

## **Racial geographies and the challenges of day labor formalization: a case study from San Diego County**

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Recent debates surrounding immigration in the United States have brought renewed attention to day laborers. In their search for employment, day laborers temporarily occupy public and quasi-public spaces. The visibility of day labor and the appearance of day labor hiring sites raise new questions about public space and its ‘proper’ use. The establishment of a new day labor hiring site often creates a locational conflict. Creating formal spaces for day labor congregation is the current ‘best-solution’ for controlling day labor and eliminating community conflict that often surrounds informal day labor hiring sites. Drawing on an ethnographic research project at a formal day workers’ center in San Diego County, the paper shows how the effectiveness of formalization efforts is highly dependent on the particular geographies of day labor in a neighborhood. Our overall argument is that racial categories and processes of racialization that are part of the geographies of day labor impact the effectiveness of formal day labor sites. Moreover, it is argued that processes of racialization often work to promote conflict and/or cooperation among day laborers themselves and between day laborers and employers.

**Keywords:** day labor; labor geography; community conflict; race

### **Introduction**

Recent debates surrounding immigration in the United States have brought renewed attention to day laborers – people who engage in informal and temporary employment in sectors such as construction, landscaping etc. While not necessarily the case, day laborers are typically portrayed as undocumented workers by the media and as ‘illegals’ by extreme anti-immigrant groups (for example, see recent documentary films such as *Farmingville* (2004) and *The Invisible Chapel* (2007)). Overall, day laborers and day labor conflicts have become one of the

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most visible faces of the ongoing immigration debate. Yet, the growth of day labor and the expansion of day labor hiring sites into almost every metropolitan area and all regions of the United States (Valenzuela *et al.* 2006) are important to geographers for reasons outside of the immigration debate.

The visibility of day labor and the appearance of day labor hiring sites raise new questions and debate about public space and its 'proper' use. The establishment of a new day labor hiring site often creates a locational conflict – a conflict over the right to space (Mitchell 2003). The community tensions and conflicts created by day labor are disputes over which spaces, if any, day laborers have the right to occupy. Day labor conflicts are diverse, and communities and municipal governments negotiate day labor conflicts in different ways. Hiring sites exist in different geographic settings (e.g. neighborhoods with different residential demographics or character), and different settings involve many stakeholders (e.g. day laborers, local residents, business owners, law enforcement). The relationships between settings and stakeholders are also complex and dynamic; therefore, no single solution exists to the problems that arise around a day labor hiring site.

Day labor researchers and labor advocates argue that formalizing space for worker congregation, with a formal structure for job distribution, access to restroom facilities, and other amenities, is the most comprehensive solution currently available (Camou 2002; Valenzuela *et al.* 2006; Crotty 2007). We agree that formalization *is* the most progressive and successful method for regulating day labor. However, the way that the formalization process takes place has significant implications for the success of the hiring site. The physical, social, and bureaucratic situations of a formal hiring site are crucially important to consider during the formalization process. It is also important to understand how changes in the physical and social environment of the surrounding area may affect the hiring site.

To illustrate these points, we examine the micro-geographies of a formal day labor worker center in San Diego County, California (Figure 1). Micro-geographic studies focus on the details of groups' *lived* spatial experience, the daily spaces in which most personal and group interactions take place, or what Percy-Smith and Weil (2000) call 'encounter spaces.' Power relations between people within such encounter spaces create 'microcultures,' understood as "flows of meaning which are managed by small groups of people that meet on an everyday basis" (Wulff 1995, p. 65). The small groups of people who must manage flows of meaning around day labor sites are stakeholders in each locational conflict.

Located in the margins of Pacific Beach (PB), a middle to high-income community, the Pacific Beach Worker Center serves between 25 and 45 laborers each day.<sup>1</sup> Approximately half of the laborers who use the



Figure 1. View of the Pacific Beach Employment Center. The sign shown here is not visible to most drivers on Mission Bay Drive. Photograph by Sean Crotty, October 2005.

workers' center are non-Hispanic – the highest percentage of non-Hispanic laborers at any day labor site in San Diego County. However, the laborers who use the PB worker center are similar to laborers throughout San Diego County, Southern California and nationally in that more than 98% are males and nearly 90% are between 18 and 50 years old, and nearly all have annual incomes which place them below the federal poverty threshold (Valenzuela *et al.* 2002, 2006). This paper is based on data we collected for a larger research project on day labor and community conflicts in San Diego County which took place from October 2005 to April 2006. We draw from a series of participant observations at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center and a set of informal, semi-structured interviews with day laborers and other stakeholders around the site. Because our principal study subjects (the day laborers) are members of vulnerable populations and we do not want to contribute to their further marginalization and victimization, we use pseudonyms for their individual names throughout the paper.

Our main intention in this paper is to describe race and class as intertwined social relations at this formal workers' center as a way to examine how such social relations relate to conflict and cooperation among day laborers who seek employment at the site.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, we wish to contribute to the geography literature on race and urban space

and to provide a critique of the process of day labor formalization from a geographic perspective. Our approach is consistent with current human geography research that conceptualizes racial categories, economic relations, and even urban space as social processes (Pulido *et al.* 2005). We argue that racial categories and processes of racialization (i.e. how racial meaning gets attached to different phenomena), which are part of the geographies of day labor impact the effectiveness of formal day labor sites. Moreover, we contend that processes of racialization often work to promote conflict and/or cooperation among day laborers themselves and between day laborers and employers.

