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‘Boots for my *Sancho*’: structural vulnerability among Latin American day labourers in Berkeley, California

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This paper addresses the structural vulnerability of Latin American undocumented day labourers in Northern California, as it is expressed in conversations on street corners where they wait for work. The intimate aspects of migrant experience become exemplified in jokes about the *Sancho* – a hypothetical character who has moved in on a day labourer’s family and who enjoys the money he sends home. Joking turns to more serious topics of nostalgia and tensions with family far away, elements that come together with the fears and threats of labour on the corner and affect the way day labourers see themselves. Sexuality is rearticulated in the absence of women and masculinity becomes enmeshed in the contingencies of unregulated work and long-term separation from the people the men support. Together, these elements result in the articulation of threat to the immigrant body itself, which is exemplified by anxieties over homosexual propositions on the corner.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants; masculinity; social vulnerability; Latin America; USA

Introduction

The first time I took a camera to the Berkeley informal day labour site, I spent a few hours with Luis (age 43), Clemente (34), Sindi (45) and Don Raúl (48) taking pictures and joking about how we looked and what people back home would say if they saw us. We all took turns posing for the photographs until Don Raúl suddenly extended his arms and called out: ‘Take it like this Tomás, I want to look big to scare off that *cabrón*’. Everyone laughed. The image is somewhat out of focus and Don Raúl’s eyes are closed, but it turned out to be one of the most memorable events of my two-year stint on the corner. The picture became a running gag for months and, even after Don Raúl left for Mexico a few weeks later, people came by to ask about *la foto del Sancho* and find out if he had really sent it home to scare off his *compadrito*.

It is not easy to explain who the *cabrón* – roughly bastard – that Don Raúl wanted to scare is. In fact, he only arises as a joke men use to pass the time while they wait for work. The *Sancho* is a ubiquitous and yet elusive character on the street, the man who has hypothetically moved in on a day labourer’s family, sleeps with his wife¹ while he is away in the USA and, in general, reaps the benefits of the money he sends home. He is also sometimes called *el compadre*, a quintessential Latin American term of fictive kinship that links the day labourer – or *jornalero* – to his *Sancho* through ties of reciprocity. In the same way that other people say ‘bless you’ when someone sneezes, *jornaleros* scream ‘*Sancho!*’ setting off a back-and-forth in which the interlocutors discuss what the

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compadre must be doing to their women or what he needs. 'He's taking her clothes off,' someone remarks. 'No, he wants you to send him some new boots,' corrects another. Or when asked if he was speaking to his *Sancho*, one man who was trying to call Mexico answered: 'I just want to know if he got the money I sent him . . . I just want to make sure he is taking care of her and that he is taking my kids out; maybe I'll tell him to take them to the movies.' The jokes are not always cheerful; Sindi, for example, clasped his hands one morning and begged his *Sancho*: 'Don't mistreat her; I'll send you the money as soon as I can.' 'Is your *Sancho* thinking of you?' I asked. 'Not thinking of me,' he corrected, 'beating my wife!'

'We say the *Sancho* is thinking about us when we sneeze,' explained Don Raúl enjoying my bewilderment the first time I heard them do this, 'we do it to joke around, *para no agüitarnos* [to keep our spirits up].' But the *Sancho*, a rather common Mexican trope about masculinity and the fear of cuckoldry, is both a joke and a reality for these migrants. 'We all have *Sanchos*, although not everyone likes to admit it,' Don Raúl said more seriously the day before he went home to a family he had not seen in five years, 'we all know they are roaming about, taking advantage of the women we leave behind.'

Migrant subjectivity

This paper explores the fractured subjectivities of a subset of undocumented Latin American migrant workers – middle aged urban day labourers – who come to Northern California without their families. I will centre on the intimate realm of these men's experience where their role as providers becomes central to their relationships with loved ones far away and contributes to a disarticulation of male identity that threatens their social and physical integrity. This experience, which includes lack of social contact with women in general and a constant sense of threat to the body itself, is the realm of the *Sancho's* influence; the intimate aspects of structural vulnerability for men whose physical distance from home has become embodied in the impossibility of reconciling the 'here and there' (Coutin 2005).

Understood as a specific positionality, structural vulnerability entails a contextual relationship of social and physical suffering between a person or social group, their history and the greater economic, social, political and cultural forces within which they are inscribed (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011). My focus here is not on the structural forces that render *jornaleros* a marginal population *per se*, but rather on the ways that this marginalisation affects them on a personal level. By way of the *Sancho*, I address three related aspects of the men's lives – family, sexuality and masculinity – in order to outline how the intimate realm of social existence erodes the relationships *jornaleros* hope to maintain through migration.

