Intimate Gestures: Race, Photography, and Spectatorship in Tijuanas Dumps and Irregular Settlements

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INTIMATE GESTURES: RACE, PHOTOGRAPHY AND SPECTATORSHIP
IN TIJUANA’S DUMPS AND IRREGULAR SETTLEMENTS

By

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B.A., HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE, 2008

THESIS

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Tijuana that laughs because it knows that, in the end, nothing/everything is the truth.

-Rafa Saavedra
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INTIMATE GESTURES: RACE, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND SPECTATORSHIP

IN TIJUANA’S DUMPS AND IRREGULAR SETTLEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Through a sustained engagement with the theoretical work of Roland Barthes and Frantz Fanon, this thesis traces the complicated lines of connection linking photography, racial difference, spectatorship, and self-making in Tijuana’s dumps and irregular settlements. Understanding photography as a space and form of life and social death, this thesis explores the photographic work of two photographers in Tijuana that pictures the lives of those living in poverty: John Leuders-Booth and Ingrid Hernández. Of these photographic projects, the thesis asks: How does the spectatorial relationship that is triggered by a photograph also initiate a relationship of value, where one side of the formula of observation “matters” and the other side necessarily doesn’t?

The thesis, then, ultimately argues that while Lueders-Booth’s photographs serve as the completion or the realization of the white spectator’s power of self-making, Hernández’s work instead unsettles this type of spectatorship by refusing to capitulate to the demands of white self-making through the body of the racialized “other.” Rather than quick identification, which serves to fortify the subjectivity of the spectator, Hernández’s photographic work suspends or delays the act of spectatorship. As well, the thesis
speculates about the city of Tijuana’s significance insofar as it evidences modes of living, values, and forms that remain un-indexed by dominant logics.
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Introduction: Matters of Life, Death, and Looking

In the winter of 1990, Christmas came to Colonia Trincherazo in Tijuana from an unexpected source: 91X, San Diego’s leading alternative music station. The holiday surprise manifested because of an article that Luis Alberto Urrea had published during the Thanksgiving holiday in a weekly alternative called the San Diego Reader. The article, which was based on his experiences as a relief worker with a religious organization in the Tijuana garbage dumps, hoped to reveal for those north of the border the lives of “people most of us never see, never think about, and don’t even know exist”: the Tijuana garbage pickers. The story caught the attention and compassion of Carol Jeffrey, a “beautiful woman with a blonde mane” who worked in the 91X Sales and Marketing Department. In a matter of a few short weeks, the radio station was able to organize an all-day toy and clothing drive that collected vanloads of merchandise to benefit those living and working in the Tijuana garbage dump.

Reflecting back, Urrea would later write: “As the last vanloads pulled out, and the torrent of donations finally began to slow, I went inside and collapsed on the couch in the lobby.” The magnitude of San Diego’s generosity clearly moved Urrea, and he searched for a way to show his gratitude to the organizers of the effort. After all, Luis Alberto Urrea had grown close to the people of Colonia Trincherazo. And, despite the fact that

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2 Ibid., 174.
3 Ibid., 176.
4 Urrea spent a good part of the late 1970s and early 1980s doing missionary work in Tijuana. In 1982, he took a job as an expository writing instructor at Harvard University. By the time Urrea had made his way back to San Diego in 1990, the Tijuana garbage dump he used to know had actually split into two colonias: Colonia Trincherazo and Colonia Panamericano.
he’d been away from the garbage dump for almost a decade, he admitted that he “still carried pictures of them all…”

In particular, Urrea established a personal relationship with a little girl known as Negra. He writes about her:

Whenever we’d pull in, I’d look for her. Sometimes I’d hear my name being called very faintly, and I’d look up, and this kid would be hurtling through the trash, bare feet throwing up clouds of ash. Always the same dull dress, a kind of brown-gray. She’d leap into the air and fly into my arms like a bird. She usually smelled of smoke. She would be with me for the rest of the day, helping me give out food to the women, whispering secrets in my ear…

Negra taught Urrea how to properly use the homemade tools to pick through the garbage. Urrea bought her new shoes so that she could go to school. Hers was a photograph that he, no doubt, treasured. In fact, it was one of the photos that he would often share with his English and writing classes at Harvard. And so Urrea could think of no greater gift to the organizers of the event, including Carol Jeffrey. “I had been trying to think of an appropriate thank you,” he wrote, “and all I could think of was to give them my only picture of Negra.”

I retell this short story of Urrea’s intimate gesture here because it allows us to begin to reflect on yet another story, the one that’s the focus of this thesis: the complicated lines of connection linking photography, racial difference, spectatorship, and self-making. What is it about this picture of a dark-skinned little girl from Tijuana, Urrea, *Across the Wire*, 167.

The nickname *Negra* could be translated as “black girl.” Typically, the nickname is used for those who have very dark skin. Although it could be used derogatively, as a nickname it’s typically said with a certain level of affection. It is a popular nickname in many Latin American countries.


Ibid., 177.

In this thesis, I use the phrase, “self-making,” along with the parallel terms “self-fashioning,” “self-validation,” or “subject-making,” as a way to describe the fortification of one’s subjectivity. In doing so, I
Urrea’s “beloved” Negra, or “black girl,” that makes it an appropriate gift to a group of people that have never met her? Further, what types of unspoken associations, formulas, and equations does it suggest between the brown body it pictures and the white eyes—those of Carol Jeffrey and others at 91X—that gaze upon it? Or put differently, and to borrow from Roland Barthes, what ties does the photograph initiate between the “observed subject” and the “subject observing”? More broadly, how does Urrea’s gesture help us examine what Mimi Nguyen has described as “the power to observe and…observation as a power over others”? 

One way to understand photography, as this thesis does, is as a space and form of life and social death, or as scholar Ruby Tapia following Barthes has put it, “[as] the threat of death and the promise of resurrection.” Although my usage of the phrase social death certainly owes much to Orlando Patterson’s theorization of the concept—in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Patterson theorizes the term to describe the position of alienation and unworthiness of enslaved persons—my deployment of it here is more aligned with the variation of the term by scholars like Ruby C. Tapia and Lisa M. Cacho. Tapia, for example, uses the term more broadly to describe a familiar script centered on the “negation of full humanity [to] nonwhites,” and, similarly, Cacho deploys the term, in part, to, “defin[e] who matter[s],” and why that, “mattering [is]”

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13 Ibid., 21.
meaningful."

Perceived in this way, for whom, then, does the photograph of Negra threaten social death, and for whom does it promise life? Put differently, how does the spectatorial relationship that is triggered by a photograph—that of the observed subject and the subject observing—also initiate a relationship of value, where one side of the formula of observation “matters” and the other side necessarily doesn’t?

This familiar script has, in the past, served to cast the “racial other” as mere prop, or, to use Frantz Fanon’s words, as the one that “comes on to the stage only in order to furnish it.” Sieved through these logics, Urrea’s intimate gesture begins to reveal relations of power and other meanings that perhaps weren’t initially apparent, but that are important to further explore. More than a simple thank you, the photograph of Negra as a gift to Carol Jeffrey and others could be read as occasioning an opportunity for white self-making through and against the photographed racial other. In this scenario, Urrea’s gift puts the “white viewers at the center of [the] world” it pictures, not in spite of the fact that it’s a photograph of a “racial other,” but precisely because of it. In other words, the photograph serves as a vessel for the white viewer’s racialized power of self-fashioning.

Questions of the racialized contours of photography and spectatorship, then, are central to this thesis.

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15 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markman (Boston: Grove Press, 1967), 212.
Photography and the True Lies of Race

Race, as Elizabeth Apel and Leigh Raiford tell us, has often been presented as “a biologically based theory of history, one that informs us that difference…is rooted deep in the body.” This particular concept of race, however, as a biological fact, rests on a questionable history of supposed scientific substantiation. For example, Shawn Michelle Smith recounts for us how Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, believed wholeheartedly that the eugenics movement represented more than a social movement. For him, it represented a “science of race,” and a “science of heredity.”

However, this biological concept of race, as Howard Winant puts it, has “been utterly transformed.” When Winant argues that this concept of race has been utterly transformed, I understand him to mean that the recognition of race as a socially constructed concept—what he together with Michael Omi, in their influential study entitled *Racial Formation in the United States*, called the process of racial formation—is one that has been widely accepted to debunk previous biological conceptualizations of race. In other words, race is a “social fact,” or, as Stuart Hall wrote, “a politically and

18 Emphasis added. For more on Galton’s photographic experiments to capture the “evidence” of “race” on the body, see Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 51-55.
culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantee in nature.”

The products and consequences of race as social fact, however, are very real and very concrete, as is evidenced, for example, in what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls the “social practices of slavery, segregation, and racism.” As well, in the United States, race has often been utilized to structure “an unequal and unjust social, political and economic order.” For example, Coco Fusco prompts us to remember that in the United States, race has historically been deployed to deny certain racialized populations “access to American citizenship and to the full exercise of civil rights…” But how is it that we know and recognize “race”? Or, casting that question in a Fanonian light for just a minute, how is it that the young French boy is able to exclaim with certainty to his mother, “Look, a Negro!”?

Following other scholars, and as the phrase “Look, a Negro!” attests to, I would argue that we know race because we believe that we see race. Or, as Shawn Michelle Smith...
Smith has succinctly put it, “[r]ace [has been] conceived through acts of looking.” The difference that is race is a marked difference, which we can purportedly see on the body because it adheres. It sticks “to skin, to bone, to sinew.” This confidence in sight as knowing, or what Wendy Hesford has called the “seeing-is-believing paradigm,” is precisely why photography in particular has been the perfect bedfellow of racial ideology.

Both technologies of race and photography have ultimately been presented as technologies of truth and, as Tapia puts it, “the objects/products of each technology become more vivid, more true when layered over the objects/products of the other.” Again, the perception of adherence plays a role here. In his seminal work of photography theory entitled Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, for example, French theorist Roland Barthes famously argued that in a photograph, the “referent adheres.” Photography, then, has long been the medium of choice for conveying what Abel and Raiford refer to as the “true lies of race.”

However, like race, photography too is a construction. Photography, “marked as it is by that which actually was in front of the lens at the time of exposure,” and thus

28 Smith, Photography on the Color Line, 11.
29 Tapia, American Pietàs, 38.
31 Tapia, American Pietàs, 33.
32 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 6.
considered a “directly indexical medium,” is actually invested with, and shaped by, intentions and outside forces that often belie its supposed truth claims. “Photographs,” Christopher Wright reminds us, “are social objects as much as they are visual images.” Photographs, as Danika Medak-Saltzman has argued, “cannot tell the whole story, and the stories they tell are not created equal.” In other words, despite the “alibi of objectivity” upon which photography hopes to rest, let us not forget that a photographer selects and frames before his or her finger pushes the trigger of the camera or that a photograph “must be woven into other languages,” like the language of racial difference, to be seen and interpreted.

But photography does more than capture the true lies of race; it also helps to create or produce race. To put a finer point on it, rather than simply picture race, photography facilitates its production as knowledge. Racial knowledge, as scholar Benito Vergara, Jr. argues, has ultimately been attained, “not simply through sight but through photography.” Or, to quote a now often cited phrase in race and visual culture circles, photography “produced race as a visualizable fact.” This thesis, then, is in no small way both an argument and an attempt to account for the ways in which race is fundamental to studies of visual culture generally, and photography in particular. In other words, to say that race and photography, and visual culture more broadly, are mutually constitutive is

37 Vicente Rafael, White Love and Other Events in Filipino History (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 77.
38 Wexler, Tender Violence, 50.
to take seriously the ways in which photography has been, and continues to be, absolutely central to the construction of racial difference.41

The task of this thesis, however, would only be half complete without some scrutiny toward the constitutive flip side of the racial difference coin: whiteness. The production of racial knowledge, after all, is relational. Racial looks, which produce “racial effects,” are relative.42 The young French boy, in part, knows and recognizes Fanon to be “a Negro” because he sees and recognizes himself to be white. So, to argue that race and visual culture are mutually constitutive, and to take seriously issues of racial difference and social death, also means to take seriously questions of whiteness and white self-making.43 When I refer to whiteness, here, however, I invoke it as more than phenomenon of pigmentation or phenotype. Whiteness, in this thesis, takes on more expansive qualities, particularly since I’m interested in its embroilments with photography; or in concert with photography, both the taking and looking at of photographs.

