

La main d'œuvre en liminalité

Gretchen Purser

Résumé

Le secteur formel du travail journalier, industrie multimilliardaire bien établie, illustre les deux transformations les plus importantes survenues dans les relations de travail contemporaines : la croissance de la précarité d'emploi et le rôle accru des intermédiaires dans le marché du travail. Cette industrie est fondée sur l'expropriation temporelle et la rétention spatiale d'un bassin excédentaire de main-d'œuvre disponible à la demande. L'article repose sur des entretiens en profondeur et sur presque trois ans d'observation-participation de l'auteure à titre de journaliste au sein d'un groupe principalement constitué d'ex-détenus afro-américains et sans-logis issus des centres urbains d'Oakland et de Baltimore. Nous dégageons dans cet article les multiples fonctions et les implications générales de l'expérience routinière d'attente chronique imposée aux travailleurs journaliers. Nous soutenons que cette période liminale permet d'inspecter et d'immobiliser les travailleurs, tout en intensifiant leur investissement personnel dans une recherche de travail incertaine. Cette analyse nous éclaire non seulement sur le fonctionnement particulier du secteur du travail journalier, mais sur la façon précise dont la main-d'œuvre est subjuguée, dont sa dépendance est cultivée et dont les conditions de travail précaires et dégradées sont normalisées pour les personnes qui se trouvent tout au bas de l'échelle du marché du travail aux États-Unis.

The Labour of Liminality

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Abstract

The formal day-labour business is a well-entrenched, multi-billion dollar industry that exemplifies the two most consequential changes in contemporary employment relations: the growth of precarious employment and the increased role of labour market intermediaries. It is an industry premised upon the temporal expropriation and spatial retention of a surplus pool of labour-on-demand. Drawing upon extensive interviews and nearly three years of participant observation working as a day labourer amidst a predominantly homeless, and formerly-incarcerated, African-American workforce in the inner-cities of Oakland and Baltimore, this paper identifies the multifarious functions and broad implications of day labourers' routinized experience of chronic and obligatory waiting. I argue that this liminal period serves as an instrument of inspection, as an instrument of immobilization and as an instrument to intensify labourer's investment in the uncertain pursuit of work. This analysis enables us to better understand not only the distinct operations of the day labour business, but precisely how labour is subjugated, dependency is cultivated and precarious and degraded conditions of employment are normalized for those at the bottom of the U.S. labour market.

Introduction

"I'm losing it," Troy mutters, looking at me out of the corners of his blood-shot eyes as we sit stiff-legged and side-by-side in the crowded, unkempt dispatch hall of InstaLabour, one of the leading U.S. commercial day labour agencies and principal brokers in the low-wage labour market.² "I hate comin' down to this place," he continues. "I'm about ready to snap." Troy has been working for InstaLabour for over six months. This morning, he arrived well before the doors opened at 5:30am, determined to be near the top of the always-contested "list." Nearly three hours later, he now wrings his calloused hands and nods to a TV that hangs from a low ceiling, blaring an endless, pacifying stream of morning news programs that will soon morph into daytime talk shows. "And I hate watching TV

all day. I don't hate it at night, ya' know, after a long day of work, but this? This just makes the day go by so slow, just sittin' around, vegetating, hoping the whole time that you're gonna go out." Troy stares at a man standing in front of us wearing cheap, plastic headphones (curiously unattached to any musical device, the cord hanging loosely to his knees) and using an industrial-sized broom to sweep up the thin, blue carpet, littered with bits of paper and stray cigarette butts and stained by untold numbers of early-morning coffee spills. "And on top of that, we gotta deal with shit like this all day long." His frustration, anxiety and sense of social worthlessness mounting, Troy mutters, "I gotta get out of this hell hole. I feel like I'm going backwards." After a few moments pause, he concludes, "We might as well be in a damn rest home."

The day labour, or "on demand staffing," business is the bottom-rung, or "low road," of the broad, burgeoning, and highly diversified temporary staffing industry, a well-entrenched industry that exemplifies the two most consequential changes in contemporary employment relations: the growth of contingent work and the increased role of labour market intermediaries (Barker and Christensen, 1998; Benner, Leete and Pastor, 2007; Kalleberg, 2009; Osterman, 1999; Osterman, 2003; Smith, 2001a). Whereas the former has contributed to the widespread uncertainty and unpredictability of employment, the latter has contributed to an increased structural and regulatory ambiguity of employment relationships. As Gottfried (1992: 447) notes, these changes have fundamentally altered "standard assumptions about temporality and spatiality in the organization of capitalist production," resulting in an ever-increasing number of workers struggling to navigate the temporal turbulence and spatial splintering of employment. For Troy and countless other day labourers relegated to working both *through* and *for* what are colloquially termed "labour pools" or, more disparagingly, "body shops," this means a daily, pre-dawn routine that consists of waiting, waiting without pay, waiting for an indeterminate length of time, and waiting without ever knowing if the wait will be worth the while, all in the hopes of securing a day's work, what Peck and Theodore (2001: 493) insightfully call "fractions of jobs" and what Snow and Anderson (1993: 123) aptly refer to as "jobs without a tomorrow."

Drawing upon the work of Victor Turner (1967), I refer to this routine as a *labour of liminality*. In so doing, I take up Sweeney's

(2009: 582) call to “extend liminality into places of production” (albeit a place where what is being produced is labour itself and, more specifically, flexible and subjugated labour). Day labourers are, as Garsten (1999) has referred to all temporary employees, “liminal organizational subjects.” So too are they faced with what Chun (2009: 537) identifies as “legal liminality,” “a state of institutional exception in which workers are neither fully protected by, nor fully denied, the rights of formal employment.” Relegated to, and suspended within, an ambiguous, socially liminal state, day labourers like Troy are “betwixt and between” employment and unemployment, work and job-searching. Rendered “at once no longer classified and not yet classified,” day labourers are “neither one thing or another; or maybe both” (Turner 1967: 95-96).

