"American" Abjection

"Chicanos," Gangs, and Mexican/Migrant Transnationality in Chicago

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ABSTRACT: *Crime and street violence often evoke racialized discourses about urban space. In this ethnographic research in Chicago, however, the disdain that many Mexican migrants articulated about street gangs principally concerned issues* internal *to the Mexican/Chicano community, notably a profound ambivalence about U.S.-born Mexicans and a highly contradictory discourse on the inauthenticity of "Chicanos." Given the intimate relations between Mexican migrants and U.S.-born Mexicans in Chicago, the migrants' disavowal of gangs was preeminently a discourse about their own children and social reproduction. "Gangs" were the premier optic by which Mexican migrants could produce a critical difference between their own "Mexican"-ness, which they wanted to see reproduced in their children, and the debased condition deflected onto an unsettlingly intimate Other, namely Chicanos, whose perceived pathologies they sought to repudiate. These discourses figured Chicanos—in effect, Mexican migrants' own children—as a pivotal link in the fraught nexus between Mexicanness, as a racialized transnationality within the space of the U.S. nation-state, and the degraded status of U.S. "minority" associated with African American blackness.*

> The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.
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> —Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection"

Discourses of crime and street violence in U.S. cities have long been entangled with racialized discourses about urban space. During my ethnographic

research among Mexican labor migrants in Chicago during the mid-1990s, however, the aversion and candid disdain that many migrants articulated toward street gangs principally concerned issues *internal* to the Mexican community. They expressed ambivalence toward the most degraded of their own (segregated, virtually homogeneously Mexican) neighborhoods and revealed an even more profound ambivalence about "Chicanos." Mexican/migrant discourse on the violence and criminality of street gangs, in other words, was frequently coupled with the familiar and predictable but still more contradictory discourse on the putative inauthenticity of Chicanos. Yet this was no expression of elite Mexican cultural chauvinism toward the presumed degeneracy of Mexican migrants and their descendants on the far side of the border. Rather, it was an articulation of the distinctly transnational anxieties of those migrants themselves with regard to their own racialization and the specter of abjection that seemed to threaten their children within the racial order of the United States.

This essay does not presume to provide an ethnography of Chicanos (if that term is taken to mean Mexicans born or raised in the United States), much less a study of street gangs. I have little interest in the social scientific objectification of "gangs" as such, and no pretensions of intervening in the morbid sociology of social control, "deviance," and "delinquency." Rather, this essay is an ethnographic examination of Mexican migrants' discourses about gangs in the historically and regionally specific ways that such concerns were formulated in Chicago during the 1990s. I am concerned with the ultimate construction of the Chicano as a figure of perdition and abjection and in what these perspectives might elucidate about the racial economy of the United States.[1] "Gangs" emerge here not as the criminological object of study of a positivist inquiry, but rather as a contradictory discursive formation that served to mediate the more agonistic and intimate ways that Mexican migrants contemplated the commonly beleaguered "American" prospects for their own children. "Chicanos," as a figure of abjection, tended to provide a negative foil against which to project an

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alternative but no less racialized imagination of distinctly and emphatically "Mexican" transnationality within the United States.

It is critical to clarify from the outset how I deploy various terms in the ensuing analysis, how that terminology relates to the particular usages that prevail in Mexican Chicago, and how those conventions of speech signaled the more substantial social conflicts with which I am principally concerned. Chicago has the second-largest urban concentration of Mexican residents in the United States, with over 1.1 million in the metropolitan area and over 530,000 in the city proper.[2] Although Chicago's Mexican community has already reproduced itself over four or five generations since the World War I era, a dramatic acceleration of Mexican migration to Chicago began only in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it has continued unabated ever since. In contrast to other parts of the United States with prominent Mexican populations, therefore, the absolute majority of Chicago's Mexican population consists of people who have themselves migrated from Mexico (55 percent "foreign-born" as of the 2000 census). As a result, the overwhelming majority are either migrants or the children of migrants. Regardless of their various legal statuses and heterogeneous migration histories, Mexican migrants in Chicago virtually never use the terms "Mexican American" or "Chicana/o" to describe themselves. Instead, they simply call themselves *mexicana* or *mexicano* in Spanish, or "Mexican" in English. Likewise, Mexicans born or primarily raised in the United States pervasively identify themselves in Chicago simply as Mexican. The term *Chicano,* much like the term *Mexican American,* has very little currency in the everyday life of Mexican Chicago (Davalos 1993; Guerra 1998; Valdés 2000).

Indeed, this inherent ambiguity and heterogeneity about *being* Mexican in Chicago, regardless of one's place of birth, citizenship status, or cultural orientation and tastes, is instructive; it reflects an expression in everyday practice of the resignification of "Mexican"-ness as a specifically *racialized* category (De Genova 2005).[3] If the category Chicano is almost universally disavowed in Chicago, it is not the result of a lack of familiarity with that term and its genealogy (although this may be plausible to a fair extent) so much as the consequence of a more elementary repudiation of that identification in favor of a re-racialized and transnationally inflected Mexicanness. Although I usually opt against imposing a category on people who would not be inclined to use it themselves, in this essay I nevertheless use the term *Chicano* fairly liberally, relying upon a distinction between *Mexican* (referring to migrants from Mexico) and *Chicano* (signaling Mexicans born or primarily raised in the United States). I do so not so much in the interests

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of economy, although *Chicano* might provide a convenient shorthand for this sociopolitical distinction that Mexican migrants in Chicago typically expressed descriptively, referring to people "who were born here," "who grew up here," "who are from here," and so forth. Rather, my aim is to problematize the way that the term *did indeed arise* in some particular instances, as a distancing mechanism that served to disavow some "Chicanos" for the sake of recuperating others. During my ethnographic research, street gangs and gang members provided the premier optic through which Mexican migrants could produce a critical difference between "Mexican"-ness (their own, and more important, that which they were concerned to see reproduced in their children) and the debased condition that could be deflected onto an unsettlingly intimate Other—namely, "Chicanos" (presumably, some other Mexicans' children). This abject Chicano tended to be a figure with whom they were painfully familiar, but whose perceived pathologies they were intent to repudiate.

The term "migrant," furthermore, consistently serves here to do a certain epistemological work, namely, to supply a more rigorously transnational category of analysis intended to disrupt the implicit teleology of the more conventional term "immigrant." The latter is posited always from the standpoint of the U.S. nation-state with reference to supposed outsiders coming *in*, presumably to stay. Indeed, because I am committed to a thoroughgoing critique of the ways that conventional discourses of immigration, settlement, and "assimilation" play a critical role for U.S. nationalism, I have generally been cautious if not frankly hostile to inevitable sociological preoccupations with the so-called second generation (De Genova 2005, 56–94). This essay may therefore be understood as a provisional attempt to explore such themes concerning Mexican migrants' children, but in a manner that I hope will scrupulously foreclose hegemonic and commonsensical presuppositions about "Americanization." Indeed, the racialized figures of both "American" and "Chicano" identity loom here as pronounced horizons against which an equally racialized "Mexican" transnationality came to be posited.

