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# Neighborhood outsiders, field insiders: Latino immigrant men and the control of public space

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how a group of primarily Latino immigrant men claim and control a sought-after and contested public soccer field in a West Los Angeles public park. In contrast to previous studies that took the stability, viability, and visibility of groups, and their claims, as given, this study examines how group boundaries become constructed and taken-for-granted in working out the use and control of public space. As this study reveals, control is premised on creating and sustaining meaningful distinctions between insiders and outsiders, which are far from self-evident in open gatherings. Control is also constructed through the enforcement of informal authority, which is inherently uncertain in public space, especially for stigmatized groups with no formal association to the area. By studying how social organization is repeatedly challenged and reconstructed on the playing field, this paper sheds new light onto how informal claims on public space are made and remade in the contemporary city.

**Keywords:** Public space; territoriality; boundaries; social order; sports

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Monday through Friday, 30 to 60 men, and an occasional woman, play and watch a series of midday soccer matches on a synthetic turf field in a West Los Angeles public park. This popular soccer-specific facility is officially open and free of charge to anyone during these unreserved hours. The regular use of the field by this group is the result of their own organization. Primarily working-class immigrants from Mexico and Central America, the players control a field in an area where they are ethnic and class outsiders.

Regular participants face a series of challenges for sustaining their play in the park, most of which center on how authority is contested, negotiated, and established on the open facility. While the games stretch back several decades, most of these challenges are catalyzed by current dynamics, including the steady arrival of newcomers and at times hostile interventions from local residents, which emerged with the installation of an attractive synthetic turf soccer field that replaced an inferior “dirt” playing surface. By studying how social organization is repeatedly challenged and reconstructed on the improved field, this paper sheds new light on how informal claims on public space are made and remade in the contemporary city.

The organization and vulnerability of group claims on public space was made apparent on my first visit to the local social world that is midday “pickup” soccer<sup>1</sup> at this particular park<sup>2</sup>:

I arrived at 11:15 and observed approximately 15 guys casually warming up on the field. Over the next 15 minutes, about 25 more guys appeared. Some of them joined the others on the field, while the rest socialized in small groupings around the facility; not everyone seemed “dressed to play.” Most of the men appeared working-class Latino, and Spanish was the primary spoken language, which contrasted with the seemingly upscale and predominantly white neighborhood.

At around 11:30, a man arrived carrying a large bag of jerseys. As he stepped up on the bleachers to the empty top row, prospective players made their way toward the structure. Most of them seemed to know each other and I felt largely ignored by the group despite my “soccer getup.” After shaking hands and speaking with a few of them, the apparent leader [Polo] opened the bag and distributed jerseys for two teams, deliberately bestowing some and bypassing others.

Of the four sets in his bag, he allocated red and green jerseys, the sleeve-less mesh variety often used in training sessions. A few guys extended their arms and verbally pleading their case, but most maintained eye contact and more confidently waited their turn. A few rebuffed participants expressed mild anger and frustration to no apparent avail or local support. Several guys showed up during this process and were given jerseys despite the previously waiting players.

This excerpt illustrates both the structure of the “right to use” on this open field and the sources of potential conflict. At this public facility, neither fees nor membership restrictions limit the number or type of users. As entry is open to all and no system formally allocates use of the space, random use, debilitating conflict, and chaos are all possibilities. Instead, soccer playing takes an organized, highly patterned form that continues on a sustained basis, day after day after day. However, demands for inclusion by potential players exceed the number that teams can accommodate and there is vigorous opposition to the games by some nearby residents in the largely white, upper-middle-class neighborhood that surrounds the field. Thus, organized play,

characterized by differential treatment and access to the games and challenged by neighborhood residents, is neither monopolistic nor egalitarian, but a negotiated product of local conditions.

While sociologists have long studied interactions in public space (Anderson 1990; Goffman 1963; Lofland 1973), the actual processes through which open territories are claimed, controlled, and contested have received inadequate attention. As I will show in this paper, understanding how, why, and with what limitations, these Latino soccer players manage use of this field sheds new light on both the mechanisms by which public space is claimed and the conflicts triggered by those claims. That this research uncovers social order in public space is not surprising; rather it is the underappreciated relationship between social and spatial practices in the ever-tenuous control of public space that this paper seeks to emphasize.

In the pages that follow, I examine three general ways in which use is differentiated and controlled on the open playing field through sometimes contentious and unresolved negotiations. I show how distinctions are drawn between “regulars” and “newcomers,” power relations are made and enforced, and assumptions about local apprehension are managed and manipulated. All parties, however, face significant obstacles in claiming the open facility and controlling its use, even though power is not equally shared. For example, categories of insider and outsider require constant renegotiation by regulars who feel powerful on the field yet marginal in the predominately white residential setting. In fact, attempts at exercising and maintaining control often result in aggravated and unintended problems in and around the field. The multiple layers and domains of conflict and resolution spotlight the particular place of Latino immigrant men in contemporary Los Angeles and the more “universal” roots of these recurrent struggles over urban public space.

### **The Neglected Role of Social Boundaries in Territorial Studies**

This project builds on a longstanding sociological interest in territorial behavior. Territoriality, or the attempt to “affect, influence, or control” space (Lyman and Scott 1967; Sack 1986, 1), was introduced in early ecological studies of neighborhood change (Park et al. 1925; Zorbaugh 1929) and advanced in more ethnographic examinations of urban life (Anderson 1990; Duneier 1999; Suttles 1968). In these studies, contestations over space frequently surface in “public” areas, such as sidewalks, street corners, and parks, where claims and counterclaims to access and control are especially volatile and susceptible to complex processes of negotiation, manipulation, and adaptation. That is, while public and private spaces are customarily distinguished according to legal access, the line between the two is often fluid and contextual.

Presenting a more nuanced and differentiated social geography, scholars have examined the numerous ways in which ostensibly public space is appropriated and transformed into types of private or semiprivate places, such as “home territories,” which Lofland (1973, 119) usefully describes as “a relatively small piece of public which is taken over—either by individuals acting independently or by an already formed group acting in concert—and turned into ‘a home away from home’” (see also Cavan 1963; Lyman and Scott 1967). In fact, urban ethnographies are replete with examples of individuals and groups claiming public space as their own, and often at the expense or displeasure of others.

Most notably, urban ethnographers show how only a small number of members are needed to wrest control of a neighborhood's public spaces (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Deener 2010; Suttles 1968). Not limited to the threat of violence, public space is seized through a range of social and spatial practices. As two everyday examples, the familiar rituals of beach

going, such as spreading out a towel, help establish private territories in public beaches (Edgerton 1979) and in a less material sense, the "social membrane" of interacting groups can function as psychological barriers to intrusion, such as when individuals cluster in social gatherings (Goffman 1963). How pet dogs facilitate interaction and create divisions in urban space has also been well demonstrated (Tissot 2011; Robins, Sanders, and Cahill 1991). More sensationally, the presence and activity of "undesirables" in public settings are shown to repel and upset those within different categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Anderson 1990; Duneier 1999; Gardner 1995; Mitchell 1995; Pattillo 2007).