This article draws upon a multiyear ethnography of the day labour industry in the U.S. to identify the multifarious functions and implications of the routinized period of obligatory and chronic waiting that exemplifies this labour of liminality. In so doing, it aims to contribute to our understanding of the distinctive operations of day labour companies as active agents in the broad “regime of precarious employment” that is “effectively rewriting labour market rules and refashioning the opportunity structures open to vast segments of the labour forces of major U.S. cities” (Theodore, 2003: 1812; see also Freeman and Gonos, 2005; Gonos, 1997; Hatton, 2011; Smith and Neuwirth, 2008). Indeed, this regime is today so well instantiated that precarity is widely regarded as “the dominant feature of the social relations between employers and workers in the contemporary world” (Kalleberg, 2009: 17), having led to the (re)emergence and rapid-fire expansion of a heterogeneous and chronically insecure social class referred to as the *precariat* [i.e. precarious proletariat] (Harvey, 2012; Standing, 2011; Wacquant, 2007; Wacquant, 2008; Waite, 2009).³

This article begins with a brief discussion of research methods, followed by a general overview of the day labour business. I then turn to the analysis in which I document how the obligatory waiting period in the dispatch hall operates as an instrument of inspection, an instrument of immobilization, and an instrument of intensified investment. In the conclusion, I argue that identifying these functions enables us to better understand not only the distinct features of the day labour industry, vis-a-vis other segments of the temporary staffing industry, but precisely how labour is subjugated,

dependency is cultivated, and precarious and degraded conditions of employment are normalized for those toiling at the very bottom of the U.S. labour market.

Research Methods

The data for this article, drawn from ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts and corporate documents, were gathered during the course of a much broader investigation of the U.S. day labour industry.

To understand the workings of the day labour industry and its role in the reconfiguration of the labour market, the degradation of work and the reproduction of urban poverty, I conducted thirty-two months of intensive participant observation working as a day labourer in the Oakland, California and Baltimore, Maryland branch offices of InstaLabour. In the longstanding tradition of workplace ethnography, I immersed myself in these agencies, waking at the pre-dawn hour of 4:30am, throwing on some work clothes, signing up at the agency and waiting around in the hopes of “getting on a ticket” and being dispatched to work.⁴ Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I kept my status as a researcher hidden from management, though I never pretended to be anyone other than who I am. Although aware of the ethical debates surrounding such a lack of full disclosure, it was clear to me that gaining entrée to a company with such an odious reputation was not going to happen from the top down. To echo Kris Paap’s conclusion from her ethnographic study of the construction industry “much of what I saw and experienced suggests the need for at least partially covert ethnographic projects, particularly in the realms of work, exploitation and violence” (Paap 2006: 202).⁵

Despite my “semi-covert” entrée, I never operated inconspicuously, for as a young, highly-educated, white woman amidst a workforce predominantly comprised of formerly-incarcerated and precariously-housed African-American men, I violated the well-demarcated boundaries of race, class and gender that stratify the labour market. Incessantly asked to explain my anomalous presence in what so many workers described as “this shit hole of a place,” it became very clear early on in my fieldwork that although I could not explicitly reveal my research intentions to the dispatchers, I similarly could and would not hide them from my fellow workers, with whom I sought to build relationships of mutual

respect. Within a short period of time, I became an accepted and expected participant in the ebb and flow of the labour pool.

Although I do not draw on this data for the purposes of this article, readers should note that throughout the course of this fieldwork, I worked a wide variety of jobs: I cleaned up construction sites, performed janitorial work, packaged boxes on high-speed assembly lines, flagged vehicular traffic through construction zones, scrubbed dishes in industrial kitchens, set up for, and cleaned up after large-scale events, sold concessions at stadiums and arenas, acted as a “human billboard” advertising discount furniture at a busy intersection, drove used and repossessed cars through auto auctions, collected garbage and recycling, and carried out evictions. All of the jobs paid between \$6.15 and \$9 (in U.S. currency) per hour, prior to tax and a whole assortment of fee deductions. When factoring in these deductions and unpaid waiting time, the “wages of day labour” fall well below the federal minimum wage (Roberts and Bartley, 2004). Such participant observation did raise an ethical quandary related to the fact that I was occasionally garnering a day’s work that might have otherwise gone to someone who needed it more than I. While this dilemma is one shared by most workplace ethnographers, it was certainly exaggerated in my case given both the shoulder-to-shoulder competition that characterizes the day labour hiring process and the considerable social and economic vulnerability of the day labour workforce. Fortunately, for a variety of reasons, dispatchers’ loyalties laid elsewhere; they rarely considered me the best match for the “roughneck” jobs of day labour, so I was typically (though not always) one of the last workers to be dispatched. Moreover, I believe that to bring about any kind of systemic change at the bottom of the labour market, we need an in-depth understanding of the practices of these new labour market actors, the kind of understanding that grounded, in-depth ethnographic research makes possible. This is particularly the case given that these agencies are operating in the shadows of the state, in what has been termed the “gloves-off economy” (Bernhardt et. al 2008), and in the shadows of much of the current scholarship on work and employment.

To grasp the dynamics of intra-industry competition (i.e. competition between day labour companies for both clients/contracts and their “product”/“on demand” labourers), I conducted an additional five weeks of targeted observation in six competing day labour companies located in Baltimore, including companies I

refer to as Workers Unlimited, P&P Staffing, Hard Hat Enterprises, Tip Top Staffing, Hire Options and Central Temps.

