ANGELS' TOWN

Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday

RALPH CINTRON

"A special book that is just as much about inequality in the contemporary U.S. as it is about the way to research it. Cintron succeeds in doing what many well-intentioned policies do not."
—Virginia Dominguez, author of *White by Definition*

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Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday

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In Angels town, a mid-sized, Midwestern city, Cintron pursues his ethnographic work through the language of everyday life in the Mexican-American community. He explores how Don Angel, an older Mexican immigrant, expresses his traditionalism in his storytelling, elaborate gestural style, and folk beliefs about healing. A youth, Valerio, reveals the "inbetweenness" of his life through his difficulty writing English in school and through the images he puts on his bedroom wall. For other teenagers, the language of vengeance and violence, trust and respect provides a rationale for joining gangs. As issues of power and social order loom large in Angels town - from family dynamics to the complexity of city management - Cintron shows how eruptions on the margins of the community are emblematic of a deeper disorder. And as the unwieldy disorder of his fieldsite is transformed into a book, Cintron explores his text as if it were a field-site itself, engaging his own impulse to order and make sense of things.

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A BOY AND HIS WALL

Ralph:
Why did you put everything up on the wall?
Valerio:
I put it because it looks better.
R:
You like it that way?
V:
Yeah, cause if I don't, it looks, it looks plain. Just like the water, it looks plain.
R:
Just like plain water?
V:
Yeah.
R:
What's the first thing that you put up? Do you remember?
V:
First thing that I put up is, is these two posters right here, this one and that Ferrari . . .

R:
The Ferrari?
V:
Yeah, the one ripped.
R:
And that one up there?
V:
That's a Porsche.
R:
OK, then, the Ferrari went up first and then the Porsche?
V:
Yeah, well I put them at the same time.

There were two walls in Angelstown that framed a life. In fact, all over Angelstown there were literal and metaphorical walls framing the lives of individuals I cared about. These walls were symbols of confinement, of the deep fissuring that separated those who have more power and socioeconomic standing from those who have less. Their power to confine heightened a certain fantasy-making. But desire and fantasy-making are a kind of scaling of walls. Walls as confinement, then, walls of a pressure cooker that caused the imagination to bubble.

I turn, therefore, to two walls in a bedroom. They belonged to Valerio Martínez, who was fourteen when I first saw the walls. He was born in Mexico and arrived as a five-year-old with his parents in 1980.[1] Valerio and his two brothers shared the same small bedroom, while the two sisters slept elsewhere. In this sense, confinement was literal, and everyone in Valerio's family talked about it. A two-bedroom apartment is too small for seven people, they said. When I was with Valerio or members of his family, my feelings became shaped by theirs, curved like the curved doggedness of their stocky bodies. I never felt this anywhere else in Angelstown: something Saturnian, relentless as the overpowering heat that emerged from the bakery ovens and vats of *carnitas*[2] and pushed me drenched out the door of the cooking shed behind the grocery store where Valerio's father worked when I first met him—or like his mother's common observation that the family was *muy tapada*, "closed," "stupid," "thickheaded."

But people find ways to subvert what pains them. One day when I walked into the apartment, Valerio's father asked me how I liked the walls. I looked. He had found cans of leftover paint and painted a few walls in pastels or bright colors. He grinned. It reminded him of the colors used in Mexico he said. Vale-

rio's family had also trained vines (varieties of pothos, which are a kind of philodendron) to frame entire entrances to some of the rooms in the apartment. Don Angel similarly trained vines to a cord that ran up to the ceiling of his room, across to the central light fixture, and over to a second wall. And there was the dance teacher of the local Ballet Folklórico who had no place to put all the props of his troupe, and so he arranged his brilliantly colored props along the walls of his apartment. Walls, then, may confine, but they are also "blank spaces" on which imagination can write out a desire and protect the self. If these individuals protected themselves with the traditional and nostalgic, Valerio, as we will shortly see, protected himself with images of the modern.

Within their home nostalgia provided Valerio's family with beauty and comfort in the form of colorful paints and winding green vines, but how vulnerable is nostalgia as it moves outside the privacy of one's home and becomes public, hence, susceptible to the derision of others. For instance, Valerio's father was labeled *chero*, and Valerio probably was too by his peers who wore hipness on their bodies. (Valerio hated the word, and his animosity suggested, to me at least, personal encounters that had stung him.) For youth, in particular, the label *chero* was threatening because it was an ever present reminder of what it means to be unmodern. I recall an afternoon when, during an open-air performance of the local Ballet Folklórico, gang members sitting in the front row poked fun at the dancers in their colorful, quaint costumes, and the dance teacher lost his cool. I had never seen him rant and rave. That day he was trying hard to shame his critics, pointing to what he imagined to be their dissolute lives. He didn't understand their own need to separate themselves from all the quaint imagery of Mexico that locked them into backwardness and a kind of systemic humiliation structured by the power differential that separates the United States from Mexico more exactly, if invisibly, than any border.

Valerio's narrow bedroom walls seemed to mirror the psychological and socioeconomic confinements that boxed his life, while the montage of posters, newspaper clippings, and mementoes that he scotch-taped to the walls revealed his imagination's work in subverting that confinement. Valerio constructed a narrative about himself in these posters and clippings. In a sense, he wrote himself out on these walls. In school, he did not write himself. There, he was labeled learning disabled (LD), as was his older brother, and they both said being LD meant being a "dummy." They talked about getting out of LD classes, but I knew that doing so would entail passing a battery of special tests, tests that had already designated them over the years as LD. The histories of these tests had become parts of their perceived personas, and such histories are hard to overthrow because they are official histories, products of the most up-to-date testing instruments that educational experts have devised.

Approximately two years before Valerio began covering his walls with posters, I talked to the language therapist/pathologist in charge of LD at Valerio's school. An attentive and playful person—Valerio's favorite teacher he had said—she spoke in her smokey voice of her affection for Valerio, but she also told me, so to speak, about the wiring of his psyche. According to the test scores, Valerio had a learning disability in the language area but not in other areas. We started to look at some of his recent test results. On the digit-span test, for instance, he exhibited poor memory skills. On the similarity test, he had trouble finding the overarching category that would link, say, a ball and a wheel (roundness). In addition to a poor memory, then, he had trouble labeling and finding exactly the right word. We started to examine some of the details from one of the labeling tests. He typically got things, as she said, only "sort of right." A "cash register" became a "casher"; "tweezers" became "eyelashes"; a "stadium" a "field"; an "anchor" a "hook"; a "stump" became "bark"; a "well" a "fountain." We turned to another test to examine his problems with categorizing. He couldn't say, for instance, what "hot," "cold," and "warm" have in common. The answer is "temperature," but he said "opposites" and "liquids." For "mother," "aunt," and "cousin" he provided no answer, and the speech pathologist explained, "Sometimes he just quits. . . . It's just like an overload. Too much goes in and he doesn't absorb anymore, so he just quits."

Valerio also had trouble, she said, with explanations, definitions of terms, and reading comprehension. Reading for him, she surmised, was not reading for meaning or enjoyment but reading in order to fill in blanks and hoping that he got it right so that he wouldn't have to do it over again. While I listened to the language therapist describe Valerio's "disabilities," I thought about the magnificent circularity of schooling, that schooling historically has trained students into a fill-in-the-blanks conception of reading and then complained when students have thoroughly absorbed that training. But even as she specified Valerio's learning disabilities, she noted some of his strengths. His nonverbal skills were at least average, she said, and he scored well on yes/no answer tests and, interestingly enough, on activities that required connected discourse. It was as if in the everyday world where discourse is largely performative and social, constructed in groups or dialogically, he did well, but in the school world of metadiscourse—where discourse and its parts become the objects of study or, in short, testing grounds for evaluating individual competence—he st[illegible] to short-circuit. Notice, for instance, that in her own summary o[illegible] strengths and weaknesses she made a distinction between co[illegible]

almost as if his learning disabilities might vanish within a context that was not a testing ground: "I think there's more ability than the testing indicates. There is more in there than we're getting out. . . . But his ability to communicate to you and to define and explain his thoughts is very difficult because he lacks the vocabulary, he lacks the memory and he lacks the specific labels to tell you what he would like to. And when he feels comfortable with you, he doesn't worry about it. And that's when you get all the questions . . ."