### **Geographies of day labor and community conflict**

According to Pulido (2006), the United States as a nation has been defined in explicitly racial terms. Race and class are so closely tied to one another in the United States 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. In other words, the emergence of an informal day labor hiring site draws more negative attention in affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods than in neighborhoods with a larger minority presence (Crotty 2007).

In a study of day labor conflicts throughout the United States, Esbenshade (2000) argued that day laborers' visible minority presence was the primary cause of conflict in the majority-white, suburban communities in which they sought work. She argued that all-day labor conflict was in essence an attempt by white suburban residents to remove the visible presence of minorities. Esbenshade's analysis shows that community groups opposed to day labor are not simply opposed to the traffic, environmental or other problems that arise from laborers' use of public space. The attempts of community groups to remove the visible presence of day laborers are also about the workers' symbolic impact in the communities' public spaces. The presence of day laborers in the suburbs of America forces a minority presence into the traditionally minority-free, symbolic American landscape of suburbia (Meinig 1979). Therefore, the conflicts caused by day labor are about much more than proper uses of public space. Day labor conflicts are battles for material and symbolic inclusion in America, and therein is the most significant challenge to day labor formalization efforts. For many, creating a day-labor worker center in a community is tantamount to formal acceptance of poor, minority presence in that community.

### **Day labor workers' centers as marginal spaces**

Because the establishment of formal day labor centers is fraught with conflict, it is not surprising that day labor centers often end up situated in marginal urban spaces that render them almost invisible to the rest of society. This de facto invisibility is at odds with the geographic requirements for a successful worker center. The importance of the location of a workers' center to its effectiveness cannot be understated. A successful day labor workers' center must be visible and easily accessible to both employers and laborers (Valenzuela *et al.* 2006). Day laborers who seek employment informally depend on 'selective visibility' to gain advantage over other laborers (Crotty 2007). That is to say, informal laborers seek to make themselves as easily visible and accessible to potential employers, while avoiding attention from those who are unlikely to hire them. Therefore, in an ideal situation, a day labor worker center should be situated such that it is as visible and easily accessible to potential employers as is a competing informal location. A workers' center should also be accessible for the laborers themselves. Many laborers have limited resources to use for travel to and from a job site. If a workers' center is not located such that it is convenient to public transit, many laborers will choose to continue seeking employment informally.

However, worker centers often occupy marginal urban spaces. It is argued here that the de facto invisibility of existing workers' centers is a result of the liminal space (a space in between) that day laborers occupy in the contemporary social geographies of American society. Our analysis of the Pacific Beach Worker Center in San Diego focuses on two main points that relate to this conceptual statement. We first examine how the overarching social geography of San Diego becomes entangled in place to create a particular micro-geography of day labor at the Pacific Beach Center. Second, we illustrate how this place-specific social geography – a context where people of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds come together – affects actions and opportunities of day laborers seeking work in Pacific Beach.

### **The Pacific Beach Workers' Center: (in)visibility in the landscape**

It would be difficult to find the Pacific Beach Work Center without previous knowledge of its location. The physical and location characteristics of the site serve to render it virtually invisible to passing traffic on Mission Bay Drive, which is a four-lane road directly west of the hiring site. The workers' center is located on the northeast corner of Damon Avenue and Mission Bay Drive.

The center's offices consist of two pre-fabricated aluminum buildings, politely known as 'modular offices.' Each building is approximately 20 feet wide and 80 feet long. The buildings were painted dark brown previously,



Figure 2. Laborers relaxing at the center after-hours. Photograph by Sean Crotty, October 2005.

which camouflaged them against the sewage/drainage ditch located directly behind the workers' center. During the research period, the offices received a fresh coat of light blue paint. The buildings are still difficult to see from the south, which has less to do with the buildings' new color scheme than the vegetation that grows along the center's western edge. The waiting area is an extra-wide circular concrete driveway which prospective employers drive into to hire laborers.<sup>3</sup> The space offers few amenities that nonetheless make the time laborers spend waiting for employment less uncomfortable: several large trees shade the waiting area and raised concrete barriers that outline the driveway act as improvised seating.

Few official signs indicate the location of the workers' center. The closest sign for the center is about three-quarters of a mile away, with a directional arrow pointing in the general direction of the center. Yet, to enter the center, a day laborer or employer must make a right turn onto Damon Avenue, for which there is no official signage. The aforementioned sign simply reads 'Employment Center.' According to city government documents, the center was built for "the benefit of day laborers and employers within the community" (City of San Diego 1995). However, the city-approved sign contains no reference to day labor. Although it may seem a minor omission, the term 'Employment Center' does not draw the same negative attention as would an official sign reading 'Day Labor Workers' Center.'

The center uses three unofficial signs to better identify the site for potential employers. The most effective of the three signs is a temporary sign that the workers' center staff bring out during official operating hours (7am–3pm Monday through to Saturday). The sign is a bright orange octagon, similar to road construction signs. The sign reads 'Day Laborers Available.' Each morning the sign is placed just west of the employment center's driveway. From that position, the sign is visible far enough south on Mission Bay Drive that a potential employer could see it before s/he missed the turn onto Damon Avenue. The other two signs used at the site are also hand painted. The first is a small sign with black and white lettering located at the corner of Mission Bay Drive and Damon Avenue and identifies the site as a workers' center operated by a non-profit organization. This sign is hard to see because the space surrounding it is heavily vegetated. The second sign is by far the largest sign identifying the site. This sign is painted on the concrete wall between the site and the Rose Canyon drainage ditch (see Figure 1). Unfortunately, the sign is located much lower than the road it faces and is therefore relatively ineffective at drawing new employers to the site.