In addition, I conducted 78 face-to-face, in-depth interviews. I interviewed day labourers, agency dispatchers and on-site employers. I also interviewed representatives of local poverty-management institutions. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and a half hours and all but six of these interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and coded for salient themes. To supplement the ethnographic and interview data, I collected corporate documents, industry reports and news articles related to day labour and temporary staffing. For this article, I draw predominantly upon ethnographic field notes and interviews conducted with agency dispatchers.

Distinguishing the Day Labour Industry

In his summation of day labour agencies in his overview of the variegated staffing business, Parker (1994: 75) noted that, in fact, “no definitive numbers exist on this subsegment of the temporary help industry.” Nearly two decades later, this is still the case despite evidence suggesting that day labour was the fastest-growing segment within the temporary staffing business throughout the 1990s, with the number of day labour agencies doubling between 1990 and 1997 (Peck and Theodore 2001). This “paucity of national data” (Valenzuela 2003: 311) with respect to the size and growth of the day labour industry is in part due to the fact that, with low barriers to entry, many day labour agencies are locally-owned, volatile operations that eschew any kind of scrutiny and that thereby fly “under the radar.” But more generally it has to do with the widespread failure to disaggregate day labour from the broader staffing industry. When the temporary staffing industry is broken down, it is merely split into the occupational sectors into which workers are placed. For example, we know from data culled from the contingent and alternative employment arrangement 2001 supplement to the Current Population Survey that 35.1% of all workers employed by temporary staffing agencies were working in broadly-defined industrial jobs (as compared to 20.4% in clerical, 21% in professional/managerial, 15.7% in technical and 7.8% in health care) (Bercham 2011: 15). This figure is up nearly four-fold from 1982, when only 9% of temporary agency workers were placed in industrial jobs, revealing a sea change in the occupational, as well

as the gendered, composition of the temporary staffing workforce. But given that day labourers are dispatched across several occupation sectors (predominantly, but by no means exclusively, industrial), this method of disaggregation tells us little about the percentage of the overall temporary staffing workforce that is dispatched via day labour agencies, a fact which significantly contributes to their overall invisibility as employers and as labour market actors both within public consciousness and within scholarly literature.

Like all temporary staffing agencies, day labour companies are characterized by a “tenuous and flawed” (Freeman and Gonos, 2005: 203) triangular employment relationship, in which the day labour agency, the *de jure* employer, sells to the client, the *de facto* employer, the “cost-cutting, flexibility-enhancing, “cost-cutting and labour-controlling” virtues of temporary employment (Peck and Theodore, 2001: 477). The agency charges the client as much as a 100% “markup” over the wage paid to the worker, thereby earning a significant profit on each hour the day labourer works at a client’s worksite.⁶ This triangulated relationship not only renders workers subject to a kind of “dualistic control” involving a “double layer of management” (Gottfried 1991), but mystifies lines of accountability, enabling both employers to abdicate responsibility for workers. As Carl, the dispatcher of Hard Hat Enterprises, explained the business to me, in strikingly blunt and unadulterated terms: “You might say we’re in the labour industry. You might say we rent people. I mean, we rent people, we don’t rent appliances.” Thus, day labour agencies broker bodies, making blatant that which is so often obscured in the world of employment: the commodification of labour. This reduction of people to marketable, tradable objects is apparent in the everyday language that circulates around these offices, where clients place “orders” for “delivery” of a “product” [i.e. just-in-time workers] and where “dispatchers” speak of “working” people (as in “I can’t work ya’ like that!” or “You wanna be worked?”), reinforcing workers’ status as objects through grammar itself.

Despite the characteristics common to all temporary staffing arrangements, for the purposes of analytical and definitional clarity, I highlight several features that distinguish day labour agencies, the “low road” of this “human marketplace” (Martinez, 1976) and “flesh peddling” trade (Parker, 1994).

Day labour agencies locate within low-income, predominantly urban areas, serving as both organizational anchors

of the U.S. geography of poverty and as brazen street-level actors of “neoliberal paternalistic” poverty governance (Soss, Fording and Shaw, 2011). They have partnerships with, and deliberate spatial proximity to, a whole assortment of poverty management institutions, including homeless shelters (Bartley and Roberts, 2006; Kerr and Dole, 2005; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Williams, 2009), drug recovery houses (Fairbanks II, 2009), penal institutions and prisoner “re-entry” organizations (McTague and Wright, 2010; Peck and Theodore, 2008; Purser, 2012), and fringe-banking establishments like check cashing facilities. With no criminal background check, no drug test, no interview and no reported work history, skills, references or transportation required, day labour companies recruit workers (or, in the words of several dispatchers, “drum up bodies”) from the most marginalized and dispossessed segments of society. As the dispatcher from Workers Unlimited explained: “Most of them have no vehicles, no homes, they sleep on the street and have a criminal background.” Day labour agencies thus operate as employers of last resort for employees of last resort. Luring in cash-strapped workers with the promise of “work today, pay today,” they both “capitalize on the crippling effects of poverty” (Williams, 2009: 212) and, paying minimum and even sub-minimum wages for radically insecure employment, ensure poverty’s continual reproduction.

Still, we must not think of such companies as “organizations that operate at the margins of society” (Bartley and Roberts, 2006: 55). In 2005, InstaLabour alone employed more U.S. workers than did McDonald’s, an especially apt comparison since the company was founded by a hamburger franchiser who decided to apply the principles of fast food production to units of human labour. Moreover, with hundreds of thousands of clients each year across a strikingly wide range of industries, day labour companies—like other “employment service” or “labour processing” industries—have fundamentally transformed the workings of the broader labour market. Thus, it is imperative to recognize that day labour companies, which “make possible forms of employment externalization and flexible labour utilization which would not otherwise have been possible, in the absence of a mature ‘infrastructure’ of labour market intermediaries” (Peck and Theodore, 2001: 475), broker between the socioeconomic margins of labour supply and the socioeconomic core of labour demand.