My research consisted of a two-year (2007–2009) ethnographic study of 25 day labourers between the ages of 35 and 55. I here address a smaller group of 10 men who had been in the USA for more than two years, worked on the corner for an extended period of time and who had left their families back in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. I spent long hours talking with these men and joined them on a few jobs (the economic downturn making it difficult to justify situations in which I effectively replaced anyone). I also conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with most of the *jornaleros* in these pages. A great majority of them are of urban extraction but the group was interspersed with men from rural areas.

Having grown up in Colombia in a bi-cultural household (my mother is what Latino migrants would call a *gabacha* or Anglo American, my ambiguous ethnicity – not quite a *gabacho*, not quite Hispanic – was solved with the equally vague term '*el colombiano*'). After all, I was the only Colombian around. At 31, I was close to many of the men in age

but considered still 'young' and inexperienced, because I was only expecting my first son. This facilitated talking about sex, family, children, the demands of fatherhood and women.

Day labourers in the USA share particularities with other migrant workers – isolation, marginalisation and informal and often dangerous work (Winnet et al. 2011) – but are furthermore characterised by being almost exclusively recent, male immigrants (Valenzuela 2003) whose work requires them to stand in plain sight for long periods of time (Esbenshade 2000). *Jornalero*'s precarious labour conditions make them especially vulnerable to accidents, employer abuse and, ultimately, poor health outcomes related to substance abuse (Worby 2007) and high-risk sex practices (Organista 2007). Ethnographic and other qualitative studies of day labourers have also called attention to the detrimental effects that these conditions have on the men's emotional stability and sense of self (Purser 2009; Quesada 1999, 2011). Pinedo Turnovsky (2006) has illustrated how the street corner emerges as a meaningful social space in *jornaleros* lives where they share and discuss many of these issues. My intent here is to explore the ways in which gender and family life become rearticulated on an intimate level and how they are talked about on the corner.

The multiple national and regional origins, along with the personal experience of each *jornalero* in Berkeley, make the site quite diverse. This is visible on many levels. Before migrating to the USA, some men worked in the fields, others in factories, restaurants and even department stores. One of them attended college for two years before dropping out to become a shoe salesman and then spent a few years as a door-to-door software salesman before leaving Guatemala. Similarly, things like taste in clothing, music and food are eclectic. One might hear Mexican *ranchera* music, ballads and Spanish pop discussed along with heavy metal or 1980s English language pop classics in a single conversation.

The site's diversity is also evident in discussions about sex and family, where *jornaleros* deploy different versions of what masculinity entails that range from traditional 'macho' attitudes of male supremacy and patriarchy to eclectic compromises that reflect contemporary and cosmopolitan images of gender roles and relations. In the same conversation, a *jornalero* might use hierarchical representations of gender difference such as keeping a woman in her place through physical violence and then turn to a younger man and explain that all relationships are based on negotiation and that partners in a marriage must have equal say for it to work. This complexity of gender representations is characteristic of contemporary configurations of masculinity in Latin America (Gutmann 2006) and furthermore affected by migration where traditional gender roles articulate in different socio-economic contexts. Among first-generation Mexican migrants, for example, many women feel greater freedom and autonomy as they enter the labour force and gain independence from the household, while men take up traditionally feminine activities like cooking and child care (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). For some, migration contributes to a reformulation of relationships with greater equality between partners while others try to reinforce more traditional structures (Smith 2005, 97). These changes not only occur in relation to the greater society immigrants are inscribed in but also within immigrant communities (González-López 2005) and across national boundaries (Stephen 2007). The case I present, however, addresses male immigrants whose distance from home has eroded the relational context between gender roles and ultimately left the men in an isolated social setting where they are threatened on many fronts.

The *Sancho* represents one of these fronts and exemplifies the complex configurations of meaning embedded in the immigrant experience. He is a threat to a *jornalero*'s masculinity (he takes men's wives, children, money and position in society) and yet embodies him in absentia. The *Sancho* emerges as a tension between the cultural representation of the fear of cuckoldry (Brandes 1980) and the reality of family and personal estrangement.