Often taken for granted in research on territoriality, us/them distinctions are not necessarily obvious or acceptable to the involved parties. Instead, they result from insiders' simultaneous attempts to construct and impose social and symbolic boundaries that designate them as "local" (Horowitz 1983; Suttles 1968) or "regular" (Anderson 1978; Duneier 1992) and separate them from outsiders. For that reason, the articulation and defense of *social boundaries* defining the in-group are as important as the delineation and enforcement of *physical borders* needed to establish and maintain territory in public space. Hence, who and what "belongs" in a given area needs to be effectively implemented and imposed in claiming public territory.

As the substantial literature on the formation and dissolution of ethnic groups and status hierarchies demonstrates, boundary formation is a social, dynamic, and interactional process with varying degrees and forms of closure and boundedness (Brubaker 2004). Following this lead, this study provides an ideal setting to study group boundaries as emergent and in dialectical relationship with territorial claims making. Specifically, in the face of competing interests and uncertain authority, maintaining distinct boundaries between privileged and underprivileged participants in this public setting—as opposed to local bars, "ethnic" neighborhoods, or gang-affiliated street corners—is less formally manageable and requires everyday negotiation. In other words, the more informal and unrecognized the social gathering, the more invisible or disputed the social boundaries and behavioral norms to outsiders (Collins 2000). In turn, territorial claims are contingent upon creating and sustaining collective unity, a source of difference that is not always self-evident or acceptable to outsiders, especially for those interested in using the space.

In public parks, which often draw from beyond the immediate neighborhood and are formally established for open use and leisure purposes, "belonging" emerges as particularly uncertain and contested for users and local residents. What is made of public park space is largely the product of privately organized responses to their possibilities. As a result, the "open condition" of public parks makes them especially vulnerable to conversion into or out of recognized home territories, a tension not fully appreciated by the usual focus on the background differences and inter-group hostilities typically assumed to promote conflict (see Anderson 1990, 1999; Suttles 1968).

While the relative accessibility and openness of public spaces provide the conditions for inter-group conflict to unfold, the degree and intensity of conflict over territory certainly varies. For example, in this study, as most parties agree that the field should be used for soccer—an accomplishment in its own right—it is not so much territorial control that is at stake but who can join and under what terms. This case differs from people controlling a neighborhood space that leads to murders and muggings, the actions of a Business Improvement District restricting public behaviors, or police officers identifying certain practices as suspect. Recognizing the range and variety of territorial practices, this paper argues that claiming space is best understood as a process whereby a group defines itself, and is recognized by others, as the established proprietors of that space. How and to what extent particular boundaries and group dynamics become the

taken-for-granted way to work out conflicts among users, potential users, and more distant observers is the subject of this study.

## **Setting**

The soccer field where my research took place was for decades a simple dirt field. In June 2005, it was replaced by a soccer-specific facility, which involved the publically financed installation of synthetic grass, unenclosed fencing, goals, and bleachers (see figure 1). While benefiting from its construction, none of the players were directly involved in the process that brought the field to the 18-acre park.<sup>3</sup> Primarily intended for area youth, local advocates of the field did not anticipate the amount of adult activity and "outsider" interest the new facility would invite.

First-rate and public, the field is heavily used, highly desired, and difficult to reserve. Referred to by many participants as "soccer heaven," the current field arrangement is certainly unusual in a region where such public options are rare (Garcia, Flores, and Pine 2002). Most agree that the new field has attracted a greater amount of players, spectators, and local attention than its prior use as a dirt field.

The park's surrounding neighborhoods are primarily upper-middle-class, white, and residential, although not as exclusive as nearby Brentwood or Beverly Hills. While L.A.'s Westside remains historically white and wealthy, particular areas within short distance of the park have experienced increases in foreign-born Latino residents, most of whom—including users of the soccer field—rent in scattered apartment complexes. Their presence fits a decades-long growth in Latin American immigration occurring throughout the region since the mid 1960s. While broadly used by its local residential population, there is no unitary park-guest characteristic, as users appear remarkably diverse across many social dimensions.

Approximately 80 percent of the participants of the pickup game are Latino men, the majority working-class immigrants from Mexico and Central America, many of whom are undocumented, with the remaining 20 percent an assortment of foreign and U.S.-born blacks, whites, and Asians of mixed class backgrounds. This demographic breakdown is roughly the same for longtime participants and relative newcomers, meaning that the bulk of new arrivals are also Latino immigrant men. Although attendance varies with the weather and calendar, out of a regular population of approximately 100 members, there are typically 30 to 60 participants, players and spectators on any given weekday. Most of the men are young adults, in their 20s and 30s, although there is a contingent of talented teenagers and venerable veterans in their 40s and 50s. In addition, several women intermittently participate in this largely male-dominated space.

The participants' residences also vary and some live close enough to walk. Though many work nearby, most drive or bus in from a range of distances. None of the regular participants live in the single-family homes directly adjacent to the park, which is where most field critics reside. The majority of players and spectators attribute their initial arrival to word of mouth and prior connections or to having seen the visible field and games in passing.

## **Methodology**

I gained entrée into this place-based social world as a capable soccer player. For that reason, the findings and conclusions presented in this paper result primarily from my extensive participation as a player and spectator, which has continued since January 2008. While most of

the participants are Spanish-speaking, working-class Latino immigrants, and I am a white, U.S.-born, graduate student who speaks a serviceable Spanish, in light of our social differences our shared passion for soccer was instrumental in helping me complete this research.

For this research, I conducted few formal interviews and largely maneuvered as a committed soccer player during my time at the park. Despite my Spanish language capabilities and extensive exposure to Latin America, I consistently asked for clarification and elaboration when I was unsure or confused about what was being said or implied at the park. In addition, while much of the field discourse is in Spanish, I have translated direct quotations recorded in my field notes into English with the help of an experienced translator.

When not playing or talking with others, I jotted down observations that I would use to write up field notes later in the day, which were then analyzed through the heuristic methods proposed by the “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). After the relationship between social and spatial practices emerged as a large subset of observations, I further categorized and theorized the data based on a continual process of analytic induction (Katz 2001). While attentive to individual backgrounds and motivations, interaction and the “contours of situations” are at the center of analysis (Collins 2008, 1).

The data for this study draw from an ongoing ethnographic project examining how these recurrent social gatherings intersect and relate with other aspects of the participants' unfolding lives and the historical roots and social context of local opposition to their use of the park. But in order to focus closely on the micro-dynamics of controlling public space, it is necessary here to bracket the meaning and import of the games and park for players and area residents. Nevertheless, part of the meaning of public parks is that control is contingent, and needs to be worked out by the users on a daily basis. What emerges is one of several alternative uses and social meanings that are built into park space.