Further understanding of what distinguishes day labour

agencies can be gleaned from a typical day labour employment contract, which newcomers must sign when they first enter the agency in search of work. The excerpt below is from InstaLabour’s employment contract. I should note that when I managed to get a copy of it from the dispatcher, she mockingly quipped: “You’re just signing your life away!” Her statement no doubt referred to the seven required signatures on the application confirming, among other things, legal authorization to work, consent to drug and alcohol testing in the event of a worksite accident, consent to fee deductions for cash payment, consent to fee deductions for transportation, consent to arbitration as sole remedy for employment disputes, consent to release clients [on-site employers] of any liability for injuries sustained on the job and recognition that I am prohibited from releasing any information whatsoever about InstaLabour that is of a confidential nature. This last point notwithstanding, the excerpt reads as follows:

I understand that my employment with [InstaLabour] is on a day-to-day basis. That is, at the end of the workday, I will be deemed to have quit until I report to the dispatch hall and begin working a job assignment. I understand that merely registering my availability to work does not constitute employment and that I am not re-employed until I actually begin working a job assignment. Regardless of my employment status, I understand that I will not be entitled to receive any fringe benefits of any type from [InstaLabour], including such things as health insurance, pension plan and vacation. I understand the significance of my exclusion from these programs and irrevocably agree to my exclusion.

Thus, in the day labour business, employment contracts are pre-terminated at the end of the day, meaning that on any given day individuals may succeed in getting work, but will again be unemployed (more precisely, “deemed to have quit”) by sundown. The fleeting and short-term temporal horizon is built into the employment contract. Additionally, day labour agencies require that job seekers physically report to the agency each morning in order to be considered for the opportunity of employment. Day labour agencies, in other words, function as local hiring halls or collective “labour pools,” where would-be workers—presumed to

have nothing but time on their hands—are made to wait, under the close supervision and managerial control of their would-be legal employers, in a daily and congregated clamour for work. Unlike Burawoy's (1985: 264) description of the “oppressive isolation” and individualistic character of the temporary staffing relationship within the clerical sector, in day labour agencies competition is “direct and even physical: highly substitutable workers stand shoulder to shoulder each morning waiting for work assignments” (Peck and Theodore 2001: 484). As one dispatcher explained it:

We're an at-will employer. What that means is if you wanna work, you come in, ok? If you don't wanna work, then you're not here and I can't work ya'. So if you're willing to work, you're here. If you're not willing to work, you're gone. That's the best way to explain it...Basically, when they sign in the morning is when they're telling us they wanna work. And as soon as they sign out for their check everyday, they're no longer an employee that day.

Day labour companies thus *mop up* and *wring out* the contemporary reserve army of labour, via the temporal expropriation and spatial retention of a highly disposable and immediately dispatchable pool of labourers to meet employers' “just in time” labour needs.⁷ Day labour thus epitomizes what Bourdieu (1998) called “flexploitation”: day labourers are “flexibly exploited,” made to straddle disposability and indispensability vis-a-vis the needs of capital.⁸

Functions of Waiting Time

To operate a “just-in-time” labour system, day labour agencies must mobilize a surplus labour force that is ready and willing to meet clients' immediate and unpredictable demands. Just as employers aim to reduce costs and increase flexibility by externalizing employment to day labour agencies, the agencies themselves aim to externalize risk by siphoning time from the workforce. In other words, the increased calculability and flexibility on the part of employers is made possible by the increased insecurity and temporal investment on the part of the workforce.

Certainly, the requirement of sustained physical presence for the acquisition of employment is well suited to the formidable logistical challenges of efficiently and expeditiously processing

“labour on demand.” This is particularly the case given that such a large percentage of the day labour industry’s impoverished workforce lacks the material conveniences of personal vehicles and telephones, two of the critical technological instruments through which the triangular employment relationship is orchestrated in other segments of the temporary staffing industry (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Elcioglu, 2010; Gottfried, 1991; Henson, 1996; Rogers, 2000; Smith and Neuwirth, 2008). The face-to-face dispatch system ensures that dispatchers can both coordinate with workers and, especially, transport them to clients’ worksites. Nevertheless, the physical stockpiling of a “just-in-time” inventory of workers—and the consequent chronic and obligatory waiting—serve a number of functions above and beyond the purely logistic and it is these less obvious, though critically important, functions (of inspection, immobilization and intensified investment) that I focus upon in the remainder of this article.

Instrument of Inspection

Plastered on the walls of the InstaLabour dispatch hall are several different kinds of signs, each of which reveals key characteristics of what I refer to as the “processing of labour” that occurs therein. There are signs that indicate stern behavioural dictates like “You Snooze, You Lose.” And, there are signs that exude contemptuous neglect, like “This office has gone 82 days with no workplace accident,” with a smudged handwritten “82” that never changes from day to day. There are, additionally, signs that call for a kind of self-regulation and responsabilization, as in the cryptic “When you cooperate with the process of change, change will come.” Finally, there is a sign posted above a full-length mirror that asks, “Would YOU hire this worker?”