The Pacific Beach Workers' Center also experiences another kind of invisibility: bureaucratic invisibility. This invisibility impacts the effectiveness of the workers' center in both positive and negative ways. The wording of the city-approved sign is only one part of the invisibility of the site. The center is operated by SER-Jobs for Progress, a national non-profit organization. Other than the vague directional road signs for the employment center, there is no publicly visible connection between the city government and the employment center. The majority of the funding for the center comes from the city's social services budget, however, there is no mention of day labor within the budget itself. The city leases the 0.35 acre plot to SER-Jobs for Progress under a contract with the San Diego Housing Commission (SDHC) (City of San Diego 1995). The primary focus of the SDHC is helping low-income individuals and families find affordable housing. It does not typically deal with labor issues directly. There are two main advantages for the city to fund the PB Workers Center in an indirect manner. On the one hand, day labor is an attractive form of employment for many low-income, social service-dependent individuals; on the other, funding through a seemingly unrelated agency allows city officials to exercise some degree of control over day labor conflicts without much public scrutiny. As Camou (2002) underscored, a strength of indirectly sponsored workers' centers as a form of 'new governance' is their ability to exercise control in situations that are too controversial for direct government involvement. The popularity of this approach is evidenced by the fact that community organizations act as the lead operator at 68% of worker centers nationally, while only 12% of workers centers are directly run by city government agencies (Valenzuela *et al.* 2006).

Indeed, one of the primary functions of the center is social service provision. Drawing on Valenzuela's (2001) notion of survivalist entrepreneurialism, we argue that the primary function of the Pacific Beach Workers' Center is to act as a distribution center for 'survivalist welfare.' Several interrelated processes lead to the existence of survivalist welfare urban spaces such as the PB Worker's center. One key process is the tendency for municipal governments to switch from a managerial to an entrepreneurial mode of governance, which has been the case in San Diego (Harvey 1989; Chapin 2002). This includes neoliberal government reforms that effectively dismantle most social services. Yet the pro-business approach common to entrepreneurial urban governance depends on low-cost labor for growth, and therefore must keep its low-cost labor force *alive*. The Pacific Beach Center's role as a space of survival assistance is of equal importance as its role as a space of employment. The site provides a number of amenities that lower the cost of survival for homeless and extremely low-income laborers. These amenities include employment negotiation assistance and structure, clean water, food assistance programs, a toilet, a microwave oven, lockers, a television, and computer access. Perhaps the most important amenity that the site provides is a safe space for laborers, and homeless people, to occupy in an almost entirely privatized urban environment.

### **The social geography of the Pacific Beach Workers' Center**

Racial and class differences between day laborers and the residents of a neighborhood where a hiring site is located are the most significant factors for predicting community conflict (Esbenshade 2000; Crotty 2007). Pacific Beach is a middle to high-income, predominantly white neighborhood, and the laborers who seek work at the site are predominantly low-income minorities. One would therefore expect to find significant and ongoing conflict around the Pacific Beach Workers' Center.

However, the situation in this beach community differs from other suburban areas in San Diego in several ways. The most conspicuous difference is the presence of a visible homeless population in Pacific Beach. Residents and visitors to the neighborhood see homeless men and women along the beach boardwalk, sleeping in front of 'hookah bars' and 'retro clothing shops' along the main shopping thoroughfares, and panhandling at busy intersections throughout the community. Bikers along the Rose Canyon bike path race past makeshift shelters along the edges of the canyon. The homeless are identified by visual indicators such as clothing or particular actions in public spaces. Despite the relatively affluent residential population of the neighborhood, poverty and homelessness have been and continue to be a significant and visible part of the physical and social landscape. Local residents may not like the visible

markers of poverty within their neighborhood, but they accept them as part of everyday life in their chosen urban 'lifestyle zone' (Ford 2005).<sup>4</sup> In Pacific Beach, day laborers are not so easily identified in the landscape because of the hyper-visible homelessness population spread across the entire neighborhood. The day laborers at the workers' center would hardly stand out if their site was located on the boardwalk. From their marginal position on the eastern edge of Pacific Beach, in the shadow of an interstate overpass, day laborers are invisible to most of the residents of Pacific Beach.

In the context of the contemporary United States, day labor sites are commonly identified by the presence of Hispanic men in an area where Hispanics are a residential minority (Esbenshade 2000). This scenario is certainly the case in Pacific Beach, but the site's appearance as a day labor space is minimized by the racial diversity of the laborers who use the worker's center. As mentioned in the introduction, the laborers who use the center have the greatest racial diversity of any hiring site in San Diego (Crotty 2007). Two main factors cause this diversity. The first is the site's relationship with public housing residents. These residents must show proof they are seeking employment to continue receiving their subsidized housing. The center keeps records of employment seeking, which would not be available if the public housing residents sought work as informal day laborers. The majority of public housing residents are African-American men who live in downtown San Diego, several miles away from Pacific Beach and the workers' center. The second factor is the center's situation adjacent to an undeveloped portion of Rose Canyon. (Figure 4) A large number of homeless men, most of whom are white, live in the canyon. When these men exit the canyon they often hang around the site, taking advantage of the amenities offered at the center and occasionally seeking work.

