post 9/11. With the exception of a few skilled and educated immigrants, they enter the country in the lowest racial, social, and economic echelons. Even within the Hispanic community, indigenous workers are racialized into the lowest level. Stephen (2007) describes how Mixtecas and Zapotecas indigenous migrants are placed at the bottom of Mexican racial and ethnic hierarchies, and how this system is reproduced in heavily Mexican population sites in the U.S. Not significantly different from their Mexican counterparts, Guatemalan indigenous migrants “who are continuously read as dark and illegal become subject to treatment that is justified by their appearance.” (Stephen 2007:152). Their mostly undocumented status puts them at a disadvantage compared to all other community members, but also makes them vulnerable with respect to the Hispanic community where, according to Fix and Zimmerman (1999), 85% of immigrant families are mixed families, meaning a mix of documented and undocumented members. Mixed families, although clearly at a disadvantage, can access certain services through their documented members that are almost impossible for the day laborers. Access to a car and transportation is of foremost importance for the worker in the suburbs and even though the documented driver might have to “play taxi driver” for

other family members, it guarantees a level of mobility. Fox et al. (2004) also assert that indigenous migrants face discrimination with non-indigenous migrants or native-born minorities as they compete in areas of jobs and services.

Identified as another group of Hispanics, these day laborers are inserted into the racial landscape of the nation. Rendering Hispanics as different, anti-immigrant forces have succeeded in racializing them, rendering them different from the dominant society. As undocumented they are “integrated into a racialized hierarchy of status and prestige” (Chavez 2007:193). Language in this case becomes the main marker of difference, although in the case of day laborers, the space where they look for work is also a racialized space. Galindo and Vigil (2006: 423) point out that the fear of linguistic diversity fuels racial nativism as it is thought to undermine national unity. The English language has become a marker / a key symbol for national identity and thus languages other than English are considered “un-American.” English-Only movements have emerged in recent years as the nativist, anti-immigrant wave has swamped the U.S. territory, and in particular those new immigrant gateways unaccustomed to seeing foreigners in their midst. When ethnic and legal differences come to be seen as absolute and natural, physical appearance, cultural practices and values are defined as inner essence or substance (Stephen 2007: 152). Leo Chavez (1994) studied imagery used in the media to portray Hispanics and concluded that the images were racially coded and equated Hispanic with a darker color and speaking Spanish with illegality.

## **Exploitation / Abuse**

While women that migrate often end up working in the domestic sphere, cleaning or taking care of children, men end up in farm work or as day laborers. The physical, emotional, social, and economic vulnerability of day laborers on the corner speaks to their position in a neoliberal capitalist society. These vulnerabilities often translate into hidden exploitation. Although their bodies on the corner are highly visible, the greater part of their work is invisible: another painter, construction worker, landscaper that shows up for a day and then disappears. No paper trail, no registrations, no recommendation letters, no letters of recognition for a job well done—nothing to prove that they were there. Today one supervisor, tomorrow another, nothing that binds the worker to the workplace, eliminating any foundation to develop a sense of pride and self-esteem through the work they perform.

Exploitation of vulnerable populations is unfortunately a side-effect of our free market and our “the market regulates itself” philosophy that is allowing the political and economic powerless to pay the human and economic costs of a “free” market. The power of the law to include and exclude and the lack of human rights enforcement create power differentials that in turn create a breeding ground for exploitation. Stephen (2007:166) describes how abuses increase in direct relation to the amount of control contractors have over their workers, who increasingly are undocumented :

Contractors might pay workers for fewer hours, loan them money at high interest rates, require workers to pay for food, rent, tools, and transportation (...) often at exorbitant rates.

Deregulation and the increased use of undocumented workers undermine the enforcement of labor laws and make it easier to abuse workers.

Haynes (2008:10) writes that exploitation specifically “refers to the upper hand wielded by the former over the latter, in which the one who secures labor opts to cheapen, undermine, or devalue the labor, and the humanity, of the one providing it. It refers to the relationship between the devaluing of the labor to the devaluing of the human person providing it, and the choice made by the one the exploiting to choose financial gain or other personal profit over the dignity of the human person being exploited.” Critical of the free market, Haynes (2008) points out that this market accepts a “large and silent underclass of migrants, both documented and undocumented” to satisfy the needs of the middle class.

Workers on the street are exploited on a daily basis: stories of non-payment are plentiful, of work with no breaks, of insults and injuries unattended to. Distressing as this exploitation of other human beings is, for the workers the authorship of these denigrating actions is even more confounding and saddening for them. Feeling a special connection to the Latino community, they believe themselves to be in the “same boat.” Thus the betrayal and mistreatment from this precise community that they instinctively trust, inflicts more pain.

Prefiero trabajar con un americano. Lo trata a uno con sentido humano. El latino te trata como lo más bajo, como esclavo. (I prefer to work with an American. He treats me with human sense. The Latino treats you like the lowest, like a slave).

He paused and said “no todos son así” (not all of them are like this).

When I asked him to explain this behavior, he said:

Los latinos lo traen así de sus países. El americano primero da de comer, el latino ni vaso de agua te da. El americano valora el trabajo, el hispano aunque ya hayas terminado el trabajo, lo pone a hacer más, solo por agarrar más plata. El americano valora más su trabajo. (Latinos bring it like this from their countries. The American first gives you food; the Latino does not even give you a glass of

water. The American values the work, the Hispanic even when you finish the work, sets you up to do more, only to grab more money. The American values your work more).

Roberto's reaction when speaking about Latino or Hispanic contractors is unexpected and brings his very deep-seated anger to light. There is resentment, anger, and disappointment in his voice and in the words he uses. Being treated with "human sense" is juxtaposed to being treated "like a slave." The two worlds could not be further apart. Was more understanding and solidarity expected from the Hispanic contractor and therefore the disappointment bigger? Or does the American contractor treat his/her employees with more fairness and humanity? Roberto's explanation that Latinos bring it with them from their countries also mirrors his personal experiences in a highly racialized and Ladino-dominant country. He is basically saying: this is how people are treated over there and they bring these structures, these behaviors with them.

Aquí no dicen que eres tonto, aquí se sientan y te enseñan el plano (Here they do not tell you that you are stupid, here they sit you down and show you the plan).

He clearly demarcates the differences in treatment. At home they just call him "tonto" (stupid), not believing in the capacity of the individual and treating him like an "indio" (indigenous, but also used in derogatory form to mean underdeveloped, not intelligent).

Here they believe in his ability, they let him participate in the project, give him an opportunity to understand the concept. Roberto sees the Latino contractor as money-oriented, greedy, and only worried about his personal gain. In contrast, his American counterpart values the work he does. Giving him recognition and showing appreciation for the worker's creation, gives the worker a level of dignity and self-worth that is often missing in day laborers' interaction with the rest of the community. The Latino

contractor, however, does not value his work, and rather than seeing the worker as a human being, is only interested in his laboring capacity. Are the economic and social structures in Central and South America the reference point for the Latino contractor and does he/she therefore think that it is acceptable to treat the worker here just a little above the conditions in Guatemala, Mexico, or Nicaragua? The Latino contractor knows the conditions most of these workers migrate out from: how they live, how many hours they work, what food they eat, what kind of luxuries they have, and how little protections they are used to. From the contractor's view then, the worker is being treated better than in his home country, but far from the legal/moral understanding of decent treatment in the United States. The American contractor might lack this perspective and be more readily prepared to give workers certain breaks, to offer food and drinks, and to pay under the market rate, but still more than the meager worker income in Guatemala. The treatment of the Latino contractor creates ill feelings in the day laborer as it undermines the reason for the worker's migration: a better life, fair treatment and an opportunity to rise above the condition of poverty. The Latino contractor is replicating conditions at home, not understanding that workers left that system for something different, something better. The supply of day laborers and the need for work is so great that contractors can pick and choose, as long as nobody is enforcing basic labor laws and human rights.

Florencio's experience with Latino contractors mirrors Roberto's:

Aquí sufro en el trabajo. Dos años en grama. Como uno no tiene documentos, el dueño latino como nos corría. Los latinos se aprovechan mucho. Si yo hablará inglés podría trabajar con un americano . . . (I suffer here at work. Two years in landscaping. Because one does not have documents, you should see how the Latino owner pushed us. Latinos take much advantage of us. If I spoke English I could work with an American . . . )

The closeness and dependence of day laborers from the Latino community is primarily language-based. Working for an American is an upgrade, but only reachable if one speaks English. But Florencio also knows that having papers (being documented) would make a big difference, the dependence on a Latino contractor would end, workers could get up and find something else to do; this is a substantially more difficult without legal papers. The abuse and exploitation by the Latino contractor is at its core a human tragedy. Florencio continued speaking about his disappointment with Latino contractors:

Es que hay que ser justo. He observado yo en las casas grandes les dan \$300 por echar el mulch y el jefe latino solo sentado en la camioneta y uno lo trabaja y solo nos dan \$9 la hora. (You have to be fair. I have observed that in the big houses they pay \$300 for putting down mulch and the Latino boss just sits in his truck and one works it (works hard) and we only get paid \$9 an hour).

His frustration with the bossy attitude of his Latino boss reflects the disillusion of many other workers with their contractors. The Latino boss is somebody domineering, authoritative, making sure the workers understand his position. Could Roberto be right? Do they bring it with them? Maybe this is what Latino contractors who have reached a relative position of power have seen and experienced at home, and all they do is replicate a system of power and abuse. There is a boss, and then there are the workers. Some workers are astounded by the willingness of some American patronos (boss) to work side by side with the workers, get dirty and sweaty. This is not to say that some Latino contractors do not also do the right thing. When Antonio arrived in the country, a Peruvian contractor took him under his wing, and according to Antonio:

Me enseñó como funcionaba todo y aprendí muchas destrezas (He showed me how everything worked and taught me many skills).



Antonio was dismayed about his own decision to leave this Peruvian contractor for a higher- paying offer. Although the higher paycheck in the beginning was a reason for joy, in the end the new patron tried to stifle him, and he ended up worse than before.

