Letter Home: Turning the Tide through the Power of Memory: A story of permanent workers in the temporary Economy

Hector Gutierrez
UC Berkeley Visiting Scholar
May 28, 2011

This weekend I had the pleasure of attending a summit in Arlington, Virginia entitled “Turning the Tide.” The National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON) and several other grassroots organizations held the conference at George Washington University. The ambition of the summit, which attracted over 400 people, was held to create a collaborative space where different organizations nationwide were able to come together and create steps towards ‘turning the tide’ to combat the countless issues emerging around the “secure communities” initiative taking place under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security. Likewise, the summit served as a venue to discuss other issues such as 287g, national campaigns to fighting the xenophobic attitude towards immigrants, and much more. The weekend was full of trainings, dialogues, and strategic planning sessions to create a national agenda to fight towards comprehensive immigration reform and to create a more cohesive nationwide coalition to change the status quo and to call for policy that will enact progressive change.

The Conference showed me that I am not alone in making visible the struggles and untold narratives of undocumented people in this country. Over the weekend I met so many passionate people, organizations, and activists that are doing extraordinary work to ensure human rights are protected and vulnerable communities are standing up the racism and inequality they experience. Through the various trainings and strategic planning sessions I attended which included but where not limited to:

1. Beyond Silly Games: Popular Education A tool for Organizing your Community
2. From Documenting Abuses to Community
3. Story Based Strategy and Messaging to Turn the Tide
4. Getting Started The Basics of Building a Campaign to Turn the Tide

I saw that the movement is strong to fight for justice for undocumented people in this country. The conference gave me the opportunity to learn from others and gain new tools that will without a doubt help shape my project, Permanent Workers in the Temporary Economy. I had the
pleasure of meeting individuals from Los Angeles, El Paso, New Orleans, and the East Coast. I gained many contacts with organizations/individuals who are interested in my work and would like to be in collaboration. I have already begun setting up interviews with many of them thanks to my participation in the summit (e.g. NDLON, HURRICANE (based in Oakland), and Coalition for Human Rights in Los Angeles (CHRILA)). Individuals that I meet from these organizations are very excited to help me with my project and connect me with the various day laborers/individuals they work with across the state and the country.

Likewise, throughout the weekend I was reminded of the power of narrative and how much of an impact it can have to develop consciousness to fight back against a system that often becomes oppressive in nature. I had the pleasure of meeting a filmmaker who documented the ICE raids that occurred in Postville, Iowa at one of the largest kosher meat packing companies in the country. His film reaffirmed why the power of narrative is so important. His documentary entitled “abUSed” made palpable the resilience and resistance that vulnerable people are able to illustrate as they stand up and fight even though there are moments when fear that often can leave us desperate and hopeless. His film, which evoked many immigrants who worked in the meat packing plan made tangible the power images, voices, and stories evoke given the political climate of the state and the lack of comprehensive immigration reform which continues to lead to the deputization of local law enforcement to enforce immigration type work.

All in all, the conference surpassed my expectations by creating a venue for progressive people to collaborate. It showed me the work that still needs to be done and how important my project will be to “turning the tide” as we fight for immigrant rights. In terms of the progress of my project I have been able to interview four people, Maria Angelina Zepeda a health worker who works with day laborers in Alameda County and three day laborers who work with her. In addition, next week I have set up a meeting with Data Center research associate, Christina Fletes, who works on participatory and decolonial research with vulnerable people. She has put me in contact with several of her contacts that she works with including the Women’s Collective and day laborers in San Francisco. Moreover, I’m in the middle of planning my first trip to Los Angeles to begin interviewing with Abel Valenzuela and several other people from CHIRLA and NDLON. I am excited to collect more interviews and begin synthesizing the anthology of stories
that I hope to create as part of my project. Likewise, I am excited to begin buying my equipment as soon as my funds are distributed to get a move on the photo exhibit that I hope to create by the end of project. Through the conference I was able to borrow a camera and took some pictures, which are at the end of this letter.