The *compadrito*'s playful character points to how *jornaleros* come to terms with this tension. Men never act jealous when talking about their *Sancho*; they address the issue with dark humour that touches on his ever pressing need for their money, his quasi-marital status to their wives and, to a lesser degree, his parental role for their children. Jokes become weapons of the weak (Goldstein 2003; Scott 1985) turned inwards; a space of resistance where absence from the family and its dangers turns into a personal relationship to the fear of loss itself. To 'care' for the *Sancho* – to keep him happy, well fed and clothed – allows men to vent their anxieties about what happens in their absence and to make light of the their families' expectations; but through the ties of kinship entailed in the term *compadre*, he also allows them to feel present and represented – 'the cuckold' notwithstanding – in a sphere of relations that is otherwise mediated solely by telephone calls.

The *Sancho* points to the various mechanisms by which poverty and exclusion become embodied in experience (Farmer 2002, 424); he makes light of dire realities, but also represents and personifies them. And while the conversations that follow might depart from direct references to the *Sancho*, his playful character remains in how the men discuss these issues. All jokes taunt interlocutors who nonetheless are addressing real sources of anxiety and desire that sometimes turn tongue-in-cheek banter into serious and heartfelt exchanges between men. I start with a discussion of the men's nostalgia for home as it turns into recriminations and anxiety about the people they leave behind. I then explore day labourers' self-image; masculinity on the corner as it is put forth in discussions about sex and sexuality. This leads to the consideration of the body itself, where *jornaleros*' own analogies of their work to prostitution turn into an ever-present threat to their physical and psychological integrity.

Bittersweet nostalgia

There is a great sense of loss on a day labour site where *jornaleros* hang around for hours with little prospects of work. Men like to have conversations about how life was 'back home', in which they compare neighbourhoods, food and people. Pictures of wives and children emerge from wallets and cell phones, their personalities and tastes adding to the character of the noisy sidewalk. *Jornaleros* discuss the right way to raise a family, how to keep their spouses happy and the things their children think and do – always positioning themselves as if they were still at home. Inevitably, children appear to be frozen in time and for people like Luis, away for six years, it sometimes suddenly dawns on them that the little girl they are talking about is almost 15, or, in Don Raúl's case, a woman of 20 with two children of her own.

Nostalgia, however, is coupled with the ever-increasing demands from the people the men miss so much. Thus after a long session on fatherhood, Luis told me one afternoon that the daughter he talked so lovingly about had called him the day before. 'They always call to say they need something ... I understand; she is already going to high school.' Similarly, Adolfo (age 53) once finished a tale of his family with a sorrowful smile, telling me his wife asked for 600 dollars for the holiday celebrations last Christmas: 'The first years I sent 50 dollars, afterwards they asked for 200, now they want 600.' Getting a DVD recording of the party he subsidised (filmed with a camera he sent back) was somehow bittersweet.

These tensions mark almost every conversation about family I have heard on the street. No matter how nostalgic or loving a man appears when he talks about his wife and children, somehow the issue of their increasing demands always arises. Like the *Sancho*, families back home seem always to need more money and to enjoy the fruit of a *jornalero*'s labour at his expense. The men feel their loved ones doubt the hardships they suffer: 'Back there they think we have a lot of work; they don't know that we spend most of the time sitting in the street, dirty, trying not to get depressed, and talking about the *Sancho* we are

supporting ... they don't understand that we often go without work, or that we don't have enough money for food; they don't understand our reality,' Don Raúl explained one morning. Sindi added: 'If we don't call every day, they ask if we found another woman,' and, having an imaginary conversation with his wife continued, '... look, the thing is I don't have money for the phone card, that's why I haven't called.' Don Raúl nodded:

I made forty dollars last week, but it costs four to get to the corner and back whether I work or not; plus you buy a chocolate or a coffee, plus the phone cards, and then you have to pay rent, buy food, and send money home ... it would be better if we worked every day, but we don't; nobody here does.

Scholars have addressed the disarticulation of male identity among *jornaleros* as a central aspect of their life. Through migration, isolation sets the role of 'the patriarch' that should be at home guiding the family at odds with the role of provider who must leave in order to make ends meet (Walter et al. 2002, 225). The authors understand this double bind as a tenuous balance that disintegrates when a day labourer can no longer provide for his loved ones. Here injury is the most evident moment in which the day labourer suddenly cannot support his family. One injured *jornalero* was quoted pleading to a journalist of the San Francisco Weekly in the hospital: 'Can you talk to my wife and tell her why you're here? ... She doesn't believe me ... She thinks I'm not working because I'm messing around' (Smith 2008). But, in truth, the double bind shatters the possibility of balance as the years go by and the crisis is ever present in day-to-day life.