41 Anna-Pegler Gordon points in a similar direction in her study of immigration policies and photographic documentation, In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy. Here, Pegler-Gordon argues that photographic documentation, as part of institutionalized Immigration Bureau policies and practices, was essential in “restrict[ing] undesirable immigration and regulat[ing] immigrants already in the United States.” (8) The category of undesirable, however, was premised on racial difference. As such, writes Pegler-Gordon, “Chinese immigrants were photographed because they were viewed as different, but they were also viewed as different because they were photographed.” (10) The “undesirable” Chinese immigrant, then, was a production of immigration policy, but also, and importantly, of photography; of being pictured and being looked at. Other examples, too, illustrate the entanglements of race and photography, and how this consonance is directed against “racial others” through, for example, imperialist expansion. Case in point, Benito Vergara, Jr.’s brilliant examination of photography’s role during the early American colonial period in the Philippines, Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early 20th Century Philippines. Vergara argues that this period was one in which photography was central in producing, “Filipinos as racially and technologically inferior,” which ultimately served as both justification for their colonization and proof of the superiority of white American citizens. (4)
42 Smith, Photography on the Color Line, 11.
43 Tapia, American Pietàs, 21.
In regards to these entanglements, whiteness expresses itself in the logics and languages that are used to read and make meaning of a photograph; in the photographer’s capacity and power to photograph; in the acknowledgment, and sometimes assumption, of the photographed subject’s consent; in representations of place; in its ability to step in or serve as a screen for tales of danger, adventure, resurrection, or even compassion; and also in what Shawn Michelle Smith refers to as whiteness’ “privileged invisibility.”

This is to say that whiteness often presents itself as a normative standard, or as the standard of “value” whose coherence requires the picture of its negative, its “other.” As scholar Lindon Barrett argues, “for value negativity is a resource…the negative, the expended, the excessive invariably form the ground of possibilities for value.”

Likewise—and as I will show in this thesis—the “racial other” serves as the ground of possibility for whiteness.

**Barthes, Fanon, and Spectatorship**

At a theoretical level, my thesis is framed by the coupling of two influential texts: Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, as well as an adaptation of Ruby Tapia’s *American Pietàs: Visions of Race, Death, and the Maternal.* Barthes and Fanon share a page in Tapia’s *American Pietàs: Visions of Race, Death, and the Maternal.*

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45 Quoted in Cacho, *Social Death*, 30.
46 To find Barthes at the center of a text on photography is, of course, not uncommon, and the significance of *Camera Lucida* specifically for the history and development of photography studies as a discipline, albeit a loosely defined one, has been enormous. To stress the point further, in a recent introduction to an anthology on photography, Edward Welch and J.J. Long designated Barthes’s “reflections on photography” as one of the “sacred texts” of the discipline. Edward Welch, and J.J. Long, “Introduction: A Small History of Photography Studies,” in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, ed. J.J. Long, Andrea Noble, and Edward
Pietàs. In it, she explains the resonance between Barthes’s notion of the “Total-Image,” which he describes as both “Death in person” and the process of photographically being “turned into an object,”47 and Fanon’s thoughts on race as “effacing and dehumanizing.”48 In other words, both Barthes’s thoughts on photography and Fanon’s thoughts on race seem to parallel each other insofar as they seem to agree that both race and photography are technologies that, at times, “flatten the personhood of its otherwise human content.”49 For Tapia, then, the union of Barthes and Fanon ultimately allows her to rehearse the ways in which race and photography, at some level, serve simultaneously as obliterating (“subject-obliterating”) and reproductive (or what she calls “maternal”) apparatuses.50 She identifies this relationship of concurrence as the logic of the photographic. Not photographic in the sense of remaining strictly within the parameters of photography as a medium—because she does argue that this photographic logic could be extended to any visual medium51—but photographic in that it “fixes and creates, reflects and produces.”52 This is why Barthes can claim that photographers are “agents of Death”53 while at the same time arguing that photography “has something to do with

Welch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12. Likewise, Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks has been tremendously influential for studies that have sought to situate race at the core of their analysis. Just as much, Fanon’s influence has stretched far across a variety of fields and studies. Both, too, have been utilized together in specific instances to examine race and visual culture, although far less frequently.

47 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 14.
48 Tapia, American Pietàs, 33.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 For example, Tapia extends the photographic logic to an analysis of film and advertisements from a public health campaign.
52 Tapia, American Pietàs, 23.
53 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 92.
resurrection,” because the photographic logic, much like the logic of racial ideology, is intimately and simultaneously connected to both life and death.

Tapia’s suturing of race, death, and what she calls the maternal (or the photographic’s reproductive, life-giving, life-preserving functions) is important for this thesis. However, I’d also like to reference her thoughts on race, death, and photography as a point of departure for an understanding of those dynamics along with arguments and ideas on spectatorship and self-making. To press a bit further in terms of race, photography, and looking, I too lean on Roland Barthes and Frantz Fanon. Again, while Tapia presses Barthes and Fanon into service in order to illumine the consonance of race and photography, I press them into service in order to further illumine those connections along with the ones between spectatorship and specifically white self-making.

For example, Chapter 7 of Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, a chapter entitled “The Negro and Recognition,” executes a psychoanalytic diagnosis of the neurotic tendencies and superiority complex that Fanon claims afflicts Antilleans. My reading of it, however, highlights the embedded aspects of the chapter that resonate with Barthes’s ideas and thoughts on spectatorship and the self (or the body), which Barthes, in part, argues becomes itself by the act of looking at “the detestable body.” Both Barthes and Fanon are interested, perhaps with different aims and intentions, on matters of looking, and thus bringing them together here will help us understand how those matters of

54 Ibid., 82.
55 This is not to say that Tapia does not recognize the importance of spectatorship because, in fact, I believe she does, but more to say that spectatorship deserves even more attention as part of this formula.
56 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 18.
looking are also important to other matters: matters of race and photography, matters of life and social death.

**Picturing Tijuana’s Dumps and Irregular Settlements**

In an effort to illumine these types of dynamics, this thesis turns primarily to the photographic archive of two underexamined photographers who’ve spent a significant amount of time picturing the residents of Tijuana’s dumps and irregular settlements: American photographer John Lueders-Booth and Mexican photographer Ingrid Hernández. Although not contemporaries in the strict sense, Lueders-Booth’s photographic work in Tijuana preceded Hernández’s by only a handful of years.\(^{57}\) Taken together, Lueders-Booth and Hernández have photographically represented Tijuana’s irregular settlements, its people and spaces, for over two decades. Their photographic productions, then, like other visual and cultural representations of the city that have served as important sources of knowledge about Tijuana and tijuanenses, constitute a critically important archive and representational space through which ideas about the city and its residents get reified and/or reworked. My reading of their photographs contends that although their work is bound together in many ways (i.e., place, subject matter, and, in some respects, in the process of its production), it would serve us well to not lose sight of the important ways in which they diverge. In particular, a few central questions to help make clear these divergences are: Do Lueders-Booth’s and Hernández’s photographs reinscribe the “racial other,” or do they challenge racist ideologies? Or, to borrow from

\(^{57}\) Lueders-Booth’s archive of photographs in Tijuana was created on various trips to the city between 1990 and 1998, while Hernández’s, who is from Tijuana, began her photographic projects in the early-to-mid 2000s and continues her work in Tijuana today.
visual culture scholar Leigh Raiford, in what ways do they intervene, or not, “in the complicity of racial ideology and visual technology?” Do their photographs invite or occasion the opportunity for white self-making through spectatorship? How do the photographs disrupt or cement the meanings and myths that have come to be associated with a place like Tijuana?

The first chapter of this thesis, entitled “John Lueders-Booth’s Ravenous Camera, the Fantasy of the Photographic, and the Violence of Identification,” focuses on Lueders-Booth’s book entitled *Inherit the Land*, which pictures the lives and spaces of the residents of Tijuana who live and work in its *dompens* or dumps. Additionally, however, I am also interested in Lueders-Booth’s photographs that appear in the critically acclaimed books* by Luis Alberto Urrea entitled *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border* and *By the Lake of the Sleeping Children: The Secret Life of the Mexican Border*. Lueders-Booth’s and Urrea’s work is often presented jointly, or as a collaboration. I therefore believe it’s imperative to explore them in conjunction and thus draw on specific scenes from Urrea’s writings to accentuate my arguments and ideas about Lueders-Booth’s photography. The chapter itself seeks to realize a few things. First, it traces the lines of connection between Lueders-Booth’s photographic work,

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59 Urrea’s books that I am interested in here would most likely fall into the genres of either reportage, which seeks to give an account of observed events, or perhaps memoir. Certainly, because they’re based on his experiences and observations, both books fall squarely in the non-fiction category.
60 Some of the pictures that appear in the Urrea’s books overlap with the photographs in Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land*, and some do not.
62 Ultimately, I understand the process of seeing a photograph that appears in a piece of writing, and thus the meaning we make of it, as one that is shaped by, or sieved through, the logics, assumptions, and claims of the book’s text. For that reason, to examine one of these components (the photographs) inevitably involves examining the other (the book’s text).
together with Urrea’s narrative work, and the project of American social documentary photography. I do so in order to argue for Lueders-Booth’s Tijuana photographs as a continuation of the aesthetic commitments and underlying humanist imperatives of American social documentary photography. However, in this regard, I also pay attention to moments of divergence from social documentary photograph, particularly around issues of domesticity, family, and gender. Secondly, I draw on Coco Fusco’s work to couple this frame of analysis together with what I refer to as Lueders-Booth’s fantasy of the photographic—multiple fantasies, actually, which serve to invest photography with the powers to recuperate life, humanity, and subjectivity while at the same time disavowing the centrality of race. Finally, I argue for the ways in which the stories and pictures of those in the Tijuana garbage dump ultimately shift to emphasize stories and pictures of white bodies: the white body that pictures, that provides charity, and that looks at these photographs.

Next, the attention of chapter 2, entitled “Unsettling Photography: Ingrid Hernández, Suspended Spectatorship, and the Haunting of Space,” shifts to the work of Mexican photographer Ingrid Hernández. Although Hernández’s catalogue is vast, the focal point of my examination will be her set of photographs entitled Indoor, which picture the interior spaces of some of Tijuana’s poorest homes. This chapter ultimately aims to configure Hernández’s photographic work as a direct counterbalance to the work of Lueders-Booth. As such, I proceed by way of comparing and contrasting Hernández’s work with some of the major areas of critical analysis that I will highlight in John Lueders-Booth’s work from the previous chapter. In effect, I read their work in
conversation, and in conflict, with each other or as “visualities-in-relation.” Here, I point specifically to some of the ways in which Hernández diverges from Lueders-Booth: aesthetically in terms of color, philosophically in terms of their understanding and approach to photography as a medium, and in terms of subject matter (specifically Hernández’s choice to not photograph the bodies of poor tijuanenses). Additionally, however, I also read Hernández’s photography for its representations of place. In doing so, I argue that Hernández’s familiarity with the specificities of Tijuana allow her intimate photographic gestures to picture the city not through a frame or logic imported from elsewhere, but instead through a more organic relationship with place. In other words, Hernández’s photographs also serve as a counterbalance to the ways academics, cultural critics, curators, and others north of the border have approached Tijuana. If, for example, Lueders-Booth seeks to squeeze the city’s dumps into a visual terrain of poverty that has been mapped in specific ways and through specific tropes by American social documentary photographers, then Hernández’s picturing of her city unsettles that approach by radically diverging from it. Put differently, the animating concern for Hernández is not what Tijuana helps to illuminate about the privilege of the United States, but rather, as Fiamma Montezemolo has asked, “Qué dice Tijuana de sí misma?”