At the workers' center, race is the language through which disputes are mediated, even though conflicts at the site have less to do with race and more to do with the needs that different groups of marginalized workers have for employment and survival. African-American laborers, for example, engage with the workers' center differently than Hispanic or white laborers, not because of their race, but because of their requirement to document their search for employment as beneficiaries of subsidized housing. The PB worker center is the only non-profit day labor center in the city of San Diego and it is located so far from these laborers' homes that the men must make a two-hour commute by public transit. This puts them at a disadvantage relative to other day laborers and sometimes pits them against Hispanic or white laborers at the site. Each group of men uses the site in different ways and to their advantage. This lays the foundations for conflict between the different groups of laborers; these conflicts are often expressed along racial lines.

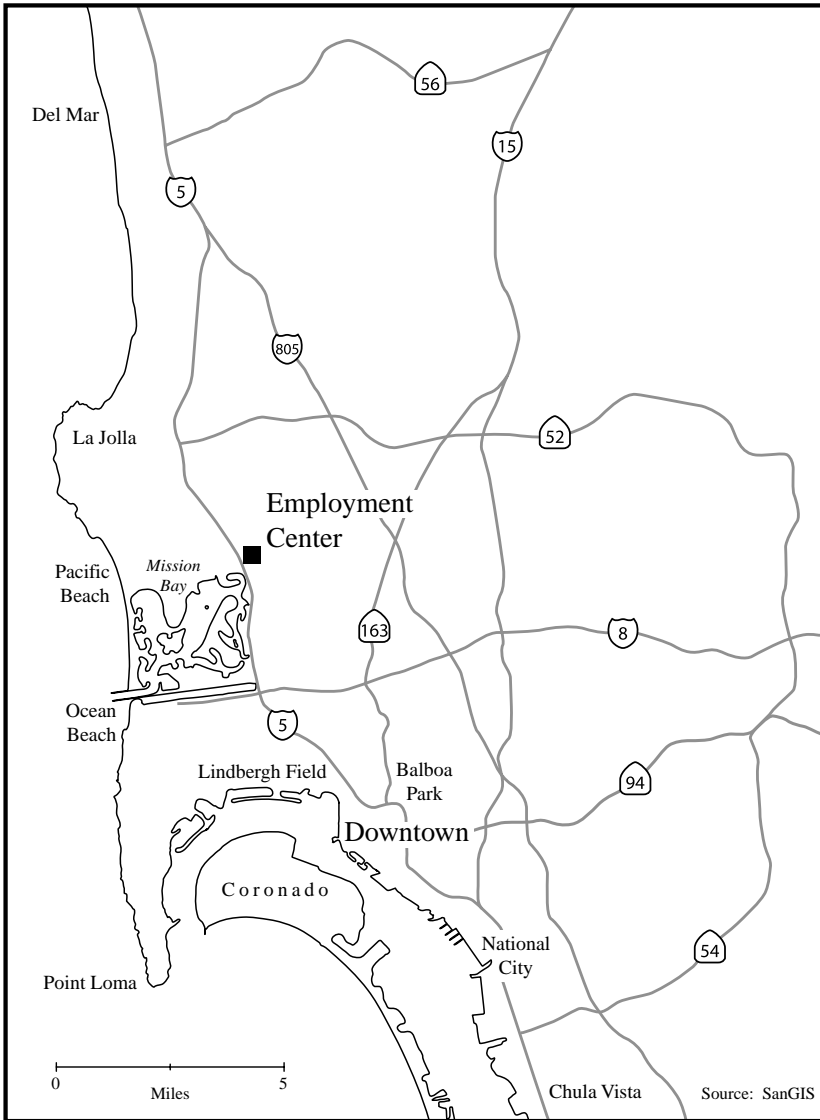


Figure 3. Location of the Pacific Beach Worker's Center. Image by Harry Johnson.

### **Race and conflicts at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center**

Laborers at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center identify themselves and talk about others in terms of three specific racial categories: white, black and Hispanic. The racial categories used by the laborers reflect the hegemonic ideology of race in the United States (Gramsci 1987; Pulido



Figure 4. Foot-path into Rose Canyon. Photograph by Sean Crotty, October 2005.

2006, 2007).<sup>5</sup> This hegemonic ideology of race structures most activities at the workers' center, but it is further complicated by their entanglement with other social relations and processes. Racial categories and structures are socially constructed, and their material effects on place are a result of the interaction between existing rules of race and the ability of an individual or group to mobilize resources that enforce or alter the existing structures (Giddens 1984). The existing structures of race are connected to class divisions as well. Historical forms of formal and informal racism laid the cultural foundation for the highly racialized class divisions found in contemporary US cities. Young (2000) maintains that although class position is defined first in terms of relations of production, class privilege is also supported by assets such as residence, social networks, and access to high quality education and to cultural supplements. The history of racism and segregation in the United States has created a landscape in which certain racial groups have limited access to the assets that collectively form class privilege.