## **The Soccer Games**

The weekday soccer games are played from approximately 11:30 to 1:30 in the early afternoon. The men do not formally reserve the field as it is generally available for free and open use at this time of day. Schools, clubs, and leagues often rent the facility in the later afternoons and weekends by purchasing a field permit from the park office, which start at \$30 per hour but increase substantially in cost and paperwork for adult and for-profit organizations.

Games are approximately 15 minutes long with the winning team staying on to compete against a waiting team. If the game is tied, both teams exit the field. There are usually enough players on the sidelines to form two to three additional teams, although Polo only provides jerseys for four teams. Those without typically try to secure a jersey from Polo or a departing player, although as I discuss, securing entry into the games is a consistent point of tension and confusion. In fact, controlling who plays during this two-hour period is the primary problem regulars face in managing the games and maintaining favorable playing conditions on the public field.

Players' work schedules facilitate participation at this unusual time and help organize and structure their days. For example, many work primarily evenings and weekends, others are self-employed, and an increasing number are struggling to find steady employment in the current economic downturn. Many men with steady daytime work also come during their lunch break. While there are usually more than enough players to field two teams for the first game, players come and go over the course of the two hours. In addition, a sizeable minority of participants

come to the field to watch the games and socialize with friends; and for many, the park, as an exemplary "third place" (Oldenburg 1989), represents the "thick of their social life," including the actual games and the interactions that accompany them (Anderson 1978, 35).

Individuals and leagues have played soccer in this space for decades, including many veterans of the current pickup game, which has its roots in the mid 1980s. Most of these original players were recent immigrants who gravitated to the park to play a favorite pastime. Many lived in the general area and worked sporadically as day laborers or evenings as dishwashers, busboys, and cooks in nearby restaurants. Now old-timers, this steady group of participants played alongside and eventually replaced an earlier group of South Americans who had organized informal games at the park since the early 1970s. Throughout its history, this pickup game has had a small number of primary organizers: the current incumbent, Polo, is a 41-year-old native of Veracruz, Mexico, and 19-year veteran of the park. One of the major reasons why Polo holds this demanding position is because he is available at this time—he works evenings as a line cook and is single and without children.

Most participants agree that circumstances have changed with the advent of the new field. While play is much improved, this unusually accessible and attractive facility has drawn a continued flow of newcomers and nonregulars, many of whom are unaware or unsympathetic to the regulars' historical claims on the field. In turn, newcomers threaten the order and stability of the soccer games, which for many regulars, provide a cherished respite from family and work life. Most concretely, newcomers take valuable playing time away from regulars, although more subjective concerns over respect and deference also motivate objections. The greater presence and visibility of play and players, both of which are perceived as foreign by some local residents, has also sparked considerable protest from adjacent neighbors, including attempts to restrict access and use. Consequently, this is largely a story of how longtime users respond to micro-level challenges brought about by a macro-level change to a park they have called home for so many years.

The remaining sections of this paper will show (1) how newcomers come to recognize the presence of "regulars" and the operation of an organized game as taken-for-granted features of the park, (2) the processes and resources by which authority is sustained on the open playing field, and (3) the mechanisms by which challenges are experienced and resolutions achieved within a predominately immigrant Latino but diverse playing population, on a field that is contested by neighbors in ways that raise ethnic and class tensions. Whereas the analysis begins by detailing the processes through which regular participants attempt to control the field and game activity, by no means are their efforts conclusive or uncontested, which becomes most evident in the concluding analytic section on the tenuousness of this social order.

### **Differentiating between Regulars and Newcomers on the Open Field**

One way that differentiated use is established is through the sorting out of participants into regulars and newcomers. Newcomers come to appreciate the presence of "regulars" and their operation of an organized soccer game as taken-for-granted features of the open and attractive field through a series of dynamic social processes and collective performances.

To begin with, while the first-rate facility and soccer activity certainly attract newcomers, the daily and dense presence of players and spectators, most of whom appear Latino, represents a preliminary boundary that newcomers must traverse to enter the games. In addition to an average of 40 distinguishable soccer players, there are usually a dozen or so "spectators" in street clothes



around the field, most congregating on the bleachers. The use and visibility of jerseys, however, accomplishes the most in signaling organization from afar, a key mechanism I return to in greater detail.

While these externally visible features, such as the jerseys and participants, may deter prospective players, not to mention those interested in using the soccer field for other purposes, they begin the work of establishing authority over the public field. Before the games commence, “waiting” players signal the advent of routine activity, and during the games, the density of players and spectators in and around the field proclaims a recurrent focused gathering. In fact, like the invisible boundary surrounding the body (Goffman 1963), newcomers often ascribe their initial hesitancy to join the games to their perceived organization and formality. However, because this group of regulars sets up the game, rather than it being part of a public league officiated by the city, newcomers are forced to interact with them if they wish to participate. I now turn to the successive ways in which control is signaled to newcomers who do cross this initial boundary and attempt to join the games.

As with my first encounter, newcomers need to initiate incorporation and are not actively or enthusiastically welcomed by regular participants. When newcomers ask a player about joining a game, regulars invariably point to Polo,<sup>4</sup> providing little helpful information, let alone friendly introductions. Newcomers thus face a limited space of entry when approaching the games and confront them in a position of strangeness and vulnerability. This is in stark contrast to how other players receive one another in this atmosphere of “competitive sociability” (Anderson 1978; Jerolmack 2009): an extended and playful ritual of first-name greetings, distinctive handshakes, and backstage behavior (Goffman 1959), which becomes especially pronounced when old-timers or absent regulars return to the park. Predictably, embellished park memories and past participants are a central feature of field discourse, a reservoir of public stories that affixes a meaningful and sustained history and identity to the current pickup games.

The following field note is indicative of the significance placed on greeting distinctions in constructing and communicating recognition and status at the park:

A recent arrival steps onto the bleachers to no outward acknowledgement from the regulars already seated. Actually, his seating is accompanied with the awkward silence of interrupted conversations. Several minutes later, Caballo, a longtime participant, arrives and is enthusiastically greeted. He appears to knowingly bypass the newcomer as he traded barbs and shook hands with his fellows. After one of the men asked Caballo where had been for the past month, Abel joked that he had been in hiding ever since Honduras lost a crucial World Cup qualifying match.

First experienced at a distance, it is through these deliberate exchanges that newcomers come to further appreciate the presence of “regulars” and history at this particular field, as opposed to an unorganized collection of individuals who just happen to be playing soccer at the particular moment. These differences in greeting, experienced upon initial entry into the more immediate space of the pickup games, provide the first signals of a broader, segmented environment characterized by familiarity among regulars and fridity towards newcomers. Such distinctions continue to play out through such practices as segregated seating arrangements, affectionate and malevolent nicknames, biased referee decisions, differentiated crowd reactions, uneven banter and insults, exclusive treating of beverages and snacks, and restricted invitations

for post-game activities. As one newcomer, a 24 year-old Mexican American, put it to me, “I felt like an outsider right away, people barely said hello.”