To be clear, this thesis does not seek to stake some sort of essentialist position that argues that Lueders-Booth’s photographs—because of his “outsider” status or because of his position as a white American photographer—are somehow naturally or by definition problematic. More to the point, a critical eye should be brought to bear on all

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63 Tapia, American Pietàs, 14.
photographic encounters, particularly ones that seek to create empathy, action, and change. In the same way, I don’t argue that Hernández’s work doesn’t constitute or present a problem simply because of what some might call her “insider” status. Notwithstanding the fact that her position as a tijuanense has no doubt provided her with a different perspective—and we could say Lueders-Booth’s position as an American has, too, provided him with a different perspective—I am more interested in the things that the photographs and photographers make evident for us: diverging aesthetic choices, philosophical assumptions, choices of subject matter, and methods of production for example. In other words, both of the photographers that I analyze in this thesis made very specific decisions about how, when, and why they would picture the way they did, and these decisions impact how we look at the images. My arguments, analyses, and ideas, then, are based on those very specific decisions and not on their status as either “outsider” or “insider.” To read my arguments otherwise, perhaps as erecting a dichotomy that by design privileges Hernández’s work, I believe, forecloses on our ability to ask critical questions about these photographic encounters—how they’re practiced and viewed.

I’ve yet to say much about the city of Tijuana itself, the stage upon which the script of this thesis plays out. However, this should not be read as an oversight or as somehow devaluing the importance of the city and issues of place. Rather, I see Tijuana as vitally important, and this thesis as, hopefully, a modest contribution to a critical understanding of it. In particular, this thesis tackles a little studied aspect of Tijuana’s representations: photography. Despite what I would argue is a rich history and relationship with the medium—from tourist photographs atop the infamous zonkey, tijuanense documentary photographers throughout the 20th century but particularly in the
1960s and 1970s, the photographic study of the city entitled *Tijuana: la casa de toda la gente* by the famed theorist Néstor García Canclini (before his now often cited *Culturastíthíbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* in which he famously theorizes hybridity) in the 1980s, contemporary art photographers like Hernández (but also Yvonne Venegas, Josué Castro, Mónica Arreola, and Aldo Guerra just to name a few), tijuanense vernacular photography, and even state-sponsored photographic projects—a sustained critical analysis of the city’s relationship with photography, to my knowledge, does not exist. In a sense, then, some form of what Laura Wexler calls *photographic anekphrasis*, which she describes as a “refusal to read photography—its graphic labors, its social spaces—even while, at the same time one is busy textualizing and contextualizing all other kinds of cultural documents,” seems to be present in Tijuana.⁶⁵ This thesis, then, seeks to begin, in a small way, to fill that void.

However, Tijuana is important for other reasons as well. For example, Tijuana’s relationship to its neighbor to the north reflects and parallels the spectatorial relationship that I delineate in the coming pages. In other words, Tijuana has consistently served as the United States’ “other space.”⁶⁶ Like a picture of a “racial other” that serves as the ground of possibility for white self-making, the stories, stereotypes, and discourses of and about Tijuana have served, in part, as the ground of possibility for the assumed morality and privilege of the U.S. This has been reflected too many times in both cultural and academic discourses. Additionally, and drawing on the writings of Iain Chambers, when

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⁶⁵ Although I don’t necessarily consider this refusal to read photography in Tijuana an intentional one, it’s certainly present. Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 58-59.

we pay attention to Tijuana, a “fiesta of multiplicity,” as well as unregistered “temps and spaces” begin to make themselves visible. These have gone unindexed by dominant ways of picturing, seeing, and living, but they are present and help illumine what Chambers calls an unsettled modernity, or “a modernity that no longer merely mirrors a single reasoning.” To see in this way is a difficult task, of course; it requires special focus and attention to the things and spaces that we’ve grown accustomed to not seeing; or, to seeing those things and spaces that we’ve grown accustomed to seeing in particular ways with fresh eyes. Nevertheless, it is a necessary task.

John Lueders-Booth’s Ravenous Camera, the Fantasy of the Photographic, and the Violence of Identification

“And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes.”
– Frantz Fanon

In her essay, “Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors,” scholar and performance artist Coco Fusco discusses, in part, the “disavowal of race” that she sees functioning in various photographic encounters, both contemporary and historic.68 One such photographic encounter, for example, presses the trope of beauty into service, in particular the beauty of the “racial other.” According to Fusco, beauty serves as a thematic element through which the active construction of the “racial other” is veiled. This type of masking also serves to skew questions of power that surround the photographic encounter. Fusco writes: “the exaltation of the racial other’s beauty has the incredible effect of reversing the power dynamic between the viewer and the viewed in the real world: in the fantasy of the photographic encounter, the viewer is ‘overcome’ by the beauty of the other.”69 I linger on Fusco’s thoughts for just a minute in order to help crystallize a few points of departure for framing and understanding John Lueders-Booth’s photographic work in Tijuana in conjunction with Luis Alberto Urrea’s first two Tijuana garbage dump books. More specifically, I’m interested in understanding this archive of work through the logic of what Fusco above refers to as the “fantasy of the photographic encounter,” which, as evidenced by the title of the chapter I have shortened to the fantasy of the photographic.70

69 Ibid., 21.
70 Ibid.
But, I mean fantasy on multiple levels. First, like Fusco, I mean it to represent the disavowal of race (and thus the skewing of power dynamics) in photographic encounters with the “racial other.” The fantasy that this type of encounter is not invested in the continued construction and reification of racial difference is particularly vigorous in photographs whose primary purpose is not the “denigration of racialized subjects.”71 In other words, representations of race can run the gamut: from denigration to celebration (of the “racial other’s” beauty, for example, as we saw above with Fusco), yet they never escape the logics of racial ideology. To be clear, I don’t mean to argue that either Lueders-Booth or Urrea had malevolent intentions in representing the Tijuana garbage pickers. On the contrary, it seems certain that they’d hoped their work would have positive outcomes for those living in the garbage dumps through increased awareness and visibility of their situation and thus greater attention to the needs of the community. However, this only gives us more reason to explore the subtler, more complex, and thus more unsettling ways in which racial difference is central to their work.

I also use the phrase fantasy of the photographic to help express a prevailing belief in the photograph’s power to redeem and rectify. Or, to borrow Lisa Cacho’s expression from another context, the power of “representation as recuperation.”72 I argue that this fantasy is an extension of the belief in photography’s indexical authority and that, like the fantasy that tries to disavow the presence of race, this fantasy also helps to reject and obscure. In this case, it obscures the subtle, but sometimes overt, outcome of white self-making that photographs purported to redeem “racial others” actually serve. In

71 Ibid., 20.
72 Cacho, Social Death, 18.
what follows, then, I explore the photographic work of John Lueders-Booth along with scenes from the narrative work of Luis Alberto Urrea in order to articulate the ways in which their representations are invested in, and charged with, these types of fantasies.

First, however, I will provide some brief contextual/background information, and I will also encase Lueders-Booth’s photographic project as a continuation of the aesthetic and philosophical strictures of American social documentary photography.73 Tracing the similarities between Lueders-Booth’s photographs and those of well-known social documentary photographers like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Rusell Lee, and others accomplishes two things: First, because I see the school of social documentary photography as also invested in the fantasies I’ve briefly outlined above, the similarities should help reinforce Lueders-Booth’s own investments. Secondly, insofar as Lueders-Booth essentially redeployes a “readily available rubric for framing poverty,” we could say that he approaches Tijuana in the same way as many others before him have: to fulfill something for him and others like him.74

**John Lueders-Booth and American Social Documentary Photography**

John Lueders-Booth, oftentimes called Jack by his close friends, was born in the throes of the Great Depression in June of 1935.75 That same year, Roy Stryker, then head of the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) was developing,

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73 For the purposes of this thesis, I am defining social documentary photography as photography—like that of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Rusell Lee, Jacob Riis, and others—whose explicit aim was to generate social awareness and change through the documentation of the lives of poor families, immigrants, and other marginalized communities.


and eventually launched, the FSA’s documentary photography project. The project, which photography scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau has described as, “a large-scale, federally funded propaganda machine,” has now been recognized as critical in the career development of many now-famous American photographers. Almost four decades later, an unknown, then amateur, photographer in Lueders-Booth would try to follow in their footsteps. In 1970, when he was 35 years old and 15 years into a successful career with an insurance company, Lueders-Booth decided to quit his job and instead follow his interest in photography. Perhaps, as Fanon has written about the white man that feels he’s getting too mechanized, Lueders-Booth was also in need of “a little human sustenance.” He certainly seemed to get it through photography, as he later acknowledged that his photographic instincts and “ravenous camera” always pointed him “to people,” and in particular, I would argue based on his archive of work, marginalized people of color.

One of his early photographic projects, for example, was entitled “The Orange Line,” and it featured photographs of community folks, many of them African American along with some “pockets of Hispanics and whites,” who lived and worked near the old Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority Orange Line train in Boston. In a small book of his work that was printed during his time as Artist-in-Residence at the Department of Visual Studies at Dartmouth College in 1989, Lueders-Booth described

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78 The quote I refer to here is: “When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance.” Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 129.
80 Ibid.
“The Orange Line” project as “photographs [that] represent a population that is on the verge of extinction.” He would also attribute this near-extinction to the neighborhood’s unsightliness and crime rate. Ultimately, this type of characterization only serves to reinforce the marginalization of this particular community.

Another project found Lueders-Booth inside the walls of a medium security correctional facility for female offenders in the city of Framingham, MA. The series of photos produced here, which feature mostly African American and white female inmates, were brought together and exhibited as a group under the title “Women Prisoners.” It could be argued, then, that Lueders-Booth’s early photographic credentials were built and rested on the backs of marginalized communities.

His career in photography also allowed him to teach at both Harvard University and the Boston Institute of the Arts, to receive numerous photography fellowships, exhibit individually and collectively in well-established galleries and museums, and be presented with and nominated for numerous awards. Much of his work, however, was geographically focused in the Northeastern part of the United States, namely in the state of Massachusetts. This begs the question: How did Lueders-Booth come to photograph

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81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
84 Some of the photography fellowships he has been awarded include those from The National Endowment of the Arts, The Polaroid Foundation, The Artists Foundation, and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. Exhibitions include those at the Boston Center for the Arts, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, the Art Institute of Boston, the Robert Friedus Gallery, the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography, the Institute of Contemporary Art in New York, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Smithsonian Institute. Prizes awarded include the Pine Street Humanitarian Award and the Joseph R. Levenson Memorial Prize. He’s also twice, together with Luis Alberto Urrea, been nominated for the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.
the Tijuana garbage dumps nearly 3,000 miles away from his home base of Boston? The answer to this question takes us back to Luis Alberto Urrea.

As already mentioned, Urrea, who was born in Tijuana, had worked for four years as a relief worker in the city’s dumps and irregular settlements with a religious organization called Spectrum Ministries. In 1982, Urrea landed a job at Harvard University as an expository writing instructor and eventually met Lueders-Booth. In the introduction to Inherit the Land, Lueders-Booth’s book of Tijuana photographs, Urrea writes: “[my] offices were a few yards from [Lueders-Booth’s] photography empire, where he guided students to greater visions.” Their later collaborations, then, most likely started as conversations between colleagues and friends. Both, too, however, shared and were driven by an understanding that “nobody knew about this, [the Tijuana garbage dump], world.” Their task then, was to document, through photographs and narrative, the lives of the people who lived and worked in Tijuana’s garbage dump. They apparently did such a good job that they’ve twice been nominated for the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, a prize that was created to “encourage collaboration between documentary writers and photographers in the tradition of the acclaimed photographer Dorothea Lange and writer

85 An irregular settlement is essentially a squatter community. It is usually characterized by the lack of municipal infrastructure: proper roads, electricity, running water, etc. Irregular settlements are often also typified by what some have called emergency architecture, or by the building of domestic spaces with recycled materials—garage doors, wood pallets, tires, tv sets, etc.—that can be readily found. The term “emergency” in the phrase “emergency architecture,” as I understand it, refers namely to the immediate need that this type of construction meets.
86 Lueders-Booth, Inherit the Land, viii.
87 Ibid.
and social scientist Paul Taylor.  