The Pachuco's Long Shadow

The elision if not outright equation of Chicanos with gangs, and by implication with criminality, has a genealogy that deserves some critical scrutiny. Following the spectacular public visibility of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial in 1942 and the subsequent Zoot Suit riots in 1943 in Los Angeles, the

despised figures of U.S.-born Mexican (male) youth and street gangs became sutured in the ideological unity of the pachuco (Escobar 1999; Mazón 1984; Pagán 2003). George Sánchez has written of the Sleepy Lagoon case, "No other event best symbolizes the ascendancy of *second-generation* Mexican Americans to public consciousness" (1993, 266, emphasis added; see also Jew 2006). During the Sleepy Lagoon/Zoot Suit crisis, the mass media, like much of the subsequent sociology, routinely depicted "zoot suiter" youths and pachuco "gangs" in utter isolation from their own Mexican/migrant parents, "almost 'orphans' in the history of Mexican immigration" (G. Sánchez 1993, 268).[4]

Since Octavio Paz's notorious rendering of the figure of the pachuco as a "sinister clown" in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1985, 16), his dismal treatise on Mexican "national character" first published in 1950, there has been no dearth of specifically Chicano-identified criticism devoted to recuperating that same figure as a redemptive one, an icon conscripted into the somewhat awkward service of epitomizing a distinctively and definitively Chicano mode of cultural subjectivity and style of resistance.[5] Luis Valdez's theatrical and later cinematic representation of the pachuco in *Zoot Suit* (first staged in 1978, screened in 1981, and published in 1992) stands as perhaps the most widely circulated of such images, becoming virtually hegemonic (Babcock 1995; Barrera 1992; Brown 2002, 36–61; Elam 1997; Fregoso 1993, 21–48; Noriega 1992; Webb 1998). Much earlier, however, the figure of the pachuco had already contaminated the Mexican popular cinema through Germán Valdéz's comedic persona of Tin Tan (Durán 2002; Monsiváis 1977; 1997, 106–18), much to the chagrin of such eminent Mexican cultural gatekeepers as former minister of education José Vasconcelos, who predictably denounced "tintanesque gibberish" as so much corrosive *pochismo* (Durán 2002, 43–44).[6] In contrast—indeed, in response—Chicano studies scholars across a variety of disciplines, theoretical orientations, and political agendas have repeatedly conjured up one or another rendition of the pachuco's anti-assimilationist defiance as a kind of oppositional, protonationalist (notably, masculinist) embodiment of Chicano particularity. Alfredo Mirandé, for instance, is characteristic in his frank celebration of the pachuco as "an especially visible symbol of cultural autonomy and resistance" whose distinctive style and demeanor "is at once an affirmation of one's manhood and one's culture" (1985, 179–80). Indeed, despite the robust Chicana feminist critique of the patriarchal and heteronormative presuppositions that animated Chicano nationalist discourse and practice, it is possible nevertheless for one to encounter the

reconstruction of the pachuco's emblematic resistance in celebrations of the pachuca, both in her affront to the gendered prescriptions and proscriptions of hegemonic familial ideologies and in her disruptive transgressions of public space (see, for example, Brown 2002, 81–123; Fregoso 1999). In short, the unique creativity and sheer insubordination romantically associated with the figure of the pachuca/o have proven enduring and seemingly irresistible for many Chicana/o political and scholarly projects, even as this revalorizing and validating gesture would appear, in effect, to reappropriate but nonetheless reiterate plainly racist hegemonic representations that sustain an enduring affiliation between Chicano street gangs, as distinctive youth cultural formations, and U.S.-born Mexican youth, in general.[7]

There can be little doubt that Paz's disparaging sketch in "The Pachuco and Other Extremes" drew its force from elitist prerogatives for superintending Mexican cultural "authenticity" and a predictable, concomitant disdain for migrants and their progeny in the United States as mere *pochos* (Griswold del Castillo 2002; Madrid-Barela 1976). After all, one of the didactic and demonstrative points for Paz was precisely that "like it or not," pachucos were indeed Mexicans—"one of the extremes at which the Mexican can arrive" (1985, 14) when shorn of "his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs . . . left with only a body and a soul" (15). Furthermore, but seldom noted, Paz's analysis bore a striking resemblance to the assimilationist commonsense of hegemonic U.S. sociology as programmatically formulated by the Chicago School, which explained the purported delinquency of the "second-generation" children of "immigrants" as a pathological but inevitable effect of intergenerational conflict and cultural hybridity, bifocality, and dislocation (for examples, see Bogardus 1926; Thrasher 1927; Wirth 1928, 253–54; 1931; see also Bogardus 1970, 55–58, 68–75). Neither truly "Mexican" nor genuinely accepted as "American," and with an "assimilation" process gone woefully awry, the Chicano, for Paz, devolved to delinquency to satisfy more elementary existential needs for visibility and recognition. Desiring self-humiliation, seeking to attract persecution and scandal, accepting victimization in place of anonymity and mere negation, the Chicano-as-pachuco, according to Paz, "as a delinquent . . . can become one of [society's] wicked heroes" (1985, 16). Thus, when the pachuco is cherished, in effect, as a defining icon of *anti*-assimilationist Chicano cultural specificity—posited in contradistinction to both the white supremacist ideal of "American" national identity and an authentic *mexicanidad* that has proven elusive at best—it is troubling that some Chicano studies scholars may retain an uncritical affinity

for the basic premises of Paz's caricature of the ostensibly maladjusted children of purportedly inassimilable Mexican migrants. Indeed, the putative repudiation of the presumably inexorable "assimilation" process was precisely what constituted "pathology" within the conceptual logic of this problematic, all the while ensuring that stubborn allegiances to "ethnic" insularity would merely defer the assimilation question from the migrant generation to subsequent ones (De Genova 2005, 56–94). Moreover, it was the presumed cultural bifocality and ambivalence of those who were supposedly in-between, neither completely "foreign" nor truly "American," that likewise generated "delinquency."

Both the elite Mexican and Chicano perspectives tend, furthermore, to rely upon the conventional reductive binary disjuncture whereby "real" Mexicanness is treated as an exclusive preserve of Mexico, and all things Mexican on the U.S. side of the border are presumptively and preemptively classified as a "something else" that comes to be called Chicano. The problem that I would underscore, therefore, is the ease with which these two seemingly opposed gestures come to share a common conceptual terrain, ultimately confined within the teleological premises of a problematic of "assimilation" and "pathology," whereby street gangs—and therefore, self-destructive violence and criminality—come to stand in as a reductive metonym for all things Chicano. This pathologizing gesture toward Chicanos is especially vexing once we descend from the heights of literary or philosophical abstraction where the figure of the pachuco remains precisely a figure, a representation. More urgent is the task of contending with the ways that similarly ideological gambits—collapsing the substantive distinctions between Chicanos and figures of criminality, such as gangs, cholos, and so on—come to be reanimated, not in the (ultimately Eurocentric) cultural nationalist discourses of Mexican elites, nor in the respectability discourses of the Mexican American middle class, but rather in the discourses of everyday life among working-class Mexican migrants in the United States.

More vexing still is the manner in which the hegemonic legacy of Mexican criminalization in the United States, and particularly the vociferous mass-mediated moral panic about gangs, crime, and violence that stigmatized black and Latino communities from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, could apparently have been so readily recapitulated within some of those same communities (Acuña 1996, 255–87; Brownstein 1996; Chiricos 1996; Davis 1990, 265–322; Escobar 1999; Jackson 1993; Moore 1991, 1–9; Rosales 1999; Tovares 2002; Welch, Price, and Yankey 2002).

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Monica Brown (2002, xiii) has astutely noted that after the pervasive association of *all* Latinos (and particularly Mexicans) with the conjoined stigmas of "foreign"-ness and migrant "illegality," constituting an invasive menace to U.S. nationhood from beyond the country's borders, "delinquent and dangerous gang youth . . . are considered an enemy alien nation within . . . part of a problem that threatens to eat up our society." Thus, juxtaposed to, but also deeply entangled with, the figure of the "illegal alien," Latino gangs come to be distinguished by a kind of delinquent citizenship (Brown 2002; see also Ramos-Zayas 2004). This semblance of an awkward *internalization* by (often undocumented or previously undocumented) Mexican migrants of the hegemonic discourses of moral panic about gangs, however, turns out to be more enigmatic than it may first appear. What was at stake—in the case examined here, at least—was an effort by these migrants to strategically deploy that dominant (racist) ideological commonsense (about "Mexican" youth gangs) toward the ends of mediating and confirming the very meanings and limits of what could be counted as truly "inside" or "outside" of their own fundamentally *transnational* sense of "Mexican" community, albeit at the expense of those Mexican ("Chicano") youths who were perceived to have become a kind of liability.