The prevalence of inside jokes and local sayings are particularly powerful in creating feelings of difference and strangeness. For example, a white newcomer asked me why the guys yelled “jugador (player) de Santa Monica” whenever he messed up on the field, especially as he did not live in the neighboring city. I explained that the men often associated someone’s play with “their” team, be it the professional one they support or the one they play for in the city’s many recreational leagues. Although his biography was unknown, this referred to the perceived whiteness of Santa Monica and the new participant. In another case, an African American newcomer expressed confusion when someone urged him to “buy Polo’s video” after he failed to score an easy goal. Having only played a few times at the park, he was unaware of the local intrigue surrounding the alleged videotapes documenting Polo’s younger playing days.

For many newcomers, feelings of ostracism and estrangement are compounded by the dominance of Spanish at the field, a language some are unable (or unwilling) to speak or understand. While often a vehicle for humor and friendly interaction, “linguistic collusion” can also represent a source of difference and suspicion for all involved parties (Lyman and Scott 1967). Indeed, access to Spanish is another way that differentiated use of the field is sorted out, although Spanish-speaking newcomers face similar barriers of coldness and indifference. In fact, as most newcomers generally resemble the regulars, newcomer status typically supersedes perceived commonalities, such as Latino, Spanish, immigrant, or working class.

As with any rite of entrance, meanings reside beyond apparent forms and carry wide-ranging implications, which are intimately connected to the social hierarchy at the park—an evolving pecking order based on several variable and contingent factors including a player’s park history, skill level, sociability, resources, and relationship with core participants. As power is a social relation, not a personal characteristic (Emerson 1962), it is through these interactions that newcomers come to experience a power differential at the park vis-à-vis “regulars.”

This is not to imply that there are no differences amongst the regulars, or that the line between regulars and newcomers is clear and stationary. Indeed, I have observed several newcomers gradually develop into recognized regulars during my time at the park, often through a combination of steady participation and agreeable behavior. It is only to argue that for newcomers, the notion of “regulars” and the ensuing power relations become socially experienced through these early field interactions.

As hypothesized by Collins (2000, 26-27), the more invisible or informal a social gathering—a pickup soccer game in a public park being a good example—“the more effort needs to be put into making them emotionally intense, if they are to be experienced as having much effect upon feelings of social position.” In that regard, as us/them distinctions are not necessarily self-evident or acceptable to the involved parties, these subtle and overt interaction rituals help publically distinguish insiders from outsiders. Indeed, an indispensable step in establishing social control is clearly differentiating and confirming the status hierarchy among previously undifferentiated individuals, as soft as the edges may be.

At the field, this tension is recurrent and serious in that the group has no formal, externally supported identity or claims on the open facility. Thus, in the face of competing interests and uncertain authority, maintaining distinct boundaries between deserving and undeserving participants is both essential and less formally manageable. While dynamic and fluid, the everyday creation and negotiation of social distinctions through these practices

communicates the presence of a collective unit and presumptive rights of control to unsuspecting newcomers drawn to the public facility and informal sporting activity.

### **Creating and Enforcing Field-Based Inequalities**

The making and enforcement of unequal "player preferences" represents a second way in which use of the public field is differentiated and controlled. Stratified power relations on the open field are most directly expressed to newcomers by the preferential playing queue established through the public distribution of jerseys. As an additional and often unexpected border confronted by newcomers, this process signals a local system of organization and serves as a valuable material and symbolic resource in creating and sustaining the status structure. As there are usually well over ten players waiting to be included in a subsequent team, decisions and debates about the playing queue are frequent and become key "staging areas" to implement and enforce social order and hierarchies on the field (Anderson 1999). Indeed, the "right to use" the public field takes its most pressing form in waiting to play.

At this field, participation is contingent upon receiving a jersey, an incontrovertible object, and inquiring newcomers are often told that they need to "get a jersey" to play. The instruction is clear, providing regulars with a ready response for newcomers and a way to identify themselves as sanctioned participants. But for the newcomer, just how to "get a jersey" is far from self-evident. The regulars' initial unhelpful replies reiterate newcomers' unfamiliarity with field proceedings and presence on foreign ground, a distinction materially represented by those with and without jerseys.

Because newcomers are initially ignored upon arrival, it requires active work on their part to decipher the system and make themselves known as potential players, an especially unaccommodating and intimidating situation for non-Spanish speakers. Moreover, like the participants' presence in and around the field the jerseys, whether worn or hanging from the fence, independently accomplish important preliminary and anticipatory work in establishing claims on the public facility (Paperman 2003). Operating as a "language of space" (Hall 1959), newcomers read the jerseys, like a draped coat on a "reserved" library seat (Sommer and Becker 1969), to indicate expectations, and understand that they must either fit in or mount a battle to get access to a team through the jerseys. As one newcomer explained to me, "I knew I couldn't go on the field without a jersey but it wasn't really clear how to get one."

While only so many people can play at a time, the partiality of the playing queue also signals a power differential and in-group dynamic. That is, the games do not operate on a strictly first come, first serve basis as regulars are often given preference over newcomers—a violation of commonplace moral expectation to which I later return. While most players eventually get to play, deliberate rituals of selection help establish and confirm regulars' power and autonomy and newcomers' dependence and subordination (Schwartz 1975). Indeed, the jerseys are powerfully and deliberately yielded and withdrawn to materially and symbolically distinguish insiders from outsiders at the park. In fact, newcomers are often reprimanded for taking or passing out jerseys without consent, as seen in the following data passage:

A newcomer attempts to gain entry into the games by seizing a lone jersey hanging from the fence. Polo confronts the young Latino male and asks in Spanish: "Where did you get that jersey?" When he replies that he took it from the fence, Polo assertively responds, "You can't just take a jersey!" With a

confused look, the newcomer replies back in Spanish, "I thought I could take it," to which another regular retorts in English, "No, you can't just take a jersey here, you have to respect our rules if you want to play here."

Jerseys are also tactically withheld and dispensed to sanction "disobedience" and reinforce social hierarchies. For example, after a newcomer gets into a fight on the field, he is blatantly passed over in a following game. Oftentimes, inequitable distribution of jerseys occurs for less apparent reasons, such as when newcomers fail to actively defer to regulars on or off the field. For example, when I asked Robert to offer his account of why Alex, a new and skillful participant from Brazil, appeared to wait longer for a jersey than others, he replied: "He thinks he's all that, like he's better than us," adding, "he should have to wait." Reflective of their symbolic power, players often measure their status and incorporation in regards to when and how they receive a jersey.