This latter sign is an indication of one of the key functions of the physical dispatch system and consequent waiting period, which is that it serves as an *instrument of inspection*. Other segments of the temporary staffing industry typically have a one-shot “intake process” through which prospective workers are formally interviewed, their “hard” and “soft” skills verified, their references checked and the appropriate “fit” then made between candidates and jobs. Certainly, the ability to be re-placed is premised upon the workers’ performance in the previous position, but there is no need for these workers to physically report back to their temporary

staffing agency in order to obtain a new assignment. They are, on the basis of the initial screening process, trusted to be sober, to exhibit the right attitude, to look reasonably presentable, and to report to their job assignments in a punctual manner. The direct supervision to which they are subjected typically only comes from the on-site employer and they typically have only occasional contact with their legal employer, the staffing agency.

The day labour business, on the other hand, has virtually no formal screening mechanisms as part of the initial registration process. Recruitment is a mere matter of “drumming up bodies,” achieved predominantly via word-of-mouth amongst the poor and those otherwise shut out from an inhospitable labour market. The application itself functions more as a tool of social leveling than it does as a tool for social distinction. It is aimed at unilaterally stripping the labour pool of traditional employment rights, not gauging workers’ individual skills and aptitudes. Thus, necessitating that workers physically report to, and wait within the office in order to be considered for the possibility of employment not only ensures agencies’ ability to expeditiously respond to clients’ uncertain and immediate demands, but also enables dispatchers to inspect, discipline, and draw distinctions between candidates in a labour pool otherwise rendered homogeneous. Dispatchers use these judgments and distinctions—particularly concerning reliability, attitude and appearance—in their discretionary allocation of jobs, a principle InstaLabour has codified as “best match for dispatch”. Presumed to be an undependable and untrustworthy lot, day labourers must prove their “worthiness” of and suitability for a job on a *daily* basis.

As scholars have documented, dispatchers principally reward those who show up to the agency on a consistent basis and who are thereby deemed to be “loyal,” “dependable” and “willing to work;” in short, “reliably contingent” (Peck and Theodore, 2001). My findings support this argument, for as Lorraine, the dispatcher at Workers Unlimited, states: “The biggest challenge in the business is stability. ‘Cause you depend on people, most of whom are not dependable.” Tamara, of P&P Staffing, explicitly states, with no equivocation, that “those who come consistently will be the ones to go out first.” And the flipside is also the case. Workers with a more spotty record of attendance are often positioned towards the end of the dispatch queue, not only judged on a practical basis to be less “dependable,” but judged on a moral basis as less “willing to work.”

Despite the overriding fact that there is never a guarantee that the wait for work will result in actual employment—that what workers are waiting for is only ever the *possibility* of obtaining a day's work—dispatchers make evident their expectation that workers report to the agency on a consistent and punctual basis.

This expectation is apparent in the following excerpt from my interview with Stacy, the dispatcher of Central Temps:

“There are certain times of the month when it's real hard to work people. They just do not come in. Cause they get help from the government and just sit around waiting for that check. Well, they find out real quick that Stacy doesn't care for that and that if they are not consistently here the first of the month, then they will not have a job here. Period. Because my clients need employees and I need my clients. The check, you'll spend on the weekend. And having that attitude with them helps...Consistency is the key to this business. Be consistent and keep 'em in between the lines and then they prosper and then you prosper.”

Stacy outright threatens to deprive workers of employment if they fail to report to the hall on a consistent basis, revealing not only the extreme inflexibility of this hyper-precarious regime of employment but the way in which both positive incentives and negative sanctions are used in an effort to stabilize a surplus pool of labour power. Indeed, all dispatchers I interviewed use the waiting period to gauge or assess workers' dependability. Like Stacy, they reward consistency in an effort to avoid the kinds of dips in supply that occur whenever disbursements of social assistance are made. Take the following quote from John, the dispatcher of Hire Options:

“The third of the month, we call it ‘mother's day’. [Laughter] That's when all the checks come. People that are subsidized – social security, disability, whatever it is. I could have jobs for 100 people on the third of the month and I'll be lucky to get fifty people walking through that door. Because it's check day. It's mother's day. That's what we call it. Look, there's people out there that wanna work. They just don't have any clear cut work ethic at all. I'm gonna be flat-out honest with you, we have a lot of people that wanna work the system, ok? They're looking

for a free ride. And that's why we try to prioritize those who have it in them to show up everyday."

The professed rewarding of consistency—part of a broader effort to mould “regular” workers who are normalized to “irregular” work—supports the finding that day labour agencies are “reinstitutionalizing a stripped-down form of loyalty through their informal job allocation practices” (Bartley and Roberts, 2006: 54). Moreover, we see that failure to report to the agency is taken as a tell-tale sign that workers don’t “really wanna work” and would rather “work the system” in pursuit of a “free ride.” Dispatchers’ job allocation practices are thus inextricably wrought through with moral judgments of candidates’ worthiness of work, determined on the basis of such criteria as consistent presence and punctual arrival at the dispatch hall.

In addition to gauging dependability, dispatchers make no effort to hide the fact that physical presence in the dispatch hall is required so that candidates can be visually (and olfactorily) inspected prior to being dispatched; hence, the strategically-positioned full-length mirror and the sign above asking, “Would YOU hire this worker?”. Several of the agencies I studied even have what looks like a menu posted on a wall behind the counter that lists all the various and sundry personal accoutrements that dispossessed job seekers—in the event that they arrive, as some of them do, off the street—may be prodded to buy and use prior to being dispatched for a job: deodorant, socks, toothbrush, toothpaste and disposable razors, the inflated costs for which are advanced/deducted from the day’s paycheck. As Stacy at Central Temps put it:

“Many come in and because they haven’t had a bath, I can’t send ‘em. But we even have a shower here that some of the guys that are loyal, that really are just down on their luck, we let them go back there and take a shower, get some clean clothes on and we’ll wash ‘em and then we show ‘em how to take care of themselves after that.”

