

A READING OF WALLS: THE
POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF
PRINT IN A MEXICANO COMMUNITY

Ralph Cintron
University of Iowa

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112 Paolucci Building
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824
(517)432-1317
Fax:(517)432-2221

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ABSTRACT

I attempt a rhetorical reading of print on three walls or surfaces within a Latino community that is mostly Mexican in origin and living in a medium-sized Midwestern city. The three surfaces are the bedroom walls of a teenaged child whose parents are mexicano, the Spanish print on downtown storefronts, and gang graffiti on buildings close to a new strip mall. I read these surfaces in order to highlight the socioeconomic and ethnic tensions of the city. In a larger sense, however, my reading also argues that communities, particularly in modern urban settings, are woven with each others ways of being, and this means that traditional notions of cultural and ethnic identity are questionable. Another argument of the paper concerns the rhetorical nature of social science texts, particularly ethnographic texts; hence, knowledge-making is also story-making.

A READING of WALLS: THE POLITICS
and ECONOMICS of PRINT
a MEXICANO COMMUNITY¹

By

Ralph Cintron²

I have been doing ethnographic fieldwork for four years in a primarily mexicano community in a Midwestern city that I will call Splitsville. By mexicano I mean immigrants who have recently arrived from Mexico. Many inhabitants I have interviewed and lived with prefer mexicano to Chicano or Mexican-American. Splitsville consists of about 90,000 inhabitants outside of Chicago. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates the Latino population in Splitsville at about 1/4 or 1/5 of the entire population. This means that the Latinos number anywhere from 20,000 to 25,000, the largest percentage being Mexican-origin.

My brief interpretations of selected examples of public and private print, illustrate the socioeconomic and political tensions that apparently exist in Splitsville. Before focusing on these tensions, I should try to explain the rhetorical and ethnographic traditions that frame my analyses. Social scientists in particular may find the artifacts that I choose to analyze as well as the conclusions that I draw quite foreign to their own procedures and styles of interpretation. This discussion is largely based on new fieldwork completed during the summer of 1990. Therefore, my discussion is based on a series of interpretive experiments that I offer in the hope of receiving feedback in order to strengthen future analyses.

The larger project (and this paper is only a sample of it) originally began as a study of the acquisition and use of literacy among a small number of mexicanos living in Splitsville. The study of literacy in community settings contains at least one classic text, Heath (1983). Her work compares a working-class African-American community, a working-class white community and a neighboring mainstream or middle-class community in the Piedmont area of

¹ This paper, now revised, was presented at the National Association for Chicano Studies, Midwest FOCO 1990 Conference, Iowa City, Iowa, with slides of many of the objects discussed. The ideas presented here will be revised even further for future publication. I thank Edmundo Cavazos, my research assistant and graduate student in the College of Education, University of Iowa, for his help in this and other projects. He has a special knack for getting complicated technical equipment up and running as well as getting reluctant people to talk and tell jokes.

² Ralph Cintron is in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.

the Carolinas. Another important text is Scollon and Scollon's (1981) contrastive study of oral and written language differences among Athabaskan speakers in Alaska and Canada and their monolingual English-speaking neighbors.

Among Latino communities in the United States, Louis Moll's or Juan Guerra's or Marcia Farr's or Olga Vasquez's or my own studies of literacy in different Mexican-origin settings may represent, at some future date, sustained research programs that may eventually be comparable to the other works mentioned. To date, however, though a considerable amount of research concerning literacy in specific community settings has occurred in the United States, there are few book length studies and a noticeable lack of work within Latino communities. I am not speaking here of the wealth of oral language studies--for instance, those on bilingualism, bilingual education, and code-switching--that are highly sociolinguistic. Following Peñalosa's (1980) overview of this research, that work has proceeded with considerable vigor. Nor am I speaking of Briggs' (1986) ethnography of communication research. These kinds of oral language studies are provocative. My essential point is that studies of the entire language scene in Latino communities, both its oral and written characteristics, are few indeed.