The racial segregation of the waiting day laborers is immediately apparent at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center. National demographic data on day laborers show that the day labor population is nearly 99% foreign born and 84% undocumented, and that 98% of day laborers come from Mexico or Central America (Valenzuela *et al.* 2006). Of the 25–45 men seeking work at the Pacific Beach center each day, about 15–25 are

Hispanic, with the remaining 10–20 laborers split evenly between whites and blacks. Even if one were to assume that all of the Hispanic laborers were undocumented (which they are not), the laborers using the formal hiring site show a clear deviation from the day labor population nationally.

Both inside and outside the center, the day laborers typically congregate in racially homogenous groups of three or four while waiting for employment. The men in these groups are usually close friends and spend the majority of their waiting time with the same few people. The groups seeking work just outside the employment center are also segregated spatially by race. The groups remain 20–30 yards apart until a prospective employer drives up, at which point the racial and spatial order is abandoned as each individual vies for the employer's attention. Once a member of one of the small, racially homogenous groups is hired, he often negotiates the hire of one or more of the other group members.

Day labor conflicts do not only occur between laborers and non-laborer stakeholders. Similar to almost any other form of employment, conflict often arises between co-workers. At the workers' center, conflicts between laborers almost always occur across racial lines. Waldo Lopez, the Director of the Pacific Beach Workers' Center explained to us that negotiating differences between laborers of different backgrounds is the greatest challenge of his position. Racial difference impacts the hiring process and leads to underlying tension along racial lines; however, some of the conflicts between laborers that occur across racial lines and that are attributed to racial difference are really the result of the workers' center's geographic and social situation. For example, the workers' center is located at the southernmost access point to a section of Rose Canyon where many homeless people camp. The prevalence of drug and alcohol addiction among homeless populations is well documented (Dear and Wolch 1987; Hartwell 2003). The situation in Rose Canyon is even more severe, where nearly all the homeless residents are addicted to methamphetamine, crack cocaine, or heroin. The majority of the drug-addicted campers are also white. Through our field observations, we were able to ascertain that these particular laborers are the primary source of conflicts at the site and that their behaviors are the foundation for a racial stereotype connected to drug use and criminality.

Similarly, the majority of African-American laborers who use the site are formerly homeless men who live in public housing downtown. To maintain their housing benefits, they must sign in at the workers' center to formally record their search for work that day. After signing in, most of the African-American laborers choose to seek work informally outside the center. Laborers who 'follow the rules' and seek work within the formal space and job distribution structure in place at the workers' center have a negative opinion of the laborers who disregard the system and essentially cut in line. It should come as no surprise then that tensions increase when

an entire racial group appears to be cutting in line and stealing jobs. Laborers from public housing units in downtown San Diego who choose to seek work informally make their decision based on their probability of employment. None of the laborers living in public housing own vehicles. Therefore, they must take the bus from downtown San Diego to Pacific Beach every morning. The commute can take up to two hours depending on traffic, frequently causing those laborers to miss the 7 am morning lottery – the process through which hiring priority is established at the site. Laborers who arrive after the morning lottery are issued work numbers in the order they arrive starting after every man who was present for the lottery. If the laborers arriving from downtown chose to wait for their number to be called they would stand little chance of finding employment that day. An African-American laborer named Ray explained his decision-making process very explicitly to us:

I'd like to sit over there in the shade with the other guys, but over there I'm number 45. Over here I'm number one. I can't get here early enough to get number one over there, so I take it over here. (Fieldnotes 2006)

Conflicts between laborers tend to arise when an individual or group of laborers fails to follow some of the unwritten rules at the site. The most common and visible conflicts arise when someone litters, spits, drinks, does drugs, or otherwise disrespects the formal space at the site. These sorts of conflicts are always handled directly by laborers with a longer tenure at the site. These men take pride in the appearance and cleanliness of the site and have little patience for 'new guys' or 'bums' disrespecting their space. Longer-tenured laborers control their space by publicly shaming anyone who disrespects the site, often showing remarkable linguistic dexterity as they heckle those who drop litter with a combination of colorful profanity in both Spanish and English. If the violator does not clean up his own mess, the other laborers will quickly clean it up. The laborers have the option of reporting these types of violations to the site staff but often choose not to because they do not know the violator's name. If the violator were reported, he could be warned or sanctioned by the site staff. A sanctioned laborer is banned from getting work at the site and using the center's amenities. This punishment is more symbolic than effective because the site staff has no formal control over the informal market just outside the center. When laborers are sanctioned by the center, they simply seek work in the informal market a few feet away. The director of the Pacific Beach center believes that about half of the men seeking work informally outside the site on a given day do so because they have been sanctioned for misbehavior. During our time at the site we never saw an 'everyday' laborer disrespect the site. All of the violators were laborers who were new to the site. Very few choose to return after they have been publicly shamed by the site's everyday users.

**Racial difference, resources, and employment at the center**

The fortunes of each day laborer vary significantly each day. We found that during periods of very slow employment, conflict often arises when a laborer or group of laborers believes that another group of laborers is getting more work than his own. The reality of day labor work at the workers' center is that no one is getting very much work. On average, less than 10 men of the 25–45 who come to the site find work on a given day. Considerable racial bias distorts day labor hiring, but, at the site, men from each racial group believe that other groups have it better. The demographics and geography of the informal market outside the employment center combine to heighten the impression of racial bias in hiring at the site. For example, during our fieldwork, day laborers waited for work in racially defined clusters, and employers tended to hire multiple men from a given group of friends. When an employer was identified on Damon Avenue outside the center, all laborers from the informal market rushed to the vehicle to offer their services. All things being equal, the group closest to the vehicle had a much better chance of being hired, simply because they had less distance to travel to the car. This gives other laborers an opportunity to claim racial bias in hiring decisions.