The role of provider becomes the strongest and most essential link to those left behind. Ultimately it is impossible to be a full member of a family via timed phone calls and the men feel compelled to satisfy their loved one's needs at the expense of their own. Remittances, computers, music players, cameras and other items sent back with 'travellers'² become essential for the family's sustenance. Yet the people who benefit from these 'sacrifices' seem to constantly doubt the day labourer abroad who feels they unjustly wonder what he must be keeping and misspending. This never-ending vortex of work, remittance and recrimination in both directions reshapes family relations. As 'a few months' turn into years, the men feel that life for those back home has become easier, while their hardship and loneliness only increase (cf. Mahler 1995).

Tied to these feelings are *jornaleros'* ever increasing suspicions that their families become accustomed to their absence. In a sense, a *jornalero's* subjectivity is riddled with the scars of abandonment and mistrust – his own in relation to his family's and vice versa. For men working towards saving some income or building a house, or for those who send back trucks and tools for use when they return, fear also entails losing the fruits of their labour:

[The *Sancho* is] real; that happens here all the time [Adolfo leaned against a bus sign as we talked] Look Tomás, for example, I lived with a Salvadoran who had been here seven years. He was the type who never spent a penny; everything he made he sent home. In the morning he just had a coffee and a doughnut. ... If he was working he wouldn't eat anything. ... He spent nothing. ... He slept on one of those cots – so do I – but he slept there with no mattress, only a blanket. ... Then he returned home to find that his wife had another man; they started fighting and she finally said: "Leave, but leave alone; the house is in my name."

Permanent estrangement from your family is a common subject of conversation on the street. Everyone knows someone who has lost it all. Everything a *jornalero* works for can disappear in an instant; the *Sancho* looms at every corner because most men do not have bank accounts in the USA – a possibility precluded by the ever-present threat of deportation – so those at home manage the savings and things they send back. When a *jornalero* loses his family,

he also loses everything else he saved, built and bought with his effort. The *Sancho* is real and the ascetic lives of most of the men can ultimately lead nowhere.

The tenuous balance that implicates a day labourer's relationship to his family while simultaneously eroding the ties of trust and faith in one another forces the rearticulation of many of the referents the men have to their own masculinity. The over-determined provider finds himself amidst destitution and marginalisation in a cohort of men who he usually only knows in passing. Masculinity thus must reconstitute itself at a distance from its traditional frames of reference (women, family, social networks) (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Purser 2009; Stephen 2007).

Men, women and desire

Rethinking the image of the Mexican macho, Gutmann (2006) suggests that masculinity among working-class people in Mexico City is a fluid social construct in which 'traditional' stereotypes of what it means to be a man interrelate with historically-specific economic, political and cultural changes. Age, ethnicity, class, experience and personality colour the ideas that men put forth when understanding themselves as providers, partners, lovers, fathers and workers. Ideas about gender, for Gutmann, develop into a contradictory consciousness where traditional notions about maleness from the past interact with practical transformations of the social and political body to produce ambiguity, confusion and contradictions in male identities (243). *Jornaleros* are distanced from the complex dialectic through which masculinity emerges as a function of male/female and family relations within a particular historical and cultural milieu (González-López 2005; Smith 2005). Men are isolated and their engagement in life back home becomes limited to phone conversations. Masculinity thus rearranges itself in a contradictory set of representations where family members deploy certain traditional expectations – man as provider, man as potential womaniser or drunk – while the men must redefine themselves in terms of their experience of isolation.³ Thus, *jornaleros* find themselves inexorably tied to the stereotypical image of the macho that can be easily tempted by women and alcohol; one they can happily engage in daily performance on the street (cf. Pena 1991), but which, in truth does not aptly reflect their commitment to their family, which among the sample of men I am discussing here was central to their understanding of their 'sacrifice'. Herein lie Sindi's explanations to his wife; it is not women who hamper the remittance – he tries to argue – but that lack of money.

Few, if any, of the men in this sample had sexual or affective contact with other women, in part because they were committed to their families at home, but also because there is little access to women in general. Male subjectivity thus becomes tied not only to the absence of face-to-face relationships with family, but also to an almost complete lack of interactions with women in the USA. While rearticulating traditional female roles into their daily lives and dealing with the tensions inherent in their isolation, the men must also come to terms with a subjectivity devoid of significant interactions with women. Not surprisingly, the issue of sex emerges as a central trope through which the men relate to their social environment (González-López 2005; Pena 1991).