Throughout my fieldwork, it was not uncommon for dispatchers to implore workers to do something about their appearance prior to getting sent out to work, to “do something about those [sagging] pants!” or to “take off the do-rag” or even make them borrow a few dollars, to be deducted out of their paycheck, to

go buy a clean shirt at a nearby thrift store. Take the following field note excerpt, which typifies the condescending and paternalistic tone of such admonitions:

At about 8:50am, Reginald storms back into the office, for as it turns out, the pawnshop was still closed, so he didn't get a chance to "take care of his business." Santiago, who had been impatiently waiting, immediately yelled out: "Alright, alright. He's back. Let's hit the road. Can we get the dispatch, Caroline?" Caroline took one look at Ron, stood up from her chair and yelled, "Why 'n the hell you be comin' back down here still lookin' like that? Where's your white shirt?" Ron said, "Don't be trippin', Caroline. We're gonna swing by my place on our way out of here and pick it up." Caroline looked skeptical, but relented, handing Santiago the work ticket, along with a printed out sheet of directions to our destination: a suburban grocery store parking lot, where we'll spend the day directing the busy holiday traffic and helping load frozen turkeys into customers' cars. "Brush your hair," she yelled out to Ron, as we made our way out the front door. She followed us outside and repeated her command: "I said, brush your nappy hair!"

This critical, albeit cursory, inspection function, whereby dispatchers check to ensure a worker's basic hygiene, sobriety, and attitude, is further evidenced in the following quotes. As John, the dispatcher of Hire Options, explained: "You need to be here by five. Because I wanna make sure you're wide awake, dressed properly, got a good work attitude and work ethic for the day. And that way, we got a couple of hours to get you to work on time." Carl, of Hard Hat Enterprises, similarly explained: "Yeah you get to know 'em, 'cause you see them everyday. But before they go out on every job, I still call 'em up and and make sure they seem like they can go out to work that day." Lorraine, of Workers Unlimited, stated: "If they come here when they're drunk, I tell 'em to go home. Same thing with the drug addicts. That's why they gotta be here and why I bring everybody up to the counter before I send 'em out on the job. I look 'em straight in the eye and I've gotten pretty good at determining whether or not they're able to do the job that day." Like Lorraine, Tamara, of P&P Staffing, also emphasizes the importance of a

rudimentary sobriety check and visual “once over.” “You have to be able to actually give them a once over. I mean, you got someone coming in who’s smelling of alcohol, you’re not gonna send ‘em to work. I’m not gonna send ‘em to work. ‘Cuz, I don’t think anyone would want ‘em to come in their establishment, in that sense.”

Thus, the hiring hall model—premised upon the temporal expropriation and spatial retention of a surplus pool of “labour on demand”—facilitates an “extremely high-discipline labour control regime” (Peck and Theodore, 2001: 486) wherein this liminal labour force is subjected to the discerning eyes, moral judgments, and disciplinary control of their would-be employers. But, let me be clear: the “inspection” described here is only ever a roughshod form of “quality control,” done on an inconsistent basis and with indeterminate outcomes, for whether or not a worker is dispatched depends entirely on the flow of business in the office, the dispatcher’s capricious whims, and the dispatcher’s relative need for “bodies”.⁹

Instrument of Immobilization

The waiting period also functions as an *instrument of immobilization*. “Downtime”—the time between jobs—is a characteristic of all forms of temporary employment. The literature has shown that workers rarely experience this “downtime” as a form of “free time,” given that it is overwhelmingly an involuntary phenomenon that workers feel they must strategically “manage” in an effort to obtain their next job.¹⁰ But whereas workers in other segments of the temporary staffing industry can spend this “downtime” waiting for their next assignment in a place of their own choosing—potentially filling it with a wide array of alternate social and even income-generating activities—day labourers wishing to obtain employment (who, it bears repeating, experience “downtime” on a daily basis) are physically confined *inside* the hiring hall, sometimes, as I will go on to show, quite literally and through threat of expulsion.

By requiring job seekers’ physical presence inside of the office in order to be considered for the possibility of employment, day labour agencies radically curtail workers’ *already* profoundly-curtailed labour market mobility.¹¹ Workers in other segments of the temporary staffing industry can strategically aim to minimize “downtime” by registering with multiple agencies, playing agencies

against one another, and accepting the first position that they are offered.¹² Workers in the day labour industry, on the other hand, although capable of being registered with multiple day labour agencies, are rendered incapable, by virtue of the requirement of physical presence for dispatch, of being an actual candidate for employment in more than one agency on any given day. This means that they are in a heightened position of vulnerable dependency vis-à-vis the day labour agency, a situation dispatchers readily recognize and even encourage: “For some of these guys, if they don’t go to work,” Tamara explained, “they don’t eat that day.”

Indeed, several agencies require that job seekers not only report *to* the office, but in most cases, that they remain physically *inside* the office throughout the duration of their unremunerated wait, indeterminate in both length and outcome though it might be. These attempts at physical enclosure and spatial retention are geared towards both limiting complaints from neighbouring businesses about excessive loitering and, more pointedly, preventing other employers from driving by and “poaching” or “stealing” workers, a phenomenon referred to by employers as “cherry picking” and by workers as “bootlegging” or “freelancing” and a phenomenon which, ironically, the physical stockpiling of surplus labour makes possible in the first place.¹³ “People know that this is the place for desperate people,” a worker named Howard bluntly explained. Stacy, the dispatcher of Central Temps, stated that she learned about this the hard way, after continually looking up to discover that a third of her workforce had simply vanished, snatched up by an employer who discreetly hired them “under the table” and out from under her nose. Nowadays, she admits to locking the doors after everyone comes in. “This here is a holding cell. I tell everyone they have to stay inside until they get on the vans. It’s just that kind of world. It’s different, definitely.” The InstaLabour office in Baltimore has an official policy, printed on a sign by the door that reads: “Anyone caught standing, sitting or smoking outside the building will be barred from working out of [InstaLabour] ever again.” This rule was hardly enforced; the typical penalty for loitering in the parking lot was a public lecture or verbal threat from the dispatcher, not expulsion from the premises. But indeed, a significant element of the social relations between dispatchers and workers can be characterized as a kind of “cat and mouse game,” whereby the dispatchers continually attempt to corral workers back inside the building. As a worker named