Insofar as theirs was a project that aspired to produce and sustain community through what was largely imagined to be essentially the *conservation* of something—"Mexican"-ness—we of course should be reminded of the fundamental *conservatism* implicit in the maintenance of any community (De Genova 1995). Notably, this project largely sought to expel (or *externalize*) the abject specter of Chicano gangs as part of a larger gesture that upheld the externality of all things "American" from the (migrant) Mexicanness that it nonetheless fashioned very much *within* the space of the U.S. nation-state. Like any strategy, this one was fundamentally premised upon uncertainty and irresolution, and there was no guarantee of its outcome. Moreover, this strategy embraced hegemonic ideological conceits while seeking to critically redirect the force of those conceits by refining its targets, in an overall exercise of collective self-exoneration. Thus, this project for the production of a pronouncedly "Mexican" transnationality— ensnared as it was in a beleaguered dialogue with U.S. nationalism and its unrelenting racial project—was inevitably bedeviled by reckless gambles and unanticipated perils.

"Chicanos, Not Real Mexicans"

Mexican migrants' conceptions of their own Mexicanness came to be reworked in Chicago as a distinct transnationality in contrast to the putative U.S. national identity of "American"-ness. Indeed, Mexican migrants in Chicago ubiquitously tended to reserve the term "American" as a name for racial whiteness. Very seldom did they refer to any people of color as "Americans" or conceive of their own or their children's futures in terms of "becoming Americans" (De Genova 2005, 167–209). This involved an implicit recognition of U.S. nationalism and "American" national identity as racial formations inextricable from a sociopolitical order of white supremacy. Such a transnationalized Mexicanness, therefore, seemed likewise to be always already (re-)racialized, inasmuch as it was significantly and substantially posited in relation to whiteness, blackness, and so on.[8] Thus, the ambivalent discourses about gangs can be seen to figure Chicanos—in effect, Mexican migrants' own children—as a pivotal link in the fraught nexus not so much between Mexicanness and "American"-ness as between "Mexican"-ness (as a racialized transnationality within the space of the U.S. nation-state) and the degraded racialized status of U.S. "minority." If this transnational Mexican formation was no less pronouncedly racialized, it was radically distinct nonetheless from the latter, which was seen as something strictly *internal* to the constitution of U.S. ("American") nationhood, approaching or approximating African American blackness as the archetypically debased bottom of that social formation (De Genova 2006a).

During an English as a Second Language (ESL) course that I taught in 1994 for workers at a metal-stamping factory that I will call DuraPress, a Mexican migrant named Ricardo mentioned that he had just seen the film *Blood In, Blood Out*.[9] When asked what the movie was about, another Mexican migrant, Benito, asserted plainly, "It's about Mexican people." Immediately, Ricardo, Adelberto, and David disputed the claim, demanding, "What are you saying, dumb-ass [*güey*]?! It's about gang-bangers [*cholos, gangueros*], not *mexicanos!*"[10] Clearly, street gang members and Mexicans were posited as mutually exclusive sets, and Benito's sloppy elision of that stark separation was anathema to the other members of the group, all of whom were also migrants from Mexico. Much of the ensuing commentary was ironic, humorous, and playful, but it nonetheless reaffirmed these men's collective sense that gangs in Chicago, as elsewhere, were a genuine menace.

Yet in the course of the conversation, there surfaced a series of rather intimate connections between these Mexican migrants and the gang-bangers whom they disavowed. Ricardo announced that there was a new gang where he lived in La Selva ("The Jungle," as it was known in English). This was a ghettoized Mexican/migrant enclave in a predominantly white, working-class suburb near the factory, where many of the DuraPress workers either still lived or had previously resided. This new gang was called Los Vatos Locos, reportedly having adopted its name from the same movie we were discussing. Ricardo affirmed, furthermore, that his own nephew was involved with the gang. Nevertheless, while various members of the group acknowledged familiarity with street gangs and family connections with gang-bangers, David proceeded to clarify: "They're Chicanos, not real Mexicans."

I pursued the issue, turning David's comment into a question: "Are Chicanos not real Mexicans?" Ricardo explained, "They're born here, they're not from Mexico, they just have Mexican parents . . . they're called pochos." "But their parents are from Mexico," I continued, so "that means somebody will call *your* kids pochos." Confronted with this dilemma, Adelberto reworked the formula for inclusion and exclusion, specifying, "If both parents are from Mexico, then they're 100 percent Mexican, not Chicano." Ricardo's wife, however, was not from Mexico—she was a Chicana; this meant that Adelberto's solution would not serve to recuperate Ricardo's children. Ricardo went on to explain, "Some [Chicanos] will tell you, 'I'm not Mexican, I'm American,' but others will say they're more Mexican than the Mexicans (the ones from Mexico) . . . they wave the Mexican flag, wear it on their shirts and pants . . . but it's different for us, because it's against the law in Mexico to wear the flag on your clothes or wave it around (except on September 16)." Thus, even when Chicanos tried to perform their Mexicanness, Ricardo implied, they merely exposed all the more just how un-Mexican they really were. Concerning the ostentatious display of large Mexican flags that was popular during the Mexican Independence celebrations in September, David added, "Also, when Puerto Ricans see you wave the flag like that, you get into fights." Benito and David had both lived in Los Angeles, where there are much larger Central American communities than in Chicago and where they would have been more accustomed to hearing the term "Chicano" than in Chicago. They asserted, "Chicano means they're born here, but the parents can be from anywhere, they might be Mexicans, but they can be from Guatemala and El Salvador, too."[11] Now, confronted with yet another reformulation, I asked,

"So what about those who are born here but have Puerto Rican parents?" David replied adamantly, "No, they're Americans" (see also De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003, 101–3).[12]

In this discussion, a Mexican/migrant discourse on the criminality of gang members was more or less seamlessly coupled with the still more contradictory one on the presumed inauthenticity of Chicanos. But the relations between Mexican migrants and Chicanos are ultimately, of course, intimate ones. Thus, in spite of what may sometimes be palpable sociocultural incongruities, any attempt to produce a stable or coherent opposition between the two inevitably founders. Furthermore, while these men grappled with various formulations of how to sustain the divide between Mexicans and Chicanos, there was a measure of fluidity that could even accommodate an analogy between themselves and some other Latino groups (with the remarkable exception of Puerto Ricans, at least in this instance). Moreover, a social practice of identification as Mexican, waving the Mexican national flag—here attributed primarily to Chicanos, and thus implicitly a practice of *non*-Mexicanness—was in part disavowed precisely because it threatened to incur the violence of Puerto Ricans, whom Mexican migrants often perceived as threatening and antagonistic (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003). These thoroughly equivocal Mexican/migrant discourses can be seen to figure "Chicanos"—which is really to say, the migrants' children—as an intermediary and unsettling connection between Mexican transnationality and the distinctly "American" abjection of Puerto Ricans.

Shared Spaces, Contested Spaces

If the Mexican/migrant discourse on gangs was pervasive in Chicago, it was indisputably connected to the fact that street gangs did indeed figure prominently in the everyday life of many Mexican communities. These discourses were often narratives of familiarity that came from living with the reality of gangs as contenders for many of the same urban spaces that migrants and their children commonly inhabited or traversed. The struggle over space that the gangs enacted was an everyday affair, manifested ubiquitously in graffiti as well as in streetside gatherings, primarily of young men who demonstratively signified their gang allegiances with verbal pronouncements, hand signs, and distinctive clothing, the latter employing particular colors, letters, numbers, and pictographic symbols to convey coded but more or less legible meanings. All of these practices served to

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demarcate specific gang-identified territories through what Ralph Cintrón has called the syntactic and lexical creation of "a thick semiotic full of redundant messages" (1997, 164). Of course, accompanying this intricate semiotic war of position was a more forceful enactment of the same sense of territorial prerogative, sporadically and sometimes systematically expressed in assaults on the persons, property, and spaces that could be identified with rival gangs. Therefore, although most of the energies and ambitions of Chicago's street gangs were narrowly directed at one another, anyone sharing space with the gangs ran the risk of being caught in the crossfire. Moreover, the gangs were *at least* as actively intent to mobilize forces and resources—in short, to organize their communities—as any church or political organization or even the police, if not more so. In this sense, the gangs were viable and tenacious contenders in a struggle for social reproduction in which Mexican migrants' Chicano children (especially but not exclusively their sons) were positioned at the center.