During our time at the site, there were typically 10–15 non-Hispanic laborers at the site each day, half white and half African American. When two or three African-American laborers were hired for a job, it gave the appearance of bias because such a large proportion of those laborers found work. The appearance was the same when multiple white laborers 'went out' on the same day. It was not uncommon to hear rumblings from Hispanic laborers about "all the White guys went out" or "all the black guys went out." The majority of laborers at the site were Hispanic, and they received a slightly greater-than-proportional number of the jobs hired from the center. The large number of Hispanic laborers and their proportional success in finding work often left white and African-American laborers feeling like the odd men out.

The following excerpt from our fieldnotes provides another example of the kind of race-based hiring practices that take place at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center. The passage also illustrates the multiple ways in which individual laborers deal with racial prejudice:

One of the cars that came in actually refused to hire the Black guys that reached her window first looking for a job. She said 'Spanish speakers only' . . . the Black guys thought that was very funny, but apparently that is a fairly common practice at the site. There is one Black guy named Ray who sort of leads the rest of the Black guys, organizing them a bit, but mostly being a dominant conversationalist, and exuding a real confidence that most of the other laborers, of any race, don't show. He said that he respected her for being straightforward rather than skirting the issue and wasting his time. To that, the youngest of the Black guys said that she wasn't being

straightforward, to him straight-up would have been to say, in a sarcastic voice: 'I'm a fat, white, cracker-ass bitch and I don't hire niggers so get off my car'. (Fieldnotes, 28 January 2006)

From this individual case one cannot sufficiently argue that the particular employer's hiring decision was racially prejudiced. The African-American laborers who were passed over clearly did not believe that their language skills were the real basis for her refusal to hire them. However, the laborers' reactions to her hiring preferences do illustrate the habitual manner in which language is substituted for race in day labor hiring. Day-labor hiring decisions are always made informally, even within the formal structures of the employment center. Hiring decisions often involved a quick negotiation of wages, a brief discussion of specific skills needed for a job, and an employer's spot judgment of each available laborer. The standard wage at the employment center is \$10 per hour; laborers would almost never work for less than \$10 per hour, and employers rarely offered more. The majority of jobs hired from the employment center are low-skill, and all laborers are capable of performing the tasks, at least to the limits of their physical ability. The standardized nature of wage level and skill demands for day labor jobs served to reduce their importance for employers' hiring decisions. When wage and skills are removed from the hiring process, all that remains is the employer's spot judgment of the laborer's strength, intelligence, and ability. Inherent in these spot judgments are each employer's racial stereotypes, which lead to discriminatory hiring practices.

At the Pacific Beach Workers' Center, racial stereotypes have a much greater effect on hiring practice than any other factor – given the laborers' similarities in terms of age, gender, and class that we described earlier and that are common of day laborers nationwide. The racial stereotypes held by employers carry assumptions regarding citizenship, drug and alcohol use, honesty, and work attitude. During our fieldwork, for example, we observed that all Hispanics were assumed to be undocumented, despite the center's registration requirement that includes an identification check to verify a laborer's right to work. On the other hand, we also noted that Hispanics were also assumed to be honest, hard workers by the majority of employers who use the site.<sup>6</sup> African-American and white laborers were perceived to be drug users or alcoholics. Employers also considered drug users to be dishonest, dangerous, and to have a poor work ethic. Such stereotypes are substantial challenges for African-American and white laborers to overcome during a quick employment negotiation. African-American and white laborers were also assumed to be legal citizens. Employers often hired white men with whom they were clearly uncomfortable simply because they were concerned about hiring an illegal immigrant. Overall, the few positive attributes that are tied to racial

stereotypes become the primary form of human capital available to laborers.

A few other resources affected hiring and allowed individual laborers to overcome stereotypes and gain employment, and laborers at the workers' center often drew upon them. For instance, language as a base for hiring highlights one way in which language proficiency is often used during day-labor hiring to disguise or hide an employer's racial bias. Despite the fact that language proficiency was often coopted by employers for their own purposes, a laborer's language proficiency is an important resource. English proficiency is a particularly valuable skill for Hispanic laborers because it helps them overcome the assumption that they are undocumented immigrants. At the Pacific Beach Workers' Center the large majority of employers are monolingual English speakers. Therefore, a basic understanding of English gives Hispanic laborers the ability to negotiate directly with employers. Laborers who speak only Spanish require an interpreter for negotiation and are often misled or lied to by employers. In general, we found that English-speaking laborers suffered fewer workplace abuses than did Spanish monolingual laborers. The most common complaint from laborers at the PB Center is non-payment of wages, but also includes lack of breaks, lack of proper safety equipment, and verbal and physical abuse by employers. These types of workers' rights violations are a common problem for day laborers nationally as well (Valenzuela *et al.* 2006).