One value of ethnographic research of this sort, I believe, will be to question statistically driven research that claims high rates of illiteracy among Latinos in the United States. Thus far, literacy studies in minority settings, including Latino communities, have shown a wealth of literacy uses and abilities and highly interesting relationships between oral and written languages. My contention is that future studies in Latino communities will continue to amplify these conclusions by showing us communities that decipher and use the printed word in innovative ways, even among those who have little formal education, put to rest the stereotype of a helpless, illiterate population.

But the perspective that I take in this paper is also very influenced by rhetorical criticism. A currently popular branch of rhetorical criticism, epistemic rhetoric, favors the "reading" of artifacts and discursive and non-discursive acts in order to illuminate how they operate and how they are created by and in turn create a social reality. Certainly, Burke (1969) is one of the foremost twentieth-century figures for sketching out these practices. But labelling this tradition "epistemic" obscures the fact that semioticians and the currently popular poststructuralist and postmodernist critics along with those who practice hermeneutics share an interest in interpreting material reality. From these perspectives even the minutia of life may entail political, socioeconomic, and, more generally, power relationships. Though these currently fashionable interpretive practices are widespread among literary and cultural theorists as well as philosophers, social scientists, particularly cultural anthropologists, and more particularly ethnographers, have been making their own

"artful" interpretations of social reality. Of course, ethnography has always been practiced in both literary ways (the work of Geertz, for instance, reveals an enduring fascination with "artful" interpretation) and more social scientific ways in which the data to the "talking," but during the 1980s ethnographers and meta-ethnographers described in greater detail the literary dimension of ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

There seems to be no easy resolution between those who advocate "artful" interpretation and those who, as with some Marxists (Callinicos, 1990) and some quantitative social scientists, remain skeptical of the intuitions of interpreters. Similarly, some semioticians have tried to create more objective procedures on which to base their interpretations in order to be more "scientific." One resolution is offered by philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1981). For him, textual interpretation (hermeneutics) and the interpretation of social phenomena are quite similar. In order to make his case he draws upon Aristotle's distinctions between mimesis and poesis. Without elaborating Ricoeur's arguments, the claim is that even for Aristotle the poetic and the mimetic were not diametrically opposed. The mimetic function contains creativity and the poetic depends on reality. Both articulate degrees of the other, suggesting that social science has never been purely mimetic. The social science text is also poetic, perspectival, and opens up a possible world, a possible interpretation, and invitation to a reader's response. Even if the Ricoeurian analysis does not convince the most skeptical social scientist, I must admit that my own techniques tend towards "artful" interpretation. I accept the rhetorical dimension of all texts, and I believe, along with other ethnographers, that any interpretation of social phenomena contains not only design elements but an ethnical dimension as well. An ethnical interpretation bonds a text to reality, or rather the ethnographer's experience of reality. When the reader experiences an ethnical text, a further bonding occurs, that between author and reader. An ethical dimension must project through the social science text if we are to believe that an interpretation is, if not the truth, at least a possibility.

Before proceeding to the heart of the paper, consider a few of the historical, socioeconomic, and political forces operating in Splitsville. The first mexicanos arrived in the city during the late teens and early 1920s. Not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, did mexicano immigration achieve significant numbers. At this same time Splitsville received significant numbers of Puerto Ricans and tejanos. In other words, in the last twenty years a large Latino population has arrived in a city that was unprepared for the social disruptions that such changes incur. Complicating matters was the fact that the city simultaneously experienced factory layoffs and the deterioration of its downtown. The layoffs, however, did not stem the arrival of Latinos, for jobs were still to be had and they found them.

In the latter half of the 1980s new conditions have emerged to complicate the conditions even further. Splitsville is currently the western edge of an expanding high-tech corridor. The corridor, which straddles an expressway, links Chicago's western suburbs with Chicago itself and has been the site of some of the most rapid commercial and residential development in the United States. Many of the companies that line the corridor are international research and development firms, insurance companies, and software manufacturers. The workers associated with this new growth have been locating increasingly on the eastern edge of Splitsville. The result is that Splitsville is split in at least three ways. The newest arrivals are primarily white and well educated and have little attachment to the city itself. In fact, all of their affairs can be accomplished at a nearby shopping mall, meaning that it is relatively easy to never visit the city. Further, close to the mall are schools, which means that their children never come into contact with the ethnically and racially mixed school buildings closer to Splitsville's Near East Side. The largest concentration of Latinos (mexicanos, tejanos, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and some Cubans) live here along with African-Americans, Southern whites primarily from Tennessee and Kentucky, and other groups. As an indication of the Latino concentration in this area, the school district has reported for the last few years a 43 percent Latino enrollment. Across the river is Splitsville's West Side. Some of the homes sit on spacious lots not seen on the East Side. Indeed, Splitsville's West Side historically has been the home of the city's high society. Nevertheless, there are significant pockets on the West Side, including the area closest to the downtown and other areas as well, that look considerably like Splitsville's Near East Side.