On the predominantly Mexican corner I studied, conversations about sex and sexuality, like the *Sancho*, are initiated and sometimes solely held through joking; specifically through *albures*, a genre where the object is to beat your interlocutor with a double entendre. Humour is the key vehicle for expression and seems 'to provide the main fabric by which men are bound to each other on a daily basis' (Brandes 1980, 98). Jokes express the wax and wane of sexual tensions or they allude to people's sexuality. Past sexual exploits mix in with descriptions of the latest *triple equis* (i.e., porn film)

bought *en la pulga* – the flea market – and, along with theatrical representations of both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse, produce a rowdy revelry among different groups of men. Cell phones invariably become a great source of fun because many men have snippets of pornographic movies or animated cartoons of ‘Scooby Do doing Wilma’, Mickey and Minnie mouse ‘doggy style’ and so on. The same phones also have pictures of children and wives that are shared at other times, when the conversations flow back into talk about family life.

The street corner itself is also scripted in conversations about sex. Standing for hours in the same place every day, the men inevitably cross paths with a number of different people who inadvertently become the source of much gossip. Men and women who walk by often are ‘known’ characters and small mythologies arise about what these people are like in bed or what their sexual orientation is. Women, especially, become the object of speculation, their beauty and dress style assessed and compared to others. During the time I spent on the corner almost every woman who came in contact with us – passersby, saleswomen, NGO workers, students and even nuns – were sexualised in one way or another. Each one was assessed in terms of her relative beauty, her imagined sexual prowess or lack thereof and her hypothetical willingness to engage *jornaleros* sexually. This does not mean that women were the objects of lewd comments, but rather that they became tropes through which sexuality was discussed. Eduardo’s predilection for older women, for example, led us to nickname one ‘regular’ *la charpei* – a reference to the wrinkled Shar Pei dog breed. Her daily appearance usually led to heated debates over Eduardo’s exaggerated accounts of his past love affairs with married, older *veteranas*. Some men also tell of horny *patronas* – female employers – who hire them to work on their house and then appear naked in the doorway, but few believe these stories.

Lack of female contact transects the age cohorts on the street and a wide variety of men discuss the possibility of sex and dating. Leonel, a bachelor in his early 20s, once met me on the University of California, Berkeley, campus to check out some on-line job applications. When I greeted him, he was beside himself with joy. Wide-eyed and rubbing his hands he exclaimed: ‘Wow! This is great, there are *some* girls walking around . . . look how hot they look.’ His giddy excitement and stares made him look quite deranged and people on the street started avoiding us. Finally we managed to sit down and start browsing the web in relative calm. After a few minutes in which we failed to find him a job he asked, in more of a pleading tone, if I thought any of these women would ever consider dating him. Another middle-aged and divorced *jornalero* I knew spent a week seriously considering the possibility that a *patrona* he met would date him after she expressed mild interest in his accounts of going out with his ‘friend from the university’ for beers. ‘Do you think she would go out with me? I wouldn’t believe it,’ he concluded with flushed cheeks. He never called her. In 12 years in the USA he has had one girlfriend, who left him because she got a well-paying job.⁴

For a few of the younger *jornaleros*, the search for women turns into drinking binges in the bars of Oakland and San Francisco – nightly outings that put them at risk of getting caught by *la migra*⁵ or, more likely, getting mugged or arrested for rowdiness or fighting. These stories are inevitably tragic in that they never end well for the teller. As Leonardo complained one morning, ‘I always end up at *las cuaras*, but not even that helps.’ *Cuaras* is a Latinised version of ‘quarters’ (25 cent coins), which refers to cheap peepshows in the area.

Along with joking about women, a great deal of time is spent on the corner making fun of other’s sexuality. Jokes can have homosexual connotations where the speaker bullies his interlocutor with offhand remarks that directly or indirectly threaten anal penetration. In other instances the joke lies in how the speaker feminises himself or engages his

audience in mock homosexual propositions (cf. Prieur 1998). Masculinity is, in these cases, an issue of how you behave with others and the tenuous line between asserting your manliness through feminising others and not appearing truly effeminate in the process (Brandes 1980).