Ah, the questions! Such a peculiar charm they had over me. Valerio's incessant questions were central to his person and one of the things that made him so attractive. Even his teachers and administrators in his school were especially fond of him, and everyone, including his parents, pointed to his incessant questions. "Where do you work, Ralph? What are the people like over there? How many people are above you, how many below you? How much money do you make? What do you do at your job? What makes your computer work? How does a plane fly? Who owns airplanes? How big is your house? What's inside a baseball?" Without my asking, the language therapist offered an interpretation of his incessant questioning: He seems to be trying to establish and reestablish bits of content in his memory bank because he has a short-term memory problem, she suggested. At the time, I was puzzled by her interpretation. Now I offer another one: Questions are probings of the unknown. What was unknown to Valerio? I return to the image of the wall, in this case, the invisible wall that separated Valerio, his family, and many others in the neighborhood from the sources of power. For me, his questions did not emerge from some sort of miswiring but from socioeconomic and ethnic differences. Each question was a potential bridge thrusting over the wall and tapping sources of power that weren't his. The world as circumscribed by expert knowledge was his unconscious target, and from his distance he fantasized its importance, became polite and docile—just like other family members—in its presence, and humiliated and *unnerved* by its existence. I never made a careful study of his questions, but I remember, in particular, questions about my income and employment. Were my answers to these questions simply inadequate, and so he asked them again and again? Maybe. Did he ask the same questions of his parents, uncles, and aunts that he asked of me? I do not know. Were these questions explicit socioeconomic probings leaping the wall manufactured by power differences and bubbling up from an invisible but ongoing humiliation, which, in short, was his side of the wall? I think so.

I spent two vigorous hours with the language therapist sorting through a messiness that was less Valerio's and more mine. Was LD actually there as something inside Valerio's psyche and the psyches of other Latino children?

> I've spent twenty years here. . . . I have seen the number of children with this kind of a problem increase. . . . The Hispanic population has increased here so . . . if you put the two together, mostly what I have are Hispanic children. . . . If you would do a strict test for retrieval or word finding, what you would do would be to take words that you know that the child already knows . . . "cat" and "book" . . . these types of words, and what happens is that you show these to the child and you take the latency time, how long it takes them to come up with them. . . . This kind of a child . . . they just have trouble thinking of the right word at the right time. It's gone. . . . Valerio will just tell you, "I don't know, I forgot." . . . It's really more than just learning the labels, it's a skill of being able to come up with one word or two short words opposed to telling me that this is something flat with four legs that you eat at. It just doesn't work for storing information. So it's more than just knowing the labels. You can already know the labels, but the latency time is so great they're useless.

The language therapist had some doubts about LD "reality." For her, LD test results were unimportant and unconvincing if a student's classroom performance or the practical judgments of teachers said otherwise. Moreover, some teachers, notably from the bilingual staff, rarely recommended LD testing for their students. They sensed, apparently, that LD "reality" was more messy than officialdom acknowledged. Nevertheless, terms like "word retrieval" and "latency time" cycled through the official discourse, amplifying its authority. Such terms seemed to reduce the appearance of messiness, but there may be an irony here: in the process of elevating the exactness of one's terms, a new kind of messiness sweeps in. For instance, for the Latinos described by the speech pathologist, might "word retrieval" and "latency time" problems have been official but obfuscating descriptions of being half-out and half-in a language? Oral history interviews, for example, revealed that since the 1920s the problem of not fully knowing English had been a characteristic of Mexican students in Angelstown's schools.[3] As one elderly gentleman, who knew only Spanish prior to entering school, put it, "I'd come home with my hands all blistered up, you know, and Ma says, 'What happened?'—and I says, 'Well they slapped my wrists 'cause I couldn't remember, or I couldn't pronounce, or I couldn't say it like the (other) kids." In the context of Valerio and others, then, were "word retrieval" and "latency time" mystifying terms belonging to a discourse of measurement that reconfigured a simple problem of not knowing a second language ("I couldn't remember," "I couldn't pronounce") as a kind of miswiring?

More significantly, might LD "reality" get constructed, in part, in the moment of discourse between examiner and examinee, between the test and the test-taker, in that moment of worry that the language therapist talked about? On the one hand, much of the authority of LD "reality" rested, in part, on objectively assessing something actually there inside Valerio and others. In contrast, to suggest that LD may also be created in the moment of dialogue between participants who are unequally powerful means that LD may be less "there" in the tested subject and more in the social/political contexts in which the testing occurs. This suggestion also begins to undermine LD as implacable authority, which was the image under which Valerio labored.

Of course, my naiveté about LD undermines this text, but as the language therapist and I worked through the messiness of Valerio's and others' LD "reality," it occurred to me, finally, that those labeled LD did not see its representation as messy or ambiguous. Here, then, was the most significant issue: if the language therapist, bilingual teachers, and I had access to several representations, Valerio and his family did not. LD as a "reality" was the only representation he and his family knew, and although in official discourse it had replaced, with good intentions, the stigmata of "dumbness," the distinction between LD and "dumbness" had become in everyday discourse too subtle to distinguish. For Valerio and his family, LD was equivalent to the old stigma. Moreover, there was the mother's own term *tapada* that was intractable because it could absorb more modern and subtle terms, such as LD, and continue to replicate the belief that one was stupid.

Participants on both sides of the wall, then, contributed in their different ways to the making of LD "reality," fixing it ever deeper as an authoritative label whose messiness was hard to uncover. On one side of the wall, there was the family's conviction of failure, ever flexible in its ability to discourage, distanced from any other representation except the one given to them by the authorities. On the other side of the wall, there was the authoritative system itself that, like most such systems, creates its specialist vocabularies and other means for erasing its own messiness. Hence, in the minds of Valerio and his brother (and others I presume), the LD designation became a subtle oppressor whose weight might have been lessened if they could have only peered into the possible messiness that was hidden by the wall. In effect, the single representation that authority offered was a magnifying lens through which outsiders beheld insiders. In the end, the good intentions of the experts who had first articulated the conditions of LD and devised the diagnostic tests were unable to deflect real-world appropriations—or so goes my interpretation.

The language therapist and I also looked at some of Valerio's writing. My fieldnotes for that afternoon (29 January, 1988) describe formulaic, cramped, unmotivated "essays" of single paragraphs as if the object were to get them done and leave. Unfortunately, I was unable to make copies of those early writings because of school policies put into place to protect the students. In order to provide some grounding for my observations, however, I offer other examples of Valerio's writing. In September and October of that same year, I received two handwritten letters from Valerio. I had just moved from Angelstown to Iowa, and these letters were the beginnings of a very modest amount of correspondence between us. I doubt that anyone can convincingly argue why in these letters certain discourse characteristics occur and others do not, nor do I believe that we can reliably perceive his school essays through a very different genre, namely, the personal letter. Nevertheless, I offer these letters because I recognize the Valerio I knew in them. That is to say, I recognize—between the lines, so to speak—the same self-conscious hesitation (cramping worry) through which he felt this world of unequal power. And this condition of power difference, as I argued earlier, periodically motivated fusillades of questions. (I have copied his writing exactly, his spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and so on. He was approximately twelve years old at the time of these letters.)

Sept. 12, 1988

Dear Cintron Family,

It was nice to hear from you Ralph. I liked hearing about Iowa.

Im in sixth grade this year. My teachers names are Mrs. Hume and Mrs. Home. I'm a Lieutenant for school patrol this year.

My dad likes his job. My mom is going to go to school to learn English. My dad might buy a new car.

I would like to now more about Iowa and your house.

Sincerly,

Valerio and family

October 10–88

Dear Ralph Cintron

It give me good pleasure. That you wrote to me. It give me good pleasure That your family gete alone well. In the picture your house lo[illegible] big and nice. Angel wen't to Chicago with my mom and d[illegible]

Polonia is very well said the doctor. Next month they are going to open a new clinic in Hubertville for cistis fabroses. Ralph one day we are going to your house.

Ralph you said that you want to know about the baby. The next visit is at Jan. at the new clinic Angel is going to transalte.

Ralph thats it for now.

Ralph when are you coming to visit us.

Sincerly

Martinez family

Thank you

According to the language therapist, Valerio's school essays were comparable to those of other students his age although teachers might have expected more than single paragraphs. As I sat reading the single-paragraph essays that Valerio had written over the years, I began to wonder more deeply about LD. For instance, the language therapist had two functions: she administered the LD tests to Valerio and others, but she also tutored their writing and reading. This latter service was particularly practical and very valuable to the school district. In short, it could be argued that designating students as LD helped to maintain a bureaucratic niche, that LD was less a clearly defined disorder and more a generic term or rationale, a bureaucratic ploy by which Valerio could receive the help of a language tutor, help that he, indeed, needed.