The importance of this three-way split is that Splitsville's Latino community is caught in highly complex economic and political changes. For instance, Splitsville's leadership is trying very hard to rejuvenate the downtown. Downtown redevelopment includes the establishment of a downtown campus of a popular junior college, the refurbishing of a 1920s theater and movie "palace," the creation of a transportation center, and a new post office in an area that once contained abandoned railroad buildings. Though the city's officials do not publicly admit it, it is clear that Splitsville's East Side, where most Latinos live, is the major contributor to Splitsville's poor image. An "image" task force and other city- or school-district-mandated development groups have on various occasions pinpointed the Near East Side for a variety of improvements. These groups have complained of street-cart vendors, who consist of paleteros (Mexican-style popsicle vendors) and vendors of elote (corn), run-down houses and shops lining the city's Eastern gateway, garish storefronts and signs on downtown buildings, and, most importantly, gang and drug related killings that in the summer of 1990 were unusually intense. From the point of view of city officials, all of these conditions and others have given the city a bad "image," and this in turn inhibits the kind of

economic growth that has characterized every other city along the corridor. Putting it bluntly, Splitsville's Latino population along with its other poor are an embarrassment to city leaders. They see the community as a nuisance that, if it could be made to disappear, would immediately signal the kind of downtown economic recovery that the city has hoped for for thirty years. More than likely, however, a certain amount of recovery will occur despite the Latino "problem" since the forces of growth are spreading rapidly from the East. The real issue is how much growth the city can attract as it competes with neighboring cities that have virtually no Latinos nor significant numbers of poor.

Within the context of these conditions, then, I wish to interpret the print on three surfaces: the bedroom walls of a fourteen-year-old male of mexicano parents, a downtown storefront that sells traditional Mexican medicinal herbs, and gang graffiti on a set of buildings next to a middle-class mall.

The fourteen-year-old shares a bedroom with an older brother and a younger brother. Unlike the other two he has decorated adjacent walls with personal mementos. He has scotch taped forty-nine items to the wall. Eleven of these items are awards stemming from his excellent work in reading and math classes and for being a good newspaper carrier. Note that the district has marked him as learning disabled, a label that he interprets as the district's stupidity. Hence, these school awards alleviate slightly his own embarrassment; his real desire is to work himself into regular classes. Of the other items on the wall, nine are baseball related (newspaper clippings and photos of Jerome Walton, Jose Canseco, Mike Bielecki, Wrigley Field, and so on); seven consist of cars, one advertises Budweiser beer; five are greeting cards mailed or given to him by significant people in his life; two or three are military related; three are miscellaneous items (newspaper clippings and photos of O'Hare airport, a hospital, and a framed psuedo-Japanese print of birds on branches given to him by his mother); three are traditional (a Virgen de Guadalupe idol to which he prays every night), two are calendar/posters of traditional scenes from Mexican culture that advertise a local Mexican grocery store; and finally, a group of Batman logos sold on cereal boxes.

Of these items the most significant is a large, dramatic Marine poster depicting a soldier dressed for battle and below him a scene of helicopters in action with the words "Hit the Ground Running." Almost rivalling this poster are color posters of a Porsche, a Ferrari, and the traditional Virgen de Guadalupe idol. According to many interviews, careers popular among many young males, currently and in the past, in the community include the military, particularly the Marines, and a police career. Males from the current generation also talk about exotic cars: Porsches, Lamborghinis, Ferraris, and so on. They find out about these cars mostly through car magazines.