Troubled, Florencio said,

Es nuestro propio cercano...” (It is our own close one . . . ). This shows that day laborers consider members of the Latino community belonging to their “own group. Thus betrayal from their own midst might explain the very strong response I received from day laborers in regard to the Latino contractors. And could it be a stereotype?

Another day laborer describes his feelings about Latino contractors this way:

Yo prefiero trabajar con un americano. Paga justo y es más consciente. El latino nos hace trabajar más de la cuenta y no paga....No he tenido la suerte de trabajar mucho con americanos. Con el latino, siempre es apúrese, necesito terminar rápidamente y uno lo hace porque nos paguen. El americano da descanso, se come a la hora en punto, después de las 8 horas se deja de trabajar. (I prefer working with an American. He pays in a fair way and is more conscious. The Latino makes us work more than expected and does not pay . . . I have not had the luck to work much with Americans. With the Latino it is always go faster, I need to finish quickly and we follow because we need to get paid. The American gives you a break, you eat at the precise time, and you stop working after 8 hours).

The contrast between the American and the Latino contractor is baffling. Working with an American is considered a good day, a lucky day. The American is portrayed as fair, considerate with the worker: he gives breaks, he pays, lunch is eaten on time and the workload is limited to a regular day. This stands out against the Latino contractor who seems to be constantly pushing the worker, only interested in his gain, always overworking his/her employees, and not paying fair wages for the work done.

Unconcerned about the day laborer’s working conditions, the Latino contractor seems unconcerned about the length of the workday or covering basic needs such as water and food. The Latino contractor is self-absorbed and greedy, while the American is thoughtful

and fair. The Latino and the American contractors seem to be on opposite sides of a moral scale.

Although in the minority, some workers also complain about the American contractors, but the type of complaints are usually different in character. A contractor Roberto had worked for many times asked him to move to Front Royal, even going so far as to offer him a room there. He was hesitant in accepting his offer because of his wife, and because he knew the contractor would often get drunk and take drugs and be out of control. Roberto remembers his verbally abusive behavior and the insults he received.

Me decía “shorty come here” y muchas malas palabras. (He said, shorty come here - and many curse words).

Although this type of abuse is not physical (not allowing for breaks or water), the verbal assaults made the worker feel unsafe and threatened. Most indigenous day laborers are physically smaller than their American counterparts. Calling him “shorty” ties into his indigenous identity and his male dignity.

Speaking to one of the Salvadoran workers who sometimes assemble on the corner, he confirmed what other day laborers had already told me: the Latino contractor is not good. When I asked him why he thought it was so, he said:

Ellos creen—estos vienen a quitarnos lo que tenemos. Ellos no quieren compartir. Creen que es de ellos, se piensan que son importantes. (They think—these are coming to take away what we have. They do not want to share. They think it belongs to them, they think they are important).

He openly attributes the abuse of the Latino contractor to their fear that newcomers will take away what they have. According to him, Latinos see the newcomers, the day laborers, as competition and are unwilling to share. They have a sense of entitlement and feel they are above the newcomers. With the exception of a few skilled or highly

educated immigrants, most migrating members from Hispanic countries are workers that have made a living in the United States in lower paying jobs. The structural insecurities in the job market and the harsh competition in an openly free market where the stronger, younger, and cheaper offer makes the cut, pitches established immigrants against newcomers working in the same field: survival becomes priority. This kind of individualistic attitude, supported by a system that follows the “survival of the fittest” motto, might also explain why a considerable number of Hispanics in the country are against immigration reform and legalization of the undocumented. In niche markets, Latino contractors might lose their cheap labor force and in certain jobs the more right-leaning, mobile, post-reform worker might stand in direct competition with the longer established Latino. Rather than showing solidarity with each other, the tough conditions and the desire to survive and achieve the American Dream pit them against each other. Theodore (2003: 261) describes the destructive competition among workers, in particular Ecuadorian and indigenous workers undercutting Mexican workers:

The roots of this competition, according to the organizer, lie in the desperation of the (mainly rural) Central American workers, who bring few skills and little experience to the worksite, limited ability to communicate with other workers or employers . . . and significantly higher debts owed to coyotes for smuggling them into the US. Contending with multiple labor market disadvantages, these workers resort to undercutting wages as a way to make themselves attractive to the employer (Theodore 2003:261)

Looking for work at La Parada makes day laborers more vulnerable to discrimination. Although invisible to many in the community, there is nevertheless a very specific form of discrimination based on the indigeneity of the workers. Indigenous people in Latin America generally belong to economically, politically, and socially marginalized populations. Framed in general as underdeveloped, rural, uneducated, naïve and

unsophisticated, indigenous people are treated as inferior. Members of the wider U.S. community might at first and second glance not understand that these men on the corner bring with them a very particular history, a unique language, and an ethnic difference not immediately obvious to the outside observer. The grouping together of people from different nationalities, different economic, social, religious, and educational backgrounds just on the basis of speaking the same language obliterates the richness of diversity in the Hispanic community. It also does not do justice to the differences of experiences of each individual. For the non-indigenous Hispanic community in the United States, the racial hierarchy positions the indigenous person on the bottom rank, replicating the structure in their native countries.

Samuel was being mocked by Mexican co-workers and treated as a simple-minded indio. He was putting gas into a machine to cut trees when it spilled and got into his eye, burning his eye. He showed me the injury, which looked to me like cataracts. He had developed a light skin over part of his eye. The reaction of his Mexican co-workers offended him. Rather than helping him, they decided to mock him.

Burro, me dijeron, la gasolina es para el motor, no para tus ojos (Ass (donkey), they said to me, the gasoline is for the motor, not for your eyes).

He described how they did not do much to help him, and used this occasion to get a good laugh. Samuel was humiliated and let down by their reaction to—what he considered—a serious situation that left visible marks on his eye. Samuel, who suffers a few medical problems, was however more positive towards the Korean contractor he had worked for that week. In 90-degree weather with high humidity, he had worked outside and kept sweating and sweating. The contractor who saw him asked Samuel if he could drive him

home, but he told him that he was fine and always sweats. He said the contractor was nice.

This contrasts with Daniel's story about another Korean contractor who picked him up at the corner and took him to work in Maryland. At the end of the day the contractor did not want to drive him all the way back to Virginia. Daniel said:

Le dije –I call police, no good, no good you Virginia (I said—I call police, no good, no good you Virginia).

In his extremely limited English, Daniel was trying to tell the contractor to drive him back to Virginia. Showing the contractor that he was not afraid of calling the police, Daniel recounted how he sat in the van and refused to get out until the man decided to drive him back. Refusing to leave the van, Daniel insisted on his rights and actively resisted this wrongdoing. Daniel thought that the contractor was a bad person and maybe involved with drugs.

The abuse is, however, not limited to the workplace. Last year, one of the local churches that have an active outreach program with the day laborer community asked one of the wives to bring some traditional food from their region to an upcoming meeting. Paula hesitated for a little while and then told me that she would really enjoy cooking something, but she did not have a kitchen. I was surprised to hear that because I had dropped her off in front of her townhouse a few times and assumed she had access to a kitchen. She lived with a Hispanic landlady, who did not allow her to use the kitchen. Sometimes she would warm up something when the landlady left the house, but she was always afraid to be caught. In the end Paula and her husband moved to a different apartment. She wanted to cook for her husband and felt bad that after a long day working

outside, she could only offer him cold canned food. According to Paula, the landlady was afraid she would use the kitchen to make dishes and sell them. Many Salvadoran women in the area make tortillas and other food for men to take to work or sell them close to construction or workplaces during lunch time. Salvadoran women have seen a business opportunity in this field, given that many immigrants are men, willing to pay for home-cooked meals. For some women who have children and are home-bound, it is an opportunity to earn some extra income. Obviously aware of this practice, the Hispanic landlady prohibited the use of her kitchen. Paula also spoke about their restrictions in the house: how they were only allowed to sit and watch TV in the living room for a certain number of hours in the evening and they were not allowed to keep the lights on in the evening, not even while watching TV. The mistreatment of Hispanic people towards these new migrants extends to the social spheres of their lives, living and working under unpleasant conditions.

The person inflicting the abuse often excuses the action by explaining how much better off this person is here than in his or her home country, comparing earnings, etc. They sometimes even see themselves as “saviors” and “helpers” and find their behavior morally acceptable because they went through hard times and abuse themselves when they started off. I remember talking to a Latina contractor with a small housekeeping business. She was trying to sell me her housecleaning products after she saw me talking to her employees. I had become friendly with some of the young ladies that cleaned a few houses in the neighborhood and engaged in conversations with them while they were waiting and eating their breakfasts under a tree, waiting for the van to pick them up. They would eat after they cleaned the first house, because in the morning they were too tired to

eat. The van would pick them up in the early morning hours and it sometimes took an hour to pick up all the cleaners. After cleaning in Virginia, they would clean some houses in Maryland. The young women were complaining that they lost a lot of time in the van and they only got paid per house cleaned. Sometimes the owner would forget to leave the keys, and they could not enter the house. The contractor would not pay them for that house. One of the young women lived with the contractor. She had left children behind in her home country and had only recently arrived. The contractor would deduct rental and housing money from the pay check, leaving only small amounts to send her children. Commenting on the difficult economic situation in the country, she was convinced that we all have to pay a price and the newcomers even more: the system always worked like that, you have to work your way up.

Relationships with the Spanish-speaking community are constricted by workers' undocumented status. They depend on contacts that are made through the workplace and housing market, where they enter relationships with other Latinos on a purely gain-oriented level. Their lack of mobility and their low socio-economic position make social activities cost-prohibitive and simply impractical. In the warm months, workers toil long shifts in landscaping and construction. Hard physical work under difficult weather conditions precludes any possibility of an active social life. Going out to dances, restaurants, and to visit places takes time and money, and the workers' priority is saving money. Some workers take advantage of close-by ESL classes or church events. One of the activities that workers have participated in the past is sports. On Sundays after ESL classes, some workers would get together to play volleyball and often they would take a

ball and walk to the closest soccer fields. Gonzalez (2000:145) describes how the first types of immigrant organizations in the Washington area were soccer leagues.