Overall, this weekend reignited the fire in my soul to go above and beyond the proposal I have set forth for my project. I am dedicated and ready to ensure that I make visible the hidden stories that exist in the Bay Area and in Berkeley. I might even make my way up to El Paso, Texas if I can find a way to fund the trip. During the summit I meet a man named Martin, he knew not one word of English and had arrived late to the summit. He told me he was desperate and frustrated because he though he would never arrive. He had been the only person who came from his organization in El Paso, the El Paso Immigrant Rights Coalition. Not knowing one word of English and traveling to DC for the first time by himself, he like me went to that summit to learn and to connect with others. Its funny because we got so caught up in our conversation that instead of going to one of the scheduled workshops we had intended to go to, I helped him check in with his organization in El Paso (because he had lost his cell phone and had not communicated to them that he had arrived) and we spent the next two hours talking about his story and all the stories of border crossing that many of his friends have experience. His story only reaffirmed the need to document the injustices that go untold. Martin had been a victim of wage theft and had been injured more than five times on the jobs. He told me how one time an employer took him to the hospital and left him there and he never saw the man ever again. I hope that in the next couple of months I will be able to “turn the tide” through the power of memory and stories like Martin to show politicians, academics, and the community at large the injustices that exist all around us. My goal in the next months will be to bring social justice through the power of memory and narrative. I wait what the next couple of months have to bring.
Letter Home #2: The Story of Paula
Hector Gutierrez
July 3, 2011

My project is moving along well. I have already finished most of my interviews in the Central Valley (CV) and have started the transcription process for many of the interviews. As I was interviewing individual in CV, I realized that given the type of economy that exist there temporary work manifest itself in the agricultural sector and not necessarily in construction or other types of industries typified by day laborers economies in the East Bay. Consequently, work is not confined to solely men. Women also engage the temporary economies of the Valley. As I interviewed my participants I found many of the same stories of hardship and exploitation recounted by day laborers in El Cerrito and Oakland. The only difference in the narratives told by these agricultural workers were the above 100-degree weather many of them have to endure to earn a living. When I first began my interviews in CV I met most of my interviewees by means of my aunt who is a social worker and works with the population. Many of the people I interviewed told me the stories of racism, discrimination, wage theft, humiliation and pain that they've lived through. Many articulated the same ideas of the American Nightmare rather than the American Dream narrative that pushed many of them to migrate to the United States in the first place.

For this letter I’m going to share with you the story of Paula Macias, an agricultural worker who migrated at the age of 14 to the United States. Paula began her story by talking about the conditions that drove her to migrate north. It all began with the death of her boyfriend. At the age of 14 Paula got pregnant and was about to begin a new life with her boyfriend. Shortly after she found she was going to have his child he died. With no one to support her in Mexico her sister in law (her deceased boyfriend’s sister) crossed her into the U.S. using fake documentation while pregnant. Using someone else birth certificate Paula crossed the U.S. Mexico border with the dream of a better life for her unborn child and herself. Once in the United States, she believed she was going to find comfort in her sister-in-laws home. Instead what she found was a situación no 14 year old should ever undergo. While pregnant, Paula’s sister-in-law made her work in the agricultural fields of the Central Valley. While many employers denied Paula work given her young age others turned their heads and allowed the 14 year old to work under unthinkable conditions. It wasn’t until she started showing because of the pregnancy that many employers saw her as a liability. Many felt that given the chemicals and pesticides being used to ensure crop yields, Paula’s pregnancy could be a serious liability if word got out a she was working for the many companies she worked in. In this way, since Paula couldn’t work through the latter half of her pregnancy her sister in law made her take care of the foster children. Paula vividly remembered the days where her and the three other children she took care off would go hungry because Paula's sister in law wouldn't buy food for them. Paula remembered the hunger and anguish she felt when she went without food.