The profoundly territorial orientations of street gangs and their own spatial practices, combined with the ideological valence of "gangs" within the Mexican/migrant moral economy, likewise fostered a decisive link between the discourse about gangs and migrants' social construction of various urban spaces. The conjunctures of race and space in Chicago are notoriously stark and are further exaggerated by the distorted perceptions that come with severe racial segregation. (Chicago is, by any measure, one of the most segregated cities in the United States).[13] Inevitably, then, discourses about crime and street violence tended to overlap with racialized discourses about urban space. This was evident in Mexican/migrant discourses about African American neighborhoods, which were ubiquitously framed as dangerous and inhospitable spaces. Similar allegations of crime and violence, however, also pervaded the distinctions Mexican migrants deployed to maintain status hierarchies among their own neighborhoods, especially with regard to the most impoverished, dilapidated, and densely populated Mexican areas. These included Pilsen (or La Dieciocho, the 18th Street barrio), where I was living, and Little Village (La Villita, or La Veintiséis, the 26th Street barrio), which shared the reputation of "bad" neighborhoods, typically described as *duro* (hard) and *feo* (ugly).

The absolute aversion that many Mexican migrants articulated toward the crime and violence they attributed to black neighborhoods was clearly an effect of the decisively racialized divisions that separated them from African Americans. The often candid disdain that they expressed toward the most degraded of their own neighborhoods, on the other hand, revealed

a rather more profound ambivalence toward their own "Chicano" youth, as they tended to subsume all U.S.-born Mexicans into a discourse that revolved around street gangs, crime, and violence. With the discourse on gangs as the preeminent lens through which to rank the status of the neighborhoods where Mexicans lived, migrants repeatedly, and quite formulaically, evaluated neighborhoods negatively or positively in terms of the relative presence or absence of visible gang activity and posited an equation of gangs with "problems." It was clearly a point of honor to inhabit a quiet and clean neighborhood that was not scarred by the unsettling restlessness of gang activity, and likewise, a point of despair to have to admit to making one's home in a place marred by the stigma of gangs and all the trouble that came in their wake.

If street gangs were formidable contenders in struggles to control or at least define urban space, gangs were also engaged in a struggle for their own social reproduction in ways that directly challenged Mexican/migrant parents' authority and control over Chicano youth and their futures. Chicano children were positioned at the center of the gangs' struggles in the literal sense, as the targets of drive-by shootings; these same children were likewise the premier targets for the gangs' recruitment efforts as they sought to reproduce themselves in subsequent generations of membership. My apartment in the Pilsen neighborhood was on the corner of a busy street that effectively functioned as a gang boundary line. It was common to witness teenage male gang members pedagogically cultivating gang identifications among small boys, as young as six or seven years of age, tutoring them in how to make gang hand signs accompanied by the boisterous recitation of gang names and slogans and affronts to their rivals. In one instance, a male teen gang member was training a small boy to repeat various phrases such as "fuckin' pussy," "punk-ass bitch," and "punk-ass nigger"—in short, a predictable litany of sexist, homophobic, and racialized epithets that served as a kind of standard repertoire for the rehearsal of a distinctly aggressive manhood.

Concerns over the cultivation of gang identifications among small children arose in an interview in 1996 with Yolanda, a Chicana in her mid-twenties who had formerly been intensely involved in some of the most violent activities of a female gang:

> I have a son; I don't got time for that gang stuff no more. . . . I just, I gotta try my hardest to . . . just get past all that, so he don't grow up to be like that. But all my friends that have kids, their kids are from gang-bangers too, and their kids are like four or five, and they'll walk around

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already talkin' 'bout gangs. Four- or five-year-old kids, ya know, throwin' up the Bunny, and "What's up, punk?" And I don't want my kid to hang around them. . . . But see like, my one cousin, he's in jail—his father was in jail with him . . . his father's the one that brought him up to be a gang-banger.[14]

Upholding her parental commitment to shield her young son from the damaging effects of exposure to her own gang-identified social milieu, Yolanda's narrative confirmed the deeply pedagogical dimension of intergenerational relations implicated in the social reproduction of street gangs. She went on to suggest a kind of parallel familialism within gangs that mirrors and mimics normative family and kinship structures. A gendered separation between the principal (male) gangs and their female affiliates, on the one hand, is accompanied by a self-enclosed communalism in the heterosexual gender relations between male and female members, on the other. As Yolanda explained, there was a commonplace recourse to the rhetoric of family in the gang's self-conception:

Their families didn't care about them, so we just all became like one big family. 'Cause I really considered them more family for me than, like, my dad. . . . My dad always made me feel, like, real low about myself; my sisters were never really there for us. So it was like, ya know, we just all became like one big family; 'cause they'll be like, "This is my family, ya know—*mi familia!* That's our family, this is our 'hood, and we're not gonna let nothin' happen to you. . . . If anybody hurts you, we're gonna get back at them." And . . . families don't think like that, ya know?

The gang's explicit appropriation of the ideology of the family, and Yolanda's critique of the actualities of families like her own and those of many other young Chicanos, directly addressed the competition between gangs and more conventional structures committed to the (patriarchal, heteronormative) social reproduction of Mexican/Chicano communities—what was finally tantamount to a competition over Chicano youth.

A Crisis of Reproduction

The Mexican/migrant discourse on gangs, as already suggested, sometimes drew from intimate knowledge occasioned by the gang affiliations of migrants' own Chicano children and other kin. This was precisely the source of its ambivalence. A week or two prior to the *Blood In, Blood Out* dispute among the male workers at DuraPress, a discussion of the neighborhoods where the workers lived led to the familiar mapping of those spaces

according to the discourse on gangs. Following the example of several of his co-workers in the class, Homero (an Ecuadorian married to a Mexican woman) described the majority-Mexican working-class suburb where he lived, noting that "It's Latin Kings in Stone Park." But he added, "The police stay on the corner all day, though; they stop the kids—it's good. There are little kids—nine, ten years old—painting the walls [with gang graffiti]." Homero continued, "Sometimes my kids make gang signs—they learn it in school. I tell them to stop, but they just say 'We're Kings, they're Disciples.'" The logical chain of Homero's associations suggested a sense of immanent danger: the prospect that migrants could unsuspectingly lose proper parental authority over their own children. Notably, the source of corruption was located in the children's school, which may be understood in this context as a specifically U.S. social institution, outside the effective control of Mexican/migrant communities. This apparently left little recourse other than the endorsement of another specifically U.S. social institution—the police—as a solution.

The debate that ensued concerned the requirements for migrants to properly raise their children, as their own parents had done in Mexico. Ricardo appeared to indirectly criticize and judge Homero's seeming lack of vigilance with his children. "It's the fathers," Ricardo said in English, "They don't stop the kids—that's the problem."[15] He added, "The kids in the gangs, their fathers are all from Durango." Ricardo spoke with regret, as he was himself from the Mexican state of Durango, as were a majority of the workers at the DuraPress factory. "But the kids in the gangs," he continued, "90 percent were born here, or at least grew up here." Others in the group were quick to concur, but they insisted that this equation of gangs with Chicanos was even more absolute. "Ninety-*five* percent!" replied David, and Homero affirmed an even higher proportion: "Ninety-*eight* percent." This consensus, however, was abruptly disrupted by Federico: "No!" he scoffed, "Only about 40 percent are from here. At least, that's how it is in La Selva." Federico reminded his co-workers that there were many young Latino migrants who came to the United States, prepared to begin a life as young adult workers, who found themselves socially intermixed with youth of the same age who had been in the United States much longer and who often infused unanticipated complexities into the experiences of the newcomers. Homero then paused and admitted that Federico had a point: "It depends if you find a job when you come here; they [gang members] try to get you to hang out and get involved with them." Still upholding an implicit distinction between Chicano gang members and those who had

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migrated from Mexico but, due to their misfortunes, had been effectively seduced into the gangs' way of life, Federico suggested that even if many gang members were actually from Mexico, the equation of gang criminality with Chicanos remained fundamentally sound. Indeed, all of these men had begun working almost as soon as they arrived in the United States and had virtually never stopped. They had begun their lives as migrant workers when they were still in their teens and had immediately been subjected to the disciplining rigors of long workdays, typically with six- and even seven-day workweeks, for low pay. Many had coupled these laborious routines with the additional demands of starting families at fairly young ages.[16] Federico had simply reminded them that there was another conceivable trajectory for teenage migrants that was recognizable to all of them, one in which an absolute equation of gang membership with Chicanos was not as unproblematic as their disavowals might suggest.