Soccer provided day laborers the space to meet other Latinos and interact in a non-business environment. The high numbers of Latinos, in particular in close-by Prince William County, fostered the creation of Hispanic soccer leagues. Soccer is above all a very inexpensive and paperless sport. Show up with a ball and a few friends, and you have a game. Soccer, like many other sports, opens up a field for encounters and friendships. It is on the soccer field where day laborers can measure themselves against the other Latino, or the other English-speaker. Dziembowska (2010:30) finds soccer a tool for building solidarity: "Soccer facilitated camaraderie and provided the workers with an opportunity to relate outside the competitive environment of the job market."

The increasing anti-immigrant policies of the neighboring county dissolved the local Hispanic soccer leagues in the area. When Prince William County passed the highly controversial anti-immigrant laws, many undocumented Hispanics were afraid to go out, taking their children out of school, and leaving strip malls empty. Active soccer leagues were decimated (Brulliard 2008), players not showing up out of fear of being apprehended or deported for not having the legal documentation to stay in this country. Legal status again emerged having an impact "far beyond labor force participation and access to services, to encompass sociocultural spheres as well" (Menjivar 2006:1000).

Two years ago Chris played soccer on Tuesdays, close to the field on Route 28 and the Burger King. Then they stopped playing because they tied down the goal. Chris thought that maybe people were leaving trash and that is why they closed down the fields. Then they tried to build their own goal arches.



Con colaboración para los arcos, compramos los tubos, los cortamos, pusimos tape alrededor, compartimos los gastos. Yo traje el invoice. Todo, todo. Pusimos los tubos en el suelo para que cabiesen dentro de los otros tubos, armamos todo y Luego después el juego siempre los escondíamos para que no se los llevarsen. (With collaboration for the posts, we bought the tubes, cut them, put tape around them, we shared the costs. I brought the invoice. Everything, everything. We set up the tubes in the ground so they would fit in the other tubes, we set up everything and later after the game we always hid them so that they could not take them away).

Here they had an opportunity to collaborate, to work together, build something for the common good. It was important enough for workers to take their time and money to organize a few men and open up space outside of la Parada, a place for them to enjoy, a place that could foster camaraderie and friendship. Despite their efforts, this opportunity vanished in a matter of months:

Luego ya no nos dejaban jugar allí, no les daban espacio a un grupo que vino y quería jugar. Llegó la policía y nos dijo que entre semana no vengan a jugar, solo el sábado y el domingo. (Then they would not allow us to play there anymore, we did not give space to a group that came and wanted to play. The police arrived and told us not to come during the week to play, only Saturday and Sunday).

Somebody took the tubes he had paid for. Later they bought movable goal posts, but they got stuck in a van in one of his five moves, and they were never recovered. Obviously playing soccer was important to Chris and despite his efforts to build the goal, they could not sustain playing soccer as a continuous activity. According to Chris there are two leagues: he plays with the group in Manassas, the other group plays differently:

Cuando ellos juegan apuestan y cuando apuestan eligen a los mejores. A mí me gusta jugar rústico, ellos no juegan limpio. En Manassas no va por apuestas. Aquí todo se vale como son por apuestas y por el dinero . . . (When they play they play for money and when they play for money they select the best. I like to play rustic, they do not play clean. In Manassas we do not bet. Here everything is acceptable because they are betting and because of the money . . . ).

Chris's critical observation that as soon as money or gain is involved the game is not played clean and it is a free for all, is a direct criticism of how profit spoils the game.

Yo lo hago por el deporte, es una distracción, como un grupo de amigos, con las apuestas se crean conflictos (I do it for the sake of the sport, it is a distraction, like a group of friends, with the betting they create conflicts).

Chris and his friends don't go to the fields regularly anymore. Thus an opportunity to meet people outside of the community, to get out of the apartment and relieve the daily stress, particularly in days of no job offers, has been limited. Soccer could facilitate community relations, and would make this community also more visible to outsiders. The lack of public spaces to interact with others in a positive social environment impacts their integration into the wider community and furthers what some scholars have called the "atomization" of the community.

From charges for driving a day laborer to a doctor's office, to the abuse in the workplace or the humiliation from a Latina landlady, the majority of exchanges between the Ixil-speaking day laborer community and the Latino community seem to occur in monetary exchange relations. In this environment, there are few stories of mutual support. Feeling abused and mistreated by their Latino contacts, day laborers look at these relationships with disappointment, having expected more from "nuestros cercanos" (our close-to-us).

Menjívar (2000) reminds us that a great social distance sometimes exists between longtime residents and newcomers and that "social relations do not exist in isolation from the structures in which immigrants live." (Menjívar 2000:115). The material and physical conditions in which day laborers and the Latino community exist affect the social fabric of communities, often undermining local solidarity (Mahler 1995b; Menjívar 2000).

Destructive competition in the unregulated labor market combined with little opportunity to make social connections outside the business environment of finding work, renting homes or purchasing food and phone cards, shapes the field of contact between Latinos and the day laborers. Although many Hispanics show solidarity and are working to support the newly arrived immigrants, the lack of mobility, education, and financial means reduce the exchanges between the day laborers and the rest of the community. In an extraordinary expression of solidarity, the 2005/6 demonstrations for immigration reform, millions of predominantly Latinos all over the United States insisted on immigration reform and legalization for the undocumented. However, as Gomberg-Muñoz (2011:105) emphasizes, “divisions have anything but disappeared . . . , Latino/a identity is nuanced with respect to class, gender, nationality, and ethnic group.” Places of encounters such as public soccer fields or public libraries are undergoing severe cuts in services to the community, affecting the quality of life and the integration of residents into a functional social—not just business-community.

### **The Wider English-Speaking Established Community in Northern Virginia**

Workers are painfully aware of the barriers that separate them from the wider English-speaking community: the first and most obvious barrier is a language barrier, but class and legal barriers also complicate communication. The lack of interaction with the community surrounding the day labor settlement is not acknowledged by workers in daily conversations, but is tacitly accepted as a natural condition. The social atomization and isolation of the Ixil day labor community at La Parada is a result of their social, economic, and legal presence in this neighborhood. If the perception of being similar to

other community members and the recognition of interdependence between members is a criterion to establish a sense of community (Hombrados-Mendieta et al. 2009:671), the Ixil-speaking day laborers are far from considering themselves members of the same community with their English-speaking non-migrant neighbors and vice versa.

Geographical factors also play a role in the level of integration. Unlike earlier immigrants that would settle in bigger cities with ethnic enclaves, newcomers have formed new settlement patterns in the suburbs, creating new gateway communities that tend to be more isolated than those living in cities. Ethnic enclaves facilitated social, economic, and organizational connections, which are difficult to establish in some of the newer settlement areas. The geographical isolation affects newcomers' engagement with their communities, and tends to limit the possibility of political organizing, and building leadership (Andersen 2010). Although larger enclaves in big cities might mitigate the effects of isolation, they also tend to slow down English-learning and thus also have an effect on social and political integration with the mainstream society. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994:205), legal status and living in smaller communities produces isolation and marginal involvement in societal institutions. In the suburbs of Virginia this is especially true for day laborers. Interactions with the English-speaking community around the day labor corner are predominantly limited to business interactions (workers being picked up by contractors or homeowners) and faith-based and immigrant advocacy groups. Spaces of daily existence do not seem to overlap with the regular English-speaking citizen and in those rare moments where spaces overlap, language barriers arise. Heightened visibility on the corner is countered with heightened invisibility of their social life.

While most day laborers do not speak much about the lack of interaction with the wider community, it is an issue that concerns migrant community leaders. During one of the meetings, Alfredo, a Mexican community leader working with day laborers in Annandale, Virginia, gave a speech to the 30-40 day laborers who had assembled. The three pillars of his speech rested on the idea of dignity, encouragement for the workers, and the importance of reaching out to other members of the community. He urged the day laborers to reach out to talk to people. Paraphrasing his message, he pled with the workers: "We all have a person we can talk to. Not doing anything is not why we came here. It is very important to open spaces to talk to others, with the community." He conveyed the story of how some people in the community would act surprised when walking past the Annandale corridor where up to 500 workers assemble at times. Passersby would be surprised to see day laborers playing chess and would ask Alfredo if those men really could be day laborers. The limited and narrow representation/depiction of a day labor in the imagination of outsiders creates barriers to human interaction. If it is not possible to imagine a day laborer playing chess, it is because we are not imagining a human being behind those faces that is capable of thinking, or enjoying pastimes similar to ours. They are different, uneducated and any similarity with our lives would bring them uncomfortably close to us. It is so much easier to think of them as being different. It validates our no-contact zone, endorsing our "natural" distance.

Assimilation and integration of newcomers has been in the minds of sociologists for decades and has increasingly become of interest to anthropologists. With a majority of newcomers in the Washington, DC metro area settling in suburbia in the 1980s (Brettell 2003), the area around La Parada has experienced an influx of immigrants from many

countries, predominantly Asian and Latino newcomers. Although Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, and prior to them Jewish, Chinese, and Italian immigrants, all had to struggle for their acceptance in the wider community, newcomers today find themselves arriving in a political and social environment that is very hostile to immigrants. “New migrants are increasingly excluded and criminalized by the mounting neo-assimilationist and increasingly xenophobic public discourse and policy which are replacing those of recognition, accommodation and tolerance of cultural diversity typical of multiculturalism.” (Pero and Solomos 2010:5). The exclusion and discrimination of newcomers is by no means a new concept in U.S. history. The vicious criminalization of newcomers in the last decade by state discourse might have amplified the level of discrimination and othering.