However, recalling at this later date that meeting in January 1988 with the language therapist, I believe that doubts should be raised about the tutoring help that he received. Valerio, it now seems to me, had come to understand rather precisely what his school meant by language training: Before one could learn connected discourse, one had to lay a foundation in unconnected discourse (labeling, defining, categorizing, and so on). Indeed, the language therapist stated several times how important it was for students to practice these language skills, which I earlier called metadiscursive skills. Such a conception of language instruction might be called structuralist, and the next structural unit up, so to speak, is the paragraph. (Interestingly, when the language therapist showed me the paragraphs of other LD students, her main concern was with sequencing—beginnings, middles, and ends, as she put it—and a concern with sequencing seems to affirm, again, a structuralist orientation.) Valerio's one-paragraph essays were formulaic and unmotivated, then, for the reason that the school's structuralist orientation had been drilled into him so extensively that he felt no additional and personal motivation connected to writing. In fact, one day, according to the language therapist, he pulled out an early "essay" and said,

"Remember when I could not write?" What he meant by writing was the quality of his handwriting. A preoccupation with structure had prevented the emergence of what might have been a more motivating concept, namely, writing as meaning-making.[4] It occurs to me now that perhaps Valerio was cycling nicely through the circularity of schooling: (1) He had clearly experienced trouble in the classroom, but the trouble had been defined according to a structuralist conception of language instruction. (2) The LD tests located the trouble because they were constructed to measure student ability in handling the structuralist aspects of language. Further, the scientistic aura of the tests elevated the importance of the structuralist conception for language instruction and made it a verity. (3) The therapy or tutoring that was offered was similarly conceived within the same womb—as well it should have been because tutoring is meant not to interrupt the cycle but to return the student to the fold. The three components of the cycle, then, were mutually reinforcing, circular.

Moreover, Valerio's parents tacitly reinforced the same assumptions. Before meeting Valerio's language therapist, I had discovered that his parents' language instruction in Mexico had also followed a largely structuralist conception in which language drill, correct spelling, handwriting, and so on played prominent roles and meaning-making did not.[5] Valerio's cramped, dutiful, self-conscious, and uninspired paragraphs—as if nervousness and fear had written them—seemed to me consistent with his parents' experiences with schooling that somehow had induced, at least in his mother, the conviction that she was *tapada*. Valerio's school may have wanted to see confident students in command of their pages, but in Valerio's case the methods for producing that student coalesced with a family history in which regimented rights and wrongs were seen as natural. The result was paralysis, not confidence-building. A certain heaviness of life, the Saturnian quality I named earlier, had been etched onto the Martínez family because this is how life had managed them. The heaviness seemed dense, buried, and not graspable because reflective and self-reflective languages had not yet emerged.[6] Despite its intentions, schooling for Valerio continued to etch the same theme of heaviness even deeper with a new tool called LD. Here, then, was another real-world appropriation in which the good intentions of schooling—whether enlightened or not—were bent until they conformed to massive social and historical forces. If one accepts my perhaps overpsychologized interpretation, all this (and much more that was hidden from me) was present, I believe, in the life of Valerio.

But people find ways to subvert. The very walls that confine can also become blank spaces whose prodigious size can be used to magnify interior life and

make a spectacle that can be read by its author and others as well. Valerio did not so much read the spectacle that he made on the walls of his bedroom that he shared with his brothers, for his own self-reflective language had yet to jell, but the spectacle itself might be understood as a first salvo of an inarticulate interior starting to articulate itself. Interestingly, the spectacle was a montage of posters, articles, artifacts, and mementoes, a kind of fragmented discourse whose coherence was not so much built into and across the fragments but resulted more from an act of my own interpretation. In short, if Valerio had difficulty shaping a version of himself according to the conventions of oral or written narratives, he managed to create a more perplexing text, an implicit narrative whose themes were not original but rather floated around him in the culture of his peers. The fact that the themes were not original but part of a collectivity that I knew well allowed me to make the implicit narrative explicit, in short, to interpret not only the particularity of Valerio but also the generality of others his age in Angelstown. It is this two-pronged interpretation, therefore, that I will pursue throughout the rest of the chapter.

Ralph:
So tell me Valerio, how come you're the only one to put things on the wall?
Valerio:
I like it, it's a reflection of me.
R:
How is it a reflection of you?
V:
Makes me feel strong.
R:
Makes you feel strong?
V:
Yeah.
R:
What makes you feel the strongest?
V:
The ground Marines.
R:
The Marines? How come?
V:
The helicopters . . .

R:
Why do you want to feel strong?
V:
To do work.

How does one create respect within conditions of little or no respect? This question and its many versions constantly appear in my fieldnotes.[7] One answer is to appropriate images that are larger than life, such as those on Valerio's walls. These larger-than-life or hyperbolic images circulated throughout the Angelstown neighborhood where the Martinez family lived. In my interpretation, such imagery enabled one to dream oneself beyond one's conditions. Either such dreaming was mostly a male preoccupation or I had greater access to males. Either way, males, old and young, seemed to invent giant scenarios for themselves, even as they mocked, with different mixes of gentle humor and anxiety, the likelihood of achieving these scenarios. Sometimes the scenarios became real success stories. For instance, I recorded the graceful and cultured story of a print shop owner, the hardscrabble story of a man who had a small company that laid down *chapapote*, "asphalt," and the mysterious story of a man who, although arriving from Mexico with little, came to own a number of Mexican-oriented businesses. His particular success story was cut short when he was professionally murdered.

If these particular scenarios were realized in the sense of providing an income and a degree of independence, most scenarios were not realized. Among the *mexicano* adult males I knew, there was often a piling up of scenarios, dreams about starting small restaurants or grocery stores, about becoming computer programmers, notary publics, doctors, or exporters/importers, dreams about fixing one's house (with fancy tiles in one instance and, in another, fixing the attic and basement so that a two story house could be stuffed with renters on four floors.) However, even among these adults, one common scenario typically came true: money earned in the United States was put to use in Mexico. This money allowed families to purchase land, to build homes for themselves and relatives, to purchase gifts and critical needs for relatives in Mexico, and to acquire retirement incomes for use in Mexico. Sometimes the money was used to start small businesses there.[8]

The common factor, of course, in all these scenarios, realized or not, was the making of money that was often transformed self-mockingly into becoming a *millonario*. But this transformation of the reasonable into the far-fetched was only one example of Angelstown scenarios flowing toward the hyperbolic

short, in Valerio's immediate surroundings, imaginings such as the ones mentioned and many others—rather than their realizations—were prolific.

I raise these points, then, about the circulation of hyperbolic imagery throughout the neighborhood to problematize Valerio's own comment, that the objects on the walls were a reflection of him. What kind of a reflection? The one that Valerio might see in a mirror, or a reflection of the fantasy life invisible to the mirror? Obviously, I think the objects on the walls mostly reflected his fantasy life, for the life that the mirror would have reflected was one that included three painful labels: that of *chero* applied to him or his family by peers, that of learning disabled applied by his school, and that of being *tapado* given to him and other children in the family by his mother. These views in a real mirror, then, were a few of the images from which his imaginary life tried to free itself to make him "feel strong." In my interpretive scheme, then, "feeling strong" pointed decidedly toward the hyperbolic, and in the hyperbolic Valerio found three main constellations of images: Marines in tough poses who could "hit the ground running" from high-tech machinery, baseball stars whose heroic skills earned them vast sums of money, and expensive, exotic cars whose smooth shapes could slice through limiting nature, wind and all, having retrieved from a fantasized future a technological design that could master and overcome natural limitation.[9]

Ralph:
Why do you like them [cars]?
Valerio:
Cause . . . they look, they look smooth.
R:
What is it that looks smooth about them?
V:
The shape.
R:
Can you point out the kinds of things that you particularly like?
V:
The whole car, convertible . . .
R:
Oh, the convertible top, OK.
V:
I like the shape, I like the rims, and I like the lines that goes like this.
R:
Kind of like a circular–

V:
Yeah, that line . . .
R:
You like those.
V:
Yeah, I–
R:
Almost like fins?
V:
I like the shapes.