Craig explained: “The ladies [dispatchers] always be threatening people and shit. Oh hell yeah, they get mad! They see it like they [the employers] stealin’ all their workers!” Thus, through such cat-and-mouse games, workers have acquired an understanding that, as Rodney succinctly put it, “you do that (bootleg), don’t expect to work here no more!”

A garbage truck, with “Parks Refuse Service” painted on its side, stalled in front of the InstaLabour office. The roughly dozen of us who were standing around the parking lot took notice. “Are they looking for someone?” one guy asked. A thin, African-American man in his forties or fifties slowly crawled out of the cabin of the truck. KJ and Von, both relative newcomers to the agency, traipsed over. The garbage man did not, initially, seem to pay them much notice, pointing instead to Michael. It appeared that Michael had worked with this trash collection crew in the past. Michael grabbed his backpack up off of the asphalt and approached the employer. “You only need one?” someone else shouted out.

Von, whose negotiations with the employer I could not hear from the distance, climbed into the garbage truck after Michael, closing the door behind him. The man who did the hiring leapt up onto the back of the truck and, with the two handpicked labourers tucked inside, the truck drove away, joining the morning rush hour traffic.

All of us standing in the parking lot had something to say about this act of drive - by hiring. KJ, who rejoined us after his advances had been rejected by the employer, explained that he wasn’t going to “force himself upon the brother.” He said that he didn’t feel comfortable being too aggressive and that he “couldn’t be all like ‘take me, take me.’”

Another guy in the crew shouted, “Well, that’s a good job right there! I bet they’ll be making sixty dollars cash today! Whenever you see a garbage truck doing like that, y’all should be haulin’ your asses over there because that’s a real good job. I ain’t lyin’.”

Ryan, wearing a maroon baseball cap with a Newport cigarette tucked behind his ear, announced: “Yeah, but you know what’s gonna happen to them, right? They gonna come back down here tomorrow and find themselves shit outta work. ’Cuz Shanté [one of the dispatchers] is sitting right in there, watching the whole thing. And you know they don’t like you bootleggin’ it like that!”

“Shit, I’m not worried,” Boo retorted, brazenly countering Randy’s fear of dispatchers’ backlash on workers who “bootleg”. As if in an effort to assert and defend his freedom of movement, Boo described a hypothetical confrontation with the dispatcher: “Hell, I’ll walk right in there and do the recruiting for ’em [the employer]. ‘Hey, there’s a guy out there in a truck. He’s looking for two guys, paying seven dollars an hour.’ Shit, I don’t pay them [the dispatchers] no mind.”

Thus, the hiring hall model—premised upon the temporal expropriation and spatial retention of a surplus pool of “labour on demand”—works to directly and indirectly limit workers’ mobility, both in general and, specifically, in the labour market, thereby helping dispatchers stabilize “their” pool of desperate and dependent “bodies.” In this way, we can understand the recent claim by McTague and Wright (2010) that day labour agencies operate as “space[s] of containment and control”.

Instrument of Intensified Investment

Finally, and arguably most importantly, the waiting period serves as an *instrument of intensified investment*. Following on the previous point, workers in other segments of the temporary staffing industry can “passively” wait for their next assignment. At most, they need to “call in” to inquire about job opportunities that day, and at the least, they need only answer their phone. However, given the demands of the day labour dispatch process, day labourers must wake well before dawn, travel to the agency, and put in untold hours of unremunerated waiting, under the paternalistic gaze and despotic control of their would-be employer, prior to even knowing whether or not these efforts will pay off. As a worker named J.J put it: “Sometimes, it’s frustratin’. Sometimes, I feel like cryin’. ‘Cause I go to work everyday and half the time they don’t even send me out.” Note J.J.’s reference to the hiring hall as “work,” a reflection of his

own awareness of and despair concerning his labour of liminality. Day labourers thus expend a considerable amount of time, energy and, in many cases, money (for bus fare and lost time in the informal economy) simply in an effort to be considered for the opportunity of work that day. As a result, waiting for work in the labour pool requires a considerable investment, which thereby raises the stakes for a successful or worthwhile outcome.

While the uncertainty that is endemic to all forms of temporary employment leads workers to accept jobs they might otherwise turn down, for day labourers this pressure is exacerbated by the considerable, sometimes costly, investments they have already made by the point at which a job is offered. Failure to get a job, then, signifies not just a letdown, but what many workers experience as a tangible loss: a loss of money, a loss of sleep, a loss of time, a loss of other opportunities for income-generation. This period of chronic and obligatory waiting, conceptualized as a transitional intervening period between “two relatively fixed or stable conditions” (Turner, 1967: 93), thus helps to organize workers’ consent and prepare them for the degraded and degrading working conditions that lie ahead. As a worker who gets on a 3:30am bus to get to InstaLabour by 5am put it: “To wake up at three in the morning and come home eight hours later empty handed, that’s my definition of hell, man.” “The worst part is when you don’t go out,” another worker named Mike declared. “That’s just like a solid waste of the day.”