Those making nominations to the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize committee must have seen something of Lange’s work in Lueders-Booth’s photographs. And although Lueders-Booth and Urrea have not won the award, the nominations themselves serve as invitation to examine the ways that John Lueders-Booth’s and Luis Alberto Urrea’s collaboration, but the photographs in particular, continue the project American social documentary photography.

In doing so, this section argues that Lueders-Booth’s work follows a ready-made rubric for picturing the poor—one that stretches back to Lange and other FSA photographers like Walker Evans and Russell Lee, but also further than that, to the turn of the 20th century and Jacob Riis’s photographic documentation of immigrant tenements in New York City’s Lower East Side. In effect, then, Lueders-Booth’s approach is to try to fit Tijuana’s dumps into a visual terrain of poverty that has already been mapped. As such, many of the same aesthetic qualities and philosophical underpinnings of social documentary photography seem to be present in Lueders-Booth’s photographic work and are also further accentuated by Luis Alberto Urrea’s text. When we consider Lueders-Booth’s and Urrea’s collaboration in this way, then, we could argue that the photographs of Tijuana garbage pickers were “already taken long before.” In other words, the photographs we find in Inherit the Land seek to incorporate Tijuana’s garbage pickers into a visual terrain of poverty previously mapped by other social documentary photographers.


89 Vergara, Displaying Filipinos, 14.
Additionally, it’s important to add that this recycling and importing of a ready-made rubric is something that is all too familiar to tijuanenses. In terms of the city’s place in cultural and academic discourses north of the border, for example, the typical maneuver has been simply to reprocess some type of narrative or myth about the city; or, alternatively, to import a particular story or theory and to then find a way to squeeze Tijuana into its parameters. This is what Josh Kun means when he calls Tijuana, “a constellation of fantasies, an infinite junkyard where age-old myths get piled on top of each other, recycled and renewed with each new generation.”

Or what Tijuanense writer Rafa Saavedra meant when he wrote that it’s “so easy to put labels on [Tijuana]…that all end up saying the same thing…” The ultimate effect with a maneuver like this, however, is the erasure of the city’s specific historical and contemporary material specificities. In contrast, the study of Tijuana that is not based on questions and lines of inquiry that generate north of the border, or that ultimately serve a U.S. agenda, particularly by scholars north of the border, has only recently begun to materialize.

Accordingly, Lueders-Booth’s rehashing of a ready-made photographic rubric should be

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90 Jim Heimann and Josh Kun, The Donkey Show (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2011).
92 A 2012 anthology entitled Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border, for example, brings together Tijuanean and U.S.-based scholars and writers to tackle issues that contemporary Tijuana is grappling with. It includes essays on music, film, the maquiladora industry, violence, and literature, and ultimately serves as a necessary first step towards realizing a critical analysis of Tijuana. This anthology also features an extended interview with tijuanense photographer Ingrid Hernández. The interview covers her upbringing and her recent work. However, a sustained critical analysis of photography is missing from the collection. Particularly when we consider Tijuana’s rich history with the photograph, this omission is surprising.
understood as continuing the discursive erasure that’s been a steady feature of the approach taken toward the city.\footnote{For more on Tijuana’s discursive erasure, as well as the discursive acrobatics that some scholars, curators, and cultural critics execute in order to place Tijuana within pre-formed theories/ideas, see Heriberto Yépez, Tijuanalogías (Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California: Libros del Umbral, 2006); Heriberto Yépez, Made in Tijuana (Tijuana: Instituto de Cultura de Baja California, 2005); Tito Alegría, Metrópolis transfronteriza: Revisión de la hipótesis y evidencias de Tijuana, México y San Diego, Estados Unidos (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2009); and Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, “The Factory of Dreams,” in Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).}

This brings us to the various ways in which Lueders-Booth’s work can be considered a continuation of previous social documentary photography.\footnote{To be clear, I don’t mean to suggest that all social documentary photography follows a specific set of guidelines, or that individual photographers don’t themselves deviate in certain ways. Instead, I simply want to illustrate the resonance of Lueders-Booth’s work with some common and acknowledged features of what we could call the school or cannon of social documentary photography. This includes what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has described as the “unchanging tropes” that we find in much of the work that could be categorized as social documentary photography. Solomon-Godeau, Photography at the Dock, 178.} In her study of performance and black visuality, scholar Nicole Fleetwood characterizes American social documentary photography as “promoting a noble or transcendental notion of humanity embodied in the poorest and most disenfranchised members of society.”\footnote{Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 42.} This commitment to humanity often visually demonstrated itself through photographs of the poor participating in activities that could be recognized and identified with instantly, such as everyday tasks or cheerful play and celebration. As William Wroth wrote about FSA photographer Russell Lee’s pictures of the poor: “…of greater importance in Lee’s photographs are the striking human qualities of the subjects. We see them not as statistics for relief rolls or as stereotypic poverty cases but as strong, often joyful human being carrying out their daily tasks.”\footnote{William Wroth, Russell Lee’s FSA Photographs of Chamisal and Peñasco, New Mexico (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1985), 3.} In other words, even in the midst of their dire material circumstances, the poor are depicted as “leading comparatively serene and dignified
This type of commitment is evident in Lueders-Booth’s photographs, some of which I will specifically look at in the next section of this chapter.

Together with the belief and emphasis on the humanity of its subjects, social documentary photography also subscribed to Hesford’s seeing-is-believing paradigm, or to what I’m referring to as the fantasy of the photographic. For social documentary photographers like Lee and Lange, for example, their photographs served as “an index of social ills.” In doing so, the notion of what Barthes refers to as photography’s “evidential force” is emphasized. Put differently, photography and the photograph are reified as objective tools for truth, and the photographer, or the viewer through the photographer, simply serves as the witness to the truth of the scene. Of course, this power of witnessing is also a racialized power insofar as it’s premised on the spectators’ presumed whiteness. In other words, through the act of witnessing, white American viewers are positioned as rescuers. The power of whiteness, then, serves as the power to witness and recuperate.

The principle behind this type of belief is that if viewers are invited to see the truth of living in poverty, which includes the humanity of poverty’s residents, then they will hopefully be moved to action through sight. In “Labors of Looking: Unseenamerica and the Visual Economy of Work,” however, scholar Rebecca Schreiber calls this belief

98 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 43.
99 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 89.
100 In Lueders-Booth’s photographic work, there exists a curious consonance between photography’s evidentiary power and his almost sanctified role as a witness. Lueders-Booth’s role as photographer/witness is often portrayed as decreed from a higher power. His missionary friends, in fact, Luis Alberto Urrea included, would say, “God wanted Jack to be a witness.” Lueders-Booth, Inherit the Land, vii.
101 I thank Antonio Tiongson, Jr. for making this implication clear to me.
into question when she characterizes it as a *conceit*. She writes, “the works of Jacob Riis, Hine, Lange, Evans, and others share a conceit that ‘representing’ the concerns of the poor and working classes to the middle and upper classes will provoke awareness and thus social change…”

To create anger toward the scene framed in the photograph and to then direct that anger toward meaningful positive change is a fundamental rationale for much social documentary photography. This strategy is present in Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land* as well, in both its framing text and photographs. In the afterword, for example, we are told that, “[the] families we meet here will continue to mourn more of their children than we in the First World do, eat leftovers from our tables, clothe themselves and their offspring in our discards, construct their dwellings from shipping pallets, cardboard, auto parts, and demolition debris, until *we change* the way we ourselves lives.”

The lines of connection between Lueders-Booth and previous social documentary photography are also evident in some of the aesthetic choices made by Lueders-Booth. In particular, he chose to picture in the “aesthetic of black-and-white realism.” Lest we not think this was a conscious choice, one that I would argue is certainly informed by the visual terrain of poverty that had been mapped by previous photographers, then I would point our attention to reviews of Lueders-Booth’s earlier work, which has been described as “rich and brilliant [in] color.” In fact, one review in particular intensely emphasized this aspect of his photography, even calling Lueders-Booth a “first rate color

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photographer.” Yet, in his Tijuana pictures he chooses to shoot in black-and-white, reminiscent, of course, of much social documentary photography. Additionally, it’s striking how many of his photographs are visually and compositionally suggestive of well-known images from other social documentary photographers, almost as if Lueders-Booth modeled his images after theirs, or, as if their images were embedded in his photographic unconscious.

One final way in which Lueders-Booth parallels and continues the project of American social documentary photography becomes clear if we briefly delve into what Benito Vergara, Jr. calls the “inherent sort of authority” of the photographer. To put a finer point on it, social documentary photographers claimed the “right to represent, and represent realistically” by yielding the apparatus of representation, the camera, but also by the authority invested in them by the associations they carried into these spaces and encounters. For example, FSA photographers were affiliated with a state-sponsored project that would have invested them with the inherent authority to picture, as it was the presumed responsibility of the state itself to assist those that FSA photographers pictured. A more acute example, but certainly no less pertinent, is the case of Jacob Riis and his relationship with the New York Police Department. As a police reporter for the New York Tribune, he would often make his way into the spaces he pictured with “an armed entourage of policemen.” In these types of encounters, Shawn Michelle Smith reminds us, the “power dynamics…are thus heavily skewed in favor of the photographer.”

106 Ibid.
107 Vergara, Displaying Filipinos, 79.
108 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
Likewise, I would argue that John Lueders-Booth, who was “introduced to the garbage pickers by [Pastor Von] who [had] fed them and bathe them,” would have entered into this space with a certain level of inherent authority.\textsuperscript{111} It is certainly possible, then, that the Tijuana garbage pickers who relied on Pastor Von and Spectrum Ministries for food, clothing, and medication would have been hesitant in raising their objections about being photographed in the first place. Thus, issues of power dynamics, which I don’t believe entered into the Lueders-Booth’s calculus—after all, his was a mission to document inequality and hopefully bring life and visibility to this previously “godforsaken, dangerous, and hidden region of the border”—were from the start skewed in his direction.\textsuperscript{112}

The next section of this chapter argues that the picturing/writing of the poor and suffering body by John Lueders-Booth and Luis Alberto Urrea is, in the spirit of social documentary photography discussed above, an attempt to resurrect or recuperate the poor and suffering body from a place of unknown, a place of invisibility, a place of social death, toward a place of life, of recognition, a place of personhood or humanity. In this way, the redemptive powers of photography, and to a certain extent of literature, are expressed. Let us not forget, however, that the belief in the photograph’s power to recuperate is a fantasy insofar as it also, and primarily, triggers the white viewer’s powers of self-definition through what Saidiya Hartman has called the “violence of identification.”\textsuperscript{113} First, I will briefly explore the photographic and narrative strategies that Lueders-Booth and Urrea deploy in the space of the Tijuana garbage dump in order

\textsuperscript{111} Lueders-Booth, \textit{Inherit the Land}, ix.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, 20.
to undertake the task of recuperation. These include a concentration on the idea of resurrection or rebirth via the religious overtones of the images, a sustained focus on those human qualities that, for the reader/viewer, would expectantly produce admiration (hope, dignity, joy) and compassion (suffering), and an emphasis on representing children as “emblems of promise.”¹¹⁴ Ultimately, however, the attention shifts to white bodies—of those pictured and providing charity like Pastor Von, of the photographer/writer, and of the presumed middle-class white American spectators/readers—and thus the work of resurrection turns: rebirth comes not to the photographed “racial other” as intended but to the compassionate white subjects.