From then on, she decided to go on welfare to help her child, herself, and the other foster children she took care off. When Paula’s sister in law found out that Paula was receiving welfare, she took all that money and used it for her own selfish needs. As punishment
Paula’s sister in law would deny her food and would physically abuse her. Paula told me that daily she would experience physical and emotional trauma brought on by the actions of her sister in law. At the age of 15 her sister-in-law forced Paula into prostitution; Paula, only fifteen was sold for sex in bars for over a year. Paula remembered running, crying, and locking herself in bathrooms every time her sister in law tell her they were going out together. It wasn’t until Paula was sixteen that she and had enough that she decided to run away with a young man she met in the agricultural job she worked at during the day. More than fifteen years older than her she ran away from her sister in laws and began yet another chapter of her life at the age of sixteen with the man that helped her escape hell on earth. The reason why Paula decided to share this story with me is to remind young immigrant women that even though they might be undocumented they as women have rights. That the law is not going to deny someone protection from rape and abuse because of the legal status that they might hold. The story of Paula is one that is filled with sadness, disbelief, anger, and hope to escape a surreal reality for a better tomorrow. There were other stories of abuse that Paula shared with me and I will share later. Nonetheless, what I want to evoke is that there are other stories that I’ve encountered that are inspiring and make palpable the goal of this project, which is to make visible the invisible. The oral histories that I am documenting will be used as tools for social justice and a way to make visible the institutionalized violence than many women, men, and children experience here in the United States. I’m excited to continue to gather more interviews and get started on the photo exhibit I’m hoping to show in late August.

I’ve already scheduled an interview with Abel Valenzuela (July 20), lead scholar in the field of day labor studies, and will be traveling to LA in the weeks to come to conduct more interviews. I’m excited to document the expertise of Abel and to learn how and why he was motivated to examine the day laborer phenomenon. July is an exciting time for me and I hope to share more of my progress as the month comes to a close. By then I hope to finalize the week my photo exhibit will be shown at the Multicultural Community Center. Till then, I’m excited to continue to share the progress of my project and to immerse myself in the project. Below are some pictures of taken of some of my interview participants and field shots.
Paula and her three Daughters
Agricultural Worker for more than 26 years.
Letter Home: Permanent Workers in the Temporary Economy

Stronach Undergraduate Prize

Hector Gutierrez
August 28, 2011

My Project is going well. I just got back from Los Angeles and I found a place to move into to finish the short anthology I’m composing for the project. The apartment is in Culver City and is a two-bedroom apartment close to the UCLA campus where my grad program will begin when the project comes to an end. I leave to Los Angeles officially to finish the project late August after the photo exhibit that I am finalizing here at UC Berkeley is complete (details will be sent out soon). Moving on to my update last week I had the pleasure of interviewing Abel Valenzuela, lead scholar in Urban Planning who has examined the day labor phenomenon. A little about Professor Abel Valenzuela, he is a full professor at UCLA and is the chair of Chicano Studies Department and holds joint appointment in Urban Planning and Chicano Studies. He also runs the Center for Urban Poverty on campus. Throughout the interview I gained a greater understanding for the work that has been done and needs to be done on day laborers. It was a surreal experience interviewing Professor Valenzuela given that he has informed my work so much as an undergraduate here at Cal. At first it he seemed a bit intimidating asking me questions about my own research, but once we started the interview he loosened up and enjoyed reflection on his journey as an advocate and academic.

The interview began by me asking professor Valenzuela about his academic trajectory and life work as a professor. Likewise, we discussed the series of events that lead up to the “National Day Labor Survey,” which he and others spearheaded. He told me that it was a joint effort through the Center for Urban Poverty and collaboration with his former MIT Professor and colleague Nik Theodore that Abel decided to conduct the day labor survey. Throughout the interview he discussed his passion for social justice work and how that came to materialize through his scholarly interest in informal markets and labor demands made visible in the day labor population. Throughout the interview we discussed the way in which his colleagues and himself raised the revenue for the study (a little bit over $500,000) and the methodology they employed to conduct the survey that many thought would be impossible given the demographics of the population. Abel said that it
was a bit difficult to localize the different hiring sites nation wide given the fluidity that materializes in the labor market as new markets are created and others vanish. It was just great hearing the way he went about becoming fascinated with his research, which launched his tenured track career at UCLA. Likewise, Abel gave me some great contacts to connect with for the project in the Los Angeles Area.