Easy access to inexpensive communication technology, as well as a constant flow of new immigrants from Central America, might also have consequences for the integration of these new members. Only a few decades ago, due to the lack and costs of communication technology, new immigrants could not sustain continuous communication with those left behind. This has changed considerably now, allowing immigrants to call home daily, weekly, send packages, even Skype for free. Until recently, immigrants could, although at a certain risk and costs, cross the border and engage in circular migration. The heightened border protection makes this almost impossible today, limiting the back-and-forth movement of immigrants and imposing a voluntary confinement in their ethnic or immigrant communities. The feeling and sense of insularity of the day labor community is only comparable to the isolation of transient temporary farm workers during the Bracero Program. The Ixil day laborers struggle to

make connections with the local community for the aforementioned reasons: language, legal status, and economic status. Most social contacts for the day laborers are initiated through religious or immigrant advocacy groups that choose to be in touch with the day laborers.

Members of the English-speaking community can be divided into three groups based on their relation with the day laborers: those actively trying to defend the human rights of immigrants, the dignity of labor, trying to support their integration in the wider community; those bystanders that have political views about immigration, but stay at a safe distance from the day labor community and might or might not hire a worker for a house improvement project; and those who have very strong anti-immigrant day labor positions and engage in direct or indirect harassment of this community.

### **The Anti-Day Laborer Group**

Anti-immigrant groups have soared in the last decade and have been energized with the failure of Congress to pass immigration reform. The strength of anti-immigrant groups has allowed for the development of country-wide organized structures with local chapters that aggressively pursue the “disappearance” of immigrant day laborers on our streets. The existence of anti-immigrant attitudes and movements plays an important role in how immigrants are incorporated into the community. Organized groups such as the Minuteman Project “may provoke counter-organizations among immigrants and their liberal allies or may instead have a repressive impact on the organizational capacity of immigrant groups” (Andersen 2010:97). The geographical closeness of La Parada to Prince William, a county that has aggressively passed anti-immigrant ordinances, and the

local chapters of anti-day labor groups like the Minutemen Project or S.O.S. Manassas, might have a repressive effect on immigrant organization. According to their website, the mission of the nationally organized Minuteman Project, with local chapters in Virginia, is “to secure United States borders and coastal boundaries against unlawful and unauthorized entry of all individuals, contraband, and foreign military.” They consider themselves the “National Citizens Neighborhood Watch,” with a goal of securing the American border. The border in this case is fluid and mobile and is located in any space where immigrants are present.

Minuteman members were catapulted into the spotlight guarding and patrolling the U.S.-Mexican border: Armed civilians sitting in lawn chairs, flying the U.S. flag, using binoculars to spot the undocumented, and defend the American soil from the foreign invader (Navarro 2009). They call for a heavy militarization of the border, petitioning the Secretary of Defense for members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps to assist in this effort. At the same time, they are spreading the politics of fear (Stephen 2007:30). A drive to sign a petition on the Minuteman’s website under the heading “Secure our Borders Now” declares:

Border security is absolutely essential if we are to reduce the imminent threat of new acts of terrorism on American soil, maintain our sovereignty as a free and decent nation, and contain the alarming growth of international criminal syndicates that are violently overtaking our territory and assaulting our people (Secure America’s Border Now, Minutemen HQ, n.d.)

Playing to the fears of Islamist terrorism after 9/11, the group’s strategy is to link undocumented immigration with terrorism. A ticking counter on their website tallies the number of illegals crossing over the border synchronically, evoking the image of a ticking time bomb. The website text is intermittently scattered with reminders such as “50



Illegals WILL JUMP America's Borders While You Read This” (Minutemen HQ, n.d.- Immigration Crisis Survey) .In the following excerpt, Carmen Mercer, a co-founder of the Minuteman HQ, attempts to link the Mexican border with Islamist terrorists, and stresses the inaction of the U.S. government (that gives the Minutemen their reason for existence):

There’s an even worse situation to consider. One friend of mine who has a ranch on the Arizona-Mexico border was awakened late one night by his dog barking. When he went to the window, he saw several men in military helmets and full body armor marching across his land, just a few feet from his house. That was strange enough, but when he heard them speak, a chill ran through him. My friend served with the U.S. Army in the Middle East and clearly recognized that the men were speaking Arabic. Because of his ranch’s location near the border, it was logical to assume that they were crossing from Mexico. He shuddered when he thought of where they might be heading and what they might be planning. Once again, when the Border Patrol arrived, the men were long gone, and they were never found. (Mercer 2010)

The formal worker HOW center in Herndon attracted many local members of this organization. With more or less intensity depending on the news or political environment of that moment, Minuteman would assemble early in the morning protesting against the day laborers, carrying signs, shouting at the waiting day laborers, taking pictures of day laborers, volunteers, and contractors, with the clear intention of intimidation. Surprisingly for me, many of these Minuteman, were younger, middle-aged Minutewomen, who would show up in the very early morning hours (HOW opened sixhh am) to “defend” their homeland. Not allowed to trespass on the HOW area, these protesting women and men would stand for hours watching the workers. Some workers would pass the Minutewomen and men on their way home when the center closed. There was an intrinsic moment of violence when these young men would pass through the Minuteman crowd, so close to them that they inevitably could face each other. The hate, anger, and

discrimination directed at their bodies were too intense. How could these women and men look at these young men and hate them so much for wanting to work and feed their families that they would go through the tribulations of getting up early and expressing hate so openly? As a mother I could not understand their position towards these young men, some still young enough to be in school. Where was the sense of human solidarity, compassion, and tolerance towards other human beings?

A local blogger addressing the situation of the day laborers at La Parada writes:

We are the citizens of Centreville, Virginia, who are fed up with our local government's abject failure to address illegal immigration in our community. Our public library is a haven for illegal alien day laborers who regularly molest and abuse underage children at what should be a place of learning and safety. Our community is overrun with illegal aliens who trash our community, overcrowd houses on our streets, and destroy the quality of life in our community. . . . Our community is under assault, and our public officials are actively complicit in fostering this problem. ([www.centrevillecitizens.org](http://www.centrevillecitizens.org))

Day laborers as child molesters, wild people trashing the community: the mean and degrading rhetoric around the issue of day laborers has pitted some community members against these workers, bearers of all moral ills, as if all their problems were tied to these few men and would disappear if they would only return to Guatemala. For Brettell and Nibbs (2010), the anti-immigrant backlash is closely tied to a crisis over the identity of middle-class America, where class in addition to race and ethnicity are fundamental contributing factors. Discussing the viral anti-immigrant legislation in form of local anti-immigrant ordinances, they affirm that this type of legislation:

is a defensive strategy against people who have been discursively constructed as a threat to middle class suburban identity. Where they live, their home, their neighborhood is part of the internalized world that suburban Americans inhabit as members of the American middle class. When ideas about what these places should look like and be are challenged, local residents react in an effort to hold on

to particular modes of living and to a particular social status (Brettell and Nibbs 2010:20)

Day laborers upset the ideal landscape of suburbia, spoiling the idea of prosperity, security, order, and cleanliness. By doing so, these workers also upset the identity of the suburban middle class.

### **Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations**

In light of the economic crisis of the past few years and the escalating national debt, state, local, and federal governments have been and are forced to cut services significantly. Increasingly thus, responsibilities are shifting from the federal to the local level, transforming local community-based organizations (CBO) into critical actors in the suburban political and social landscape.

The image created around undocumented workers taking away jobs from deserving Americans and using limited public resources (hospitals, public schools, social services) fuels the anti-immigrant sentiment at a time when some natives are struggling to keep a job and see their own services dwindling. At a time of increasing exclusion and scapegoating of the immigrant, civil society might fill the void left by retreating government. Theodore and Martin (2007:207) define civil society as “community organizations, social movements, hometown associations, churches and faith-based organizations, social clubs, and other organized groups that represent the interests of migrants and operate between markets, households and the state.” However, Pero and Solomos (2010) argue that the state can play a positive role in supporting immigrants’ rights and conditions and admonishes the reader not to “conceive the neoliberal state as a compact and coherent anti-immigrants engine which is strongly committed to and fully

effective in enforcing governmental policy” (Pero et al. 2010:14). In reality, however, unauthorized immigrants are legally denied access to the vast majority of federally funded services. In some instances, social workers of the Fairfax County local government have distributed information about homeless shelters or have given talks about pedestrian safety and provided neon bands for better visibility of the pedestrian, but the relationship is frail at best. The weak connections with the state leave civil society as the potential bridge builder and integration motor for new immigrants. Then again, Heyek (2008:431) addresses the disconnection of day laborers from civil society organizations and describes the disconnection as “exceedingly problematic, as the majority reported that they do not know their rights as a worker or as an immigrant residing in the US.” At La Parada, for the most part, civil religious organizations are the ones actively reaching out to the workers.

Faith-based organizations form part of the civil society organizations that “have stepped into the void created by the withdrawal of public services to migrants in an attempt to patch holes in the societal safety net by providing emergency services, housing assistance, job training programs, and otherwise assisting migrants in need.” (Theodore and Martin 2007: 207). They provide ESL classes, serve as intermediaries and information gateways to community health clinics, social and legal services, provide food, connect immigrants to civil society structure, and tend to the spiritual needs of the migrant community. Anderson (2010:90) also believes that reception of immigrants and the perception by natives is “highly dependent on the kinds of organizations that help to integrate refugees and immigrants.” These community-based organizations (CBO) work with local government officials to work against the NIMBY (not in my back yard)

phenomenon. CBO's advantage of knowing the immigrant and ethnic communities, "lowers transaction costs associated with overcoming language and cultural barriers between newcomers and native-born residents" (Frasure et al. 2010:456). The National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON) describes congregation and interfaith groups as the most compelling vehicle for community organizing, as "they have shared values that allow them to speak and mobilize for their members" (NDLON website).