The Human Value in Unknown Lives

At the outset of his first book about the Tijuana garbage pickers, Luis Alberto Urrea informs the reader that he or she should expect a narrative about the “human value in these unknown lives, a story of hope in spite of horror and pain.”¹¹⁵ Lueders-Booth’s book of photographs is similarly framed: “We cannot help but admire them and be humbled by the evidence of joy and beauty in lives whose material circumstances are inconceivably poorer than our own.”¹¹⁶ Taken together, these two quotes underscore the idea that the Tijuana garbage pickers’ humanity, his or her “human value,” is evident by his or her capacity to suffer amidst “horror and pain” and yet still be able to feel joy and express hope. Based on the large number of photographs that seemingly follow this logic

in Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land*, I would argue that this was a central component of his work in Tijuana. Let us for a minute take Figure 1.1 as an example. I would argue that this photograph pictures three main subjects: the two males in the foreground of the frame, as well as the trash that engulfs the image. One male stands, leaning slightly forward but with his right leg firmly planted and carrying the weight of his body. The other male lies on the ground, his arms crossed near his chest and stomach while his legs are pressed up and toward his body. Trash surrounds them both: scraps of paper and plastic, pieces of wood and cardboard, and what appears to be a mattress lying on top of a cardboard box. The trash, which literally fills every corner of the image, creates an overwhelming feeling—a feeling of chaos and precarity. This image, then, could be described as a “communion with precarious life”—a life overtaken by piles and piles of garbage. Yet, both males have cheerful or joyful expressions on their faces. Amidst the torrent of trash, literally on top of the trash, the two males hold onto and dynamically express a certain level of joy, perhaps even hope that belies their apparent state of affairs. Over the trash, their humanity, their *human value* is stressed.

Their humanity is further illustrated in the image by the relationship that is invoked between the two foregrounded subjects. The male standing up appears to have a beard and a mustache, which might suggest he is older than the male lying on the ground, who appears to be a boy of about 12 or 13 years. Their posture toward one another—a friendly or caring and playful one—suggests a certain level of intimacy, a closeness of relationship. The piece of plastic that meanders through the legs of the older man curves in the direction of the young boy joins them together, further emphasizing their

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connection and close relationship. I would argue, then, that the relationship invoked is a familial one, that of a father and his son. Further, the boy’s work gloves suggest that this moment of joyful play with his father is a momentary break from the no doubt strenuous work of picking through the heaps of trash, which those behind them are currently engaged in. Yet, the photograph seems to be arguing that hope and humanity are certainly alive and well here, particularly when amidst the work, amidst the trash, amidst the precarity of the situation they inhabit, this father is able to take a moment for cheerful play with his son.

Likewise, Luis Alberto Urrea’s narrative also presses humanity into service against the dire circumstances that he narrates. One tactic that Urrea deploys is what I would describe as a counteractive sentence. More specifically, Urrea’s counteractive sentences are carefully crafted to first summon or allude to the dreadful circumstances of the Tijuana dump, but to then negate or counteract them with human qualities that those in the dump exemplify. His narrative abounds with these types of sentences: “There is no welfare in the dump, but there is work, care, sweat, and dignity.” The first part of this sentence invokes the deplorable conditions that folks in the Tijuana garbage dump live and work in. It describes the “dump” as a place of lack, specifically the lack of “welfare.” Welfare here could be read as any number of presumably positive and desirable conditions: good health, prosperity, and comfort. Yet, as the first half of the sentence informs us, these types of conditions do not exist in the Tijuana garbage dump. On the other hand, the second half of the sentence serves to counteract the lack of welfare with

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other, what we could perhaps describe as socially valuable, qualities of humanity: “work, care, sweat, and dignity.” Despite the lack of welfare, then, and the fact that the people who live and work and sweat in Tijuana’s garbage dump may suffer because of it, the community is represented as proud and hard-working—as continuing on, or surviving, with honor and “dignity.” By invoking both the suffering of the Tijuana garbage pickers but also their humanity, then, Urrea’s narrative reflects, parallels, and reinforces Lueders-Booth’s visual narrative in Inherit the Land.

**God Wanted Jack to be a Witness**

The use of religious imagery and symbolism is yet another strategy that this collaboration drew on in order to redeem the lives of Tijuana garbage pickers, to stress that theirs was an attempt at resurrection or rebirth. That Lueders-Booth and Urrea’s work in Tijuana had a spiritual dimension is, I believe, clear. After all, both Lueders-Booth and Urrea were present in the Tijuana garbage dump through their associations with Spectrum Ministries, a religious organization.

However, the spiritual dimensions of their collaboration are also clearly evident in different aspects of the book of photographs that was produced: Inherit the Land. To begin with, the title of the book itself invokes religious verses: Psalms 37:10-11, which read, “Wait a little, and the wicked will be no more; look for them and they will not be there. But the poor will inherit the land, will delight in great prosperity.” At the most

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119 Ibid.
basic level, the verses that the title of the book comes from seem to point to a time, in the future (“Wait a little…”), when the lives of the poor will be redeemed to a better life (“great prosperity”). The title, then, reinforces the photographic work of Lueders-Booth who, as we have seen, is also interested in redemption or resurrection of the Tijuana garbage pickers (“the poor”).

Lueders-Booth’s description in the introduction to Inherit the Land, which was written by Luis Alberto Urrea, also presses religious symbolism into service. For example, Lueders-Booth’s project in Tijuana is portrayed almost as a decree or commandment from God. Urrea writes that many of the missionaries working in Tijuana, perhaps himself included, believed that “God wanted Jack to be a witness.” What better witness, of course, than one that yields a camera? The evidentiary powers, or the truth capturing powers, of photography take on an almost sacred dimension with this description. As well, it’s important to, again, note that the power to witness is also a racialized power. In other words, to witness in the Tijuana garbage dump is an exercise in agency and power—one almost exclusively reserved for white bodies. More succinctly, the power to witness is also the power of whiteness.

Additionally, Lueders-Booth’s arrival in Tijuana is described in language similar to that used in The Apostles’ Creed, one of the primary prayers of the rosary in the Catholic tradition. The Apostles’ Creed reads, in part, “[Jesus] was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell…” Similarly, Lueders-Booth’s arrival into the

121 Lueders-Booth, Inherit the Land, ix.
122 Again, I thank Antonio Tiongson, Jr., for very gently pointing this out to me.
“hell” that was the Tijuana garbage dump is described as “Jack descend[ing] on the dump-world…” The allusions to religious imagery, when coupled with the photographs that Lueders-Booth shot of Tijuana that are also rich with religious symbolism, ultimately serve to foreground the notion that the picturing of Tijuana’s garbage pickers was an act “with an eye toward preservation, resurrection, and restoration.”

In particular, Lueders-Booth’s picturing of religious figures, which he often couples with very evocative natural light, helps to invoke the theme of resurrection in the Tijuana garbage dump. One image in particular serves as a good example of this (see Figure 1.2). This image pictures two men sitting on a bed inside of what appears to be, because of the exposed wood and the wood pallets that are visible through the window, a home built out of scrap wood from the Tijuana garbage dump. The two men sit back on the bed. The man on the left side firmly grips an unknown object in both hands—perhaps a small flashlight that he uses to pick through the garbage—while the man on the right sits with a searching or contemplative look on his face and a baseball cap on his head. This appears to be a family home, as suggested by the family photographs on the wall behind the man on the left. These photographs, however, are not straight or level, but are slightly askew. The uneveness of the family photographs, then, along with the exposed wood of the home’s walls and the searching expression on the man with the baseball cap’s face, contribute to an overall sense of uncertainty or precarity.

Yet there is another dimension to this photograph—a more sacred one. Taped to the wooden wall behind and slightly above the man with the baseball cap is what appears to be a poster of Jesus Christ. Just below the poster, perhaps through a crack or a hole in the wooden walls of this home, a ray of light shines into the house like a laser beam, almost as if emanating directly from the figure of Jesus. The light crosses over the man with the baseball cap and through the room. In the midst of such precarity, Lueders-Booth’s photograph seems to be suggesting that Jesus Christ himself has descended into the darkness of the Tijuana garbage dump to resurrect those whom his light touches. In the photograph’s formula, light is equated with life. The photograph visually retells John 8:12, where Jesus Christ proclaims, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” By evocatively capturing the light in this photograph, Lueders-Booth emphasizes the notion of resurrection, of redeeming the Tijuanense garbage picker, which, as I have been arguing, is a central task and concern of his.

**By Virtue of Their Sheer Potentiality**

Resurrection is, of course, a future-oriented endeavor. An attempt to breathe life into something is an attempt to project it beyond the present moment. In this formula, death itself—in our case, social death—is relegated to a past cadence. If this is the case, then, perhaps no image serves this purpose better than a photograph of a child, to which Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land* can certainly attest. In fact, other than perhaps its trash,

I would argue that children are the most photographed feature of the Tijuana garbage dump. Amongst other views, Lueders-Booth pictures children playing on their own and in groups, with their parents, dressed up for parties, showering in tubs and in the makeshift showers that Spectrum Ministries provided weekly, at Sunday school, and, of course, working in the dump. If the title of the book suggests a time in the future when a more “prosperous” land will be inherited, then it is the children of Tijuana’s garbage dump that Lueders-Booth pictures as its inheritors.

In *Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant describes the paradoxical ways in which children, and also those envisioned as children, are the privileged, and thus protected, subjects in the American political imagination. She writes that, “[the] most hopeful national pictures of ‘life’ circulating in the public sphere are not of adults in everyday life, in public, or in politics, but rather of the most vulnerable minor or virtual citizens—fetuses, children, real and imaginary immigrants…” A similar logic—one that stresses the vulnerability and the innocence of children—seems to be at work in giving emphasis to many of the photographs in *Inherit the Land*. For example, Figure 1.3 pictures a child amidst the trash in the garbage dump. The photograph is shot from a middle distance, which offers the viewer a close enough view to ponder the details of the image: he stands with his right leg slightly ahead of his left, his right hand reaches and holds onto the rim of what appears to be a trash can, and his clothing and face are grimy—almost caked with dirt—perhaps from picking through the trash which surrounds him. Lueders-Booth has apparently bent or knelt down and pictured the young boy face-

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to-face. As Raiford points out about this shooting position for a photographer, it conveys to the viewer that the young boy should be “sincerely considered.”

His mouth is turned slightly downward; at best his facial expression is meditative and at worst distressing—both of which would seem to overwhelm his tiny frame (he’s barely taller than the barrel right behind him). As well, his posture connotes insecurity and vulnerability. Like the jacket and hat that don’t fit him, the photograph seems to be saying that he doesn’t, or shouldn’t, fit or belong to this landscape. Rather than participating in what might be considered typical activities for a young boy, which are alluded to by the image of baseball players barely visible through the dirt on his shirt, this young boy lives a much more precarious life in the Tijuana garbage dump. The photograph, then, seems geared toward creating what Barthes called “photographic ‘shock,’” or what one reviewer of Urrea’s books identifies as the “emotional shockwaves” that stem from the recognition that the children of the Tijuana garbage dump should not have to live in these types of conditions. Images like this one are ever present in both Inherit the Land and in Urrea’s books. In fact, out of the fifteen images that Lueders-Booth contributed to Urrea’s first book, Across the Wire, nine of them picture children. Most of them attest to the vulnerability of the children in Tijuana’s garbage dump.

Yet, there is second logic at work in the pictures and stories of children in Lueders-Booth’s and Urrea’s collaborative work. Yes, children are vulnerable, however

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128 Leigh Raiford, “Notes Toward a Photographic Practice of Diaspora,” 211.
129 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 32.
131 For Urrea’s second book, By the Lake of the Sleeping Children, Lueders-Booth contributed 11 photographs, six of which picture children.
they are also pictured, to borrow from Leigh Raiford again, as “emblems of promise.”

This logic parallels the logic of much photography during the early American colonial period in the Philippines, as traced by Benito Vergara, Jr. Discussing why pictures of children during this time were so common, for example, Vergara writes, “[m]ore effective and poignant than pictures of newly-constructed bridges, images of children being educated almost naturally connoted, by virtue of their sheer potentiality, a forward movement into the future.” Similarly, in Lueders-Booth’s and Urrea’s work, children serve as the vessels and vehicles for hope in the Tijuana garbage dump—a hope that is present in their present but that is also projected toward the future via the child. A brief emphasis on a few photographs should show us this logic at work.