Conclusion

Let’s return for a moment to Troy, the worker introduced in the opening paragraph of this article. Troy is waiting for work, his anxiety and frustration rising with each passing minute. Condemned to social liminality, Troy finds himself suspended “betwixt and between” the worlds of (productive) work and (useless) warehousing. Feeling like he is “going backwards,” the temporal parameters of his existence are unsettled and uncertain.

As active institutional agents in the regime of precarious employment, day labour companies produce and sustain liminality through the temporal expropriation and spatial retention of an “on demand” labour pool. In this paper, I have argued that this period of chronic and obligatory unpaid waiting, spent under the watchful eyes and behavioural control of day labourers’ would-be employer, serves a number of functions critical to day labour agencies’ ability

to process a pliable pool of labour “on demand.” It serves as an instrument of inspection, an instrument of immobilization, and an instrument of intensified investment. I argue that recognizing these functions enables us to better understand not only the distinct operations of the day labour business, but the ways in which labour is subjugated, dependency is cultivated, and precarious and degraded conditions of employment are normalized for those at the bottom of the labour market.

In such a precarious segment of the labour market and “high discipline” labour control regime (Peck and Theodore, 2011: 16)—structured by the dispatcher’s discretionary allocation of jobs, on the one hand, and employer’s ease of labour disposability, on the other hand—instances of collective and organized resistance are indeed rare. Over the course of 32 months of fieldwork, I never once saw evidence of collective organizing. Nevertheless, contestation between day labourers and dispatchers, particularly over the duration of waiting and the principles by which jobs are allocated, was ubiquitous. Although a thorough discussion of how day labourers contest or resist subjugation is beyond the scope of this paper, this analysis does raise the question of the extent to which “chronic waiting may be the soil in which political projects blossom” (Jeffrey, 2008: 956).

Endnotes

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2. To comply with institutional review board requirements and to ensure participants’ confidentiality, I use pseudonyms when referring to all companies and individuals in this study.
3. Standing (2011: 10) defines members of the precariat as those who lack seven forms of labour-related security: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income insecurity and representation insecurity.
4. As Smith (2001b: 224) writes, articulating the virtues of this approach: “Labouring side by side workers in their natural settings has enabled fieldworkers to experience the emotional reactions, bodily pains and injuries, personal humiliations, compromises, ambivalences about mobility and resentment about blocked opportunities. Fieldworkers’ shared experience itself thus has been an important and unique source of insight and data.”
5. For examples of other workplace ethnographies that employ lack of full disclosure, see Gottfried (1992), Graham (1995), Henson (1996), McDermott (2006), Rollins (1985), Sallaz (2002), Smith and Neuwirth (2008) and Williams (2006).

6. Gonos (2001) argues that this “markup” operates to obscure the surplus value generated within the temporary employment relationship. He also shows that the “markup” is nothing but a new brand of the “fee-splitting” that had been limited by the regulatory regime covering the “vampire system” of private employment agencies. Thus, Gonos (2001: 605) concludes: “What would have been ‘big money crime’ in an earlier era of employment agency regulation is now merely the legalized looting of workers throughout the economy.”
7. Although as Bourdieu (1998: 98) astutely pointed out, “the term ‘army’ is inappropriate, because precarious employment isolates, atomizes, individualizes, demobilizes and strips away solidarity.”
8. Bourdieu (1998: 85) defined flexploitation as “a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submissions, into the acceptance of exploitation.”
9. See Purser (2009) for extended discussion on this issue. Moreover, it is important to recognize that when it comes to issues of certification and safety, shockingly little inspection takes place, often in violation of company policy and state and federal employment laws.
10. Barley and Kunda (2004) present a particularly thorough analysis of the experience of “downtime” amongst technical contractors, or “itinerant experts,” why rely on staffing agencies for employment, a category of workers we might position at the opposite end of the occupational spectrum from day labourers. Downtime for these highly-skilled and highly-paid – also referred to as “beach time” or “bench time” – was rarely experienced as unemployment, since contractors “understood and accepted downtime as inherent to contracting” (p.227). Though Barley and Kunda conclude that most contractors had considerable less flexibility than they claimed, they report that contractors nevertheless had a “subjective sense of freedom,” stemming from the perception that “they, not the employer, were in charge of their time” (p.242).
11. This is also accomplished via “noncompete agreements” which severely restrict day labourers’ mobility in the labour market by introducing an additional barrier to permanent employment. These agreements, signed by the worker and/or client, stipulate that the client cannot hire the worker permanently until a certain length of time has passed. The agreements, in other words, put a price on workers’ heads (Freeman and Gonons, 2005:205; see also Keer and Dole, 2005). At P&P Staffing, one of the companies in Baltimore that I studied, that price is \$2,500. Workers sign a clause in the application that reads: “I understand that as an employee of [P&P Staffing], I may not accept a position with any client until: (1) The client has paid [P&P Staffing] a placement fee of \$2,500, (2) I have completed six months of 1,000 hours of employment with [P&P Staffing].” Central Temps, another day labour company in Baltimore, requires that workers work 380 hours before an employer can hire him or her permanently. Stacy, the dispatcher, explained: “It’s not anything big. It’s not a big deal. But it gives them [clients] an opportunity to see how they work before they hire ‘em. Because anybody can be good for a month.”
12. Of course, as Henson (1996: 83) reports, “registering with multiple

agencies requires extensive management work on the part of the temporary. Ties with each agency have to be maintained and the possibility of being black-listed increases, as temporaries have to refuse assignments from one agency to work for another. Many workers believed that it was necessary to conceal the fact that they are working for other agencies from their temporary counselors.”

13. Although I do have the space in this article for sufficient analysis, it is clear that more research is needed to understand the dynamics between the formal and informal day labour markets and how these play out in different localities.

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