For most men, talk about homosexuality oscillates between a humorous exchange and a threat. Eduardo (age 33), in fact, lost face with the group as the months went by, and became 'known' and referred to as a *maricón* – gay – mainly because of his habit of singing love songs out loud while listening to his mp3 player. Eduardo's lack of social ability probably contributed to this perception, since he 'shared' too much information with us and set himself up for the brunt of many jokes. For example, he told us, quite innocently, he had made a male friend on the corner who after beers in San Francisco had tried to kiss him. A couple of men wondered aloud why he had not beaten the guy up. Defensively Eduardo said the man had hit him and threatened to kill him if he told anyone. It had been months since anybody had seen his attacker so he felt it was all right to tell us, but Luis and Clemente seemed to have all their suspicions confirmed and scolded him for being so stupid; 'it must be that you really wanted something,' they concluded.

Day labourers' precarious living conditions and the absence of women from their lives have led to interventions from Public Health and social workers that construe them as a population at high risk of HIV and other STIs (Organista and Kubo 2005). While one young *jornalero* loved to tell us how he got 'that sickness that sounds like the name of a woman', Chlamydia, from a prostitute in Los Angeles, most of the men in this sample were not likely to visit prostitutes either because they thought it was a breach in the *confianza* – trust – necessary to survive separation from their wives, or because 'good' prostitutes are really expensive. More relevant to the case of these day labourers is the stark contrast between the friendly revelry and joking entailed in *albures*, the scripted machismo mixed in with intimate conversations that indicate strong commitment if not reproach to their families, and how these men feel their work threatens their physical integrity. Talk about sex, homosexuality and prostitution brings conversations back to the very real vulnerability that these men experience.

The male body at risk

In many ways, day labour looks a lot like prostitution. On the cold foggy Berkeley mornings the image of dark figures standing out on the curb waving down passing cars is eerily reminiscent of other corners I have seen where it is women leaning against the street signs or sitting on the steps of buildings laughing and waiting for men to stop and make a deal. Day labour sets men up on the curb in a 'feminine' role (Purser 2009), passively waiting to be chosen by a *patrón*. This is not lost on *jornaleros* who, like Luis, refer to standing on the street as *pirujear* – slang for selling yourself sexually. But like the *Sancho*, this analogy represents a threat that melts into reality.

I first heard of men selling their bodies in reference to *jornaleros* who had ceased to work and had become alcoholics living by the train tracks nearby. These are well known characters on the street; people we all saw defecating in vacant lots early in the mornings, begging for hot water at the coffee shop and sometimes walking into Friday lunches at a nearby church drunk, calling out obscenities or quietly hoarding food. The lumpenised image of the failed *jornalero* reaffirms the worth of those who remain able and serves as a referent to delineate the 'true' man who works for his family and future. People told me that these *borrachitos* – drunks – became so dependent on alcohol that they would even sell their bodies for a couple of dollars in order to buy liquor. One man who spent

a week under the bridge because he could not pay his rent said that he saw first-hand how *puñales* – gay men – drove by at night and took them away. When I started bringing this up in conversations I discovered that almost everyone had a story about being propositioned by men. Excerpts from my interview with Jaime, a Honduran in his early 50s, illustrates the most common type of account I heard:

Jaime: Even gays come to pick you up.

Tomás: Gays here?

Jaime: Yes, they come ... [they pick you up] for work, but when you get there ... they offer you ... [uncomfortable] they ask if you want to have sex with them. ... Once this bastard picked me up. He says: "you want to work?" "Sure, how much are you paying?" "Look," he says "I'll pay eight [dollars an hour]." "Listen," I tell him, "eight is too little, at least pay me nine." "I don't know; it's a really easy job," he says. ... Bah! "I'll go," I said. "Friend, what is it we're going to do?" He says, "you are going to clean a birdcage ...". But when we were [driving] he said, "What's your name?" "My name is Jaime." "And where are you from, do you have family here?" "My children are in Honduras." "And a wife?" he asked. "No, I'm divorced." "I," he says, "don't care about women." "Why?" I ask him; "I do, they're the most beautiful thing God made." "I don't think so," he says, "my family doesn't accept me because I'm gay."

Tomás: He told you he was gay in the car?

Jaime: Yes, in English. ... We got to his house; I cleaned the birdcage. And ... then he said: "do you like porn movies?" "Well," I said, "sometimes ...". "Do you want to watch one?" "I don't know," I said. Then he played this porno ... horrible things with two men. No, no, no!

Tomás: Two men?