In the book format of Lueders-Booth’s Tijuana photographs, Figures 1.4 and 1.5 serve as the bookends of his project. Figure 1.4 is the first picture in the body of the book, just after the introduction, while Figure 1.5 is the last picture in the book just before the afterword. In bringing them together here, I’m interested in the interplay between them, and the narrative story they tell together. Compositionally, the photographs are strikingly similar. Both are shot from an above angle, as if Lueders-Booth was perhaps standing on a hill during both moments. Both photographs picture two subjects, one in front of the other, surrounded by land. What appears to be a man-made walking path snakes through each image, and the two subjects of each photograph make their ways on these paths. As well, the horizon is a prominent feature in the background of both images.

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132 Leigh Raiford, “Notes Toward a Photographic Practice of Diaspora,” 211.
133 Vergara, Displaying Filipinos, 138.
Yet, there are a few salient differences that speak to the distinctive logics underscoring each image. Firstly, while the subjects in each photograph appear small because of the vast amount of land that is framed in the picture, the landscape in each photograph differs. The landscape in Figure 1.4 is filled with trash. The subjects of this photograph walk through, past, and around the trash. In contrast, the landscape of Figure 1.5 hardly pictures any trash. Besides what might be a small clump of trash in the middle of the image, the landscape is clean of trash. Instead, the landscape in this image looks much healthier, with vegetation growing throughout. So, while the landscape in the first image appears barren, the landscape in the second image conveys growth and emergence.

A second distinction in these images comes to us via the subjects of the photographs. Although two subjects are photographed in each image, there is a clear difference in the age of those subjects. The first photograph in the book pictures two adults, both of who carry trashcans on their backs. The last photograph in the book, however, images two children, neither of which appears to be carrying anything. These photographs, I would argue, connote a difference in temporality. The two children in Figure 1.5 are pictured to connote the future, while the adults in the first image are pictured to connote the past. It could, of course, be argued that all of the subjects in the two photographs appear to be walking and that their trajectories will eventually lead them all past and beyond the photographic frame, which might also imply a movement out of the situation that is pictured. And while it is certainly the case that they are all walking, the trash cans on the backs of the adults in the first photograph evidence a different temporality. Theirs is a moment filled with trash and dirt. Like the trashcans on their backs, this is a fact that they carry with them. And although their trajectory might move
them beyond the frame of the photograph, and imply some sort of future, the burden they carry will stay on their backs. In contrast, the children are pictured moving away from the poverty of the Tijuana garbage dump. In the background of this image, we can see homes that are likely built with scrap wood and other things found in the garbage dump. The children, however, move away from, and thus past, this moment. Implied in this movement, then, are a future and a life beyond the trash of the first image.

Images of children for Lueders-Booth, however, don’t simply evidence a contrast between children and adults, and thus a different sense of temporality. There are also plenty of images that connote life and potentiality in which adults and children are pictured together. In contrast to the last two images analyzed, however, the images of children and adults together that connote life and potentiality for both subjects typically picture them in some form of contact. Put differently, it’s almost as if the child, as the source of life and the hope for the future, transfers life, hope, and potentiality to the adult pictured with them. Or, to borrow a phrase from Uday Singh Mehta from a different context, the child in the photograph serves as the anchor on which to hitch the adult to “a more meaningful teleology,”—to a story not of poverty and misery but one of hope.134 Plenty of portraits, for example, of a mother and her son hugging or pictures of a father and his daughter embracing and playing are present in the book. Figure 1.6 serves as a good example of this.

The photograph pictures a grown man and a young baby girl. He sits on the bed and, based on the way he holds the baby up for the camera, like a proud parent, we can

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assume that he is the father of this young child. They’re most likely pictured in their family’s home. Both the black heels on the ground near the dresser and the nail polish on the shelf above the dresser evidence the presence of an adult female, perhaps the baby’s mother and man’s wife. As well, the poster on the wall, marked by the handprints of a child older than the baby, evidences the presence of another child in the home. The baby girl is dressed in a nice white dress. The sharpness of the white stands in contrast with the rest of the objects in the image: the dark duffle bag that also sits on the bed, the dark bedding, the dark heels, and the stained walls and dresser. The baby, perhaps no more than a year old, is essentially the image of new life. Hers is a life with a long future ahead of it. Again, her father holds her up for the camera. His attachment, then, is quite literal. If the baby symbolically represents new life, potentiality, and the future, then her father is firmly fastened to that future. Or, put differently, his resignification and redemption are premised and made real by both his proximity and attachment to his child. The image seems to be saying that, together, the two subjects of this photographic frame will find themselves outside of the situation they’re currently pictured in. Although currently in the dire circumstances of living in the Tijuana garbage dump, the photograph compels us to picture the baby, with her father affixed to her, in a future where they overcome the obstacles of Tijuana garbage dump life. Much like David, who is pictured in the poster behind them on the wall, they too will conquer Goliath. Only their Goliath is poverty.

Ultimately, the photographs of children in Inherit the Land argue for the resurrection of their tiny bodies. The logic follows that they are an innocent and vulnerable group—that the harsh realities of Tijuana garbage dump life might be too much for them to bear, and thus they must, somehow, be exempted of this precarity.
However, scholar Wendy Hesford’s book *Spectacular Rhetorics*, and in particular her chapter entitled “Spectacular Childhoods: Sentimentality and the Politics of (In)Visibility,” shows us how this representational strategy—of picturing the lives of “non-white children outside of [U.S.] borders”\(^{135}\) in ways that stress some sort of “moral salvation”\(^{136}\)—is problematically wedded to what she describes as “Western idealized notions of childhood as a universal state of innocence…”\(^{137}\) Put differently, this discourse of child innocence only serves to make their vulnerability more apparent, and thus their recuperation more necessary. We see this, certainly, in the photographs of children from *Inherit the Land*.\(^{138}\) In particular, though, and these are the specific aspects of Hesford’s arguments that I’m interested in here, she points out that this representational strategy runs the risk of simply commanding the Western viewer’s position as the privileged subject.

For example, Hesford analyzes the documentary film *Born Into Brothels*, which won the 2005 Academy Award for “Best Documentary Feature.” The film itself attempts to make visible the lives of children who, as the title suggests, were born to prostitutes working in Calcutta’s red-light district. It follows “British-born, white photo-journalist turned advocate”\(^{139}\) Zana Briski as she “attempts to get the children into boarding schools and out of the brothels.”\(^{140}\) While many of the individual children do become a focal point of the film, Hesford argues that the narrative trajectory of their stories—“from pain

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\(^{135}\) Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 152.  
\(^{136}\) Ibid, 153.  
\(^{137}\) Ibid., 152.  
\(^{138}\) The argument could also be made that this underlying assumption is present in much of American social documentary photography.  
\(^{139}\) Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 160.  
\(^{140}\) Ibid., 161.
and trauma…to personal expression…to an imagined global citizenship…”—ultimately fortifies the underlying and parallel story of Briski’s “humanitarian or even missionary intervention.” Although there are certainly differences between the work that Briski was doing with *Born Into Brothels* and with the work that Lueders-Booth does with *Inherit the Land*, I ultimately see them both contributing to a story that becomes more about themselves and the white spectators they address their work to.

In other words, the work and stories of resurrection that is heavily stressed in Lueders-Booth’s photographs is ultimately overshadowed. Certainly, these are the stories and photos of a marginalized group of people living and surviving in terrible material conditions, but these are also the stories and pictures of those of us that look at them and think of ourselves. Put differently, their stories serve the purpose of, “inaugurat[ing] and impos[ing] a new story of ourselves.”

But these photographs of children, and in particular Figure 1.6, which pictures a baby and her father, also allows an opportunity to begin, even if just briefly, to consider Lueders-Booth’s photographic work in Tijuana in terms of its representations of gendered and domestic lives and spaces. My understanding of the domestic parallels Wexler’s definition of the term in *Tender Violence*, which, as she argues, isn’t strictly confined to images of, “mothers, babies, and family groupings,” but can also be exemplified by, “a battleship as by a nursery…” In effect, Wexler extends our understanding of the domestic by remaining attuned to both the sites of domesticity, but also to domesticity as,

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141 Ibid., 162.
142 Coincidentally, Zana Briski, like John Lueders-Booth and Luis Alberto Urrea, carried with her a spiritual component to the work of “moral salvation” that likely stemmed from her theological background. Ibid.
to borrow from Anne McClintock, “a social relation of power.” Therefore, while my consideration of Lueders-Booth’s Tijuana photographs in terms of their gendered and domestic dynamics does pay attention to pictures of mothers, babies, and family groupings—or to the more narrow or common way to think about the domestic—it also follows Wexler in extending the parameters of the domestic to include other spaces and social relations: like the space of the dump site where tijuanense garbage pickers work and spend a significant portion of their day, or what we could perhaps describe as relations of labor.

The family and the domestic, of course, have been intimately connected to Western liberal ideologies. In terms of photography, Wendy Hesford, following Wendy Kozol, for example, reminds us that oftentimes “dominant Western images…mobilize ideals of domesticity to construe American viewers as rescuers.” In addition, and more generally, as Roderick Ferguson argues in Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique, “[l]iberal ideology has typically understood the family as that institution that provides stability and civility against the instability and ruthlessness of civil society.” In some ways, we see both of these assertions present in Lueders-Booth’s photographic work in Tijuana. The “family portraits” that Lueders-Booth provides serve both to reify the family unit—in particular the heterosexual family unit that produces children—as a marker of stability even in the midst of the precarious conditions of poverty present in the Tijuana dump. These photographs, like the photographs of

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145 McClintock quoted in Wexler, Tender Violence, 21.
146 Hesford, Spectacular Rhetorics, 110-111.
children, also serve to invoke sympathy and ultimately position the presumed white American viewer as “rescuer” of the poor and precarious family unit. Even in an image like Figure 1.6, which doesn’t explicitly picture the entire family unit, the presence of a maternal figure is still evidenced by both the black heels on the ground and the nail polish on the shelf above the dresser. We could argue, then, that this picture serves to reify heteronormative family formations, which, as Ferguson would argue, positions “heternormativity as the scene of order and rationality…”

Yet, Lueders-Booth’s photographs in this regard are a bit more complex than that. Indeed, on the one hand, as I’ve mentioned, by picturing the recognizable trope of the heterosexual family unit, or what Smith might refer to as “normative family structures,” Lueders-Booth both positions the spectator as a “rescuer” of this family unit and also illustrates his photographic investment in those normative structures. However, Lueders-Booth’s photographs also serve to destabilize the strict gendered roles that are often associated with the realms of domesticity and the family. For scholar Alicia Schmidt Camacho, for example, domesticity “signifies a gendered division of space and labor, where women are responsible for the family and the home.” Lueders-Booth’s images, I’d like to suggest, unsettle those easy gendered divisions of space and labor. For example, again paying attention to Figure 1.6, the fact that this photograph pictures and positions the father in the home and as the caregiver serves to destabilize those gendered divisions that dictate that the space of the home and the position of caregiver falls

148 Ibid., 18.
149 Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 166.
somehow naturally to the woman of the household. In this way, Lueders-Booth also separates himself, at least momentarily, from previous social documentary photographers that he’s so far closely followed. For instance, if, as Lawrence Levine shows us, FSA photographers were directed by Roy Stryker to capture images of “the woman’s world,” then certainly many of those images produced seem to reify gendered divisions of space and labor. In other words “the woman’s world” for Stryker was one that fulfilled particular domestic ideals: with women typically and normatively confined to the role of caregiver. On the other hand, Lueders-Booth’s photographs unsettle those domestic ideals and thus deviate, momentarily, from previous social documentary photography. As well, Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land* presents us with images of women working alongside men in Tijuana’s garbage dumps. Women lift what appear to be loads of trash—cardboard boxes and other recyclables—drag trashcans, and sift through the mounds of garbage just as their male counterparts do. Urrea, as well, in his books, retells stories of women laboring in the dump alongside men, or sometimes on their own. In this way, as well, Lueders-Booth again complicates expectations about normative divisions of space and labor.