Of course, the attraction of the hyperbolic is not limited to this fieldsite, as Susan Stewart's analysis of the gigantic suggests.[10] One can read signs of the hyperbolic in the culture at large, for instance, in such exhibitions as monster trucks and tractor pulls, such sports as professional wrestling, body building, and karate, and such toys as Ninja Turtles, Transformers, and the Garbage Pail Kids. All these images and artifacts were parts of the hyperbolic spectacle inside and outside the fieldsite as I conducted research. In my view, the aggrandizement of mechanical mass and power, and the aggrandizement of human body mass and power seem to share the same hyperbolic structure; similarly, the lure of the horrific, which is what sold the brief fad of the Garbage Pail Kids (cartoonlike figures whose popularity lasted from the late 1980s into the early 1990s and who depicted "disgusting" bodily excesses: drooling, throwing up, and so on), was another kind of aggrandizement. Many of the children I knew in the neighborhood purchased toys or eagerly watched television shows that relied on this kind of hyperbolic imagery. In my view, the hyperbolic was a generalized system of seduction temporarily releasing young males, in particular, whether they were *mexicano* or not, from the everyday and mundane. In short, Valerio and his brothers consumed this generalized imagery as readily as others every time, for instance, that they hooted their enjoyment while watching televised professional wrestling or wore a T-shirt depicting a lunging Frankenstein with a nail driven into his head or another T-shirt saying "genuine bad cat." (*A question: When the generalized hyperbolic becomes globally marketed, as these images became, does it lose its mark of hyperbole—its difference—and become itself the mundane?*)

I believe, then, that the images of tough Marines jumping from helicopters on Valerio's walls synthesized the aggrandizements of both mechanical mass and body mass. Moreover, I would argue that this imagery was common and longstanding among many of the males in the neighborhood. For instance,

most of the young males I knew saw the military and police work as highly attractive careers. Even those in the midst of illegal activities, or on its edges, envied the Marines and the police, imagining their work as tough and dynamic. A few older men of Mexican origin who had grown up in Angelstown also talked of their youthful idealizations of the Marines and more generally of the military as well as of the police. Their accounts of growing up differed from what contemporary young males told me and what I observed only in the recently increased violence from street-gang warfare. One of these older men became a Marine and another chose a career as a policeman. The persistence of these idealizations across generations says something about a persistent innerscape paired to—but not determined by—an equally persistent outerscape of social conditions that were loosely structured around ethnic, socioeconomic, and power differences. In short, I would argue that the need to "feel strong," as Valerio described his own "innerscape," was paired as a rather precise response to the conditions of his outerscape. "Feeling strong," then, was one way to *create respect under conditions of little or no respect.*

But I wish to concentrate particularly on one constellation of images, that of cars and more generally high-tech machinery. In addition to the pictures of a Porsche and Ferrari on his walls, Valerio also displayed pictures of a Cadillac, Beretta, Honda Accord, and Desoto Club Coupe. The Desoto was of much older vintage and, hence, an apparent anomaly in this constellation of contemporary cars. When I asked Valerio why he displayed an old-fashioned car alongside contemporary ones, he said that he would like to have been in the old times because they made "neat stuff" back then, like the Wright brothers. (Valerio had always been interested in airplanes and the history of aviation; hence, alongside the cars, he had the pictures of a jet and O'Hare Airport.) Sometimes he imagined himself an inventor living in the "old times" but, interestingly enough, never in the present. For Valerio, it was as if reference books (*The Guinness Book of World Records* was one of his favorites) could reduce the amorphousness of history into a set of verities so that certain characters, moments, and actions from the "old times" were now labeled as important on a historical trajectory. From such assuring texts, Valerio could imagine a place in history for himself, but the present held no assuring text, no place to clearly locate his future worth in the eyes of others. Hence, the "old times" were another place of the imagination where one could "feel strong," as strong perhaps as when one is surrounded by images of hyperbolic, high-tech machinery.

Valerio's fascination with cars, however, deserves even more extended analysis. Such an analysis, I believe, will not only uncover more of Valerio's particular innerscape but also a kind of collective innerscape of many of the young

males in the neighborhood. The car, it seems to me, acquires importance in the imagination precisely because it can move through public space generating images that might camouflage private space. The car, obviously, is a practical tool as well, but its practicality can never fully explain, as we will see, the use of a car as a site for self-display. The car, if the owner wishes, can be a mobile display of an artfully constructed self. This self can safely cruise public space because it knows that there is not enough knowledge out there to unveil the camouflage. The car, then, is a particularly useful site for the creation of hyperbole. For instance, Valerio's older brother, Angel, at the time of the wall interview was shopping for a used red sports car. I was told that he had saved enough money from a variety of jobs to purchase such a car. I never did find out if Angel's search was successful, but I had also come to know him well over the years, and I knew the power of a red sports car to hide what he, like Valerio, was eager to hide. He and Valerio were unusually close, and both had absorbed the same sorts of indignities, but Angel always struck me as being the more vulnerable of the two, as if he had recorded a bit more deeply the hurts tossed out by his mother and the schooling system. (But I hesitate here even as I offer my analysis about a sharp difference between public and private spaces—for instance, that the first is a camouflage of the second. Such an analysis may distort how one space vibrates sympathetically with the other. For example, the ability to muster enough cash to construct whatever self Angel hoped to display was itself a partial realization of his fantasized private space. The public realization of one of his private dreams would certainly contribute to a partial healing of his vulnerability. Can one confidently say, therefore, that the private spaces hidden behind the public displays are, in some sense, always an emptiness kept at bay because once unveiled they would reveal the pretense of one's displays?)

I will take my argument about the significance of the car one step further: One unforgettable day I rode with some thumpers. In Angelstown, the term "thumper" was used for a certain kind of car and was also sometimes extended to describe the driver. On weekend afternoons in the summer, the thumpers of our neighborhood cruised the corner where Don Angel had his small apartment, which was about half of a mile from where Valerio and his family lived. Oftentimes they would park outside a small Mexican grocery store across the street. According to my friend Martín, who knew all of them but was not himself a thumper, they had been hanging out in front of this store since they were little kids on bikes. (Later, after I had taken a small peek into their lives, it occurred to me that the expensive, flashy thumpers that they now drove extended old rivalries from their bike days. For instance, against the backdrop of a ending crapshoot just to the side of the store, I witnessed ar diff

exquisite display of a difficult give and take between genuine camaraderie and one-upmanship.) On the unforgettable afternoon I'm recalling, Martín signaled one of the thumpers to pull over as he drove by. Martín introduced me, and I started taking pictures. Suddenly, thumpers were all around me, more than I had ever collectively seen, and I was peeking into the mysteries of Alpine sound systems whose speakers quivered from the backs of the cars. Here was the source of that "thumping" bass that could vibrate an entire block or two with concussions more to the body than to the ear. The preferred music, as I already knew from Martín but which was verified by the drivers themselves, was "hip hop," "heart throb," "techno," and "rap." In Angelstown, thumpers also often had specialized hydraulic systems powered by an array of hidden batteries. These systems could tilt the car left or right, front or back, or jack the entire car up and drop it herky-jerky fashion. When raised high, the car became harder to drive, fragile, overly sensitive to the conditions of the road surface.

I turn here to fieldnotes written the day after I first talked to Manuel, the owner of one of the thumpers I rode in. The fieldnotes are lightly edited:

> Of all the thumpers, clearly the best guy to talk to is Manuel. He has an 82 green Jaguar. I ask him to take me for a ride. I conduct an interview as we ride around. No tape recording on this one. At one point, I ask him to crank up the sound. It's loud, but it is also behind us. We can't really talk while hearing it, but it doesn't totally blast us away either. In the interview, he tells me that he listens to it when he feels stressed out. It makes him feel better. He knows no one in the neighborhood has a car like his. His is the only Jaguar. The car cost him $3,500. ALL OF A SUDDEN IT OCCURS TO ME THAT THAT IS A PRETTY CHEAP PRICE FOR A JAGUAR, NO MATTER THE YEAR. He has put more money into the car than that though. The figure I have in my notes is $4,000, but I do not recall if that was 4,000 more or 4,000 total. He did not do the work himself, and that seems pretty typical of all the thumpers. Professionals tend to detail the cars, to put in the sound systems, and the hydraulics. What's interesting about his car is that it is pretty modest in comparison to some of the others. For instance, his sound system is not one of the louder ones. He doesn't even want to be heard two blocks away before he arrives. The paint job is not one of the fancier ones. All in all, his car is pretty functional, no hydraulics, for instance. As he drives around, he listens to hip-hop, heart throb, and techno. This is pretty much the list that Martín provides for his group, which is counter to the alternative music group. For Manuel, the Jaguar has both status in the neighborhood as well as practical comfort. In fact, his buying decisions revolved around three types of cars: Jaguar, Mercedes, and Cadillac. He was not going to look at any other car except these three, because other cars simply don't drive as well. Besides, girls like them. He sometimes goes into competitions at McCormick.[11] Another car, which he later sold, also went into competition. Perhaps one of the most interesting things that he says about car status is that it's all in the surroundings. For instance, around here—and as he says it, he points to the neighborhood—a Jaguar or Mercedes, or Cadillac is a big deal, but in a neighborhood where Jags, Mercedes, or Caddies are common, they aren't such a big deal. I really like this sensitivity to context. As I talk to him seated on a little concrete embankment, I point to the houses and talk about their run down nature, the run downness of the neighborhood. I ask him if having a sharp car was a way to counteract the decay around oneself. He said yes.