Jaime: Yes, man on man. "No, no!" I told him; "turn that off," I said. "No ... if you like I'll do a good job on you ...". He said that to me and started masturbating, "No, no!" I said, "I don't want that ... turn that off, pay me, and then I'm gone ... I'm going to call the police," I said. "No, no," he said, "I'll pay you." And he put his pants on, and we went in his car and [near the corner] he paid me.

Tomás: Was he a *gabacho*?

Jaime: Yes, he was an older guy. I told you [things happen]. The other day the guy they call the *camarón* drove by; maybe you know him.

Tomás: Yes, I know who he is.

Jaime: He said to me: "You want ... blow ...". he said it in English, that terrible word ... [uncomfortable] "you want me to suck your penis?"

Jaime's horror towards the proposition affects his narrative and probably jumbles the facts. His conversation was mediated by a very limited knowledge of English. The anxiety in his tale, however, is quite clear. The *camarón* Jaime mentioned – literally 'shrimp', a reference to the man's red hair – was a known character on the street that drove by almost every week and propositioned middle-aged men sitting alone. He was so infamous that the first time I was offered work I refused it thinking the red haired *gabacho* who wanted to hire me was the 'shrimp'. 'We wouldn't have let you go Tomás,' Eduardo said patting me on the back as the rest of the men laughed.

Most labourers say they have felt sexually intimidated and claim to have been propositioned by men who hire them for jobs around the house. One of the younger men on our corner, for example, disappeared for a day after he was stranded in the suburbs and claimed he had been propositioned by the *patrón* and locked in a basement for a while. When he managed to escape he ran away and, not knowing where he was, ended up spending the night by the freeway.⁶

Homosexual propositions constitute a clear representation of the men's understanding of their vulnerability. Estranged from their families and supporting their *Sanchos*, they are left only as passive observers of the opposite sex, their masculinity expressed through their role as providers and a stereotypical, rehearsed, 'macho' bravado that is, nonetheless, precarious. Faced with the realities of day labour they are at the mercy of chance and open to violation. The danger of getting into a *patrón's* car is latent in every encounter. In every suspicious glance and question directed at the potential employer lies not only the fear of being exploited in economic terms,⁷ but the realisation of the hidden and yet very obvious nature of their subjectivities as immigrants: the body for sale, the body for abuse.

In the interview cited above, Jaime also mentioned being offered 50 dollars to let another driver's wife, recently graduated from some sort of dental hygiene programme, practice on his teeth. 'No señor, not that! I'm not going to open my mouth,' he repeated into the recorder. 'What was it they wanted?' I asked in disbelief. 'I don't know, maybe they were going to take an organ, take my teeth, and afterwards who's going to pay me? For 50 dollars I am not doing that job, nor would I do it for more. I don't know what they are going to do with my teeth, I don't know what they are going to do with my mouth,' he answers in panic.

Life and '*la vida de un leibor*'

Life and work on the labour site entail the articulation of the political economy of US society, its thirst for the undocumented, 'right-less', body and the personal tragedies and desires of the commodified labourer – *un leibor*, as *jornaleros* refer to themselves in broken English. This articulation fractures the men's social reality in space – they are neither here nor there (Coutin 2005) – and threatens their personal and social representations of masculinity. The structural vulnerability on the street corner endangers economic stability, family unity, identity and, ultimately, bodily integrity. Jokes become referents to fears that are latent and shared by most *jornaleros*; they are funny because they make light of what is evidently on everyone's mind. Hand in hand with these jokes comes talk about the sexual prowess of strangers, good fun to 'pass the time', that, nonetheless, make visible the lack of affective and social contact with women. The *Sancho* looms at every corner; families become estranged as the men's economic stability and wellbeing erode. Meaningful relationships dissolve and contact with women is limited to passing interactions on the street, while those back home suspect every silence, every penny not sent to support them. Labour is scarce, abuse prevalent, the sojourn abroad indefinite and the body is at constant risk.

This risk, for the *jornaleros* I have addressed here, seems most evident in the way their fears shape reality. Marginalisation takes on the form of the abandoned provider whose sense of self is torn asunder by the experience of immigration that leaves him at the mercy of powers out of his control. This perception is by no means only relevant to the day labourers themselves. For people like the *camarón* come looking for cheap sexual encounters guaranteed to be without consequence because of the ease of exploiting desperate men who will not turn to the authorities for help. There are also those who need the body itself, not only for its labour but also for sex, teeth to practice on or, in another case, Spanish-speaking men to colour a themed drinking binge for a senile parent who remembered living in Mexico. The degree to which these events actually occur is beside the point, since they are prevalent in the subjective experience of *jornaleros*. The *Sancho*, misunderstanding, isolation and exploitation are inscribed in the body – they are all referents to the same experience.