Still, by reifying the presumed white American spectator as rescuer of children and families, Lueders-Booth’s photographs ultimately transfer the emphasis to white bodies: of the fearless photographer/writer, of those providing charity like Pastor Von, and, ultimately, of the presumed white American spectators invited to identify with the suffering pictured and narrated. The remainder of this chapter, which I dub “White

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Bodies at Risk,” offers a sustained engagement with these dynamics (of race, photography, and spectatorship), along with their attendant modes of feeling (adventure, compassion/sympathy, and identification).

White Bodies at Risk

In a chapter entitled “Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject,” from his book, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty characterizes the modern subject as the person who is not an immediate sufferer but who has the capacity to become a secondary sufferer through sympathy for a generalized picture of suffering, and who documents this suffering in the interest of eventual social intervention…In other words, the moment of modern observation of suffering is a certain moment of self-recognition on the part of an abstract, general human being.152

Chakrabarty’s definition of the modern subject here parallels Susan Sontag’s claim that, “[b]eing a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience…”153 Both Sontag and Chakrabarty identify, and explicitly refer to, “suffering” or “calamities” as part of this experience of modern subjectivity, yet they both also seem to agree that it is the act of spectatorship or observation that triggers this recognition of subjectivity for the self. Putting this in the context of photography and Tijuana, we could argue that photographs of suffering, of calamities, in the Tijuana garbage dump, like those that Lueders-Booth produces, are the trigger of and vessel for the self-recognition of their presumed white viewers north of the border. If we had yet another wrinkle, self-making stems from the act of viewing/recognizing another and an

“other.” It is a relational act and look premised on both a momentary recognition of sameness, as an “abstract, general human being,” and a hierarchy of difference, or recognition of a “racial other.”

Mimi Nguyen, in her book *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, helps us understand this dynamic as well. Writing about the Nick Ut’s photograph of a young Kim Phuc—the infamous “napalm girl” photograph that pictures a naked Phuc, running down the middle of a Vietnamese street near Trang Bang after a napalm attack—Nguyen writes that the “perception of pain interiorizes for the observer an experience of distance and approximation, through which contact with the photograph and the thing that has been there elicits recognition of the other’s specific relation to oneself, and the revelation of oneself in relation to an ideal.” To reiterate, seeing the photograph of a suffering “racial other” triggers a recognition of that “other’s” relationship to our self but also an examination of our relationship to an ideal insofar as it reminds us of our own precarity (or, at least, of how close we are to a precarious life). In this way, the body of the “other” is, once again, forgotten, destroyed, or replaced even while it’s made visible through photography. The photographed body of the “racial other,” then, serves merely as a vessel for a story about the spectator’s body and identity. It enables, in other words, the white viewer to realize what Fanon would describe as his or her “subjective security.”

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156 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 212.
Following Barthes, we could argue that one way in which a photograph animates a viewer is through the trope of adventure. Barthes writes, “…this photograph…what it produces in me is the very opposite of hebetude; something more like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too…” This agitation and excitement Barthes refers to here is what elsewhere he recognizes as an important aspect of photography: “adventure.” The trope of adventure, indeed a dangerous but pleasurable adventure in the Tijuana garbage dump, is very early on stressed in the collaborative works of Lueders-Booth and Urrea. For example, I would argue that both the introduction to Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land* and the early pages of Urrea’s *Across the Wire* explicitly position their activities in the Tijuana garbage dump, photography and missionary work, alongside the act of war as a way to stress the trope of adventure, as well as its counterpart: danger.

“It must have seemed like a combat assignment at first,” states the introduction to *Inherit the Land*, “some of these shots are reminiscent of war scenes and the photographer had to be fast on his feet; sometimes he had to shoot and get out before weapons appeared.” Likewise, *Across the Wire* states:

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158 Ibid., 18.
159 Ibid., 19.
160 Adventure as a trope of empire—as a common trope in colonial encounters—has been a topic much discussed as well. In particular, scholars like Amy Kaplan and Benito Vergara Jr., underscore the role that the trope of adventure plays in the recuperation of what Kaplan has called “imperial masculinity.” See Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos*.
161 Emphasis added. Lueders-Booth, *Inherit the Land*, ix. The language of photography, at times, certainly lends itself to being analogized with the language of war. This is likely what Barthes had in mind when he called photographers “agents of death” whose “organ is not [their] eye, but [their] finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens…” However, my point is not to highlight the similarities in both languages, but instead to show how those similarities are deployed to underscore the danger and adventure of the Tijuana garbage dump. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.
When I was younger, I went to war. The Mexican border was the battlefield. We sustained injuries and witnessed deaths. There were machine guns pointed at us, knives, pistols, clubs, even skyrockets... We were armed with water, medicine, shampoo, clothes, food, milk, and doughnuts. At the end of the day, like returning veterans from other battles, we carried secrets in our hearts that kept some of us awake at night, gave others dreams and fits of crying.¹⁶²

The trope of adventure is also evident in the very early photographs of Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land*. The first few scenes depicted all center on people working in the Tijuana garbage dump: sorting through the trash, walking on and over large clusters of garbage, working near heavy machinery, lifting trash cans and/or large bundles of garbage from the ground. Figure 1.7, for example, pictures an unidentified person lifting a bundle of what appears to be cardboard boxes, amongst other things.¹⁶³

The person is surrounded by trash, and in the background a heavy-duty wheel-loading tractor is also pictured. The tractor’s bucket extends across the left half of the image and just beyond the frame; it appears to clearly be in use, lifting and pushing mounds of trash aside.¹⁶⁴ The trope of adventure is invoked in this scene first from the sense of commotion and instability that the photograph pictures. It is an active scene that creates for the viewer, to quote Barthes on adventure again, an “internal agitation, an excitement...”¹⁶⁵ What is most likely dust, but what may also be construed as smoke, lifts from the ground near the tractor. The seagulls circling above look ready to swoop down

¹⁶² The notion of adventure continues into Urrea’s second book, *By the Lake of the Sleeping Children*, when Urrea recounts the times that he escorted American tourists who, after reading his first book, wanted to see, with their own eyes, the Tijuana garbage dump world. In these instances, Urrea refers to the trips/tours as safaris, which, I would argue, continues the trope of adventure. Urrea, *Across the Wire*, 9-10.
¹⁶³ Besides sorting through the trash to find necessary essentials, many of the folks that worked and lived in the Tijuana garbage dump collected recyclables like cardboard, aluminum, and other metals that they would then recycle as a way to make money.
¹⁶⁴ Tractors like this are often used in landfills and garbage dumps to indiscriminately move materials from one particular place to another, usually to make space for more garbage.
any second. As well, the person in the photograph is dwarfed by the size of the tractor. Their posture, although clearly lifting a bundle of trash, also appears defensive and unsure. Finally, the mounds of garbage on the ground, layered, twisted, and stacked on top of each other, create jagged and irregular lines in the photograph that underscore the sense of tension, agitation, and adventure. Similar feelings and tropes are called upon and intensified in the next photograph (see Figure 1.8).

Again, people, in this case two men in the middle ground of the image and perhaps a young boy in the right foreground, are pictured working amidst the garbage in the dump. The two men both grasp what appears to be a homemade pole for sifting through the trash. At the end of the pole we can see a garbage bag, similar to the many bags that line and dot the ground. In the background, barely visible through the dust, which again resembles smoke and adds to the sense of tension in the photograph, we see the cab of a tractor. This, again, lets us know the proximity of these folks to dangerous heavy machinery. Like the previous photograph, jagged, twisted, and irregular lines also mark this image and add to the sense of uneasiness. Overall, the two photographs together, along with the many similar photographs in *Inherit the Land*, emphasize a feeling of tension and danger that the trope of adventure is so often premised on.

But who experiences this danger and/or adventure? Or put differently, if a photograph is the object of three practices, which, as Barthes reminds us, are “to do, to undergo, [and] to look,”

166 Among other tools used, a pole with nails attached to the end of it was a common apparatus in the Tijuana garbage dumps.
167 For Barthes, “to do” refers to the act of taking a photograph, or to the role of the photographer; “to undergo” refers to the act of being photographed, or to the subject of the photograph; and “to look” refers to the spectator of the photograph. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9.
emphasized in the early images of *Inherit the Land*? I would suggest that adventure photographs like the two presented here tend toward emphasizing the practices of the *operator*, or the photographer, and the *spectator*, the viewer of the photograph, and dilute or override the practice of the people who are ultimately the subjects of the image.\(^{168}\)

We’ve already seen how the practice of the operator is emphasized clearly in Urrea’s narrative, by comparing it to being in a battle zone. As well, the following description from Urrea’s book *By the Lake of the Sleeping Children* is also revealing in terms of understanding for whom the notion of danger and adventure is emphasized: “Above us, the infinite swirl of gulls. And garbage hurricanes lift off all around us: the photographer thirty yards away…dwarfed by a whirlwind of trash—it rises twenty, thirty feet above his head, and he stands at the apex, shooting us…”\(^{169}\) The “infinite swirl of gulls” is reminiscent of the gulls circling above the scene in Figure 1.7, and the “garbage hurricane” perhaps helps to explain the huge churn of dust pictured in Figure 1.8. And yet, despite the dangers, the photographer, “dwarfed by a whirlwind of trash,” remains confident in his fearlessness, steady in his adventure, and stands “at the apex” confidently shooting his subjects.

Additionally, the photographs also emphasize the position and practice of the spectator. In other words, the photographs don’t simply invite us to stretch our imaginative faculties and picture the photographer’s adventure in the Tijuana garbage dump; they also implore us to imagine our own. Not only because, as Laura Wexler

\(^{168}\) Similar parallels could be drawn, for example, to the genre of travel literature, which often emphasizes the adventurous aspects of the trip itself, thus invoking the sense of adventure for both the writer and reader.

\(^{169}\) Urrea, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, 50.
might say it, the tensions in the pictures transport the spectator to the scene “by a kind of photographic ‘You Are There’,” but also because the spectator is visually invited to identify, and thus replace, the body of the photographed subject.\textsuperscript{170} Both of the images above, for example, picture specific people in the Tijuana garbage dump. Yet, the details of their identities are never made clear for the viewer. There is, in other words, a lack of specificity. In both photographs, the people pictured either have their back to the camera’s lens or are darkened to the point of becoming silhouettes. I would argue that these darkened or silhouetted figures represent both an analogy for the “racial other” and also an invitation for the spectator to see him or herself in that place. The silhouette, in other words, is that of an “abstract, general human being” that could very easily be \textit{our self}.\textsuperscript{171} The spectator is thus invited to imagine him or herself in that place of danger, precarity, and adventure. The photographs, then, draw meaning from the adventure and danger that the “white or near-white body” is placed in proximity to.\textsuperscript{172} Ultimately, then, the photographs are meant as tools for self-fashioning or, to quote Fanon once more, “[i]t is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility.”\textsuperscript{173}

The logic of the white body at risk, which supersedes the body of the “racial other” and thus provides additional meaning and visibility to the situation, is perhaps best exemplified by the photographic and narrative treatment of the person of Pastor Von. Pastor Von, whose real name is Earhardt George von Trutzschler III, is a bit of a legendary figure in the Tijuana garbage dump world. “Von-watchers,” writes Urrea,
“trade sightings of him like baseball cards. He’s like a combination of Woodrow Call and Gus McRae if they were wrapped up in a single body, knew the Bible, and were Rangering for Moses.”