With a thin waist and bulging biceps, Manuel was an experienced weight lifter. His tight T-shirts seemed to be consciously chosen to show off his bulk. Almost as if he had been scripted by the poster image of the tough Marine on Valerio's wall, he seemed to have realized Valerio's dream of "feeling strong." For Manuel and his friends, the body was a visual space to be meticulously controlled. Manuel was less "displayed" than his friends, who in their clothes and hairstyles presented themselves as far more self-consciously constructed. However, his car, just like theirs, served as an articulated visual space and extended the possibilities of the body simply because a car can cover more public space in less time than the body. Hence, the detailing of the cars, the flashing lights around license plates, the hydraulics, the sometimes tinted windows, and so on expanded the thumpers' ability to *create respect under conditions of little or no respect*. In this sense, the sound system was a brilliant extension of the self's ability to occupy space because the special signifier of the thumper was its domination of a plane beyond the visual, that of sound space. What was at work here might be explained this way: The ego (I use the term metaphorically not psychologically) as a kind of aura frames the body, and certain artifacts expand the ego's presence in public space; in short, the body, car, and thumper sound system were transitions from the biological to the technological, from the visual to the aural, allowing the ego to occupy ever-increasing amounts of public space.

Under such conditions, public space sometimes became *noisy*. The noise was both literal (as I said earlier, a cranked up sound system could be heard two

blocks away) and metaphorical (egos barking at each other, insisting that their presence be felt and known). No wonder, then, that the thumpers who gathered around the grocery store in front of Don Angel's apartment were oftentimes described as drug dealers or gang members by those whose own egos inhabited smaller, more routine spaces. On the one hand, some of these descriptions were factual. Indeed, according to my friend Martín, who had grown up with the thumpers and whose own bragging ways could not deceive but only be a source of affection between us, some of the thumpers had flirted with gangs, and others had been caught selling drugs (Manuel had supposedly sold steroids, for instance). On the other hand, Martín, himself a former small-time drug dealer who had recently been arrested, claimed that his thumper friends and he too had been mostly clean and were now all clean. I believed him. The rumors that the thumpers were gang members or drug dealers seemed to me to be woven with bits of envy. Circulating these rumors seemed to be one way to undermine the excesses of ego that overflowed onto public spaces and crowded out more restrained egos whose bodies and styles of dress seemed to argue humility as a virtue. The rumors, then, were leveling devices that undermined the pretentions of Caddies, Jaguars, and other kinds of new cars in the neighborhood while simultaneously revealing deep-seated envy. In short, rumors functioned rhetorically, revealing the inner and outer worlds of those who gossiped as surely as the bodies, cars, and sound systems revealed the inner and outer worlds of those gossiped-about. Ironically, it seemed to me, the dialectic of gossipers and gossiped-about could only emerge from profoundly shared worlds (shared innerscapes and outerscapes) that were differently inflected and, therefore, strained.

Thumper cars, of course, are related, particularly in their hydraulics, to the low-riders driven by the Pachucos of the forties and fifties and the Chicanos of the sixties.[12] The differences and similarities between the two styles are more than I can delineate here, but when I saw one of the local low-rider clubs parade their vintage Chevies and Fords, their style seemed frozen and nostalgic, a tame hobby of males in their fifties. The thumpers, in contrast, were flashy and modern, in part, because their thumping sound systems dominated sound space more thoroughly than any low-rider. Nevertheless, it is this idea of domination, which the more powerful sound systems of thumpers have heightened, that links the two generations of cars. This domination suggests that what I defined earlier as a pairing of a persistent innerscape to an equally persistent outerscape loosely structured around certain social conditions was as alive in the Angelstown I studied in recent years as it had been forty years earlier. What the Pachucos and low-riders had initiated, the thumpers seemed to extend. Did

they not share the same sad and exuberant need to splash themselves visually and aurally across one's "hood" and to occupy it with a thick panoply of symbols that signaled some in-between space that had broken away from the ethnically traditional while simultaneously refusing to assimilate into the dominant culture? And in spending all that effort to invent and dominate an in-between space, was it not inevitable that sometimes explicitly illegal acts should occasionally combust on the social scene? The Angelstown thumpers, then, it seemed to me, whether really dangerous or not, wore danger as part of a historical costume that they had updated in order to signify an in-between space that had refused to pass away.

Before returning to Valerio's wall, I want to discuss one other car group in order to amplify my thesis about the circulation of hyperbolic imagery. In addition to thumpers, there were cars in Angelstown that belonged to a specialized club called Too Low Flow. To this day, my knowledge about these cars and their owners remains sketchy. What I wish to discuss here, therefore, concerns less the reality of Too Low Flow and more of how these cars were imagined among those I talked to. Among those who admired them, Too Low Flow cars exaggerated the styling characteristics of thumpers. This evaluation seemed to me accurate because the various times when I saw these cars, I too noticed that the hyperbole of Too Low Flow seemed to be written with an extra difference. For instance, in addition to the sound system and the careful detailing of the cars, Too Low Flow club members used brightly colored (oftentimes pink) windshield wipers and chrome rims on low profile tires that lowered the car. At times, the cars were exuberantly comical because some owners, in addition to installing whistles and chirps, had individual control of eyelids covering the headlights. The total effect included, then, high-pitched sounds, winking eyelids, manic windshield wipers, and, sometimes, almost at the very limits of comedy, hydraulics shaking the entire car to the right and left or up and down. This translation of visual and sound space into comedy was, in its own bizarre way, a part of the same in-between scene that I described earlier, for these cars too were crafted by young Latino males of the neighborhood. As far as I could tell, Too Low Flow was strictly Latino and never a part of the African-American or Anglo styles. A Too Low Flow car, then, seemed to be a kind of Latino carnival whose excesses, although inflected differently, were the shared theme that linked low-riders to thumpers to Too Low Flow.

Most importantly, however, owners of Too Low Flow took extra precautions, I was told, to keep their cars fanatically clean. Engines were spotless, and the bodies of the cars, ideally, were not allowed to show water spots, mud, or rust—or so I was told. I was particularly fascinated by these descri

natical cleanliness. I was even more fascinated by the kind of respect that these descriptions generated among the youth who looked up to the Too Low Flow. Why would fanatical cleanliness be so openly admired?

My answer is a complex one that will slowly evolve over the course of this text because it embraces more than the Too Low Flow. I have already introduced hints of my explanation, but I will now more directly address a major point. Cleanliness, quite simply, was an important ingredient in almost all the hyperbolic imagery that I have been discussing. It represented one more type of control over one's outerscape. Through such control, the innerscape could gain authority, in short, acquire *respect under conditions of little or no respect*. Of the many ways by which one might express control, dominance over nature and its plenitude of decay (in this case, rust spots) was an attractive route. Recall here the scene with Manuel who owned a thumper and not a Too Low Flow. As we sat on the little embankment about ten yards east of the grocery store where he and his friends even as children had gathered on bikes, the store that had been the backdrop of their never-ending crap shoot, Manuel was quite explicit about his "raggedy" (his word) neighborhood. The thumper he owned, a Jaguar, and the thumper his brother owned, a two-door Cadillac, were explicitly contrasted to a specific context. On one side, were the cars; on the other, was the neighborhood. In short, the cars were elements in a larger system of display that also included clothes, hairstyles, and conspicuous displays of jewelry. All these displays signified control, the dominance of the "neat and clean" over the raggedness of the neighborhood. For me, however, the descriptions of Too Low Flow seemed to take the rhetoric or semiotic of the "neat and clean" one step further to reveal with unusual clarity the urgent need to camouflage with large public displays all those traces of raggedness and decay that lurked in one's private spaces. In short, these private spaces, too often crafted by systemic humiliation, created an urgency to exert control over public spaces and to craft in a hyperbolic style the emblems of such control.