The fourteen-year-old boy describes all the memorabilia on his bedroom walls as being a "reflection" of him and as making him "feel strong." It seems appropriate, then, to examine these artifacts as exteriorizations of potent internal forces. We might think of the internal forces as hopes, dreams, and even fears that have attached themselves to specific objects from a dense and broad public culture. In short, internal forces have become sufficiently objectified that we can offer a reasonable reading of them by examining these material artifacts. My contention is that this fourteen year old has made visible a linkage between the personal and the social, the private and the public. He has in effect created a text, though not the kind of explicit written or spoken text that function in school settings.

I am not so much interested here in a psychological interpretation of what makes him "feel strong." I presume that many psychologically oriented interpreters would make much of his attraction to the military, baseball heroes, and fast cars and planes. All of these do indeed seem to be male oriented and expressions of some physical ideal that conquers a variety of material limits. And certainly these ideals are fed by manufacturers and advertisers whose own economic well being depends on furthering the images of these ideals. He has expressed desires to be a baseball player, a Marine, or a pilot, suggesting, perhaps, that these cultural images have so shaped his personality that he wishes to actually inhabit those very ideals.

But this sort of psychological interpretation of a young male's fantasies encounters some difficulties when trying to interpret his attraction to the variety of cards that have been mailed to him. Some cards are Christmas cards from customers on his newspaper route. The cards depict a variety of scenes that he finds attractive. The real attraction of the cards, however, seems to be the fact that they acknowledge his existence. The awards similarly acknowledge beingness but offer an additional ingredient: the acknowledgement of special talents not oriented towards some physical ideal conquering material limits.

To repeat, however, I am not interested here in offering a psychological interpretation of a young male's fantasies and projections nor his desire for self-worth and acknowledgement from others. Rather, these walls display a broad public culture that is international in origin. For instance, America is distinctly displayed through American baseball heroes, images of its military, and images from its popular culture (the Batman logos, for instance). Mexico also finds its niche in an advertisement for Tecate beer and in the statuette of the Virgen de Guadalupe, which is, perhaps, the most potent item on the wall since he claims to kneel before it and pray every night for about five minutes. His local neighborhood, mostly mexicano, is also represented with the calendars from a nearby grocery store. Also displayed are artifacts from other cultures and countries: a Canadian dollar bill and the highly prominent

posters of a Porsche from Germany and a Ferrari from Italy. There is a difference, I believe, between these international artifacts and those from the United States, Mexico, and his neighborhood. The fancy cars representing virtually unattainable levels of wealth seem to exist on a distinctly surface level of this community's public culture. Such cars are never seen in this community's neighborhoods. Instead, they exist abstractly in magazines. The images from Mexico and the United States, however, are first-hand realities, even if witnessed mostly on TV. Nevertheless, an important point is that virtually every item on these walls might be found on a bedroom wall in Mexico. In short, this boy's bedroom walls not only represent a complex symbiosis in which a male child's fantasies become animated--even bodied--by material realities shaped over time and existing in his surrounding culture but that, in addition, these walls represent an international public culture whose images, though sometimes shallow and veneer-thin, reflect a deepening globalization that challenges older notions of national identity. In other words, the immigration experience disrupts for this child what might otherwise be the integrity of a Mexican identity (for instance, he speaks English and his parents do not, and his Spanish is not equal to his English). To what extent is the notion of national identity a myth, when seen from the perspective of deepening globalization, realized, among other things, as a set of images from an international public culture?

Let me break my analysis at this point to introduce another surface, another kind of wall, ripe for analysis. Splitsville's downtown, as mentioned earlier, has suffered. A number of major stores that had prospered prior to World War II and into the 1950s had, by the 1970s and early 1980s, left. One reason for these moves was the increased competition from malls rimming the western, northern, and in particular, the eastern edges of town. Numerous downtown buildings were left empty or with businesses and services that cater to poorer clientele. For instance, at one point in the early 1980s tattoo shops and a hubcap shop had short-lived existences. In addition, prostitutes in blocks adjacent to me downtown solicited customers twenty-four hours a day, when not hiding from police patrols. Meanwhile, Latinos had opened and were continuing to open downtown stores that catered to Latino customers. One result is a significant amount of Spanish print in the downtown in the form of store names and window displays. Any passerby would see a strong Latino presence, which, for a Latino, might be seen as a kind of welcoming sign, but a middle class white might be seen as another sign of continuing downtown deterioration. Within this context the city has attempted to pass an ordinance controlling downtown signs. One main target of the ordinance is a particularly large sign in English print in bright neon that covers a considerable percentage of a large building's facade. Other stores have similarly garish signs. Only a few stores have Spanish print, but every store caters to the Latino population. For instance, the