I think the best thing that came out of the interview was learning about Abel’s passion and mission to change public discourse on day laborers. It was inspiring and motivating for me to listen to his interview. Something else that happened was Professor Valenzuela offered me a job as a research assistant once I start my grad program in late September. He said he was going to put me on a study that examines street vendors and labor market trends. I am more than thrilled to be working with him at the conclusion of this project.

In terms of other updates, I am off to the Central Valley this week once again to take pictures of agricultural workers and to do two more interviews. As soon as I come back I am finalizing pictures to send to the printers to start putting together the displays that will be up for the photo exhibit. I will send dates out very soon of when the display will be shown. Thank you once again for giving me this opportunity to continue my research endeavor to make visible the invisible and to give voice to those workers who want their stories to be shared.
LETTER HOME August 2011
Hector Gutierrez
Permanent Workers in the Temporary Economy

It’s been a busy summer and I’m trying to finish up all that I have to do for my Stronach Baccalaureate Prize Project, including the anthology of oral histories and the photo exhibit where I will be showcasing some of the pictures that attempt to capture the daily struggle of permanent workers in the temporary economy. Below is a small preview of some of the photos that I will be showing. I’ve decided to do a mix of both black and white and heightened color scheme. I’m waiting to see the layout of where my pictures will be placed once the art committee at the Multicultural Community Center decides. Accordingly the location for the exhibit will be the Multicultural Community Center (MCC), located in MLK student Union building. My project will be featured as part of a bigger art exhibit the MCC is putting on entitled “art as Liberation,” which is scheduled to open September 30 to October 21st. The date might be a few days earlier or right at the beginning of October. They have informed me that hopefully by Friday they will have the date and time finalized. In addition, I am also planning a collaborative event with the Raza Recruitment and Retention Center a brown bag to make sac lunches for day laborers. The tentative date for that is September 29. I want it to coincide with the exhibit opening, but I’m just waiting on the reservation to go through on the location. But other than that everything looks good. Pictures are ready to be sent to the printers and ready to be put up as soon as I get my hands on them. In the meantime, I’m finishing the write up of the anthology and the final editing of it all. The anthology will be comprised of many voices including day laborers, agricultural/seasonal workers, activist, scholars, and of course my story as well. As I sit and write everyday, I am reminded daily of why I’m both passionate about this work and why it’s so necessary. It reminds me of the movie, “The Help,” which recently came out in theaters. I hope that I do justice to the various stories, struggles, and lived history that many of my interviewers have described to me. Thank you once again for all your support.