How did the pictures of cars on Valerio's wall fit into this larger portrait of cars in the neighborhood? These posters were not of thumpers and Too Low Flow;[13] instead, these posters of Porsches and Ferraris imaged an exotica that was even more out of Valerio's reach. Europeaness, exorbitant cost, and streamlining were a few of the characteristics that these posters could excite in the imagination. Valerio pointed to these characteristics, and I interpreted him to mean something of the following. As exotica, these characteristics helped define Valerio's present as mundane and in so doing offered a rupturing of that present: Europeaness as emblem of sophistication and difference; exorbitant cost as emblem of the amassing of capital; streamlining as emblem of futuristic

design and perhaps technological mastery of nature. In short, Porsches and Ferraris were outside the limits of the real, whereas thumpers and Too Low Flow, even as they exoticized the reality of the neighborhood, had become common features of that reality. At most, Porsches and Ferraris inhabited only magazines and posters, not the streets—Valerio was quite explicit about this. It was the exotic distance of Porsches and Ferraris, then, that made their images valuable and provided the reason for bringing them into one's living space.

We might understand all the images on his bedroom wall in somewhat the same fashion. If the bedroom walls were, figuratively, the confinements of his present, they were also blank spaces upon which to write out an implicit text of his desire, a desire that was not just his own but shared the clichés and conventional tropes and topoi of his neighborhood. Indeed, his was part of a collective desire ready to be filled, a vacuum, so to speak, for drawing in the phantasmagorias produced by inventive marketplaces whose reach was global. One could just as easily find, for instance, similar posters and images—and probably walls—in Mexico as in Angelstown or, for that matter, in many other locations. Despite global production and circulation of the phantasmagorias, however, their consumption is probably best understood according to local conditions and meanings. For instance, Valerio's notions of "feeling strong" and of his bedroom walls being a "reflection" of him, and his incessant questions—which I interpreted as probes thrown over his wall of difference in order to understand what constituted that difference—were aspects of his particular style for consuming the phantasmagorias. But his own style was part of a larger system of desire and consumption that operated on the streets of his neighborhood, and it is the simultaneous analysis of these two sites that has been my goal thus far in this chapter.

The next large constellation of images on Valerio's walls consisted of baseball heroes. He had taped to his walls newspaper clippings and pictures of Jerome Walton, Will Clark, Mike Bielecki, Jose Canseco, and Kevin Mitchell. Valerio also owned baseball cards that he kept in a safety deposit box in a bank. Two of these cards were of Mark McGuire and Ryne Sandburg. Walton had either won the rookie of the year award the year before or was the leading candidate that year, and Bielecki, another Chicago Cub, was having a career season of pitching. The other players were established stars in baseball. Canseco, for instance, had accomplished the phenomenal statistic of forty home runs and forty stolen bases in one season and was earning $23 million, and Sandburg some day will enter the Hall of Fame. The point is that the images of these baseball players were another phantasmagoria cycling through Valerio's imagination along with those of exotic cars and tough Marines and their high-tech ma-

chinery. Remarkable physical prowess, staggering incomes, fan adulation, and so on were some of the major ingredients through which baseball stardom manufactured its exotic distance; hence, like other conventional phantasmagorias, the images of baseball stars could be globally marketed.

Because Valerio and I were both Cubs fans, I sometimes watched parts of baseball games on television with him. As I reconsider those moments through the lens of this analytic moment, at least one insight into the workings of exotic distance and the special magnetism that constitutes phantasmagorias is worth exploring. Baseball broadcasting on television depends largely on the juxtaposition of the long shot, medium shot, and close-up. The long shot helps to fabricate exotic distance and, perhaps, is its metaphor. The long and medium shots, which more or less replicate the overview of the fan sitting in the stadium, keep the viewer separate from the intimate details of the game in order to provide a more general understanding: for instance, the strategic positioning of infield and outfield players. The close-up, however, provides a different kind of understanding: for instance, the emotions of a hitter or pitcher or the specific detail of a runner sliding into second base. But the "close-up" can be defined in broader and more interesting ways than just the close-ups of televised baseball. I would like to include here the "close-ups" of baseball cards and the "close-ups" of newspaper articles and photographs. All three of these "close-ups" were actual aspects of Valerio's life that fed his imagination. In interesting ways, these "close-ups" help to fabricate the exotic distance of baseball stars and their global marketing. For the consumer, the close-up reaches across exotic distance by providing a fleeting intimacy and a sliver of knowledge concerning the object hidden by exotic distance, and, thus, the close-up removes the slightest of veils. The sliver of knowledge might be as minuscule as batting-average statistics, and the intimacy as insignificant as the feelings of the baseball star on having been traded the year before or the grimace of a frustrated batter. Nevertheless, these little stories and facts are the close-ups that begin to fill the emptiness of the consumer with an identification, a relationship with the exotically distant. If the desire of the consumer and the goal of marketing is to fill such emptiness, the close-up makes the exotically distant more familiar and simultaneously generates the desire for even more familiarity. Out of this want, an entire economy is manufactured in which the exotically distant is peeled of its abstraction so that it can begin to inhabit intimately the very life of the consumer. These forces were at work in Valerio's own life, for over the years he had consistently expressed the very conventional desire of wanting to be a professional baseball player and, indeed, played first base that summer for a local church team.[14] Moreover, cycling through the culture at this time was the very

revealing refrain "I want to be like Mike" from a popular television commercial that relied on close-ups of Michael Jordan, the Chicago Bulls basketball star. The refrain summarized brilliantly the marketing of mass images that evoke and depend on an "empty" consumer "wanting" identification with something almost totally out of reach, the exotically distant Michael Jordan. Of course, sometimes the selling of a star does not work, and an intimacy between star and consumers never materializes. This fact points to the agency of the unpredictable consumer, for the emptiness that is inside all of us always chooses how it desires to be filled and with whom and what.

I have pointed to three constellations of images that dominated Valerio's wall. In addition to these constellations, however, there were other images, artifacts, and one prominent constellation of images that I have yet to discuss and that deserves analysis. Some of these more miscellaneous items were congruent with the constellations that I have been analyzing, but others were less congruent. For instance, there were a series of Christmas cards, several from me and other cards from clients on his newspaper route. These cards did not project fantasy images of tough Marines, baseball stars, high-tech machinery, and cars; rather, they were sentimental acknowledgments of appreciation for the real being that was Valerio. But an even more prominent acknowledgment of self-worth was a set of eleven awards. Two awards recognized his school-patrol work, another was for physical fitness, and still another was given to him by the local newspaper for being one of their newspaper boys. The newspaper awards and even the newspaper route were regarded almost indifferently, except for the fact that the route had provided him cash with which to buy his own television and other items. (He was far more proud, for instance, of having been a member of the school patrol for several years.) However, there were also seven LD awards that must be discussed, given what I said previously about Valerio's lack of school success and seeing such lack as one more humiliation in the mirror of his real life.

Just how successful or unsuccessful in school was Valerio? Valerio described only one of the LD awards as being significant to him: The Highest Achievement Award in LD math. The reason for its importance, he said, was that he did not expect to win anything, that he thought he was having trouble in math. The other LD awards were mostly in reading and language arts, and these subjects, to him, were not as important. Valerio and his family, particularly his mother, saw with a suspicious eye the school system's tradition of award-giving as well as the passing marks that her children received in LD classes. For instance, his mother pointed out to me that Valerio's passing marks on [illegible] cards were in LD classes, not regular classes. I did not realize this u[illegible]

eral report cards, and when I looked more closely, indeed, I saw the stigmata of LD stamped on the cards. That stamp in her mind explained everything, an everything that others in the family had been made keenly aware of. (For instance, Angel, Valerio's older brother, too was LD, but, after learning certain "tricks" about representational painting, he painted some highly creditable landscapes, and later his mother expressed withering skepticism that he had, indeed, painted them.) For the family, then, the awards and passing marks were more fictitious than real, the ploys of a school system whose good intentions to encourage and nurture were undermined by social and attitudinal realities that could not be easily displaced. Nevertheless, Valerio displayed these awards prominently, and that act contained, perhaps, a significant desire: that of projecting back to him some sort of worth that others had actually seen in him. In my interpretive scheme, then, these cards and awards, projecting memories and images of self-worth acknowledged by others, were juxtaposed and scattered among fantasy images that implied, as I argued earlier, an emptiness that wanted to be filled. It was as if Valerio could fill his emptiness with two sets of images: one an acknowledgement of real worth, the other more of a search for worth not in mundane reality but in the planes of the hyperbolic and the astonishing.