The Mexican/migrant analysis, which posited Chicano youth involvement in street gangs as a symptom of a more profound breakdown of parenting and intergenerational communication, also was articulated by some of the Chicano children of Mexican migrants. Ricky Chávez was a Chicano in his mid-twenties who was living at home and, along with brothers and sisters, helping his parents with the mortgage and renovation expenses of a single-family house they had recently bought in Brighton Park. This neighborhood was directly south of Little Village and southwest of Pilsen, but was separated from both by an approximately mile-wide industrial corridor surrounding the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. The Chávez family had lived for most of Ricky's life in rented apartments in Pilsen. In an interview with Ricky, I asked of his new neighborhood, "Were there any surprises?" Ricky replied:

> Yeah! Last weekend, all these kids came out and they started representing gangs' slogans and shouting . . . they broke a windshield of a car that stopped over here on the corner. . . . Yeah, they just threw a brick in his window. Scared the hell out of him! . . . And these are Mexican kids, too. . . . I didn't think that problem had gotten over here [to Brighton Park], but I guess when you got a lot of families, you know, and they have young kids . . . parents work and stuff—they don't get to raise the children like they should . . . and then the kids go astray, they start hanging out in the street and stuff.

Ricky's Chicano perspective resonated with the distinctively Mexican/migrant discourse that grappled with a crisis of communal reproduction, but as the child of Mexican migrant factory workers, Ricky also highlighted

the working-class specificity of this dilemma and opened up the possibility of a broader social critique. This incipient critique concerned the ways that labor discipline and subordination imposed palpable material and practical constraints upon how well Mexican/migrant workers could be attentive parents. But it was not always transparent to many of the working poor, who lived with daily overtime hours and six-day (sometimes seven-day) work-weeks as regular routines. Instead, the seemingly intractable "problems" of Mexican communities, for which gangs were the preeminent ideological figure, were sometimes perceived to be merely an endemic and corrosive fact of the Mexican/migrant condition.

To Be or Not to Be a "Mexican" Problem

The Mexican/migrant discourse on gangs thus became inextricable, at times, from a Mexican discourse on Mexicans. This problematic frequently emerged when Mexican residents of the majority-Mexican working-class suburb of Cicero, immediately adjacent to the Little Village neighborhood, evaluated the place where they lived. The Mexican population of Cicero nearly tripled during the 1990s.[17] Juan Carlos, a worker at a box factory called Liberty Carton (located near Pilsen), articulated a typical perspective. "I like Cicero," he explained, "because I don't see a lot of people on the streets. In Chicago, I think every corner has people from gangs. Now, there are more families moving in, but I think the police are stronger there. I own my own house, and don't have to pay rent. You don't hear people playing music too loud either." Cicero evidently represented for many Mexican migrants the much-prized value of homeownership in a quiet neighborhood. It is remarkable, however, that the influx of "families" was perceived as a potential source of woeful disruption rather than of stability, leading to a perceived need for vigorous policing. Mexican families here signified (Chicano) youth and thus signaled the inexorable advent of "problems."[18]

Amidst a fairly generalized concern that the quality of life in Cicero was deteriorating, there was, indeed, a tendency among many Mexican residents of Cicero to attribute this apparent decline to "too many" Mexicans. Another Liberty Carton worker, Farabundo, explained in a separate instance that he had initially liked living in Cicero, approximately ten years earlier: "It was real quiet—but now there are too many Latino people moving in, so it's not so quiet. There are more people, more gangs—my car was stolen from right in front of my house just three days

ago! You know, but maybe it's the kids from the city who come to Cicero and make trouble." Analogous to Ricky's caveat that the gang problem in his new neighborhood might have been imported from neighborhoods like the one his family had fled, Farabundo seemed to reserve the possibility that the incidence of gangs and related crime in his suburban space was really the consequence of an external (specifically, urban) contagion. As with Juan Carlos's formulation of an influx of "more families," however, when Farabundo explicitly identified "more Latino[s]" (which, in fact, disproportionately meant more Mexicans), there was a sense of imminent and mounting peril for the residential area that he had previously cherished as quiet. These Mexican/migrant concerns clearly implied that the problem of gangs was effectively a "Mexican" problem, because where there were Mexicans, there also followed Mexican (that is, Chicano) youth.

However, against this sense that street gangs were an internal and endemic problem of their own self-contained Mexican communities, other migrants formulated precisely the contrary perspective. During an ESL course at the Imperial Enterprises factory, when the topic of street violence arose, Fernando asked, "What about the police and the government—why can't they stop the gangs?" In the ensuing dialogue, I hypothesized that the police might in fact sustain various kinds of compacts and accords with the street gangs, and that the police and the gangs often seemed to work in concert. Alfredo was quick to affirm this possibility: "That's right. I see four guys on the same corner all day, every day. I know what they're doing, I know they're selling drugs, so why don't the police do anything?" Fernando concurred, adding, "The United States has a very serious problem with this, worse than in Mexico. In Mexico, there are just small gangs—they might fight a little, maybe they hit somebody in the head with a bottle, and that's it . . . but here, they kill people for nothing." Although I was instrumental in this exchange by positing potential collusion between the police and street gangs, Fernando had already asserted the sheer inconceivability that the U.S. state could be helpless to handle the kinds of street violence that prevailed in Chicago's poor neighborhoods. Alfredo shared this spirit of incredulousness. Furthermore, Fernando contended that the problem of gangs was precisely *not* a Mexican one, but rather one endemic to life in the United States. The fleeting possibility of recognizing that street crime and violence are in fact universal political-economic facts of *capitalism*, and thus distinguish virtually all impoverished urban areas throughout the globe, was summarily foreclosed, however, in favor of a more pressing concern with the apparently unique dilemmas of Mexican/migrant life in

the United States. Indeed, some migrants, worried that gang intimidation and violence represented a threat to their children's prospects, concluded that the only way to evade this seemingly distinctive U.S. problem was to "return" their children to Mexico.[19]

Albeit with significant ambivalence and certainly no consensus, many Mexican/migrant discourses did express the sense that there was a gradual and seemingly ineluctable process by which their own children, growing up in the United States, could eventually become transformed into something no longer easily apprehensible as "Mexican." If not quite "American," this alterity belonged in any case to "this side" of the U.S.-Mexico border (*de acá, de este lado*), and for present purposes may be called, concisely, Chicano. One conceivable and presumed remedy to this process of estrangement and perceived loss was to return as a family (or send children alone) to Mexico—if not permanently, then at least sufficiently often that the youths' alienating transformation into "Chicanos" might be circumvented and perhaps subverted by means of distinctly transnational strategies. Juxtaposed to such efforts to enact/reproduce a durable and expressly Mexican trans-nationality, however, the sign of all that could be identified as resolutely Chicano was increasingly not differentiable from a kind of abjection, the price of which seemed to be a corrosive, self-destructive violence, not implausibly culminating in death.