Members of four area churches (Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ) have come together as CIF (Centreville Immigration Forum) to strengthen and address issues that affect the local community, such as immigration, poverty, and homelessness. One of their objectives is to "support each other's work in reaching out to the poor, many of whom are low-income immigrants." (Wellspring United Church of Christ correspondence Feb 8, 2009). CIF meetings serve as a platform of dialogue for issues and concerns that arise in the community. With the help and collaboration of immigrant advocacy groups and non-profit agencies and representatives of Fairfax County government, CIF's goal is to raise the quality of life for everyone in the community. CIF was founded in 2007, concerned about the negative reaction to diversity in the area, as seen in Herndon or in neighboring Prince William County. In their outreach to day laborers, CIF's goal is to find local solutions to a local problem. In cooperation with organizations like the Virginia Legal Aid Justice Center (VLAJC) ([http://www.justice4all.org/our\\_programs/vjc](http://www.justice4all.org/our_programs/vjc)) and the Western Fairfax Christian Ministries (WFCM), CIF reaches out to day laborers trying to cover their more urgent needs. VLAJC support immigrants in Virginia through their Immigration Advocacy Program. Reducing abuse and exploitation is one of their explicit goals: recovering

unpaid checks and trying to recover unpaid wages is only one way in which this organization supports day laborers and immigrants in the community. The Western Fairfax Christian Ministries (WFCM) runs a food pantry and supports the homeless in the area. These faith-based organizations have historically assisted immigrant communities and continue to do so (Anderson 2010:73). In some cases, faith-based organizations encourage immigrants for political participation. This support can range from information about the 2010 Census to active participation in the struggle for immigrant rights and immigration reform. Catholic Cardinal Mahoney for example publicly denounced anti-immigrant political propositions and actively supported the 2006 pro-immigrant mobilizations (Navarro 2009:329).

Faith-based organizations like CIF are filling the vacuum created by the disappearing state-involvement in the day labor community (Anderson 2010:27). These organizations are for the most part the only connection day laborers have to the English-speaking community outside their work environment. Driven by a humanitarian call that does not prioritize national and legal identities over human needs, members of these organizations strive towards an inclusive community that treats ALL members with dignity and humanity. Heyek (2008:432) determines that “no moral imperative is repeated more frequently in the Old Testament than the command to care for the stranger.” The people of Israel are also “repeatedly commanded not to exploit the oppressed and the vulnerable, also relevant categories for our consideration of migrant workers.” (Heyek 2008:432). Stepping out of their traditional role of religious leaders concerned with the spiritual well-being and development of their parishioners, their approach is hands-on, and pragmatic. With no money to be made or votes to be gained,

the privatization of services so typical of the neoliberal economy connects civil society and the migrant community.

The unrelentless anti-immigrant atmosphere in the nation has further limited the possibilities of the state to support marginalized communities. The day labor center in Herndon that was partially supported with funds from Fairfax County drew national attention for supporting potentially illegal day laborers with American taxpayer money. Anti-immigrant groups like the Minutemen and the national press made Herndon a poster child for the state helping out “illegals.” This issue divided the city of Herndon, and became the political hot iron in the local elections. When council elections came around, the topic of illegal immigration took front stage. Pro-day labor politicians were ousted and the new city council “adopted a more punitive day labor stance, which included a strict anti-solicitation ordinance. The city has also made English its official language (Herrera 2010:9). As a result of this election, the HOW was slated to close. Far from resolving the problems of day laborers, most of the workers returned to the streets, assembling in front of the 7/11. Yet again, workers wait on the streets without the protection against abuse and the supportive environment of a center.

This experience has made it very difficult for any government official in Virginia to support the establishment of other formal day laborer centers, despite the increasing number of day laborers on the street. The Herndon experience, although a sensitive and pragmatic solution for the community, is not likely to be replicated in the near future in this county. For elected officials that depend on their constituents votes, defending a decision to use taxpayer funds for immigrant day laborers that might be unauthorized in this country sounds like political suicide. This is not to say that although in the minority,

there are some locally elected politicians that look to find solutions for to improve the quality of life of all members in the community, running the risk of not being re-elected.

### **Workers' Center**

Given the stories of contractor abuse and the demanding /strenuous presence on the corner, faith-based organizations or immigrant advocacy groups take it upon themselves to find viable solutions for both the day laborer and the community.

Unauthorized migrants in particular

have little recourse to counteract the abusive practices of some employers who view day laborers as a pliable, flexible, and exploitative workforce (Theodore et al. 2007:280).

Formal hiring centers are seen by many scholars as a positive way to control abuse and give workers a more dignified place in the community, and replace under-regulated street corners (Theodore et al. 2007; Heyek 2008; Turnovsky 2006; Valenzuela 2009) Heyek (2008:449) and other scholars find workers centers to “be one of the most effective means of reducing workers’ rights violations and helping communities address competing concerns over day labor.”

Although the majority of scholars see Workers’ Centers as a way to mitigate abuses and take the workers off the street, others are critical of such establishments. Day labor centers serve in general as protective spaces, making the hiring process more transparent and organized. Herrera (2010), however, also contends that the benevolent act of opening a center might “in fact become a mechanism for greater management of the subjects” (Herrera 2010:16), hence subjecting the worker to further policing and supervising. Critical of the spatial and physical segregation workers’ centers undertake,



Herrera (2010:16) argues that it creates a “particular kind of immigrant laborer, one that is out of sight and out of mind, and that behaves and solicits work within a certain bandwidth of permissibility.”

Groups such as CIF have actively engaged in opening up new spaces for workers, despite the incredible difficulties and challenges this entails. Unlike in Herndon, where a local partnership between a religious CBO, Reston Interfaith, and the local government worked together to set up a non-profit labor site with public funds, CIF had to rely on private donors and the support of the local shopping mall owner to plan a day labor center. For elected officials, the support of a day labor center is clearly a brave political act. The existence of formal and informal day labor sites “are a very visible appropriation of public space by individuals who many residents interpret as having no right to do so” (Frasure et al. 2010:460). The hostile anti-day laborer comments in a packed public community meeting to present and discuss the possibility for a day labor center that would be completely privately funded gives an indication of how difficult suburban politics concerning immigration and day laborers have become, and how influential anti-immigrant groups such as bloggers are. Civil society and religious leaders met in an open forum to present a plan for a day labor center and answer questions and listen to concerns. The public school was packed that night, the event announced by local anti-immigrant bloggers, as well as the faith-based organizations supporting the opening of a space for workers. Attacks, however, became ever personal: “You should be ashamed of yourself” yelled an elderly lady with passion to one of the leaders promoting the opening of a day labor center. The rage of the outburst was emblematic of many speakers in the meeting: they felt individually wronged by the presence of the workers and by the people

defending a day labor center. From personal insults to the sacrifice of time and money, these faith-based religious leaders work from a conviction of dignity and humanity that they base in the Bible: “I (Jesus) was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35b) or “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the aliens as yourself, for you were alien in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34). Faith-based organizations like the Methodist Church that participates in CIF, call upon their members to contact Congress and ask for comprehensive immigration reform and guide their members to study Spanish and other languages, share meals and social events with races, ethnicities and socio-economic classes other than their own.

### **Others in the English-speaking Community**

Besides contact with the contractors, day laborers at La Parada also interacted for a while with a private security guard hired by the shopping mall. The security guard would tell the workers to get off the parking lot and would push them out to the sidewalk close to the street. Workers were irritated by his presence. According to the workers, the guard would follow them even when they were trying to buy something at the local supermarket chain. A group of workers on the corner were describing how the guard would also walk up to cars that would park in the parking lot, if suspected of picking up workers. As a worker recalled, one morning, a blond lady got into a fight with the guard because he approached her when she was leaving her car, apparently suspecting that she was there to talk to the workers. Workers were also aware that the security guard was not

a police officer and poked fun at his behavior for pretending to be someone important. The group of workers that I was talking to that morning on the corner agreed that he was not a good person. “El negro” (the Black one), as they referred to him, apparently met two or three more black young people in the back lot of the supermarket. Those young people has been coming around since the security guard started working and even came to la Parada offering drugs. The workers were uncomfortable with him. They were fully aware that the security guard had been hired to push them out of the shopping area and could not comprehend how they hired this guy, who in their eyes was not a “clean” guy, to chase them away. The construction of the deviant day laborer collided with their negative view of the security guard. Herrera (2010:11) describes how these punitive measures construct day laborers as “triply problematic people who simultaneously engage in lewd and illegal behavior on street corners, break trespassing codes by congregating on private property, and violate federal immigration law.”

Interactions with the English-speaking community are very few and limited to people reaching out to the workers for their labor or faith-based organizations driven by their social principles to help others. Day laborers do not go to the gym or the movies, they seldom go out to eat out, they don’t drive cars, and are socially invisible. Menjivar (2006) describes how they are seen as different because they look different, immigrant and racialized, and because they work and shop in different areas and thus participate in the mainstream community in a different way. Day laborers’ isolation and insularity is on the one hand self-imposed and serves a function of self-preservation. Invisibility protects them against the potential risk of deportation. Their isolation is, however, also superimposed on them through the structures they encounter in this country. Class, legal

status, ethnicity, and language are all factors that distance the workers from the mainstream. The right to space in suburban communities is constantly contested. The isolation of the Ixil-speaking day laborer community speaks to the difficulty of working class minorities to find “their” space as members, not just workers, of the middle class suburban community. Few contacts with the English-speaking community, contentious relations with the Latino community, leave workers finding refuge and security within the Ixil-speaking day laborers and their families. It is interesting, however, that within their community, points of contention do not deal with the competition for jobs, but rather with the differential interest of day laborers to engage with mainstream institutions and the wider community, despite the risks and challenges for the workers.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: ILLEGALITY AND VIOLENCE

In an increasingly anti-immigrant environment, the voices and stories of day laborers often go unheard. Day laborers in the United States have become the emblem of undocumented, “illegal” immigrants. Vilification and exploitation of day laborers on the street go hand in hand with the wider economic and political structure that creates an underclass of rightless and discriminated people living in the midst of our communities. From a very simplistic angle, day laborers are fundamentally “surplus” workers in their countries of origin, who choose migration as their only option for a future, and only become valuable for Guatemala once they have crossed the U.S. border and are ready to send remittances. For day laborers this often means ending up on corners of U.S. streets, “out of place” in their chosen country of destination.