store with the large neon sign sells every houseware imaginable, including inexpensive living room furniture that from middle-class eyes is bright and tacky. The point is that for a city leader interested in attracting the kind of wealth that is moving into the neighboring towns, Splitsville's downtown is an eyesore that needs to be corrected, hence, the city's eagerness to create task forces and downtown development commissions and to pass ordinances controlling the downtown image.

One downtown store sells traditional herbal medicines. The selling of such products is not unusual in Splitsville since natural medicines are sold in almost every Mexican grocery store. These products are apparently packaged by large companies and consist of teas and poultices, each one addressing particular ailments. What is unusual, however, is a store whose sole business is the selling of such remedies. In this sense the store is a remarkable example of a deeply Mexican cultural practice transferred to downtown Splitsville, Illinois. Other nearby Mexican stores are deeply traditional, such as a taqueria that specializes in the making of tongue, brain, and intestines tacos. Clearly, these tacos are not examples of Tex-Mex cooking, which is Splitsville is what passes for Mexican food. Such stores, then, particularly the herbal store, are strong statements of cultural difference. Their signs and window displays are relentlessly Latino. Nevertheless, these same stores are adjacent to or across the street from stores that are relentlessly English. The Latino stores are never, or at least rarely, visited by English-speakers; the English stores, however, are often visited by Spanish speakers. One issue here is that of access under conditions of a power imbalance. For instance, socio-economic power is clearly in the hands of the English-speaking community. The Latino population must continually seek access to that power in order to acquire the goods and services it desires. Yet in few instances does the English-speaking community seek access what the Latino community controls, for what it controls has little value to English speakers. These fundamental socio-economic imbalances are reflected, as we would expect, in the uses of print in Splitsville's downtown. Spanish print hovers between visibility and invisibility. The intent of sign ordinances and other image task force initiatives to make it even less visible in the hope that true economic recovery can take hold. The most traditional stores, then, with their Spanish signs and culturally different goods and services, become sites of resistance. I use the word "resistance" guardedly because I am uncertain whether the word's connotations are appropriate--though I should note that in the last few years an Hispanic Chamber of Commerce has been formed and has "resisted" (despite their own internal dissensions) joining the regular chamber of commerce. This suggests an effort to remain independent and not a cave in to the forces of assimilation and invisibility.

In what ways might we understand, then, the appearance of Spanish print on downtown storefronts? For the fourteen-year-old boy the display of print and other artifacts

was a kind of exteriorization of private hopes, dreams, fears, and so on, as well as emblems of a broad international public culture. Storefront print would seem to publicly intensify the presence of Latinidad within a larger community that is less than comfortable with the Latino presence. Print here has such a powerful public dimension that some people perceive it as affecting the crucial economic changes of an entire city. Further, print here seems to announce in a bold way cultural and national identity. Hence, the juxtaposition of Spanish and English print is also the juxtaposition of cultural and socio-economic differences. But such differences juxtaposed suggest again that a broad international public culture is becoming more widespread, that a deepening globalization with its tensions are present.

Let's move on to the last surface wall to be analyzed. This surface is the exterior of two buildings adjacent to a new strip mall meant to appeal to a middle-class clientele. On the surface of these walls is a long conversation in graffiti. I use the word "conversation" because much graffiti is a kind of dispute between warring gangs. The point is that this particular dispute in graffiti reverberates beneath the up-scale pleasantries of the mall. Whereas the store owners and the city itself would like for this mall, which sits along the city's northern gateway, to be inviting and fashionable, the graffiti clearly announces that subterranean social forces are close by. Again, we have a version of print--perhaps a "system of signs" would be a better phrase--that makes public a set of social realities that persistently undermine the city's attempt to create another social reality.