In addition, while the games generally follow standard soccer rules, which are enforced by a Polo-appointed referee, there are a series of park-specific regulations, such as no offsides, rapid restarts, and punted goal kicks. More generally, the games adhere to a structured system of play, including regulation-size teams—plus the occasional "extra"—the use of yellow and red cards, 15 minute matches, and a transition period in which the winning team remains on the field or both teams exit if there's a tie. The aforementioned "extra" referring to park veterans who bring their own matching uniforms, rather than taking limited spots from more able-bodied players in the competitive contests. Like the jerseys, these strategic rules and routines facilitate a more ordered and satisfying game. For example, running the games without the tricky offsides call avoids arguments and delays, permitting nonstandard play, such as rapid restarts, punted goal kicks, and irregular throw-ins, increases action on the field, and the rotation system raises the stakes while providing more opportunities to participate.

According to longtime participants, prior games on the dirt field did not require jerseys, referees, or timed matches because "everyone knew everybody." Moreover, with far fewer players and a more informal playing space, there was no waiting period as participants would simply "jump in and play" when they arrived. As a result, some games were played with well over 11 players per team. However, this system became unmanageable and ineffective on the renovated field, and a new social order was required to meet transformed playing conditions and player demands.

In other contexts, banning nonregulars could have provided a means of monopolizing use while a system treating all participants as equal (i.e. first come, first serve) would erase any ambiguity in the playing order. However, given the public nature of this scarce resource and regulars' commitment to the status hierarchy—including favorable access to the field—a more negotiated order was required (Strauss 1978). Regulars achieve that objective by presenting the games as if they were fixed and intrinsic to this particular field, a constructed reality that newcomers absorb, accepting the jerseys and game regulations as the ticket for entry.

Not only do these particular rules and routines reflect considerable local organization, but they also become additional attributes to assert and defend when challenged by newcomers. For example, frequent complaints about biased decisions or the lack of offsides are abrasively responded to with such comments as "that's how *we* do it here" and "if you don't like it *you* don't have to play here." Even the smallest of suggestions can receive hostility, signaling that this "game" is to be taken "seriously":

The team's goalie, who I did not recognize, started yelling before kickoff that he wanted to change the game ball. He felt that it was lopsided. The referee overheard the request and yelled: "What do you want?" Before the goalie had finished explaining himself, he responded, "Who are you? Keep your mouth shut! If you don't like it then get out of here!" The newcomer reacted with perplexed silence, until mumbling aloud: "Man these guys take this seriously."

Even more, unskilled newcomers often face ridicule and criticism for their field mishaps, and their more skillful counterparts receive a period of unfriendly socialization. For example, when a newcomer, a white male wearing an Italian national team jersey, missed a wide-open goal, several spectators playfully screamed, "Go back to Italy!" whereas a skillful newcomer from Morocco was chastised by his teammate for "not passing the ball," despite scoring a spectacular goal. Sometimes, Polo will interrupt a live game to castigate a player for "offensive" behavior, such as a "hard" tackle. Certainly, this is not to argue that there is never conflict or disagreement among regulars, as verbal and physical fights are common. However, they do not take on the seemingly arbitrary or unjust nature of adverse regular-newcomer relations.

These excessive outbursts directed at newcomer "violations," as innocent or inconsequential as the latter may appear, serve important functions in the demarcation and defense of indigenous order and control over the visible and attractive public field. That is, by aggressively disciplining seemingly innocuous and trivial actions, regulars signal to newcomers that they have entered claimed and controlled territory where participation is contingent upon appropriate conduct. Like the preferential playing queue, such symbolic displays of aggression by unfamiliar persons breach newcomers' expectations of a public park and pickup-sport behavior (Garfinkel 1967).<sup>5</sup>

Most newcomers express a mixture of confusion, surprise, and discomfort toward such interactions with regulars. However, like men who breach norms of civil inattention when interacting with unfamiliar women in public (Duneier and Molotch 1999; Gardner 1995), there is the sense that newcomers "gotta deal with it" if they wish to participate. In fact, many newcomers understand and experience the interaction order as a rite of passage. For example, after being repeatedly passed over in the playing queue Dan, a white male in his late twenties, explained to me, "I get it, you've got to put your time in." Several newcomers have also equated unfavorable treatment to "hazing" rituals.

In her foundational study of "home territory" in public accommodations, Cavan (1963, 27) writes of how members of the "Hangout" define and defend "their" bar by greeting unwelcomed newcomers with a "parody of deference" that breaches the interaction rules and expectations of "polite society," thereby making their visit startling and unpleasant. In Anderson's (1978) study, regular patrons of Jelly's tavern receive strangers with an inquisitive mixture of silence and suspicion. In other cases, more physical and violent forms of "turf defense" are employed (Anderson 1999; Horowitz 1983; Suttles 1968).

At the park, expectations of an informal, impartial, and relaxed pickup game are breached by an organized and inequitable system and forceful demands for compliance and deference to an indigenous social order. As I have demonstrated, this is established through initial disregard and subsequent biased treatment and collective reprisals to field "violations." As with the deliberate and calculated behaviors described in these studies, there is nothing effortless or inadvertent about the order of this social world. Indeed, given the competing interests in

controlling the sought-after field and the uncertain power of all concerned parties, regulars are pressed to implement and sustain social order through these commanding measures.

However, the many explicit and tacit rules and routines vigorously defined and defended in relation to newcomers are just as easily defied by established regulars. More generally, regulars will make very public showings of displeasure if they feel that they have been unfairly positioned in the playing queue. While similar responses by newcomers are forcefully rejected, some sort of accommodation is reached with regulars, often at the expense of a nonregular. Even more, the extent to which a participant can challenge or reinterpret park norms without recourse reflects their degree of status at the field and reminds everyone of “who is who” at the games.

Of course, this focus on leadership and conflict overlooks the processes of building collective ties and sustaining group culture, and how the games fit into the men's everyday lives. The fluidity and meaning of group life does not, however, contradict how the men collectively take control of a space that is legally defined as public. Specifically, control over who plays, when they play, and how they get to play represents regulars' most potent resource in exercising power in and around the field. In turn, points of conflict generally center on a more manageable and less threatening debate over the makeup of the teams and organization of the games, rather than over exclusive rights to use the public field.

### **Exercising Authority and Managing Third Parties**

A third way in which play is sustained at the park is through the anticipation and management of external challenges (Britton 2008). In addition to managing the steady arrival of newcomers, regulars also imagine and confront local opposition to and bureaucratic threats on their use of the field. Since the new field was installed, an increase in adult play has been met with expressions of local resistance, support, and ambivalence. For some nearby residents, the new field led to “dramatic changes in the nature of the park and our neighborhood,” including the correlated increase in noise, traffic, trash, crime, and alcohol and drug use.<sup>6</sup>

While this ongoing debate extends the dilemmas of public park space to the local surroundings (see note 6), for this paper, I am interested in how the players of the midday pickup game respond to this contentious environment, especially as it is waged primarily away from the field and rarely intrudes on their daily use of the facility. In fact, bureaucratic interventions represent a more immediate external concern. While the field remains generally open during these weekday hours, it is occasionally permitted out to local schools and youth teams, thereby temporarily displacing the informal pickup game. Now an infrequent interruption, there is reasonable apprehension among the players that the field will be increasingly restricted to formal teams.