Although the demand for low-wage workers has increased in industrialized nations, the human beings taking on these jobs have been discredited by the law and by society as criminal law-breakers, as “illegals.” Illegality has material, political, and social consequences for people marked this way. An estimated 12 million people with “illegal” status in the United States live continuously with the fear of deportation and reside for years in this country without full rights. The dimension of this historically rather recent phenomenon, and the relative inaction of the state to incorporate these workers into our society and not treat them as second class members, makes the state implicit in their

exploitation and suffering. Illegality is a central concept when trying to understand the lived experiences of day laborers in this country.

Nowadays, it is politically incorrect and forbidden by law to discriminate on the basis of age, gender, sexual orientation, or race. Legal status has, however, become the new label that can be used arbitrarily to insult, differentiate, to offend, and attack the dignity and integrity of others. Even if those others have many values in common with their antagonists, like the desire to work hard, to help their families, to live in peace, the existential difference between someone with or without a government authorization to work and be present in this country seems impossible to bridge.

Thus the question arises of why these mostly young men would indebt their families and friends to risk their lives to make their way north on an extremely dangerous path, “where crimes of the most egregious nature are committed, where almost everyone who passes through becomes a victim of robbery, rape, assault, kidnapping or violent accidents” (Green 2009:332) to end up standing on a corner waiting for work, laboring under extremely difficult conditions for often abusive employers, with no protection or insurance for days of sickness or unemployment, without the closeness of their families, stigmatized by their legal status, living in the shadows of society? The answer is simple: Juan, Pedro, Florencio, Pablo and all the other day laborers I have met in the last six years are looking for a future, a future that seemed impossible in their countries. Is working hard for their families and endangering their own lives for a better future the crime of which they are accused?

### **Illegality**

For day laborers, the greatest obstacle to a dignified life is the status or assumed status of illegality. Their individual experiences are shaped by the legal context they encounter (Stephen 2007:144). Foremost, illegality is not a natural concept, but is rather constructed and produced by law, in this case immigration law (DeGenova 2002). The power of the law to create categories and hierarchies or access, to include and exclude, to differentiate (DeGenova 2002; Newton 2008), has in Willen's (2007b:29) words "deeply anxiety-production" or "terrifying" consequences for those affected. The distinctions between legality and illegality have not always existed. Many of the European ancestors that arrived in this country just walked in, given the absence of a border patrol and at times the lax enforcement of the law (Newton 2008:178).

One of the more obvious consequences of being marked as illegal is the restriction of movement "which signifies a measure of captivity and social death" (DeGenova 2002:427). Illegality is, according to Willen (2007a; 2007b), produced and experienced. Those experiencing the material and social consequences of illegality are many migrants and day laborers in the United States, but also many others that are not thought of as illegal. After all, illegality is not naturally marked on one's body—although many "bodies," in particular Latinos, are being marked as illegal and might therefore experience the same consequences. Illegality does not only exclude people from participating in the political community, it imposes a system of material and social inequalities on them, that range from being overcharged for housing, to being abused and mistreated in the workplace without recourse, to live lives in the shadows of society. Undocumented immigrants are legally denied access to federally-funded services, and

have no access to workers' compensation, or unemployment insurance (Cleaveland 2010:638; DeGenova 2004). The legal erasure of people under the law who have not entered the country with permission of the state is tantamount to living "in a state of subjugation that results in vulnerabilities to deportation, confinement to low-wage jobs, and denial of basic human needs, such as access to housing, education, food, and health care" (Menjivar 2006:1007).

Illegality is thus not just a legal category, it is a social category that "justifies exclusion from the rights and social benefits accorded to people in the surrounding community" (Bacon 2007:67). Legal status shapes migrant identities, how they participate in the job market, where and how they live, limits their social life, changes their outlook on the future, and how they relate to the rest of the community. Menjivar (2006) argues that documented and undocumented immigrants have such different experiences that they can be regarded as two different social classes. Varsanyi (2009) sees the ever-increasing walls between "us" and "them," a rescaling of membership as she calls it, the foundation for a permanent expansion of a second-class group. The increasing militarization of the border since 9/11 has conflated the concept of illegal and criminal, further pushing the migrant into this second class group as criminals, migrants are placed outside of society. Although illegal immigration is a civil not a criminal offense (Koulish 2010), the anti-immigrant discourse in the country and the conflation of national security and immigration, has perpetuated the idea that illegal migrant equals criminal. The term 'criminal' conveys images of violent behavior, rape, armed theft, murder. Koulish (2010:16) prompts the reader to "now imagine the reality of an economic migrant who seeks a job: different image, different response." As a social category the term illegal has



been inscribed on people, rather than their actions. Bacon (2008) ascribes this as a victory to the nativist movement, while Koulish (2010:17) remarks that we would not call a person that speeds an “illegal driver.” Like regular criminals, illegal migrants are associated with bad character or behavior.

Behind the scenes is a powerful nation-state creating immigration laws. The centrality of the nation-state and the sovereignty of the state to differentiate and exclude is irrefutable. The fact that millions of undocumented live in this country is a direct consequence of changes in immigration law. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act set hemispheric number ceilings for visas from the Western Hemisphere, limiting the number of those permitted to cross the border, not those actually coming over (Koulish2010:179; Varsanyi 2009; Ngai 2004). Human despair does not wait for paper approval, when knowing well through experiences with the Bracero Program, for example, that the demand for work awaits across the border. When new immigration laws in 1996 made removal of undocumented workers mandatory, “America’s long history of practicing both deportation and legalization pretty much came to an end. Amnesty, no stranger to the history of immigration policy, is now considered politically unthinkable “(Ngai 2010:62). The state’s role in controlling the undocumented population in the United States has grown over the years. Federalization of immigrant control to the states has brought border surveillance strategies to local streets in our communities. Through enforcement and potential or actual deportation, the state “enacts direct forms of disciplining day laborers, instills fear, and engenders a sense of spatial immobility of this population” (Herrera 2010:4).

If illegal immigration is such a hot topic—why has the state not enforced the law and deported all the illegals in this country? Why has it allowed for millions of people to remain illegally in the country? Has it failed to achieve the goal, or is it, as some scholars have alluded, more interested in regulating than preventing illegal immigration, and if so, why? Coutin (2005b:13) explains: “Criminalizing, but not entirely preventing, unauthorized entry would create a pool of cheap and expendable workers, who, due to their immigration status, are willing to work ‘hard and scared’ ....” Or is it as Chavez (2007) suggests the state’s unwillingness to recognize conditions that create demand for labor and thus the unrealistic number of visas the government issues? No matter the background of state intentions, historically restrictive policies have always moved up and down with economic demand. Today, however, “restrictive immigration policies are now almost independent of economic imperatives. They are firmly embedded in essentially nationalist political discourses, which are ideological rather than pragmatic” (Baldwin-Edwards 2008:1457). This might explain the high demand for cheap labor and the inflexibility of the immigration law to allow more immigrants to come in. The demand being there, millions of undocumented migrants work in our fields, our streets, our gardens, “the phenomenon of illegal migration can be reasonably described as structurally embedded” (Baldwin-Edwards 2008:1457). In other words, an economic dependence is accompanied by a social and political exclusion of the workers filling that demand.

As the economic crisis of 2008 clearly demonstrates that neoliberalism does not reject government intervention in economic affairs, but rather government intervention on behalf of the working class and minorities. The role of government under this neoliberal regime has been to promote, enhance, and facilitate the growth of corporate and financial sectors, while limiting support for

social services, education, health and welfare. The societal effects of this have led some to call neoliberalism predatory capitalism. (Rocco 2010:41)

Illegality thus also produces a docile workforce that is constantly being monitored, under constant fear of deportation, stripped of all rights. The state, thus complicit in the presence of undocumented workers, “reinforces the moral case for amnesty” (Carens 2010:28).

The criminalization of illegal workers has furthered a social environment in which illegal migrants are scapegoated, attacked, insulted and stripped of their basic rights as human beings. Hunting for illegals, a sport in armed civilian militias, would be unthinkable if it were not for the public criminalization of undocumented people. Criminalization of the migrants and an increase in enforcement has raised deportation and promoted the growth of the prison industry. (Green 2009:334). According to Koulish (2010), detention numbers have increased three-fold since 1990 and the detention industry is undergoing a boom.

Immigration detention is the fastest growing prison population in a country that has the highest incarceration rates (Koulish 2010:52). Illegal immigrants are therefore subdued, excluded, constantly threatened with deportation, and imprisoned.

The construction of private detention centers in the U.S. has grown exponentially, and Green (2009:337) speculates that if those prisoners “working on the chain gangs are migrants, who in a perverse Orwellian twist, have replaced themselves at a much lower wage, even as they await deportation for their “crime”: the refusal to be disposed of.”

In the end it comes down to the tension between economic interests and the politics of national membership and identity (Wong 2006). The issue is also a question of hierarchies of values: should capital be at the service of labor, or labor at the service of

capital? (Heyek 2008:438). Temporary migrants and particularly day laborers, fulfill an essential role in the neoliberal world. The rise of informal work and unregulated markets demands subdued, disciplined and preferably rightless members who perform at minimal costs and without complaining. Capitalism as an economic system works best when workers are used as objects, as commodities. As Max Frisch said in the context of rising anti-immigrant sentiment during the wave of guestworkers arriving in Germany, “We asked for workers, and human beings came.” Free flow of capital and the now-militarized restriction of human flow is a quintessential element of the neoliberal economic system (Nevins 2007; Varsanyi 2009). The commodification of parts of society disregards the social needs of immigrants as human beings. Excluded from society, “they have been stripped bare of their dignity and humanity, they also have become easy victims of sovereign impunity. (Koulish 2010:69)”

### **Violence**

The commodification and criminalization of workers carries an inherent violence that is played out in workers’ bodies and minds. How ironic— those who society and the law discredit as “criminals” are being subjected on a daily basis to multiple acts of violence by the state, the law, their employers and neighbors. Their only crime is to have crossed the borders “sin papeles” (without papers) to help their families, like many immigrants did before them. Illegality pushes many immigrants further into the shadows. Green (2009:335) compares their rightless and inhuman working conditions as “reminiscent of the black sharecroppers.” Migrants’ human rights are being ignored by law makers and the public (Sladkova 2010:41) in this country and often in their country

of origin. Maybe the “human” in human rights does not apply to the workers laboring in our farms or streets, or maybe the right of survival and a dignified life, the right for economic survival is not included in the rights of “humans.”