A "Chicano" Problem: The Nexus from Mexicanness to Blackness

The violence associated with gangs was not the only cause for alarm within the Mexican/migrant moral economy, however. The social stigma of criminality was also entangled with an agonistic politics of "deservingness" regarding the benefits and entitlements of a proper alignment with the U.S. state, benefits from which many Mexican migrants were automatically dis-qualified by their undocumented legal status. In 1995, during an ESL course I was teaching at a Pilsen community organization, a group of migrants, concerned with the rising tide of anti-immigrant politics associated with the passage of California's Proposition 187, revisited the equation of gangs and other figures of abjection with Chicanos. Claudio was twenty years old and had been in Chicago for four years after migrating from the small city of Irapuato in the state of Guanajuato. He worked shifts ranging from ten to eleven and a half hours, cutting glass in a mirror factory. Regarding the new anti-immigrant legislation, Claudio posited: "I think the whites [*los*

güeros] are reacting to the problems caused by the ones who are born here and grow up here, because it's mainly not us the immigrants who go on welfare and into gangs. It's the children of the immigrants, the ones who are from here—and then the problems *they* cause are blamed on immigrants." Barely beyond his own teen years, of course, Claudio could hardly empathize with the plight of older Mexican migrants whose teenage and preteen children might be embroiled in the youth culture of gangs. From this unsentimental vantage point of ideological purity, Claudio proposed that the persecution of migrants like himself was really a misplaced backlash that might more appropriately be directed against Chicanos. There was, then, a chain of associations that connected the substantive entitlements of U.S. citizenship, such as eligibility for "welfare," to the criminality of those U.S. citizens who, by implication, were least deserving of such privileges, in clear contrast to the "hardworking" and, by implication, more deserving migrants who were denied such benefits because they were undocumented. Gangs, for Claudio, were irreducibly a problem of "Chicanos," but beneath the surface of this dichotomy was the divisive politics of citizenship that commonly became racialized when it served to differentiate Mexican migrants from other minority groups in the United States (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003, 178–79).

Ultimately, then, Mexican migrants' disavowals of Chicano youth gangs allowed the disavowal of Chicanos as such, figuring Chicanos in general as a deracinated group that approached or approximated the debased condition that Mexicans frequently attributed to Puerto Ricans but more fundamentally associated with African Americans (De Genova 2005, 167–209; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003). On one occasion, in front of the building where I rented an apartment in 1994, I encountered my landlord, Francizek Czuba, an elderly Polish migrant who had settled in Pilsen when it was a predominantly Polish community and had remained there for forty years. Czuba had recently become obsessed with the lifestyle of some young Chicanos who had moved into an apartment in the adjacent building. The new neighbors were visibly involved with the local gang; they frequently held gang meetings as well as loud parties that brought a heavy traffic of young people into the apartment. There were also occasionally raucous gatherings on the front porch, where youths would drink beer, sometimes smoke marijuana, and not uncommonly leave a lot of litter in their wake. Czuba related to me his most recent altercation with the "problem" neighbors. One of them had bluntly instructed him, "Go back to where you belong." As Czuba told the story, insulted and infuriated,

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he asserted, "*This* is where I belong, because I'm a U.S. citizen! I been in this country forty years, and I live in this house already for thirty-five years! I never had a problem here until these animals came here!"—and now performing his indignant retort, Czuba responded in outrage, "So you go back where *you* came from!" Probably because of the limits of his comprehension of English, Czuba had elided the possible distinction between "go back where you belong" (which could conceivably have meant simply "go home and mind your own business") and "go back where you came from" (which, as someone who had migrated to the United States, he knew to be a nativist affront). Nevertheless, as a migrant racialized as white and as a naturalized U.S. citizen, Czuba did not hesitate to question the legitimate claim to belonging of these very probably U.S.-born (but nonwhite) Mexican youths.

As Czuba continued his exasperated narrative, a few Mexican migrants who lived in the same adjacent building as the Chicanos were quietly passing the afternoon on the porch, just a short distance away. One of the Mexican neighbors approached and greeted us. Eventually, in response to Czuba's protracted denigration of the Chicano neighbors as being "like animals," the Mexican neighbor replied, "Yeah, they're also Hispanics, but they live just like blacks—like animals." Then, apparently content that he had affirmed the difference between Mexicans and Chicanos and had achieved some mutual understanding with his Polish neighbor, the Mexican parted with good wishes, smiles, and a handshake. Of course, as I was acutely aware, my racist landlord did not make the same distinction between Mexicans and Chicanos that our Mexican/migrant neighbor had sought to establish. Indeed, the latter's will to distance his own kind (Mexicans) from that kind (Chicanos)—"they're also Hispanics, but . . ."—led him to an awkward gesture of fraternity with the white man's racism.

I began teaching an ESL course in 1995 at an industrial container-cleaning and chemical waste disposal plant called Caustic Scrub. The company had just hired two young Latinos—one Chicano, one Puerto Rican, both very probably U.S.-born. Both were fluent in English, as English fluency was now mandated as a requirement of the management's new hiring policy. A Mexican/migrant worker named Manuel remarked, "They're hiring whites [*güeros*], or blacks [*prietos*], or little gang-bangers [*gangueritos*]—and they all quit the job after three days because they don't want to get their hands dirty!" (see also De Genova 2006b; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003, 103–5). Much like the Mexican neighbor mentioned above, Manuel posited a racialized Latino identity (summarily equated with gangs and juxtaposed

explicitly to both whites and blacks) among all who could be spatially identified with the United States—a kind of *latinidad* that was reducible to a pronouncedly "American" abjection, from which the migrants excluded themselves (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003, 178–84). Condensed in the stigmatized category of gang-bangers, to be disavowed as criminal and violent and now also disparaged as lazy, here was a *latinidad* through which the pronouncedly *racialized* transnationality of Mexicanness could be radically disarticulated nonetheless from the distinctly "American" racial abjection attributed to Chicanos and other U.S.-citizen "minorities."

The conceptual continuum that associates suspicions of (Chicano/gang) criminality with (racialized) allegations of laziness, in opposition to the presumptive (Mexican/migrant) virtue of being "hardworking," is instructive. It reveals the constitutive centrality of gender in deliberations over competing ideals of manhood that are profoundly inflected with the specificities of race and class that define the parameters of Mexican/migrant experience. Just as the debased, undisciplined, antisocial violence attributed to gangs could be opposed to a proper sense of honorable masculine violence distinguished by self-control, there is a moral economy of masculinity (and by implication, a wider nexus of properly ordered, patriarchal, heteronormative gender relations) at the center of these conflicts over Mexican/migrant familial and communal reproduction. Mexican/migrant working men and women alike commonly held out their own wage labor as proof of their industrious and productive capacity—as a group—which could be recuperated as a masculinist kind of virility (De Genova 2005, 189–96; 2006b). The manly hard work that Mexican migrants heroized—commonly in racialized opposition to specifically "black" laziness—was, however, always left to confront the recalcitrant injustices of a system whose racism against them, as Mexicans, perniciously secures its profits at the expense of their well-being. Capitalism not only threatened their lives and bodies with the mutilation and death that accompanied the often brutal subordination of their labor in the United States, it also routinely menaced the security of their livelihoods with unrelenting exploitation and persistent poverty. Thus, their particularly laborious condition also jeopardized the stability of Mexican/migrant men's patriarchal authority over their families, and of Mexican migrants' parental authority over their Chicano children more generally.