Similarly, a laborer's cleanliness is extremely important for his chances of employment:

When you hire somebody from this place you just want to get a hard worker. A guy who's got his shit together. If he can't keep himself clean how's he gonna work on the job? (interview with Adam, employer, 10 February 2006)

Many of homeless men who live in Rose Canyon are heavy drug users. Those laborers have no access to showering facilities and are often visibly dirty. Employers who hire regularly from the center are aware of this fact and can be meticulous in their examination of laborers personal hygiene as a result. During our fieldwork, we observed employers checking laborers' fingernails for dirt on several occasions and on one occasion we overheard an employer ask a laborer during a hiring negotiation to "show me your teeth." We assumed the employer was looking for early tooth decay due to alcoholism or methamphetamine use, although we doubt the employer was especially qualified to make such an analysis. Regardless of race, laborers who wear clean clothes and shower regularly have a much better chance of finding work than those who do not. Cleanliness is particularly important for African-American and white laborers, because a clean appearance allows them to overcome the drug addiction stereotype.

Laborers also draw upon material resources to increase their attractiveness to employers. Two particularly important resources were access to a vehicle and a cell phone. Ownership of a vehicle or a cell phone requires that laborers maintained a minimum level of income or savings, but very few laborers can do so because of the seasonal and sporadic nature of their employment. To overcome these obstacles, laborers often pool their resources. Through group cooperation, more men can maintain access to a vehicle despite the fact that most of the laborers do not own a car. Laborers with access to a vehicle are very attractive to day labor employers because they implicitly agree to pay for their trip home at the end of the work day.

A cell phone might seem too frivolous an expenditure for the average day laborer, yet the number of laborers who own cell phones at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center is surprising. A cell phone is not a social item for day laborers; instead cell phone ownership reflects an investment in repeated and long-term employment. When a laborer gives an employer his cell phone number, he provides the means to hire him directly for future jobs. During our time at the site no employer mentioned cell phone ownership as a basis for hiring a particular laborer. However, laborers who had cell phones almost all wore the phones on their belt loops. Several of the laborers who displayed their phones in this manner explained that they liked having their phones visible because cell phone ownership distinguished them from some of the 'bums' who also sought work at the site. In this way, laborers use phones as indicators of class or stability, similar to a laborer's cleanliness. Laborers believe that cell phone ownership helped their hiring chances, and as a result they tended to be more confident during employment negotiations.

Finally, day laborers at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center also drew on less tangible resources to improve their odds of finding employment. Geographers have argued that social networks and cohesion among different people are often fostered through emotional connections that are often tied to place (Bosco 2006). In Pacific Beach, workers develop inter-racial social networks through their shared struggle for employment, as well as through their time spent at the center. In effect, workers at Pacific Beach perform 'emotional labor' (Hochschild 1983) that nurtures social relations and also results in greater employment opportunities. The laborers who best exemplify the connections established through emotional labor in place are those with longer-tenure who help to control misbehavior at the site. These are the same workers who are most likely to assist on projects to improve the workers' center. During our fieldwork at the center, for example, the laborers repainted the offices and planted a vegetable garden. Through these types of projects the men develop a shared connection to place that in turn fosters the development of personal bonds between workers of different backgrounds. These personal connections are important because employers often rely on the opinions

of some workers to select others for a job. Therefore, men who spend a great deal of time at the center and are well-liked by other laborers have a better chance of being hired as the second man for a job if the first laborer hired counts him among his friends.

The director of the center also displays an emotional connection to the laborers and their survival. The primary function of the center is as a provider of survivalist welfare, as such, the director is invested in the welfare of the laborers. The primary mechanism through which he assists particular laborers is to exempt them from the morning lottery and give them low-hiring numbers if they are facing immediate need for income. Laborers who have not found work for a week or more and men who are only passing through are often given lower numbers to help them continue their journey, hopefully moving on to better or more consistent employment. The director also exempts workers from the morning lottery the day after they took part in improvement projects at the site. In this way, he encourages participation in site improvement projects through non-monetary compensation.

In sum, processes of racialization have very real effects on laborers' chances for employment at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center. Stereotypes held by employers are the primary form of differentiation between laborers, and racial categories (however they are constructed and used) become a key dimension for workers' chances for employment. Workers must then use what few resources they have at their disposal to overcome the negative associations that potential employers have regarding people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the manner in which laborers at the center utilize resources to give themselves an advantage in hiring decisions again illustrates how race and class come together in place to produce different employment possibilities and outcomes for different groups of workers.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper it has been argued that urban space, race, class and other social relations are crucially important for understanding day labor in the contemporary United States. At the Pacific Beach Workers' Center in San Diego, race, class, urban governance and broader relations of production and social reproduction come together in one place to create a particular micro-geography of day labor in an unlikely setting. The micro-geography of day labor at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center is somewhat remarkable for the insights it provides on the ways in which racial categories and process of racialization work to influence laborers' employment opportunities. The Pacific Beach Workers' Center is indeed unique because very few day-labor centers or informal hiring sites exist in San Diego that serve such a diverse population of workers. Most day labor hiring sites in the county, whether formal or informal, are more similar to the national

averages in terms of racial demographics (Crotty 2007). Despite the unique situation of the Pacific Beach Workers' Center, policy makers can apply lessons learned there to formalization efforts in other areas. The first lesson is the dual nature of visibility for formal workers' centers. The Pacific Beach Center is, to some degree, socially and physically invisible. Although the center does not attract many drive-by employers, it also does not attract negative attention that could jeopardize its long-term existence. Through this selective visibility, the center sacrifices some of its current effectiveness as a job distribution center to ensure its longevity as a provider of survivalist welfare. Nevertheless, the lesson of selective visibility is significant to all day labor workers' centers. One hallmark of neoliberal urban governance is the attempt to eliminate all public support for social services that help to keep the working poor housed, fed, and employed (Brenner and Theodore 2002). At the same time, neoliberal urban governance attempts to remove all visible traces of existing poverty from public spaces (Mitchell 2003). Within this philosophy of urban governance, it is unlikely that a highly visible, government supported workers' center would remain in existence for very long, regardless of the racial composition of the laborer population using the center.