Rather than offering a detailed reading of these walls, I will make general statements about the function and meanings of graffiti as I have come to know them through the help of gang members and other in Splitsville. Graffiti in Splitsville is part of a highly complex set of signs that threaten the status quo. The signs consist of hand signals, colors displayed on clothing and other artifacts, caps whose bills are placed at certain angles, special styles for decorating both body and possessions, ways of speaking including special lexicons, and brand names borrowed from public culture, which, when placed in the context of gang life, acquire new meanings (Example: a jacket from the Los Angeles Kings hockey team quickly signals a Latin Kings' gang affiliation).

Graffiti, then, is one strand in a web of strands. The web or over all system, however, has a number of core signs that make the system efficient and coherent. For instance, the symbol for the Latin Kings is a five-pointed crown and its colors are black and gold. Therefore, to draw a five-pointed crown on the wall of a building or to draw the symbol "5" or to paint one's graffiti in gold is to refer in some fashion to the Latin Kings. Similarly, terms and connotations of terms from mainstream culture are constantly appropriated into the sign system. For instance, a lion, because it symbolizes the "king of the jungle" becomes appropriated to signal Latin Kings. Therefore, any picture of a lion (for instance, on a ring or

t-shirt) signals allegiance to the Latin Kings. Through the use of core symbols, communicative coherence and efficiency are maintained. As a result, messages are made and read as a kind of short hand, which is a particular necessity since graffiti is illegal and the graffiti writer must be constantly on the look out for patrol cars or rival gang members.

Earlier I described graffiti as a conversation, particularly a dispute, among rival gangs. The symbols associated with one gang are sometimes "cracked" with the symbols of another gang, or obliterated, or painted here or elsewhere with the new gang's symbols. These procedures can result in a remarkable density of messages that lead to responses that become another set of messages and so on. The point is that the dispute is made public, but constitute a strange kind of publicness since the messages to the majority of people are remarkably esoteric and abbreviated. Only the initiated can read the dispute. The esoteric is an important ingredient of gang ritual not just because gang activities need to be kept secret from the police, but because these activities lead to solidarity based on secrets that are shared.

If graffiti in Splitsville is essentially a dispute, what is being disputed? The dispute concerns the control of territory. During the summer of 1990 graffiti was also used for announcing revenge or one's gang affiliation. In fact, most gang members would probably attribute the existence of graffiti to these two motives. Here I explore the territorial motive in order to stress the socioeconomic dimension that underlies the very existence of the community. (In future papers I hope to show how all the motives might be seen as aspects of each other.) Territorial control becomes particularly important for the selling of drugs which in the case of the Latin Kings is so profitable that they do not consider themselves a gang but an organization because of their ability to purchase entire buildings. Which gang controls or owns what territory, then, is central to the dispute. To "crack" another gang's symbols or to draw, for instance, a five-pointed crown upside down, is to insult the gang or to declare territorial war. Mainstream society, of course, declares ownership through the exchange of cash. Graffiti symbols, in contrast, attempt metaphorical ownership. The graffiti system functions as if it were cash.

Now I wish to pull together my readings of these three walls or surfaces. We have been examining surfaces upon which to display oneself, to announce one's foreign goods and services to one's own community in order to participate in the economic orbit of another culture, or to announce one's metaphorical ownership of a building or intention to get revenge. The first example is personal, the second public, and the third public but esoteric. However, the three examples exist in the same power relationship to a dominant community. In the case of the male child, the symbols, languages, and artifacts of the dominant community flow towards the less dominant community. For instance, pictures of Marines, American baseball heroes, and Ferraris take up significant portions of the male child's walls. The real people and

cars that these pictures refer to may indeed be outstanding when compared to average people and cars, but in the context of these walls these images are also imbued with the glitter of dominance. These images are economically distanced from the reality of the child. Experienced through TV or perhaps the print media, all are one-way conduits; these images, but not their realities, empty themselves out into the less dominant community. Of course, not everything on the wall is economically distanced, nor is the child a passive receptacle for the images that originate elsewhere. To a certain extent the child picks and chooses what he wishes to display from the range of symbols and artifacts he determines what makes him "feel strong." However, my emphasis is upon the flow of cultural material and upon the ability of power to magnetize certain symbols, languages, and artifacts to itself so that they become impregnated by the identified with that power. To possess even the images of that power is to place oneself at least in its aura and to obscure, imaginatively at least, one's powerlessness. I take it, then, that this aura of power makes him "feel strong."