Of all immigrants, day laborers have a particularly difficult role to play in the economic and social landscape of their communities. Illegality permeates the space they occupy. Day laborers have to satisfy two contradictory demands in the social space where they encounter the dominant society in a subordinate position. The violence of having to simultaneously be visible to find a job and invisible in the eyes of the law creates an inner tension that is infused with violence. This inner tearing of the workers’ presence, visible and invisible, violates his or her integrity and well-being. Deportation looming always as a threat in the air not only destroys their dreams, it kills the dreams of entire families for a better life, for education, for adequate medical treatment. Brosman et al. (2009) shows in a PBS Frontline report the effects of deportation on the family of a Guatemalan worker caught in the raid of the Postville meatpacking company in Iowa: despite hard work, he is almost unable to pay the interest on the loan he received to cross north, his family’s house is at risk of being taken away and gone are all the options to get his mother’s cancer treated. Deportation destroys not only dreams; it destroys real and material necessities for survival.

Violence is experienced by day laborers on many levels: the distance and yearning for home and family, the paralyzing fear of deportation, the exclusion within the communities they live, the economic violence of living in deprivation, poverty, often hunger, and the physical pain of hard labor. Violence has never left the lives of these indigenous Mayan migrants. Violence permeated their lives in their home countries: war,

gangs, poverty, and the violence of no opportunities. Changes brought about by rapid globalization have created “an atmosphere of chronic distress and anxiety in many indigenous communities, expressed in acute levels of trauma, fear, psychosomatic symptoms, substance abuse, and domestic violence” (Foxen 2007). “New” violence in Guatemala is associated with a rise in narco-trafficking, gang violence, and a corrupt judicial system where impunity is still prevalent (Smith et al. 2010:4). According to Lopez (2010:34), in 2009 alone, 6,451 violent deaths were registered, compared to a yearly average of 5,500 during the armed conflict. Violence accompanied these migrants on their path to the north. In the first six month period in 2010, more than 11,000 migrants were kidnapped (Castillo 2011). Gruesome killings of migrants by local gangs have in recent years horrified the world.

The separation of families and longing for loved ones inflicts an inner level of suffering that is mentioned by many day laborers. Costs and risks of circular migration make this impossible for Guatemalan day laborers (Brownell 2001). The dangers, risks and unknowns of their destination rule out the option of bringing their wives or children with them, reducing their presence in this country to themselves, as individuals cut off from their families. For Green (2009:334), the distance to kin and place also brings along the inability to organize and change conditions at home. She calls it the “integrity of face-to-face relations, the crucial basis of organized collective struggles” (Green 2009:334).

Day laborers live consciously with fear—fear that is produced by immigration policies, but also fear of the unknown when picked up by an unknown employer going to an unknown place. The vulnerability of workers due to the lack of basic legal protection makes employers “often take advantage of such laborers’ undocumented status via

nonpayment, underpayment, threat of deportation, and exposure to dangerous conditions” (Wakin 2008:425). One worker at the Herndon HOW did not want to ride with one of the employers because he had asked him for sexual favors. According to Herrera (2010:27), the day labor corner is one of the preferred sites for immigration raids. In particular for the newly arrived, the fear of being deported and not being able to even pay off the debt is painfully present. Gomberg-Muñoz (2011:54) describes them as “indentured servants.” Fear also extends to their life away from the corner— fear in winter of not being able to pay rent, fear of getting sick and not being able to work, fear and anxiety of not being able to send remittances for the family to survive.

Violence also arises from the exclusion of these day laborers from the community they live in. Gyanendra (2006:190) describes this routine violence “practiced all along to constitute certain groups as majorities and others as minorities, to deny yet other groups even the status of minorities, and to create special targeted minorities that then live under constant suspicion of disloyalty.” The cruel and vitriolic language used in local blogs and during local town meetings or even by local politicians creates a violence of not being wanted, of being despised by people that do not even know you. These very public attacks on day laborers and the intolerance shown by some in the community, makes this type of violence not just insensitive to the feelings of others, it normalizes violence committed against others. One speaker during a hometown meeting compared day laborers to bird droppings while day laborers were present and a majority of the attendants clapping. Independently of one’s position on day labor issues, there should be no tolerance for this kind of speech. The unmet social needs of the migrant, the isolation,

being disconnected from the dominant construction of society, and being othered, also inflicts distress and anguish.

Exclusion from the dominant society makes day laborers rely heavily on men from the same Ixil-speaking communities. They are bound by language, common experiences of migration, common cultural and social reference points from the country of origin, and by legal status. According to Gomberg-Muñoz (2011:65), “the social circumscription of undocumented workers results in an increased reliance on fellow undocumented immigrants for aid and assistance.” Workers help pay other day laborers’ rent in tough months, refer them to fair employers and share information important for day-to-day existence. They also rely on each other for emotional support, in times of boredom and loneliness, some workers walk out to the corner to “chat” with others or sit on the front steps of the house to make small talk. I have observed men on the corner chatting, and laughing amongst themselves, thus helping each other to cope with the daily stress and with their social isolation from others in the community.

Day laborers’ distance from the English-speaking community arises from language and a broad social distance between both groups. As I have discussed in chapter 4, contact with the English-speaking community seems to be limited to the CBOs and church organizations that purposefully engage with the day laborers. Day laborers’ orientation in the United States tends to shift more to the Latino population. Contact is facilitated with this community by language, a major factor in communication, through their lived experiences as immigrants, but also through the common spaces they attend: shopping in ethnic stores, buying phone cards, sending remittances, going to church services and obviously the workplace. Social activities in public places during their free



time have slowly disappeared, as we have seen with the local soccer leagues. Moran-Taylor (2008:120) argues that contact with the Latinos influences the worldview of Guatemalan migrants, “they are the standard to which Guatemalans orient, at least with respect to real contact,” also indicating that contact with the “white folks” is very limited. Leo Chavez (1994) posits that even the most marginalized members of the community, such as unauthorized immigrants, develop community ties and a sense of settlement. Although I agree with Chavez that over time relationships are established, it seems that the path to relationships with the English-speaking community is long-drawn out. Many factors influence the difficulties of day laborers to enter a meaningful relation with members of the English-speaking dominant society: the anti-immigrant discourse so prevalent in the United States today is neither helpful nor supportive of these relations.

### **Agency**

Despite the incredible hurdles, the violence experienced in the past and continuously experienced, their subordination in the economic system, their erasure from political participation, these indigenous day laborers personify resilience and undeniable, compelling strength to continue fighting and finding their own “space” in this economic, social, and political system. Rather than staying home, with no opportunities to support their families and themselves, with no outlook for a better life, or even worse, rather than joining a local gang to make some fast money smuggling drugs or people, these Ixil day laborers have chosen a difficult and dangerous way to move forward. The path of migration is characterized by hard work, struggle, loneliness, and sacrifice. It is, however, also a path with moral standing: a path that follows the guiding principles of the dignity

of work and labor. Refusing to accept their fate, their decision to migrate shows that all these men resist the structural conditions of inequality and discrimination they have been born into, and show tremendous agency in moving north. If one considers that even in this day and age, 2% of the Guatemalan population owns 80% of the arable land (Green 2009:331), and poverty rates in the indigenous population hover around 75 % (World Bank 2009), the hurdles these men face are significant. Through transnational migration they take charge of their own destinies and actively participate in shaping of their own lives and identities.

The active resistance and protest towards their conditions expressed in the form of migration counters the image of indigenous people as passive victims and docile workers. In a study of Mexican indigenous labor in Mexico's neoliberal agriculture industry, Martinez (2004:221-225) attributes this image of docility to the historical subordination of indigenous people in colonial and postcolonial periods and erases a "long history of political activism in the San Quintin Valley. Indigenous workers are constructed as more docile, frugal, and patient, and this justifies lower salaries and worse living conditions. (Martinez 2004).

In the neoliberal system, a docile and disciplined worker is a preferred worker, but despite the structural restraints Ixil day laborers experience, they push this docility by not accepting just any job on the corner, refusing very low offers, sharing information with other workers about bad employers, taking a day off in the week to learn English, fighting to recoup lost wages, helping to organize workers and actively resisting the image of the illegal by standing on the corner on a daily basis, participating in community

events, dressing like other young Americans, and learning how to navigate the inadequate transportation system to see the 4th of July celebrations on the Washington Mall.

Day laborers, as well as other undocumented immigrants, resist the discourse of illegality by being active participants. We only have to look at the protest and organizing efforts of Latino undocumented youth fighting for their right to attend state universities at state tuition after having attended local high schools in the United States (also known as the Dream Act). Immigration mobilizations in the spring of 2006 also showed the agency of undocumented immigrants, to come out of the shadow to engage and counter the discourse about their legal presence, the slander of their character as immoral and criminal and their motivations for being in this country (Chavez 2007). Immigrants resisted the discourse that depicts them as a threat to the country and millions of undocumented (and documented) immigrants filled the streets in different cities of the United States. The general strikes and nationwide protests revealed, according to Koulish (2010:76), “a potential threat to the immigration control narrative.”

### **Our Response / Our Involvement**

Independently of political and philosophical orientation and stands on migrant day labor, issues that have been and continue to be dividing and highly controversial need to be discussed in a contextual framework. No social or political issue can be critically discussed in isolation. It is astounding how little people in the community know about the lives and background of these workers. Their main language is not Spanish? They are not Mexican? They speak an indigenous language? Many, however, have strong opinions about their presence and are not afraid to voice them. When we see day laborers on the

street, our first thought might not be to inquire about the forces that push more and more people out of their countries for a better life. Civil wars, militarization of rural areas, trade agreements, economic policies and an adherence to a neoliberal economic philosophy have left countries in Central America in economic disarray. Migration is for many families the way out of poverty. Neoliberal policies have produced a surplus of workers in developing countries that in turn fill the low wage jobs these same policies have created in the United States.