While primarily concerned with managing newcomers and recalcitrant participants, regulars anticipate being seen by others whom they do not contact directly or regularly, and respond to whatever vague or concrete notions they have about external challenges in a variety of ways. Specifically, game leaders attempt to ingratiate themselves with park officials, community organizations, and local residents by presenting themselves as respectable patrons of the field while simultaneously monitoring and policing objectionable behavior.

Select participants have deliberately interacted with third parties on several occasions. For example, over a dozen regulars attended several of the community meetings about the contested field held in the park gym. As the only Latino men in the audience, they clearly represented the players. At a smaller park meeting, Robert—a respected veteran of the pickup

games and, unlike Polo, proficient in English—publicly voiced his frustration with the increase in permitted play: “I’ve been coming to this park for over 20 years and it’s great that we have such a great field but it’s hard when it’s taken away from us. We’re just asking for some leniency, we’ve been playing here a long time.”

As with Robert’s utilization of history and seniority to make his case, regulars frequently attempt to construct themselves as legitimate users of the field when interacting with third parties. For example, in hopes of “getting on the books,” Polo presented the park director with a copy of game rules<sup>7</sup> he had briefly printed and distributed on the field. At a Park Advisory Board meeting, several regulars informed the director of their voluntary purchase of nets for the goals and proposed a formal cleanup of the field to the board members, to which they received a grateful and appreciative response. To make sure the board knew of their efforts, they hand-delivered photographs of the event to the park office. More recently, a dozen regulars volunteered at a park festival and proudly wore official festival shirts as they folded tables and chairs. While surely motivated by multiple reasons, Barba’s explanation to me was telling: “Now they’ll see that we do more than just drink beer and play soccer here.”

Players’ interactions with third parties have not been limited to formal settings. In one of the most notable examples, after the vandalism of the nearby home of a notorious field opponent, Polo assembled a group of regulars to approach the home and offer to repaint the defaced walls. Although the offer was declined, Polo felt that “it was good that we did so she knows it wasn’t us.” In a memorable game interruption, several players rushed to the scene of a serious car crash on the street bordering the field to offer their assistance, and many see themselves as unofficial guardians of the park and protectors of park patrons.

Regulars simultaneously interact with third parties when monitoring and policing park behavior. For example, when a player briskly pulls out of the parking lot and squeals his car’s tires, Polo confronts him the following day and publicly asserts: “You can’t drive off like that. The neighbors see that and they are going to complain about us.” Similarly, regulars will reprimand players for fighting, littering, openly smoking marijuana and drinking beer, excessive noise, or harassing park visitors (especially women with young children) in and around the field.

In addition to hostile neighbor interventions, Polo and others will also invoke the threat of park or police involvement, and its implications for their continued use of the field, when exercising authority. For example, when Tico attempts to explain his participation in a recent physical altercation, Polo unsympathetically retorts, “I don’t care what happened, we can’t have them [pointing to the park office] or the police messing with us; you want to keep playing here, right?” Like the squealing car example, appearance management extends beyond the field to other areas of the park, such as the adjacent picnic tables and parking lot, frequent sites of drinking, smoking, and gambling. In fact, Polo attempts to disassociate the soccer matches from any “objectionable” park behavior, one of the reasons why he prohibits players from wearing game jerseys away from the field. Opposition by neighbors in turn support Polo’s authority in that participants understand that they need someone in control or they may be kicked out.

Polo publicly expressed his appreciation for perceived neighborhood concerns on a large banner he temporarily affixed to the bleachers. The banner read, in Spanish and English: “Help us show a friendly appearance” and “Don’t cause problems by offending people and try not to bother the neighbors with a lot of noise and scandal.” Similarly, the capitalized line “BE A GOOD SPORT AND GOOD NEIGHBOR” was prominently typed on the list of distributed game rules, also written in both languages. When someone joked that they might want to include the stars and stripes alongside a large Mexican flag because the neighbors would fear that they

were “being invaded” during an impromptu holiday tournament, one of the regulars hurried home and returned with a U.S. flag.

On a more everyday basis, players always make room for park users walking or jogging around the field; and, on the rare occasion that a non-participant lingers to watch the games, they typically quiet down and conceal any inappropriate activity. Daily cleanups and material investments, such as purchasing nets and jerseys, further demonstrate regulars’ dedication to the field and concern with local appearances. Indeed, as their contested use of the field does not *currently* require official authorization, these efforts are best understood as strategic attempts to publicize and formalize their care and consideration for a neighborhood to which they maintain no formal association.

In addition to maintaining the field and managing player conduct, regulars also celebrate and display the “social good” their presence provides. For example, Polo makes a deliberate point of instantly incorporating the occasional woman or young child in the games because “it looks good if they’re out here.” Polo was especially proud when he recounted to me that a local resident, a middle-aged white man, had recently inquired about participating in the games. More generally, regulars have argued in community gatherings and daily conversations that the organized games make the park more safe and enjoyable. While hard to verify, regulars even take credit for “keeping the gangs out of the park” through their consistent and vigilant presence, telling of several violent and mythologized confrontations. For certain, their readiness to assist strangers in need, such as the car crash example, has been demonstrated to me several times.

Thus, whereas neighbors claim the park as an extension of their backyards (“our,” “local,” and “neighborhood” frequent descriptions of the park in circulating fliers and in my interviews with local residents regarding field problems), regulars highlight their “productive” and long-term use of the field in an attempt to legitimate their precarious control. Of course, there is a dialectical tension in the back-and-forth between players and residents: neighborhood opposition fuels integration and organization on the field, which then increases local anxiety. For example, while jerseys help prevent disorder and conflict on the field, to the apparent benefit of all park users and neighbors, they also make the games more visible, permanent, and potentially threatening to nonparticipants.

Despite the rhetoric, a sizeable minority of regulars, including Polo, threaten the status of the games by regularly partaking in illegal park behavior, such as littering, drinking beer, smoking marijuana, and gambling, and they normalize such conduct as typical of and unavoidable in urban parks. Attempts at concealment and moderation are possibly more motivated by fear of receiving costly alcohol citations than by concern with upsetting the neighbors’ moral sensibilities. In fact, many of the players privately express incredulity and resentment toward what is perceived as “excessive” neighborhood objections. Moreover, for many, drinking beer and smoking marijuana is a central appeal of group life at the park. At the same time, neighbors’ objections, while triggered by the new field, reflect broader concerns with the changing “nature” of the park and region, which—like the men’s physical appearance—is well beyond the players’ control.