Structural vulnerability for these men is a result of the forces they are subject to in the social context in which they become inscribed as migrants and the effects they have on a

personal level. These effects are present in everyday life, they colour *jornaleros*' experience on an intimate level where family, sexuality and masculinity become shifting and problematic categories that create instability and challenge their sense of self. It is thus impossible to theorise their health outcomes – whether related to unregulated dangerous work, substance abuse or risky sex practices – without accounting for the ways in which the intimate realities of these men, as men, fathers and partners, change and set them up in a position of danger in the homes they have left behind and on the corners where they wait for work.

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Notes

1. I use the term ‘wife’ to refer to each man’s partner, as they do, even though in many cases the union has not been formalised by a religious or civil ceremony.
2. *Viajeros*, literally ‘travelers’, are people who travel back and forth between the USA and Latin America and who make a living as carriers of a variety of things immigrants and family members send each other.
3. Gutmann (2006) identified *degendering* transformations in Mexico, whereby traditionally male and female activities become reconfigured and their gender specificity de-emphasised. Here women and men drink together or men play more intimate roles in child-rearing and household chores. A *jornalero*'s life is not de-gendered by the absence of women, but rather hyper-gendered in that he must undertake all activities necessary for his sustenance, irrespective of their imputed gender association.
4. Although one could argue that the cases above entail potential relationships with women in a different structural position than *jornaleros*; that is, that desire is somehow scripted onto class and ethnic hierarchies – here embodied in white college students and employers – in truth, it is these types of women who they are more likely to have contact with.
5. Immigrants call the enforcement branch of the US Department of Homeland Security – US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – *la migra*.
6. Because much of the work *jornaleros* do is in suburbs employers drive them to, leaving after an argument or being disoriented is common and many men have stories about sleeping near thoroughfares they reach, not knowing who to ask for directions. This also explains why Jaime would be both horrified and wait for the man to drive him back.
7. Several authors have noted that almost every *jornalero* has suffered employer abuse (Esbenshade 2000; Theodore, Valenzuela, and Meléndez 2006; Valenzuela 2003).

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Résumé

Cet article aborde la vulnérabilité structurelle des travailleurs journaliers latino-américains sans papiers dans le Nord de la Californie, telle qu’ils l’expriment dans leurs conversations en attendant du travail aux coins des rues. Les aspects intimes de l’expérience de la migration sont exemplifiés à travers des blagues sur le Sancho – un personnage hypothétique qui, au pays natal, s’est installé dans la famille d’un journalier pour profiter de l’argent qu’elle reçoit de ce dernier. Les blagues deviennent alors sujets de conversation plus sérieux, sur un fond de nostalgie et de tensions qui résulte de l’éloignement vis-à-vis de la famille – des éléments qui accompagnent les peurs et les

menaces liées aux embauches des coins de rue et ont un impact sur la manière dont les journaliers se perçoivent. La sexualité est articulée par rapport à l'absence des femmes et la virilité s'empêtre dans les contingences du travail illégal et de la séparation sur le long terme d'avec les êtres que ces hommes soutiennent financièrement. Ensemble, tous ces éléments ont pour résultat une articulation de la menace vis-à-vis du corps de l'immigré lui-même, qui est exemplifiée par les angoisses dues aux propositions d'homosexuels aux coins des rues.

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza la vulnerabilidad estructural de los jornaleros indocumentados latinoamericanos en el norte de California, tal como se expresa en las conversaciones en las calles donde los jornaleros esperan el trabajo. Los aspectos íntimos de las experiencias migratorias quedan ilustrados en los chistes sobre Sancho, un personaje ficticio que vive con la familia de un jornalero y que disfruta del dinero que éste envía a casa. Los chistes giran en torno a temas más serios cuando se refieren a la nostalgia y las tensiones con la familia que vive lejos, elementos que se combinan con los temores y las amenazas del trabajo en la calle y que afectan al modo en que los jornaleros se ven a sí mismos. La sexualidad se articula en ausencia de las mujeres y la masculinidad queda enmarcada en las contingencias del trabajo no regulado y la separación a largo plazo de las personas a las que los hombres apoyan. Todos estos elementos combinados llevan a la articulación de la amenaza al cuerpo de los mismos inmigrantes, que queda ilustrada por las ansiedades en torno a las proposiciones de homosexuales en la calle.