The story of migration in Guatemala cannot be told without mention of U.S. actors: undocumented migration is not a historical accident, it is, according to Gomberg-Muñoz (2010), the result of uneven economic development, the existence of links and social networks between immigrant-sending and immigrant-receiving communities, and policies that “restrict legal entries to unrealistic levels” (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011: 39). The obvious demand for cheap labor, be it in California or Florida farms, in construction all over the country, for cleaning and landscaping services, also implicates U.S. employers in the existence of undocumented migrants. Day labor brings the issue of demand to the front. It is unambiguously clear: no demand, no day laborer. Krissman (2001) argues that we always speak about undocumented immigration as a supply-problem, but don’t discuss our responsibility in the undocumented immigration waves.

It is also all of us in the US that are responsible for continued undocumented migration from Mexico. Our government representatives ignore employers that violate US immigration, labor, and health and safety laws. And, we consumers demand inexpensive fresh produce, but do not want to think about the conditions under which these commodities are produced. We do not insist on a higher standard of human and labor rights, not even in our own country (Krissman 2001:17)

The rage and highly charged nativist discourse around undocumented workers has spiraled into inflammatory expressions of hate. During the last State of the Union address, one of the Republican members broke the decorum by calling the president a liar, when discussing the non-eligibility for undocumented under the new Health Care Reform Law. Joining the anti-undocumented discourse, politicians are sure to profit in elections. Ordinances against undocumented immigrants have been rising, one state trying to trump the state before it in the harshness and inhumane treatment of migrants. Even ethnic studies have been voted out of the curriculum in Arizona. Alabama is the latest state to proclaim an anti-immigrant law: a controversial law going into effect in September 2011 that requires schools to report the immigration status of students (Associated Press 2011). Politicization of immigration has increased vulnerabilities of immigrants in particular and Latinos in general to discrimination and hate crimes (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011:36). Washington, D.C. has seen a 70% rise in hate crimes against whites and Latinos over the last year (Madden 2011).

Looking at the Ixil migrant day laborers and their daily struggle to find a job, work hard, and help their families, the rage and hate are almost incomprehensible. Why are they so despised and hated? We have to find the answer in our own vulnerabilities and insecurities, our own fears of the future. Scapegoating others might be an easy solution, in particular if we are accusing people that have no legal recourse in our society. Anti-immigrant legislation at its core is a reflection of a debate on and anxiety about American identity and perceived threat to middle class status (Brettell and Nibbs 2010:1). In suburban America, a recession, the falling real estate market, the loss of confidence and money on Wall Street that has decimated retirement plans, and the possibility of the

American Dream not coming true as in previous generations, has created middle-class anxiety and fear. Adherence to the law, being a law-abiding citizen has become the quintessential element of being morally right and deserving. Undocumented migrants violate this law by their mere presence on the corner. This has particularly played out in suburban areas. Suburbia is a symbolic place for middle class culture and identity. The “infiltration” of migrant newcomers into these suburban communities has been linked to the eroding sense of a promising middle class and has generated an anti-immigrant backlash in areas like Herndon, and Prince William County. Immigrants have been constructed as a threat to the middle class identity:

Rule of Law has been elevated in new citizenship test discourse, alongside a shared language and history, as one of the three fundamental pillars of what makes America American. At the local level immigration debates, Rule of Law has become the personification of Americanism, and hence inviolable (Brettell and Nibbs 2010:17).

For Knapp (2008:131), suburbanization is defined as a rejection of community, a retreat from community. Community is here understood as including the less fortunate, the needy. In Knapp’s view (2008), suburban citizens escape the world of poverty and the world of the less fortunate in the city. The appearance of less fortunate on their turf might make them uncomfortable, making inequalities visible that they are not ready to digest.

Politicians, right wing media and more and more regular citizens blame undocumented migrants for the ills of this country. Not too long ago, in June 2011, Senator McCain without producing evidence blamed illegal documents for setting the fires that burned over 700,000 acres of forest in Arizona. In the economic downturn, illegal migrants or just foreigners take our jobs. A Frontline PBS documentary interviewed farmers in the San Joaquin valley, who asserted that they were looking for

workers and no American would apply for the back-breaking jobs in the fields. When confronted with the idea of paying higher salaries so that American workers would be interested, the farmers said, Americans don't want to pay more for their food. The new company awarded the pool service contract in our Virginia neighborhood has predominantly hired young foreigners from Poland and the Ukraine through a work-summer program that allows foreign college students to work in the United States.

Mothers were complaining how difficult it was in this economy for our own high school kids to find jobs and that they should have had the first pick. Last year's company that lost the bid this time around hired local high school kids. Why do we think did this new company outbid the last one? I can only assume that they were more price-competitive. In a global economy the lowest bidder gets the job. These two examples show that the downward pressure on salaries and the pressures to have unregulated businesses demand cheap labor, on the one hand, but are also a result of our life style of consumption. How complicit are we as consumers in the plight of American and foreign, legal or illegal workers? How complicit is our government (and thus we) in the consequences of our foreign policies, our economic policies and treaties (see CAFTA, NAFTA), and our immigration policies that mark people as illegals meanwhile needing their services to protect our lifestyle?

### **What Can be Done?**

One thing is clear: given a choice, day laborers and other migrants would rather stay home and live with their families. As individuals, the actions we can take to influence policy and structural conditions in and outside the United States might be more

limited. However, it is on the local level where we can counter the discourses of othering and make face-to-face experiences with these workers. The move towards exclusion can only be countered by citizens trying to engage, include, and connect with these human beings on an individual level or through community organizations. We can also take an active stand against hateful speech against immigrants and not just sit as bystanders when politicians, neighbors or friends make disparaging comments about the “illegals.”

With many migrants not being naturalized or being undocumented, they lack the political voice to make changes, and to protest unfair laws. CBOs and we as individuals can play the role of advocates for those in need of a voice. We can vote for better workplace protections, for adequate minimum wage laws, for regularization of the informal and casual labor sector. As citizens we can also pressure our politicians to issue a realistic number of visas for the existing demand and push for immigration reform that would allow many long-term undocumented to lead their lives in a dignified way and allow others to find a path for inclusion.

Workers’ Centers have ultimately proven to improve basic work conditions for day laborers, secure minimum wages and workers’ safety, and provide basic services such as ESL classes and citizenship courses. Workers’ centers can increase transparency and help eliminate the rampant abuses day laborers undergo on a daily basis (Mitnik and Halpern-Finnerty 2010:62).

### **More Research Needed**

The goal of this project was to bring out some of the perspectives and lived experiences of indigenous day laborers in Northern Virginia. Despite the fact that I have



been working with day laborers for the last five years, this dissertation cannot incorporate the complexities of their experiences. Future research into the role of religion in migrants' incorporation into new communities, changes in their religious identities and the role "religious citizenship" has on their social relationships can give us better insights into their identities. Workers lean on their faith, find solace and strength in their relations with their church. However, religion is also fracturing the day labor community into groups of evangelicals and other Christians, and this seems to have negative consequences for the organizing efforts of workers. How workers engage with evangelical churches in their new communities, whether they bring their evangelical orientation from their home communities where evangelism has grown strong over the last decades, or engage or are engaged into evangelical churches once in Virginia should be explored further. Of particular interest would be to look at differential political and economic worldviews that might be driving a wedge between groups of different religious affiliations.

The complete absence of women on the corner, their secluded way of living, and their very reserved personalities has made it difficult to engage with the few women in the community. I estimate that there are fifty to sixty day laborers on this particular corner and from workers' accounts the Ixil community might only be composed of six to eight women. Women in contrast to men, continue wearing their traditional indigenous skirts "traje," an indication that they might feel less pressure than the men to dress like Americans and fit in. Research into how gender will shape the community's experiences, particularly in light of the first children that have been born, could give us insights into changes and strategies of adaptation in these families. Due to the seclusion of women and

their reticence to speak to “outsiders,” valuable insights can only be gained on a long term basis, earning the trust of these women.

As a language instructor, preservation of language and linguistic changes has always been of interest to me. It has been fascinating to watch these workers overwhelmingly speak their Mayan language, although in a heavily Latino area it might have been easier to “fit in” speaking Spanish. Language is a significant marker of their identity, and might be used in this context to consciously differentiate themselves from the rest of the Spanish-speaking Latino community. This stands in contrast to Moran-Taylor’s (2008:120) observations in Guatemalan communities in Los Angeles where indigenous language drops quickly.

### **Final Thought**

It is important to understand that our historical/ military involvement in Central America, specifically in the northern highlands of Guatemala, has directly or indirectly created a situation that forces people to move, that our economic policies of subsidizing corn in this country takes away their livelihood at home; to understand that these day laborers are the same people we admire as tourists in the highlands of Guatemala for their colorful textiles and abilities to create intricate designs; to understand that their lives are linked to ours and their well-being is our well-being. It is important to know that these workers’ lives are being marked by the laws we create and to realize that our behavior as citizens, voters, consumers, travelers, bears consequences.

Although a discussion on Central American migration to the United States cannot circumvent a discussion on the structural, political and global factors influencing the

voluntary departure of workers to other countries, the focal point of this dissertation is the smallest element in this complex structure: the migrant. By analyzing the lived experiences of these workers on the corner, I try to show the motivation, experiences, thoughts, and desires of these young men and how, despite their marginalized position in society, their spirits survive. It is also my objective to de-criminalize these workers, show their humanity and spirit and do away with their image as threats to our homeland security or violent gang-members, as recently portrayed in the Arizona elections. They are sons, fathers, cousins, brothers who month after month try to help their extended families to survive, to get medical attention, to go to school. Living in incredibly difficult conditions, these workers exemplify the strength of the human spirit and the sacrifice human beings are able to undergo for their loved ones. Blaming them for our problems is to have a very myopic view of problems we have to confront on a global level. In a globalized world, we need to support /fight for human rights independent of nationality, we have to protect the marginalized, create structures that protect workers and pay them a decent salary. And we must make conscious political decisions to minimize the damage we can do through our policies to other human beings.

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