Also, despite their occasional appearance at community meetings, the men are for the most part not involved in the making and debating of park policy. For example, men from the midday games appeared at only four of the 42 park-related meetings I attended and none served on the various committees established to deal with field issues. According to the men, feelings of discomfort in these settings—which involved primarily upper-class whites from the neighborhood—and a lack of time and interest accounted for their absence. Indeed, many



perceived their attendance at community meetings as a “waste of time.” Jokes about “la migra” (immigration enforcement) showing up may have also dissuaded those without legal documentation from participating. Feelings of marginality and vulnerability in turn keep the men from actively intervening in community debates about the field, even as they vigorously attempt to control action on the field.

Nonetheless, their increased involvement with local third parties as respectable field patrons, whether through direct interaction or when policing field behavior, represent additional strategies employed by the regulars to sustain what they recognize as tenuous claims on the contested field. The contradictions between the regulars’ control of the game and their need to negotiate relationships beyond the field is also revealing of how categories of insider and outsider operate and change in public life.

### **Challenges and Limitations in Controlling Public Space**

During my time in the park, regulars have been remarkably successful in their efforts to claim and control the public field. While this is not to argue that they transform the meaning or function of the space, from preferentially distributing admission onto the field, enforcing park-specific rules and routines, and ingratiating themselves with local third parties, regulars generally control field proceedings during these midday games. The daily organization of play described in the previous sections is certainly a testament to this everyday achievement.

Not all newcomers or outsiders, however, accept the interaction order at the field. In fact, responses vary along a wide continuum from passive compliance to aggressive defiance. During my time in the park, as more and more people come to the new field, the veterans’ control over the midday games has been increasingly threatened. For example, newcomers challenge exclusive claims on the field by citing its “public character,” as exemplified by such rejoinders as “I pay taxes,” “I have equal rights to this field,” and “You don’t own the park.” Others specifically contest the legitimacy of regulars’ unsanctioned authority at the public facility, signaling Polo out with various appellations, such as “dictator” and a “nobody.” Many dispute the hypocrisy of the in-game decisions and criticisms and argue on moral grounds that the regulars should not play favorites in sporting contests.

It is the preferential playing queue, however, that produces the most confusion and contempt. Indeed, it is through dramatic and at times violent conflicts over the playing order that regulars and newcomers most frequently and ardently establish and contest social control and status hierarchies at the park (Simmel 1955). While most newcomers appear to wait their turn as they make themselves known as worthy participants, objections are consistently expressed, and it is in these recurrent troubles that we can better appreciate the uneven stability of social order at the park (Emerson 2009). In fact, just as local rules and routines serve as something to publicly enforce and defend for regulars, they also represent something for newcomers to openly defy and disrespect. The following two examples demonstrate opposite ends of the wide spectrum of protest I have observed at the field over the playing queue, although both are in response to thwarted expectations for open and equitable access to the public facility:

A newcomer arrives with a female companion. After Polo tells him he’d have to wait, he retreats to the sidelines with his spectator friend. During the changeover for the following game, she pulls on his shirt and quietly asks, “Why aren’t you

playing? You got here way before that guy and I know they don't have a permit." In response, the newcomer shrugs his shoulders and proceeds to wait his turn.

A heated argument breaks out between two prospective players over who should receive the last jersey. Exchanging tough words, the two of them engage in a literal tug-of-war over the jersey. During the tussle, one, who had begun playing the previous week, pleads, "Come on, I have the right to play, this is not your park," to which the other, a skillful regular, responds, "You just started playing here, you have to wait your turn."

In these disputes, the "publicness" of the field serves competing interests and creates opposing contexts of negotiation (Strauss 1978). Indeed, as represented by the legitimacy *and* illegitimacy of claims and counterclaims on the public facility, this everyday dilemma strikes at the core of the tensions structuring public space. While in the preceding sections it validated "open" use and precluded external interference, for disgruntled participants it represents the illegitimacy of exclusive claims and closed ownership. Indeed, newcomer dissatisfaction is largely in response to regulars' attempts at exclusively claiming and controlling the field. As public space "belongs" to everybody yet nobody, this tension is recurrent and not easily resolved, especially for public facilities like the soccer field that are accessible and in demand. While in-group dynamics are present in any instance of collective association, its interface with the use of a public resource helps explain the particular vulnerability of this small group setting.

While regulars make and enforce claims on the field, newcomers are able to challenge regulars' absolute control over field proceedings. For example, I have witnessed Polo capitulate to a newcomer's objections over a referee's decision or the preferential playing queue. At the same time, skill and physicality, while a source of resentment and recourse, can also represent a powerful challenge to regulars' supremacy; and the "winner-stays" structure allows for newcomers and outsiders to independently affect the playing order once they obtain a jersey. With the high-quality field and organized game attracting more and more talented players, regulars' ability to assert influence on the field is becoming increasingly difficult under current playing conditions, especially for the older participants.

Accordingly, notwithstanding a few mythologized incidents, regulars rarely bar newcomer entrance outright or claim formal rights to the field, and there is a constant renegotiation of what appropriate game behavior is and who is deserving of special treatment. For these reasons, expressions of power and deference should not be regarded as zero-sum interactions at the park, for even when faced with intense discomfort and disrespect, newcomers ultimately receive an opportunity to play and exhibit their own forms of influence on and off the field. Reflecting the fuzziness and malleability of group boundaries, I have also observed the gradual transformation of several embattled and obstinate newcomers into respected and devoted regulars.

As has become increasingly clear, regulars recognize the limits of their power and the vulnerability of their control over the open facility, an increasingly valued and scarce resource in the region. For example, in discussing the difficulties of incorporating defiant newcomers, Polo disclosed that the regulars want to "fight them but I tell them that we can't risk losing the field if the police are called." In addition, Polo and regulars occasionally demonstrate exasperation and fatigue when responding to and discussing the surveillance and incorporation of newcomers, which they claim was not an issue when the playing surface was dirt. Indeed, these old timers

typically point to the arrival of the new field as the principal source of current problems. As Polo has explained to me several times, “I get so tired of organizing the games but somebody has to do it,” a sentiment confirmed by many other regulars.

While regulars acquire status and self-worth in controlling the games, negotiating daily insubordination represents a significant cost, as expressed by their reluctance to confront every challenge and periodic frustration with administering the games. Also, as many participants have made work and family arrangements to play at the park at this irregular time, there is collective pressure to avert or resolve extended disputes that take precious minutes away from their limited leisure hours. However, by not responding forcefully, regulars' authority would be severely threatened. In fact, Polo's position of leadership involves an assumed responsibility that, if left unmet, would weaken his control and open him up to opposition. More problematic, like the dialectical nature of escalating player-neighbor relations, whereas game leaders consider organizational and material improvements as solidifying their authority, for many newcomers, these measures make the games more predictable and attractive. Regulars' authority is thus simultaneously strengthened *and* weakened by their organization of good games on the first-rate facility.

While the regulars continue to control the daily games through the processes described in this paper, the inability and unwillingness to completely regulate the entrance and behavior of all newcomers or manage external perceptions of all participants reveals the limitations and liabilities of unsanctioned claims on public space. Indeed, the field's open condition and social location accounts for the volatile potential for order and disorder during the games.