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"Chicanos . . . Not Americans": Racialized Transnationality

Mexican migrants, then, sometimes felt compelled to deflect the allegations of undeservingness directed against their presumed "illegality" with remarks that recapitulated hegemonic discourses about the purported "welfare dependency" or "laziness" of the U.S.-citizen poor (De Genova 2005, 167–209; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003, 57–82). The invidious divisions that ensued from an agonistic politics of deservingness operated not only between migrants and citizens but also between distinct migrant groups. Figured as the U.S. nation-state's iconic "illegal aliens," undocumented Mexican migrants were disadvantaged in such competitions, as they were widely denounced during the 1990s as opportunistic freeloaders abusing public services. Mexican migrants, undocumented or not, had to contend with the pervasive allegations of non-Mexican migrants, who found themselves at pains to justify their own increasingly beleaguered "alien" status and felt compelled to marshal their own juridical advantages to relegate Mexicans to the more degraded immigration status of "illegality" that, in effect, approached the undeservingness or even criminality otherwise attributed to blackness.[20]

During one particularly fractious ESL class in the spring of 1994 at the Czarnina and Sons factory, a Vietnamese worker who called himself Michael seemed intent to instigate a controversy when he provocatively declared, "Only the Mexican people come illegally." Evangelina, a woman in her mid-thirties, had been in the United States longer than the other Mexican course participants and had three U.S.-born children, and she was the Mexican in the group who rose to the defense of her people. Scandalized, Evangelina cursed Michael in Spanish under her breath and then asserted, "Only Americans and blacks [*los americanos y los negros*] are from here. Even if they [immigrants] have papers, they all come as wetbacks—because they're not from here [*aunque tengan papeles, todos vienen mojados—porque no son de aquí*]. . . . And then, it's true even for their children or grandchildren—they're Chicanos, but not Americans!" Insofar as Evangelina bluntly characterized the "real" U.S. natives as belonging exclusively to one or the other category, either Americans or blacks, it is transparent that "American" served to narrowly connote racial whiteness. Not only did she posit the impossibility of assimilation for migrants, Evangelina contended that this condition would endure through the generations. Without regard to birthright citizenship, then, and regardless of being "from here," the migrants' children and grandchildren will not be

"Americans" either, but merely "Chicanos." Rather than presuming that Chicanos are simply "Americanized" Mexicans, Evangelina seemed to insist that Chicanos, like blacks, could never secure a legitimate "American"-ness despite their birthright U.S. citizenship. The Latino-Asian particularity of this exchange radically complicates the fiction of the U.S. racial order as a binary of white and black, but the content of Evangelina's reply commands an examination of how that fiction remains hegemonic and continues to supply the polarized framework for migrants' re-racializations (De Genova 2006a). Against the deprecations of their migrant "illegality," Mexican migrants such as Evangelina could take recourse to a blunt acknowledgment of the unequal politics of *race*. Whereas Latinos and Asians may have been equally invested in maintaining that they were *not* black, Evangelina sought to remind her Vietnamese co-workers that they were also not, and never could be, "Americans." The best that a Vietnamese migrant could expect in the United States, Evangelina retorted, was to have his children become a bunch of "Chicanos" (see also De Genova 2005, 200–6).

During a discussion of the Thanksgiving holiday among the same ESL group at Czarnina and Sons, Evangelina rejected the explicit "immigrant Americanism" of one of her Polish co-workers. Responding from a distinctly transnational perspective, Evangelina clarified, "Me, I'm 100 percent Mexican. Even my kids, they're not Chicanos, they're not Americans— they're also 100 percent Mexican. My oldest son doesn't even like to speak English!" Despite her many years of travail as a migrant working woman in the United States, Evangelina's transnational commitments remained substantial. Although she migrated when she was fifteen years old from a small rural town in Guanajuato, she once declared, "I'm going to stay here until I retire. Then, I'll retire to Mexico. Right now, I go back every two years." However, although she planned to remain in the United States for many years to come, Evangelina was seriously considering the possibility of sending her children back to Mexico. She was increasingly frustrated with her family's predicament in the deteriorating majority-Mexican working-class suburb of Cicero, and she wanted to move to a less densely populated place "with fewer gangs and drugs." If she and her husband could not find the means to relocate, Evangelina explained, she would send her kids to live with her family in Guanajuato. But her oldest child, a boy of thirteen, was not enthusiastic about being sent to live on a farm in Mexico. Although Evangelina had indicated that her son was more comfortable speaking Spanish than English, she nonetheless remarked, laughing, "He doesn't even like to eat beans!" Evangelina had previously posited that the

children and grandchildren of migrants became not "Americans" but only Chicanos. Yet it became increasingly evident that she, like virtually all the Mexican migrants I knew in Chicago, was profoundly invested in the prospect that her children were not, and should never become, Chicanos. Indeed, inasmuch as Evangelina intuited that "American"-ness was plainly not available to U.S.-born Mexicans, she now seemed to be positing the subordinate racial status of Chicanos to be a kind of degraded derivative of "American"-ness. The other alternative for Mexican migrants and their children, of course, was not any less racialized, but it was definitively trans-national in its orientation: Evangelina aspired for her U.S.-born children to be "100 percent Mexican."

"... and Other Extremes"

Finally, then, it is crucial to note that what I have characterized here as a kind of "American" abjection projected by Mexican migrants onto U.S.-born people of color, including Chicanos, was almost never understood to be a genuine identity with, or belonging within, what was for them the always already racialized category of "American"-ness. Indeed, what made this particular condition of abjection so distinctively "American" was precisely its *disqualification* from the legitimate or bona fide "American"-ness that Mexican migrants ubiquitously equated with racial whiteness. In this respect, the ambivalence that infused these Mexican migrants' perspectives on the troubled fortunes of their own (collective) Chicano progeny revealed the fraught predicaments that arise in the face of what tended to be seen as an impossibility of "assimilation," as their transnational migrant trajectories traversed not only nation-state borders but also the fault lines of white supremacy in the United States.

As Julia Kristeva suggests, the radical exclusion of the abject draws one to the place where meaning itself collapses (1982, 2). She goes on to supply an analogy with the sort of revulsion provoked by nausea. Since the source of discomfort and distress is not a proper "other" and not in fact an (external) object, she clarifies, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (3). Mexican migrants disavowed the figure of the Chicano as the abject of a more genuine or legitimate "American" identity—that is, as part of what U.S. white supremacy disdains and rejects but can never fully expel or expunge, because "American"-ness has only been able to constitute itself through the production of such "internal" or "native" alterities.

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The truly torturous quandary that these migrants incurred was that their own children might likewise become irretrievable in unfathomable ways that would threaten the dissolution of their own "Mexican" identity and thus plunge them into meaninglessness. In short, to repudiate some U.S. Mexican youths as "Chicanos" threatened to contaminate the prospects for recuperating others as the migrants' more genuine ("Mexican") inheritors. Without such inheritors, finally, there could be no heritage. With recourse to the "Chicano" as ab-ject, there could ultimately be no sustainable "Mexican" pro-ject. The intimacy of these abject compulsions ensured, finally, that there could be no simple and stable (external, objectified) "Chicano" Other, but rather only an incessant process of self-mutilation.

Notes

     1. Most of the ethnographic research for this study was conducted over a period of thirty-one months (1993–95), when I was employed as an instructor of English as a Second Language and basic mathematics (in Spanish) in ten industrial workplaces throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. During this period I was living in Pilsen, also known as La Dieciocho, on Chicago's Lower West Side—historically, the city's most prominent site of Mexican community organizing. I resided there again during a second yearlong period of research (1999–2000). During the first research period, I came to know two to three hundred Mexican migrants over more or less extended periods in my capacity as ESL instructor in these workplaces, and I also worked as a teacher in three community organizations in Pilsen and in a vocational training and job placement program in the majority-Mexican suburb of Cicero. My research included extensive participant observation as well as two dozen semistructured, open-ended "life history" interviews conducted in people's homes. For more methodological detail, see De Genova (2005, 13–55).

     2. These are census figures and mostly likely underestimate the real Mexican-origin population. According to estimates by researchers at the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the State University of New York at Albany, intended to correct undercounting by the 2000 U.S. census, metropolitan

Chicago's Mexican/Chicano population represents the second-largest concentration in absolute numbers (after the Los Angeles metropolitan area). According to the census, the city of Chicago's total population was 18.3 percent Mexican.

3. Strictly speaking, these racialization processes among Mexican migrants in the United States fundamentally involve a process of *re*-racialization. There is, after all, an important racialization that Mexicans universally undergo in Mexico prior to migration, grounded in the specificities of a social history of Spanish colonialism and Mexican nation-state formation. This re-racialization, however, is itself transnational in its repercussions and is not confined to the U.S. side of the Mexican/migrant experience.