With storefronts and their public announcements of foreignness, we have the beginnings of a different kind of relationship. On the one hand, legal contracts establish the stores; city ordinances and laws must be observed, and the insurance and income tax forms that must be filled out. All are written in English. These documents, written by and enforced by the dominant community, suggest that these stores are embedded in a power relationship in which the dominant community gives existence to the foreign. The very vulnerability of the stores to sign ordinances suggests the tentativeness of these stores in relationship to the dominant community. Once again, then, power from elsewhere shapes these stores. On the other hand, Spanish print as a statement of otherness alters the flow of power. Print announces an enclave in which a few immigrants earn a livelihood by dispensing their own cultural material. The flow of power, then, must accommodate to and eventually be altered, even if only minimally. For instance, banking and city officials begin to consider the need for hiring Latino loan officers, tellers, and assistants to the mayor who can fittingly deal with the changing economics of the city--whether or not they want these stores in their downtown and the "image" they project. The flow of power, then, no longer flows in one direction but encounters deflection, even a counter-power, a condition best summarized when the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce refused to join the city's Chamber of Commerce.

In the examples of graffiti and gang life, a still different power relationship appears. Subterranean forces begin to undermine authoritative forces so that control, whether emanating from the dominant community or the less dominant, becomes difficult. If the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce offered the beginnings of a counter-power, the gangs harden the resistance. Increased shootings and arrests, increased patrols, the placement of a mobile police station in one of the neighborhoods of high Latino density, and the flurry of

newspaper articles and letters to the editor describing the fears of the city during the summer of 1990 suggests that the traditional flow of power had been severely interrupted. As one letter to the editor stated, "...There are streets in this town that the average person doesn't dare drive down, much less walk through, that used to be nice quiet neighborhoods. . .let our police officers get our streets back from the gangs without the threat of being suspended for touching somebody. Let us have a chief who backs his men and knows something about what it is like on the streets of "Splitsville" (Splitsville News, 1990).

For this letter writer, the sense of a deteriorating city and the need to regain power over erupting and unpredictable social forces is quite prominent. But resistance had already jelled not only in its most hardened forms, as with gangs, but more generally in the neighborhood youth culture. For instance, the styles of dress, car decorations, music, and language manifested degrees of resistance, which might be summarized in the tensions between two words used frequently in the "hood." "Preppies" (also used in other communities across the United States) referred to teenagers from the dominant community who were "do-gooders," whereas "cheros" (short for ranchero) referred to adults and teenagers who were distinctly Mexican. Both terms were negative, and thus helped the youth of the "hood" to forge their own culture that resisted both the dominant and less dominant (Latino) communities. Resistance, however, was particularly symbolized by the hierarchical structure of the larger gangs and the "Book" that listed their rules, rituals, prayers, and so on.

The hierarchical structure, consisting in some cases of presidents, vice presidents, treasurers, enforcers, "Councils of Five," and peewees, and the "Book" controlling the actions of members, including collection of dues and the pyramidal flow of drug profits, suggests a corporate model. In short, gang members and more generally the youth of the "hood" represent the appropriation of symbols, languages, artifacts, and social structures from a variety of communities. Appropriation here, however, unlike for the fourteen-year-old boy, furthers resistance so that the five-pointed crown represents the power of a gang in conflict with other gangs and the stability of the neighborhood. In the context of graffiti, it interrupts the flow of power from the dominant community by declaring metaphorical and defiant ownership of its buildings and by creating messages that resist the uninitiated interpreter.

Now I wish to modify certain impression that my prior analysis more than likely created. Using such words as "community" obscures my more subtle point that Splitsville does not so much as represent a "split" of communities but rather the interpenetration of peoples who cannot be sorted easily into "communities." There exists the possibility that in the kinds of urban situations where I do research, the notions of community identity and ethnic identity are highly problematic. As Bakhtin (1981) suggests, communities that are in contact interanimate each other. They infect, disrupt, and even discharge their strangeness

inside each other so that one community is never inoculated from the other. Bakhtin's position is echoed by anthropologist Michael Fischer (1986): "...assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on a pluralist, multidimensional, or multi-faceted concept of self: one can be many different things and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism" (p. 196).