Almost as interesting as the Christmas cards and awards was a pseudo Oriental print of birds sitting on branches amidst sparse but new foliage. This framed print had originated the entire project of wall decoration, preceding even the car posters. The framed print had been given to Valerio by his mother and still occupied a central place on one of the walls. Valerio during the interview implied that he identified less with the print and more with his mother's desire to have it hung. As I looked at the print, I was struck once again by the global marketing of imagery, in this case, the hint of Orientalism, and the fact that it hung alongside other conventionalized global images: for instance, Batman images culled from cereal boxes; a two-dollar Canadian bill given to him by an uncle who had had to reenter the United States via Canada because of immigration problems; pictures of the Fatboys, an African-American rap group; calendars that displayed traditional Mexican images (*charros*, "Mexican cowboys," on one calendar and, on the other, *señoritas* with big flowers in their hair, dancing in brightly colored dresses); and a three-dimensional devotional icon of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

The three traditional Mexican images deserve some commentary. Whereas the colorful pictures on the calendars were disparaged by Valerio as being too *chero*, the Virgen, another traditional image, was not. Why was this? For Valerio and others, the Virgen was the locus of the sacred, the magical grantor of petitions and favors. Valerio, for instance, kneeled every night for approximately five minutes before her image to say his prayers, prayers that were meant to protect him and members of his family. In short, the Virgen was, arguably, the most powerful image on his decorated walls. The Virgen, then, may have been just as traditional as the Mexican cowboys and the dancing *señoritas*, but these latter images were also secular whereas the Virgen was sacred; hence, her sacredness protected her and made her icon difficult to disparage as *chero*.

My deeper argument, however, pertains to the international circulation of local iconographies, for instance, the hint of Orientalism that becomes mass produced or the stereotypes of Mexican traditionalism that, likewise, become mass produced and, finally, disseminated beyond their cultural and geographical boundaries. One could just as easily point to the mass production of European icons (Porsches, Ferraris) as to American icons (baseball stars, rap music, Batman, and so on and so on). From this perspective, Valerio's walls displayed not only an array of conventional hyperbolic desires but also an array of local iconographies that had become internationalized. Local iconographies, of course, have been circulating through global arenas for hundreds of years. But the proliferation of such iconographies has become so extensive during the twentieth century that the sites for producing them are not necessarily located within the cultures and geographies from which the iconographies emerged. One result is that we are mostly immune to the difference that the iconography may have once represented because the iconography has become our own.[15] Valerio's walls, for instance, were not unusual but commonplace as were the cheap plaster knickknacks of small puppies and other figurines sometimes decorated with a red heart and the words "I love you," all located in the Martinez family's living room. In mentioning knickknacks, I ought to emphasize that I am not writing about "good taste" or "bad taste." My interest is in the production and circulation of iconography, the complexity of forces by which the manufacturing of goods encourages spectators to become consumers and finally citizens.

Perhaps I can clarify my point by turning to a specific encounter with a figure whom Edmundo and I called El Arabe. He was, indeed, of Arab descent but born in Mexico, and, according to him, someone who had traveled the world as part of the Mexican diplomatic corps. As strange as it may sound, we never inquired his actual name. El Arabe was an itinerant street vendor who had been appearing every now and then for twenty years on the same busy street corner in Angelstown selling a variety of goods to his Mexican clients. His home base was Chicago where he owned a liquor store managed by others. Because of the store, his street vending was not necessary, he said, but was more of a pleasure.

During the year he made a long circuit that might include stops in Mexico to visit relatives and to purchase goods to be sold later in Tennessee, Ohio, Chicago, Angelstown, and other places where he knew of a Mexican community. He traveled in an old Cadillac, which he stuffed to the brim when closing shop. His most conspicous products were birdcages and cheap tapestries of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Rather surprisingly, he also sold cheap tapestries depicting an overview of Mecca and its holy shrine. His vending site was located next to a Mexican restaurant, a favorite of mine and Edmundo's. Because he sold cheap goods at a conspicuous site, I was particularly interested in his relationship with the city because of the passage of recent ordinances requiring the licensing of street vendors and because city hall at the time was decrying the deterioration of the neighborhoods on both sides of this major artery leading to the downtown. Indeed, some city officials were advocating the creation of an entirely new gateway, one that would bypass the minority communities and the empty buildings sometimes dressed in graffiti. El Arabe's replies to these questions did not confirm any suspicions but, instead, suggested benign treatment on the part of the city. His selling of tapestries and other cheap goods may have been an eyesore in some eyes, but the city was not actively running him off. After several visits and long talks and after the prices of his goods had dropped considerably and Edmundo and I had purchased too much, a more interesting story began to take shape for me.

El Arabe was a transporter of cultural stuff. I knew of no one like him in Angelstown, a man who derived much of his labor from a peripatetic style. The labor of everyone else I knew tended more or less to make people stationary. He shuttled back and forth between the United States and Mexico and maintained in some fashion connections to the Middle East. He boasted often, for instance, that only he knew how to get the tapestries of Mecca. For him, they were special and he was proud of them. When Edmundo and I examined them closely, we could only find Arabic script, which suggested to us that, indeed, they were manufactured in the Middle East rather than Mexico or the United States.[16] His biggest selling item, however, were the tapestries of the Virgen de Guadalupe. I was astonished when I compared the tapestries of the Virgen and those of Mecca. Other than the iconography, I could not see a significant difference between the two. Both were very inexpensive, both relied on the same materials (some kind of cheap cloth and bright colors), both were infinitely replicable, and both depicted immediately recognizable icons. It was as if a style that could circulate internationally had been in place for a considerable time to create the genre of tapestry painting whose subject matter was local iconography. As far as I could tell, it made no difference whether the local iconography was Elvis, the Virgen de Guadalupe, Mecca, Daniel in the Lion's Den (a tapestry that hung above a sofa in the home of another family in the neighborhood), Harley Davidson motorcycle riders, or some other immediately recognizable cultural or geographical icon. Tapestry paintings, as I later found out, have indeed become an international genre largely manufactured in Turkey and sold by large retailers in the United States who display iconographies from around the world in their catalogues. Tapestry painting, then, with a manufacturing center(s?) in Turkey, represents a distinctive homogeneous style, that has absorbed and reproduced local iconographies. As a universal class marker, the tapestry allows those of more modest means to decorate their living spaces and in so doing imitate the practices of the more wealthy. Of course, this need to decorate living space is itself a somewhat recent phenomenon dating, more or less, to the emergence of the bourgeoisie. If bourgeois taste has become increasingly an international style through which wealth, success, and cultivation display themselves through the purchase of art objects, then circulating among the working classes, is one of its international counterparts: tapestry paintings. The important point is that the desire for consumption and display are vast ensorcellments affecting divergent levels of society.

El Arabe may have been a minor but unique actor in this global drama, but my interpretation of him allowed me to understand better Valerio's bedroom walls, the living room decorated by his parents, and the living rooms of other families I knew in the neighborhood. Tapestry paintings were only one component in a larger system of envy and imitation of the bourgeoisie. Also within this same system were the knickknacks, mentioned earlier, that were sometimes displayed in glass cabinets; fat, velvety living room furniture that could be bought at a downtown store whose enormous, blinking neon sign had been targeted—according to a Latino city official, a friend of mine—by a city ordinance as too large and gaudy; landscape paintings bought in resale shops and drugstores; large, plastic gold and black clocks flanked on both sides by Pegasus; and, in particular, a set of brightly flowered, inexpensive pitchers and a bowl that imitated seventeenth-century European designs and was described by one family as examples of *lujo*, "good taste," a "luxury item." All these items and many more with their hints of the Orient or Europe or Mexico or whatever and whenever (local iconographies now internationalized) were parts of the unnoticed conventions of everyday life. These objects of so-called bad taste created their special seductive power by imitating the art objects of an internationalized bourgeoisie. In a larger sense, however, such objects performed a political role in so far as they ushered in and maintained an identification with political and economic structure that could deliver, if not the real ob-

internationalized bourgeoisie, then at least its imitations. In this sense, imitations are quite political in ways not normally imagined.