4. Scholarship on gangs has tended to reify them as objects unto themselves and localize them in "the streets" within narrowly circumscribed urban spaces (their "territory" or "turf"), very much on the model of Whyte's classic monograph *Street Corner Society* (1943). This often tends to reproduce the problem of severing young people involved in gangs from the social relations that situate them within wider webs of kinship and community, race and class. As Miranda argues, "In creating the very object of study—gangs—otherness is constituted. [Gang studies] segregate youth from the rest of society" (2003, 3). Furthermore, in the vast academic literature on gangs, remarkably few have done direct research into the perspectives on gangs of family and community members not involved in gangs; exceptions include Horowitz (1987), Jankowski (1991, 178–211), and Venkatesh (1996, 2000), all of whom emphasize contradictory but practical interrelations that sometimes include considerable degrees of tolerance toward gangs. The most important exception for my purposes is Horowitz (1987), whose research was conducted in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood during the early to mid-1970s. Horowitz emphasized the continued immersion of gang youth in wider social relations of kinship and community and reported a significant if tenuous tolerance toward gangs on the parts of gang members' parents, extended families, and wider community. This tended to break down only when gang members violated their community's putative "cultural" norms concerning respect and etiquette, and especially when gang violence impinged upon the well-being of those not involved in the gangs or otherwise disrupted a fragile semblance of social order. In this respect, the ideological segregation imposed analytically by the hegemonic sociology of gangs may in fact recapitulate the social segregation of gang activity otherwise demanded and more or less upheld by those who seek to control and circumscribe the disorder they associate with gangs in their immediate lives. A thorough examination of the larger discrepancy between Horowitz's findings and my own, based to a significant extent on research conducted in the same community but separated in time by more than twenty years, is beyond the scope of this essay.

5. For critiques of Paz as a treatise on Mexican "national character," see Bartra (1992) and Lomnitz-Adler (1992). For critiques of Paz, focusing especially on his characterization of the pachuco, see Limón (1994, 123–31), Madrid-Barela (1973), and Paredes (1993, chap. 2, chap. 9). For a critique of Paredes's pachuco, see Limón (1994, 91–94); for a critique of Madrid-Barela, see Sánchez-Tranquilino and Tagg (1992). Chabram-Dernersesian (1999) offers a Chicana feminist critique of the "patriarchal connectivity" sought by Chicano nationalists who, in effect, reclaimed Paz as an intellectual forefather.

6. "Pocho," as is well known, is a derogatory term for a Chicano, commonly deployed by Mexicans in both Mexico and the United States. The literal meaning is "pale" or "pale-faced," implying that U.S.-born and -raised "Mexican Americans" have been sapped of their natural strength and vigor, that their Mexican heritage has been diluted, that they have been whitened, or even perhaps that they have tried to whiten themselves in spite of their Mexican inheritance (Maciel 1990; Madrid-Barela 1976; Monsiváis 1977). Figuratively, then, the term connotes cultural inauthenticity, if not outright abjection, and also exposes the contiguity of culturalist and racialist assumptions.

7. There is of course a perfectly valid case to be made for the transgressive and even oppositional potentialities of youth gang subjectivities and countercultures (see, for example, Dawley 1992; Frias 1982; Rodríguez 1993; Shakur 1993). This is true even if one relinquishes the familiar romance of the "lumpenproletariat" and the prospects for a revolutionary transformation of street gangs in the "internal colonies" of the so-called First World into urban guerrillas analogous to armies of national liberation in the Third World, a project so compelling during the civil rights/decolonization era for many radical nationalist theorists, from Black Panthers to Young Lords and Brown Berets (following Fanon 1963; see also De Genova 1995, 120–26). For a history of the Brown Berets, see founder David Sánchez's memoir (1978) and the Brown Beret National Policies (D. Sánchez 1972), as well as Oropeza (2005), Haney López (2003), and Espinoza (2001). It is also noteworthy that the first examples of gangs in communities of color are sometimes reported to have been organizations of collective self-defense against racist terror perpetrated by white gangs (Davis 1990, 293).

8. For reasons of racial politics, I capitalize "Black" and "Blackness" as they refer to the social condition and historical specificity of African Americans, whereas I deliberately do not capitalize "white" or "whiteness." The capitalization of terms for racially subjugated groups marks an important gain in the struggle for self-definition, whereas "It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false, it is that whiteness is *nothing but* oppressive and false . . . Whiteness describes not a culture but precisely . . . the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (Roediger 1994, 13).

9. All names of companies and individuals that appear in this essay are fictive. Some of the people who have been my interlocutors in this research are vulnerable to punitive legal repercussions for their undocumented immigration status. In the interests of protecting their anonymity, I have deliberately obfuscated or altered various descriptive details that I deem to be inconsequential for my analysis but that nonetheless could serve to identify particular persons or companies.

10. "Gang-banger" was the ubiquitous English-language term used to refer to street gang members in Chicago, by Mexicans and non-Mexicans alike. It is deployed here as the most appropriate equivalent to convey the colloquial sense of words like *ganguero*, *cholo*, or *pandillero* in Spanish-language quotes. The term was already well established in Chicago's Mexican community in the early 1970s (Horowitz 1983, 239 n. 5).

11. The 2000 census found that Mexicans (including Chicanos) constituted 70 percent of the Latino population of the city of Chicago, and Puerto Ricans made

up another 15 percent. Although Chicago is one of the most diversified areas of Latino settlement in the United States, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans together still accounted for 85 percent of all Latinos in 2000; trailing far behind, the third-largest Latino group, Guatemalans, represented only 3 percent of the total.

12. Here, this usage of the category American (*americano*) was quite discrepant with the more ubiquitous Mexican/migrant equation of that term with racial whiteness; the latter interpretation would very seldom have included Puerto Ricans.

13. Chicago ranked first for Latino/Asian segregation, tied for first for Black/Asian segregation, and ranked third for Black/Latino segregation, fifth for white/Black segregation, and sixth for white/Latino segregation, according to measures of residential dissimilarity scores in U.S. cities calculated from the 2000 census by researchers at the Lewis Mumford Center at SUNY Albany (http://www.mumford .albany.edu; see also Harrigan and Vogel 2000; Hirsch 1983; Squires et al. 1987).

14. Yolanda had been a member of the Lady Two-Six, the female section of a gang called the Two-Six, whose name refers to 26th Street, the main commercial strip in the Little Village neighborhood. "Throwin' up the Bunny" refers to making the gang's distinctive hand sign, a gesture intended to resemble a Playboy Bunny.

15. Ricardo's remark, because he spoke in English in this instance, left ambiguous whether his use of "fathers" was an overly literal translation from Spanish (*los padres*) and he really meant "parents," or whether he specifically meant that it was the responsibility of *male* parents to be vigilant in disciplining their errant children.

16. Unlike the others in the group, who were in their late twenties or in their thirties and had children, Benito, the youngest at twenty-one, was unmarried with no children. He had been in the United States five years (in California for the first two) and had a girlfriend born in Chicago. Benito had originally depicted the gang film as dealing generally with Mexicans, and on another occasion he indicated that he had friends, both from Mexico and U.S.-born, who were involved in gangs.

17. During the 1990s, Cicero became 77.4 percent Latino and 19.6 percent white. Among Latinos, over 88 percent were Mexican/Chicano (constituting at least 68.4 percent of the total population).

18. This equation of "Latinos" and "families" in Chicago has also been articulated in the mass media as a naturalized fact of demography (see, for example, Mendell and Osnos 2001).

19. This research preceded the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (Public Law 104–208; 110 Stat. 3009), which has subsequently facilitated and dramatically expanded the "criminal deportations" of non-U.S.-citizen Latino gang members, commonly the U.S.-raised (but noncitizen) children of migrants. The post-1996 regime has increasingly resulted in a spectacular transnationalization of originally U.S.-based Latino street gangs, and as the distinction between "migrant" and "gang" collapses, has rendered considerably more problematic migrants' transnational strategies for evading the prospect of their children's eventual entanglement in gang activity. See Zilberg (2004).

20. I deploy quotes wherever the terms legal or illegal modify migration or migrants in order to emphatically denaturalize the reification of this distinction; also see De Genova (2002; 2004; 2005, 213–49).

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