Fischer and the school of anthropology with which he is associated have been influenced by writers on postmodernism and poststructuralism. Bakhtin, in contrast, precedes these writers but has been appropriated by them. Their position suggests that one community's beliefs, values, and language system (including its ways of speaking) interject themselves into the lifeways of the other community(ies) so that notion of community identity or ethnic identity or cultural identity are ephemeral at best. The immigrant experience itself offers an excellent study for witnessing this mingling and dissolution of one set of lifeways in contact with another. Claiming that the notion of identity points to something locatable or that can maintain integrity in the midst of such flux in the midst of so many varied ways of individually experiencing, whatever it presumably demarcates, seems an arbitrary assertion.

Nevertheless, community identity is one of the hallmarks of social science research. For Chicano scholars, the notion that "Chicanismo" exists gives purpose and meaning to their research. In this paper, for instance, I have rather glibly referred to a mexicano community or a Latino community. To what extent, however, are these terms idealizations? If we examine the material realities of a so called community or communities, what are some of the things that we find? Among other things we find Puerto Ricans marrying mexicanos; we find church festivals and other public celebrations juxtaposing tejano, Puerto Rican, and mexicano food and music, and Puerto Ricans winning a corrido singing contest; we find male children of mexicanos and Puerto Ricans joining African-American gangs in which they speak "Muslim," avoiding pork, and bowing and praying to the East (Mecca) during their secret rituals; we find five-year-old mexicano children dancing inside an auditorium to rap music in a credible imitation of dancers seen on TV's Soul Train and later stepping outside where a local rondalla is singing traditional Mexican romantic ballads on a playground belonging to a church that until a few years ago was primarily German-American; we find that the "street talk" of teenaged Latinos resembles the contours, accents, and syntax of Black English.

The list could be much longer but it seems to me that these conditions, along with the artifacts, suggest a highly porous community absorbing a variety of cultural elements. In all this is a singular community, a singular culture, a singular language that can be understood through traditional social science research that marshalls empirical data in order to prove such existences? In one sense a community that is whole, singular, and identifiable exists mostly

as an artifact for city officials, allowing them to locate city problems in a particular part of the city and with a group of people who live there. For instance, city leaders know the image that certain stores portray; they know what gang graffiti and other gang activities mean as well as where such activities are most likely to occur. From this perspective, then, the term "Latino community" is explanatory because it allows others, including members of the community itself, to explain social problems as well as degrees of pride and humiliation. From another perspective, however, the notion of a singular community seems to be a considerable invention because as a term it denies distinctly porous conditions that resist being defined. Traditional sociology, anthropology, and sociolinguistics have yet to create a language subtle enough to discuss the kind of urban situation that exists in Splitsville and other locales and how such situations are experienced internally and externally in the lives of individuals. Our current set of terms--culturally identity, community identity, ethnic identity, self-identity, cultural diversity, speech community, linguistic diversity--help to both clarify and distort the American urban scene. Breaking free of these terms and moving towards a more subtle language will not remove the distortions, for all language and research techniques are innately distorting. Nor am I recommending to researchers that they begin to scrutinize more carefully their configurations of others--through this, indeed, is good advice.

My proposal is more modest and personal. Increasingly it seems that professional researchers who study urban communities and, more particularly, the acquisition and use of literacy in community contexts, are, like all readers, misreading their subject matter. In short, what we claim to know, we don't, and richer readings won't be free of misreading. Perhaps what we need are stories full of the densities, riches, and contraries of life lived, stories that remain tentative and unfixed and resist those larger claims to knowledge that wish to subsume reality into identifiable patterns that fed the policies of decision-makers. For researchers to turn to the genre of story-making and away from that of knowledge-making does not mean, as some imply, that research is a branch of fiction or literature. To claim story-making is to claim that a pure mimetic writing is an illusion. The fact of writing makes mimetic writing an illusion. To write is to act creatively, to place a sense of design or arrangement over our words and what our words refer to. And to read is to perform a similar act. In short, to claim story-making is to claim skepticism about the powers of reason and language to escape the messy finitude of rhetoric where all claims are woven with bias, manipulation, and half truths.

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