Sincerely,
Hector Gutierrez
Victor has been a day and agricultural worker for more than 26 years. Once a university Professor in Mexico, he left his profession to leverage the opportunities the United States would afford him and his family. His days of standing in front of classroom educating students have changed into the daily routine of waiting for seasonal agricultural job opportunities and day labor work in the Central Valley.
At the age of 15 Paula immigrated to the United States after the death of her boyfriend. Pregnant, she crossed the geopolitical landscape of the Southwest where her sister-in-law took her in. Forced into prostitution by her sister in law she survived her coming of age by working the fields of the Central Valley, while simultaneously raising her child at the age of sixteen. Fed up with the lifestyle she was forced to live she ran away and decided to fend for herself. She has been working in the agricultural sector for more than 10 years earning minimum wage and experiencing the ongoing cycle of discrimination and racism that disable her to gain upward social mobility. Paula continues to engage in seasonal agricultural work to make an earnest living for her and her three children.
Agricultural workers in the Central Valley discussed how exposure to pesticides is an ongoing struggle in their daily routine. Oral History interviewees’ Maria and Paula discussed how arid winds often carry harmful pesticides to work areas getting into workers eyes and clothing, causing many health concerns and irritation to the body. According to a new study coming out of the School of Public Health at UC prenatal pesticide exposure has been tied to lower IQ in children. Some of the issues discussed in the article were referenced by workers interviewed for this project. See: http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2011/04/20/prenatal-pesticide-exposure-lower-iq/
Failed immigration reform at the national level has led many city-states to write immigration
related policies. Analysis of ordinances and laws passed in the past five years demonstrate that
immigration related issues are being addressed by state legislatures for very locally specific
reasons. In Berkeley, men sit to find work in designated worker zones where they await to be
pickup. “It’s a game of chance, the way the economy is. If you get work your one of the lucky
ones, your know your going to eat at least for one day.”
On any given day approximately 117,600 workers are either looking for day labor jobs or employed as a day laborer (NDLS, 4). According to Abel Valenzuela, lead researcher in the field, seventy nine percent of all day laborers congregate at informal hiring sites that have formed in front of home improvement stores and along busy thoroughfares and near expressway onramps (2004, 7). Nationally these men are located all throughout the United States. In the East Bay jornaleros can be found in areas that include but are not limited to Oakland, El Cerrito, Alameda and San Leandro. In Berkeley these men are seen off the high-end 6th street shopping center off of University Avenue.
In cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles we begin to see the incongruity solidify in the case of the day laborer as local communities attempt to integrate undocumented workers and immigrants into the metropolitan community. In Southern California, between 15,000 and 20,000 day laborers, are spread over 100 hiring sites (Valenzuela, 2000).
The Day Labor Street Family passing time as they wait to find work during these hard economic times.
It’s sad to think that this will be my last and final letter home. Time flies when you're doing work that you love and are so deeply invested in. Over these past few months I know that I have worked extremely hard to shed light on the myriad of social problems that day laborers and agricultural workers face. All in all, this project has been successful. The art exhibit that I created as part of this project is being hosted in the Ethnic Studies Library from September 28 to October 25 and subsequently it will be placed in the Multicultural Community Center for a short period of time thereafter. The anthology will be distributed in early November and available online as part of the blog that I created as a virtual space for this project. The link to that is as followed: http://jlslidaylaborproject.tumblr.com/. I hope that my project continues to inspire others to work alongside this community and develop similar ventures that continue to elevate social consciousness about the situation of day laborers. But as this chapter ends, another one opens in graduate school. I know that this is only the beginning for me and this work will continue on. In this final letter home, I do want to share with the selection committee a final story that made this whole project worth it.

One of the agricultural workers who I interviewed for the project (Maria) saw me recently on a trip back to the Central Valley and she shared with me some enthusiastic news. She told me that she had begun organizing workers in Bakersfield, for better wages and working conditions. This came as a surprise to me because during our initial interview she had stated that she often felt silent and unable to do anything about the inequality she and her colleagues experienced. Like most undocumented workers she expressed a fear of her employer. The risk of losing her job and being blacklisted was always the way the discussion ended. Yet, when I saw her this last time she seemed like a completely different individual. She said that she had found a new sense of strength in herself after talking to me about her experiences as an undocumented worker. Having shared her narrative, and then talking to other workers about theirs, she got to a point where she couldn’t take it anymore. Maria could no longer sit by as everyone around her was exploited. Her anger and frustration turned into a strength that helped mobilize her and her friends. “Ya Vasta, somos humanos y tenemos derecho a trabajar en condiciones que no sean
exploitivas” ("That’s enough, were human beings and we have the right to work in conditions that do not exploit us"), these are the words that she uttered to me as we spoke.

In addition, she made the point that change would only happen if someone stood up and made the inequality they experience visible. Maria said to me that she wasn’t doing this just for herself; she was doing it for her friends, other people who were scared, and her children. Maria made it clear that people who wanted to oppress her would no longer silence her. She was loud, proud, and ready to take on the challenges to come.

These were some of the most powerful words that will forever be embedded in my mind. I was full of excitement when Maria shared with me this news. Both her organizing and politicization became apparent. Being able to overcome fear and stand up to fight in something she felt good about is something no one can take away from her. This silent, petite woman transformed into a loud and outspoken woman who without a doubt will make a difference in her community. She made this experience all worth it. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to carry out this project!
Select photos from Permanent Workers in the Temporary Economy

Hector in front of the White House
UNDOCUMENTED
UNAFRAID
NO TENEMOS MIEDO

text ARIZONA to 3-0-6-4-4

AltoArizona.com