Let me explain my point further by returning to my earlier statement about the production and circulation of iconography and the complexity of forces by which the manufacturing of goods encourages spectators to become consumers and finally citizens. In my analysis, those without sufficient cash to purchase the goods—either bonafide goods emblematic of the internationalized bourgeoisie or their imitations—remain spectators of the circulating iconographies. In contrast, the consumer has sufficient cash to purchase at least some of the goods. If the amount of cash is not satisfactory, such a consumer (and spectators as well) may also have all sorts of explanations and rationalizations by which to recoup self-worth and dispel frustration in the face of economic inequities. My central point, however, is that the circulation of a common iconography, like a common language, encourages consumers to identify with a people and a nation, and this sense of identification is what I loosely define as a kind of warped "citizenship," warped because it does not proceed along lines of any sort of participatory democracy but along lines of consuming a particular iconography. Even if some "citizens" resent the social and political inequalities that both separate and tie the larger group together, a desire for the common iconography is still pervasive. Here, then, is a subtle form of identification: the complex but shared iconographies that swirl about us encourage a kind of attunement to the forces of production and consumption that mark modern economies. It becomes difficult to imagine life lived in any other way. We recognize its markers in those just like us and even those very different from us, and from this sharing of an iconography—whose separation into "good taste" and "bad taste" merely postpones the recognition of what is shared—emerges our passivity and warped "citizenship."

Let me return to the case of Valerio and his older brother. Both were born in Mexico, but they had no desire to return there to live. Both described Mexico as too traditional, too boring, and lacking in good jobs, their favorite phrase being "there's nothing to do there." They identified more with the United States than with Mexico, more with the ways of life here and their friends with whom they had fabricated a common ground. These identifications ran deeper than the fact that both were more fluent in English than in Spanish. And these identifications were also resilient, for they persisted despite small and large humiliations: for instance, the knowledge that they were labeled learning disabled or that their parents did not have much economic status in the context of the United States. Such humiliations had not unraveled the knotted forces of identification with such iconographies as the United States Marines "hitting the ground running" and American baseball stars. In my view, then, these specific iconographies were but small examples of a more general hyperbolic spectacle resembling dramatic sparks flying from an accelerating machine that manufactures and consumes goods. If this machine can be called "modernity," it, of course, is no longer owned by just the United States and Europe. Wherever the machine finds itself, its magnetic field draws many into its orbit even as it polarizes and displaces others. Valerio and his brother knew all about displacement, for the word *chero* and other humiliations reminded them of their uncomfortable position somewhere in the periphery of that magnetic field. They also knew, however, that their parents inhabited a space even more peripheral. They knew, for instance, that they were not the spectators that their parents had been when growing up on the same *ranchito* in an obscure area of Mexico. For instance, when Valerio bought his own television with his own money and installed it in his bedroom alongside his highly decorated walls, he acted out the role of consumer in a way that his parents as children had never done, and it was through such actions and abilities that an identification had emerged, a kind of warped "citizenship" aligned as much with the forces of modernity as with a geographical and cultural entity called the United States. Of course, such "citizenship" remained fragile because it depended on the machine of modernity cranking out not only its iconographies but also the ability to realize some of its icons. To produce the first without the second would have encouraged cynicism. In the case of Valerio, however, it seemed to me that the machine could keep cynicism at bay, could hide its duplicitous side from Valerio not only because it limped along but, more importantly, because it was being perceived by a dutiful and even buoyant personality.

may 1995

Shortly after the summer of 1990, I lost track of Valerio and his family. At some point, I heard that they had moved, but no one could tell me where. In one sense, I was not eager to find them. Valerio's mother occasionally had expressed annoyance with my fieldwork, the repetitious questions, the ever-present tape recorder. I found her suspiciousness and occasional negativity that ran below the general politeness of the household subtly disconcerting. Moreover, my own awkwardness while doing fieldwork—the difficulty, for instance, of explaining my highly hermeneutic conclusions in any other language except writing—made it difficult for me to explain to her the what, why, and how of my research. Better to move on, I thought.

By late May 1995, however, I felt less sensitive about old awkwardnesses, and I looked for Valerio diligently. The family was easy to find. They had bought a

two-story house across the street from their formerly cramped apartment and were renting out their top floor to young *cheros* recently arrived from Mexico. The scene was immediately recognizable: the purchasing of a house, the renting of the top floor (the hottest one in summer) to others like oneself in order to pay for the mortgage. The sorts of conditions that had first marked Valerio and his family and so many others I knew in Angelstown were being inherited by the next wave of legal and illegal Mexican workers. Valerio's family had cranked up the political and economic machine of modernity and were now shyly and quietly acquiring even more of that iconography by which spectatorship gets left behind.

Edmundo, Valerio, a high school friend of Valerio's, Valerio's brother Angel, and I moved out of the house to sit on the front stoop. Valerio had changed dramatically, had become muscular by lifting weights, but, more than that, had lost his boyishness and found a presence, one of "feeling strong" as he had described it years ago. He was on the verge of graduating from high school and had managed as a junior to escape LD "reality." He described all those LD years as feeling like "one of the dumbest students in school. . . . that I was not going to go on to college and that I was not going to be very successful in life." The escape was initiated by Valerio himself who, after receiving decent grades in a few regular classes, asked school officials to be removed from the LD rolls. He had to fight for the change, but now, on the verge of finishing high school, his intentions were to study biology at the local community college and hopefully move on to a regular university to study nursing. I found my mind drifting at times as I became more interested in watching my feelings becoming unusually rich as the different people around the stoop spoke. Edmundo and I had been doing this work together for five years now, and I had started three years prior to that. There across the street was the cramped apartment where I had first met Valerio and his family and later saw the walls that became this chapter. But the scene was moving on, and whatever I had hoped to record and interpret seemed less significant now than the affection between Edmundo and me for all the crazy years spent together, and the affection we both felt for all the people we had come to know, and even the affection we felt for the literally killing streets of Angelstown.

Were there still walls of confinement framing the family? Of course. The power differential by which mainstream America drives the political and economic machine of modernity (some might say postmodernity[17]) was still humming. The well-being of the machine depends too much on the selection, for instance, of low-wage earners who can be managed by others. Since schooling helps in the selection process, it too helps to maintain the power differential.

Had LD been part of the selection process for Valerio, his brother, and others like them? That is my interpretation, although an ambiguous one because it simultaneously offered one-on-one attention even as it stigmatized. But it was his response to LD reality and a host of other small and large humiliations that spurred a sort of imaginative dreaming that is no longer distinctly American but now internationalized. In a sense, he dreamed himself beyond his immediate conditions, beyond even the American node as producer of modernity. And yet even this dreaming helped the machine to motor forward, for it belonged to a certain complicitous acceptance, a charming yet painful optimism and naivete that I could still hear in Valerio's voice. There was still doubt in his eyes despite the recent accomplishments (which is, of course, true for all of us), and I felt a whole battery of questions residing there still, some of which he actually voiced: How am I doing, Ralph? What do you think of nursing? Will it work? He was still pitching questions over the wall, I thought. My reply, although not then but now: *échale Valerio, no te agüites.*

What I have tried to depict in my story of Valerio and his family and others in the neighborhood is the imaginary life, a kind of elusive ether, that Appadurai labeled a "key component of the new global order."[18] Any account of the reality we inhabit must include an account of that imaginary life that flows at the greatest depths of reality. Accounts that do not contain something of the imaginary life may appear less speculative, but they are not necessarily more precise or believable and certainly they are not more complete. At any rate, it seemed to me, that that which most fired the imagination of those I lived with in Angelstown was a power differential—or at least its perception—that magnified the social standing of those who seemed to have power and demeaned those who seemed to have less power. Without such a differential, the hyperbolic fantasies, the in-between spaces so distinctive in their appearance, and the circulating iconographies, which help to bind us into a kind of warped "citizenship" even as its icons remain unequally distributed and, therefore, divisive, would not have been so sharply drawn. It was the heated imagination of others, therefore, that heated my own.