## **Conclusion**

Studies of territoriality are frequently set in public places, and for good reason, as the "publicness" of these spaces produce an interaction of competing claims and conflicting interests. As studies show, the “public” in public space is a highly contested category, which is why saying that a space belongs to the people does not really tell us who uses it and under what conditions. Certainly, previous research has effectively demonstrated the independent force and vitality of territorial behavior and spatial practices in dynamically reordering the use and operation of public space.

In fact, while authorities and their supporters have tried to organize how parks are used through how they are designed and operated, park patrons have historically used and appropriated them in entirely different and insurgent ways (Mitchell 1995; Rosenzweig 1983). Thus, while power is not equally shared, the public character of parks can serve different and contradictory purposes when invoked by competing groups, and provides openings and obstacles for the most powerful and powerless of groups. Indeed, who and what belongs in public parks is often a matter of dispute and negotiation.

Building on this important work, this paper examines how a particular group of individuals claim and control a sought-after and contested public soccer field. However, in contrast to previous studies that took the stability, viability, and visibility of groups and their claims as given, this study examines how multiple group boundaries and behavioral norms become constructed and taken-for-granted in working out the use and control of public space. In fact, as most parties agree that the field should be used for soccer, it is not so much territorial control that is at stake but who can join and under what terms. This study in turn shows the need for more nuanced considerations of the degrees and intensity of territorial practices and, in

particular, the underappreciated relationship between group dynamics and the ever-tenuous control of public space.

Focusing primarily on a longstanding group of soccer players at a city park, this paper argues that claims on public space involves not only the delineation of borders and management of intrusion but the intertwined construction and maintenance of group boundaries and local order. Control is premised on creating and sustaining meaningful distinctions between insiders and outsiders—boundaries that are far from self-evident in informal gatherings—and enforcing informal authority, which is inherently uncertain in public space, especially for stigmatized groups with no formal association to the area. For certain, the vulnerabilities of the setting and the men's marginalized standing demand such strategic and deliberate action.

By clarifying how public space is claimed in one social setting, this study attempts to offer the conceptual framework for a revamped analysis of territoriality across a wider realm. For example, a similar approach could be applied to the time-honored study of "hangouts" and protest movements in public places and burgeoning research on day laborer sites and homeless camps. In addition, as what may be taken for granted in one group may appear strange and out of place in the other, comparing ways of controlling public space across social groups and settings could also prove worthwhile. That the "foreignness" of the players and social location of the field likely makes the game more vulnerable than others certainly supports the need for comparative research, including attention to the fluidity and flexibility of insider/outsider relationships. Moreover, this study shows the need for greater consideration of how macro-level changes to the physical landscape create the conditions for micro-level challenges and everyday negotiations.

As Latino soccer populations outgrow and out-sustain other park-user populations, the potential for conflict promises to remain a pressing issue in urban parks. Indeed, public parks represent grounds for testing whether and how societies can work out relations across divides routinely managed smoothly, without apparent tension, through the geographic segregation that private property rights make possible. By focusing on techniques of sustaining presumptive use, and not as a study of the problems of immigrants and immigration, this paper reverses, in part, the standard story of minorities and the undocumented as subjugated and powerless. More generally, by showing the conflict among middle-class white homeowners and Latino soccer players that we may expect, as well as intra-ethnic tensions on the field itself, this study reveals the more generic basis of conflict in and over public space.

Thus, rather than "pathological" and particular, we should explore the more "universal" and everyday roots of these recurrent conflicts. Indeed, a city defines itself in how it works out these conflicts and multiplicities of social meanings, not by whether it has them or not. Of course, by focusing on Latino immigrant men, who have been generally overlooked in research on territoriality, this study sheds important light on their public place and practices in contemporary Los Angeles. The fact that Latinos, a recent immigrant group, make claims over this space is revealing, and may signal a changing tide of informal power dynamics and contestations of ethnic identification in public parks.

In the face of uncertain expectations and competing interests—including those of newcomers, agitated neighbors, and land-hungry teams—it remains unclear how long this particular group of men will retain midday control of the field. Indeed, the multiple challenges faced by the regulars demonstrate how the very accessibility of public parks engenders competing claims and conflicting interests and expectations. This developing story thus reflects the inherent challenges and opportunities in claiming park space and demonstrates how public

territories are continually in a process of contestation and transformation in the contemporary city.

**Figures:**



**Figure 1.** Before (2004) and after (2006) aerial images of the field.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to formal matches with set rosters and institutional backing, by pickup soccer I refer to sporting contests structured by informal participation and on-the-ground organization (see DeLand 2012; Jimerson 1999). That said, there is no universal understanding or operation of “pickup” soccer, and as this study shows, its meaning and practice are susceptible to contrasting and conflicting interpretations and expectations.

<sup>2</sup> For fear of unintended reprisals, I have not disclosed the name or location of the park. Research participants, however, are correctly identified by given name or nickname. Both decisions were endorsed by the men and women who participated in this study.

<sup>3</sup> The \$850,000 field was funded as a specified Proposition K project, a 30-year \$776 million tax measure to improve the city's parks and recreation facilities, which Los Angeles voters narrowly approved in 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Following a long tradition of primary informants in ethnographic studies [i.e. Doc (Whyte 1943)], much of the forthcoming analysis centers on Polo. While Polo plays a crucial role in park interactions as the de facto leader, he is significantly supported by fellow regulars, who are pleased that someone respectable has taken on the demanding position of gatekeeper. That said, the following analysis is admittedly “Polo-centric,” as he represents the central authority figure and object of newcomer dissatisfaction.

<sup>5</sup> The expectation being that if germane social characteristics correspond, prospective players can confidently approach a pickup game in public or quasi-public space (i.e., a private gym) with the anticipation of eventual participation. Certainly, as my study shows, this “general expectation” is often imaginary, and I expect that most pickup games present varying forms and degrees of social closure, not to mention distinct levels and styles of play and interaction. Nonetheless, it remains a powerful and unique motivation in propelling individuals to enter unfamiliar social gatherings in hopes of participating in a shared practice—in this case, soccer.

<sup>6</sup> This passage comes from the opening line of a flyer inviting local residents to attend a community meeting on the field. At this meeting and many others, local residents and city officials debated how best to mitigate these perceived concerns. After three years of negotiations, the city installed enclosed fencing around the field, which, to the surprise of the players, has had minimal impact on their use of the field during the midday hours, as it generally remains unlocked at this time.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to park-specific game rules, “Rules to Ensure an Enjoyable Time for All” included rules such as: “When there’s a tied game, both teams go off if two teams are waiting” and the “Referee gives a yellow card with a three-minute penalty out for dangerous play,” “Be a good sport and a good neighbor!” and “Please do not litter the park or its surrounding neighborhoods!”