The recent attention to immigration issues nationally has generated an upwelling of anti-immigrant sentiment in San Diego and many other areas throughout the United States. The current anti-immigrant climate has made public spaces especially dangerous for Hispanic day laborers, who are increasingly becoming the victims of anti-immigrant violence and hate crimes, regardless of citizenship status (Martinez and Valenzuela 2006; Valenzuela 2006). Although hate crimes of this type are unconscionable and represent a violation of the most fundamental human rights, they are a very real part of the daily conflicts faced by day laborers. Formalization of day-labor hiring sites can help mitigate such violence. For all the racism that laborers at the Pacific Beach Center face daily (and which formalization cannot eliminate), the formal structures at the Workers' Center are effective deterrents of would-be criminals who would like to make victims of the laborers for simply being Hispanic, black, white, or poor.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative tone that surrounds day labor and immigration debates in the United States, our account of social relations at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center is also instructive in terms of how communities can cultivate cooperation across racial and class lines. The socio-political cooperation fostered through the workers' center extends beyond the boundaries of the formal hiring site and into the larger business and residential community. Through their actions and long-term presence in Pacific Beach, the staff and laborers at the center have developed mutually beneficial relationships with area businesses and residential stakeholders. The center provides low-cost, dependable labor for area residents and businesses, and the laborers who use the center are

customers of area grocery stores, coffee huts, and fast-food establishments. The informal controls on laborers' actions put in place through the Workers' Center are also important for local commercial and residential stakeholders. These informal controls are particularly essential on Damon Avenue, where the owners of the three businesses located directly adjacent to the hiring site depend on the center to informally police the entire length of the street. Without the presence of the Workers' Center, the Hispanic and African-American laborers would no longer use the space for seeking employment, leaving only the white, drug-addicted men who camp in Rose Canyon and who are already the chief source of anti-social behavior at the site.

Finally, perhaps the greatest lesson that can be taken from the Pacific Beach Center is that stakeholders are more willing to work together when they are all dependent on a particular place for their survival. It would be wrong to portray the interactions between stakeholders in Pacific Beach as purely positive and cooperative. Rather, the situation at Pacific Beach illustrates an argument made by Young (2000) with regard to community cooperation and conflict negotiation:

Political co-operation requires less a substantial unity than a shared understandings or a common good . . . It requires first that people whose lives and actions affect one another in a web of institutions, interactions and unintended consequences acknowledge that they are together in such spaces of mutual effect. (p. 110)

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### **Notes**

1. This would be considered a medium-size hiring site according to the typology established by Valenzuela *et al.* 2006.
2. Throughout the paper, we refer to Day Labor Workers' Centers as either workers' center or formal hiring site. Workers' Center is the vernacular used most commonly by researchers and academics and refers specifically to formal centers that also provide some form of social services. We use the term 'formal hiring site' in addition to workers' center to help illustrate the legal geography of day labor and differentiate between formal and informal spaces of day labor.
3. Before laborers can seek work at the center, they are required to register and then sign-in on a daily basis. Employers are not required to register, although they are asked to provide contact information and a description of the job for which they are hiring on a voluntary basis. A staff member acts as an intermediary between laborers and employers (mostly translating), but all hiring decisions ultimately rest with the employer.

4. Urban geographer Larry Ford argues that San Diego neighborhoods are best understood as lifestyle zones. As such, each lifestyle zone is understood by the local San Diegan population to embody certain cultural values, which make that lifestyle zone distinct and different from other neighborhoods that may share similar physical or economic characteristics (Ford 2005).
5. From this point on, race and ethnicity will be treated as simply racial difference. This melding is not meant to discount the importance of ethnicity for day laborers; however, the language we use reflects the way that racial and ethnic difference is discussed and dealt with at the Pacific Beach Workers' Center. We use the terms 'African American', 'Hispanic', 'white' in our discussions of race at the workers' center. We do not alter the racial language used by the laborers themselves. As such, some of the language used by the laborers is rough and not politically correct, which is a reflection of the reality of day labor work.
6. Our argument regarding employers' stereotypes about Hispanic day laborers is based on a number of observations during our fieldwork. While most employers were reticent to discuss their basis for hiring or not hiring Hispanic laborers, their beliefs were often evidenced by their body language and conversations while hiring laborers. A pointed example of the stereotype regarding Hispanic laborers' citizenship status was the occasion in which one of us (who is a mid-20s white male) was offered a job, rather than any of the Hispanic laborers available because the employer "didn't want to hire any wetbacks" (Fieldnotes 2 February 2006). For a wider discussion of stereotypes and Hispanic immigrants, see Pulido (2007).

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