Von was the founder of Spectrum Ministries and, for decades, led missionary workers not just in the Tijuana garbage dump but also in orphanages throughout the Mexican state of Baja California. Urrea often describes Von in very revered terms: as “God’s machine,” a “commander,” as “ever fearless,” and “inimitable.” For Urrea, Von’s ethic and superhuman efforts are comparable “in scope to Teresa of Calcutta’s.” In addition, much like Teresa gave witness to the plight of the poor, Von is also responsible for planting the seed of giving witness to the people of the Tijuana garbage dump. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Urrea recalls:

[Pastor Von] said, “Nobody who has access to this world writes books. You do. And you should write about the—you should give witness to these people.” …it hadn’t occurred to me. And it certainly had not occurred to me to write nonfiction. So I started keeping notes, right? And I was keeping notes. And the moment, you talk about my—this is my Damascus Road moment, I'll confess to you.


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174 Urrea, By the Lake of Sleeping Children, 28.
175 Urrea, Across the Wire, 170.
176 Urrea, By the Lake of Sleeping Children, 29.
177 Urrea, Across the Wire, 67.
178 Leuders-Booth, Inherit the Land, ix.
179 Ibid.
180 Indeed, it would seem that the idea of “giving witness” and documenting it was an important one to Von. This is evident on his personal website, where he provides many photographs and videos of his missionary work all over the world and particularly in Tijuana. However, Von problematically frames his missionary work as giving witness to “exotic people and exotic places.” He stresses the otherness of the people he works with. One section of his website, for example, informs the visitor that they can watch videos of “tribal people as they live in they’re world.” [sic] Earhardt George von Trutzschler III., “PASTORVON.com (E.G. von Trutzschler),” accessed January 6, 2014, http://www.pastorvon.com/.
Von, then, serves as a very important figure in this story. In fact, out of the many pictures in Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land* and both of Urrea’s books, only four of them picture missionary work: Pastor Von is in all four of those photographs.

I would also argue that the narrative and photographs often represent him as a consecrated figure. This is evident, for example, in Figure 1.9. The photograph depicts what appears to be a scene from one of the temporary weekly showers that Von and Spectrum Ministries would coordinate for the Tijuana garbage dump community. This appears to be the boys’ shower area. About a dozen boys, as well as three missionary workers, are pictured in the scene. Of the many people in this image, only some of the boys and Von, who stands to the left holding a shower hose over one of the boys, are recognizable. The two men who also appear to be missionary workers stand in the background with their backs to the camera. Here, Von is depicted in one of the tasks that brought him to Tijuana every week for decades. He literally helps to wash the boys’ naked bodies, and thus we could argue that, on a weekly basis, Von metaphorically cleanses them of their poverty. If poverty is a sign that can be read through the dirt on the body, then Von is the person who purifies their bodies. In other words, if, as Ann McClintock persuasively argues in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, “dirt expresses a relation of social value,” then the scene of the shower expresses the impulse to make these dirty bodies clean—similar to the impulse that seeks

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182 Von’s name even, with its three letters and one syllable, is suggestive and perhaps invokes the figure of “God.”

183 As “irregular settlements,” the homes in the Tijuana garbage dump lack many basic utilities like running water. Thus, the showers were one important service that Spectrum Ministries provided to the community.
to brand these bodies with a certain level of humanity—in order to essentially make them more socially valuable.\(^{184}\)

But the image of the showers depicted above also speaks to other crucial aspects of this encounter. First, it illumines the inherent power of those that do the cleaning. More specifically, the consecrated figure of Von is here pictured baptizing the boys into a cleaner and better life, at least temporarily. Ultimately, then, I would suggest that his power to provide showers for them—to baptize them into a more socially valuable life—is a power over them.

Additionally, dirt and cleanliness also help to illumine the racialized contours of this encounter in particular. Here, again, I invoke McClintock’s arguments around dirt and being dirty and the ways they relate to “racial difference.” McClintock, whose focus is on Victorian Britain, explains that dirt, or being dirty, was perceived during this time as an “abnormal” state. She also argues that this “abnormal” state helped mark and constitute its opposite: whatever it was that was perceived as “normal” and proper. In other words, in 19\(^{th}\) century England, the “normal”—whether it was the “‘normal’ economy of heterosexual marriage” or the “‘normal’ economy of capital exchange”—was “legitimized and made natural by reference to…the ‘abnormal’ zone of the primitive and the irrational.”\(^{185}\) This “abnormal zone of the primitive and the irrational,” was ultimately tied to and premised on perceived “racial difference[s].”\(^{186}\) As such, for example, “abnormal” class and gender differences—whether they be related to “dirty” work or

\(^{184}\) Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 152.  
\(^{185}\) Ibid., 154.  
\(^{186}\) Ibid.
“dirty” sexuality—were “displaced and represented as natural racial differences across time and space: the difference between the ‘enlightened’ present and the ‘primitive’ past.”

Likewise, I would argue that the relationship between the dirty (the “abnormal”) and clean (the “normal”) that is photographically expressed in the above image is also premised on perceived racial differences. Indeed, the image seems explicit in this regard: those that are in need of cleaning and washing—those that inhabit the “abnormal” space of the dirty—are the brown bodies in the image. Whereas those that do the cleaning—that provide the dirty bodies temporary relief into the space of the normal—are the white bodies.

Two other photographs of Von (Figure 1.10 and Figure 1.11), both of which are featured in Urrea’s Across the Wire, picture him as a selfless source of charity. Figure 1.10 portrays Von with a group of young boys. Although it is difficult to say with certainty what Von is doing here, he appears to be marking the boys’ hands. He wears his Spectrum Ministries t-shirt, and we can perhaps assume that he is marking their hands as a way to track who will receive or partake in Spectrum Ministries’ popular milk and doughnuts offering. For their part, the boys eagerly watch and stretch their hands out toward Von, who looks down upon them. They seem both interested and excited to be marked by him. Figure 1.11 pictures Von with a group as well, only this time the group is slightly older. This image appears in Chapter 9 of Luis Alberto Urrea’s Across the Wire, entitled “Meet the Satánicos.” The chapter itself is dedicated to describing the activities of the Satánicos, which was a street gang that had formed in one of the colonias

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187 Ibid.
188 The word, “Satánico,” could be used to describe either one who worships Satan or who acts in evil and wicked ways.
adjacent to the dump. The photograph shows Von meeting with three young men, perhaps members of the Satánicos. Von and the young man with the baseball cap both extend their arms out to greet each other. Von is slightly taller than the young men in the photograph and, like the photograph of Von with the young boys, he appears to look down upon them. The image, which is included in a chapter that describes the exploits of the Satánicos, including knife fights, seems to underscore the fearlessness and selflessness of Von. Only Von, it seems, could enter into this space to meet with a dangerous group of young men. The image also attempts to convey Von’s piety, which, as Urrea’s narrative informs us, is the source of his charity. This is conveyed not only through the way in which the image documents a meeting between Von and a street gang named after Satan, but also because the light in the background of the photograph, perhaps from a light bulb, appears to hover just next to Von’s head. Considering Lueders-Booth’s use of lighting in his other Tijuana photographs, then, this angle, which captures the light near Von’s head certainly seems intentional in the way that it roughly resembles a halo.

Although he is not foregrounded in any of the three previous photographs, I would argue that Von is indeed their primary subject. The picture of the showers, for example, seems to suggest that the boy in the middle of the frame, who flexes his muscles, is the primary subject. However, I would argue that his state of undress and his wet body instead remind and point us toward Von, who stands slightly to the left, yields the shower hose, and thus serves as the main subject. Additionally, and particularly in the second and third photographs, all of the attention seems to be directed toward Von. The “other” subjects in the photographic frame either look directly at him or at the actions
he’s engaged in. Furthermore, the fact that he is the only American we can identify in the photographs gives specific attention to his presence amongst a group of tijuanenses.

In my interpretation, making Von the center of attention has a two-fold effect. First, it helps to mark these photographic encounters as safe encounters with “racial difference.” In other words, Von’s white body serves almost as a prop to mark the encounter with the “racial other.” Again, the fact that he is the only American we can identify—amongst a group of “racial others” that help fill in the photographic frames and are perhaps indistinguishable to the glancing eye—helps make this point. When understood in this way, these images, and particularly the image of Von meeting with the Satánicos, recall Coco Fusco’s argument regarding photography’s ability to “rende[r] and delive[r] interracial encounters that might be dangerous, forbidden, or unattainable as a safe and consumerable experiences.”

Secondly, to make Von’s white body the center of attention reminds the assumed viewer of his or her own white body at risk. To put a finer point on it, the nearness of Von’s white body to the body of the “racial other”—indeed, Von’s white body is even in direct contact with the body of the “racial other”—prompts the spectator to associate the tribulations of the “racial other’s” body with Von’s white body, and thus their own. My assertion here follows Ruby Tapia’s examination of photographs of Princess Diana with Angolan children who’ve been injured by war. She writes, “[by] virtue of her physical

\[\text{\textsuperscript{189}}\] Benito Vergara, Jr., makes a similar point in \textit{Displaying Filipinos}. Examining a photograph of American Dean Worcester, who was a member of the United States Philippine Commission, surrounded by a group of Filipinos from the northern province of Kalinga, Vergara argues that the photograph—in particular the way in which the Kalingas fill the “photographic space from left to right, and top to bottom”—draws our attention to Worcester despite the fact that he is not centered in the image. Vergara, \textit{Displaying Filipinos}, 84.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{190}}\] Fusco, “Racial Times, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors,” 20.
proximity to these black children—all of whom have been somehow physically injured by the land-mine explosions—Diana becomes associated with, and herself a victim of, the same atrocities these children experience.”

Likewise, Von’s proximity to the bodies of tijuanenses who have been ravaged by the realities of poverty, or the violences of street gang life, serves to associate the white body with those same ravaged realities and violences. The violence of their suffering, in other words, is ultimately occluded by the white body’s association with that same violence, with that same suffering. Ultimately, then, the bodies of the photographed “racial other” become secondary to our own. “[I]t is The Other,” Fanon reminds us, “who corroborates him in his search for self-validation.”

Suffering for Von, however, and as an extension for the spectator/reader, becomes even more “real” in a scene from Urrea’s Across the Wire. Recounting Von’s commitment to missionary work through Spectrum Ministries, Urrea writes: “I was never able to reach Von’s level of commitment. The time he caught scabies, he allowed it to flourish in order to grasp the suffering of those from whom it originated. He slept on the floor because the majority of the world’s population could not afford a bed.” Again, Von is here depicted as a selfless and devoted man. Urrea cites Von’s encounter with scabies and his refusal to sleep on a bed as examples of the deep level of “commitment” that Urrea himself, and perhaps no other missionary worker, could match. Von, then, is placed in a position of privilege even amongst other missionary workers in Tijuana. But this type of “commitment” is curious, and indeed unsettling, not merely because of the

191 Tapia, American Pietàs, 58.
192 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 213.
physical pain and discomfort that it creates for Von, but also because of the way in which it prompts yet another substitution of bodies. The pain of scabies and the discomfort of sleeping on the floor are now features attributable to and visible on the body of Von, and thus the body of the “racial other,” the body “from whom [the scabies] originated,” for example, is concealed or made unseen in the process.\textsuperscript{194}

Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* provides us a good framework for understanding this type of action. In her discussion of the tactics and strategies employed by abolitionists—in particular those tactics in abolitionist literature that would imaginatively replace the body of the suffering slave with the body of the similarly suffering abolitionist—Hartman draws attention to this all “too-easy intimacy” on the white abolitionist’s part as an act of violence (albeit not one that was certainly intended in that way, but a violence nonetheless) insofar as it essentially reduces the body of the slave to nothing.\textsuperscript{195} “For in making the other’s suffering one’s one,” she writes, “this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration.”\textsuperscript{196} This is essentially what she refers to as the “violence of identification,” and it is a racialized violence to the extent that it’s premised on the underlying assumption that the “white or near-white body” is necessary to “[make] the captive’s suffering visible and discernible.”\textsuperscript{197} Likewise, I would argue that Von’s actions are premised on a similar assumption. To make the suffering of poverty visible, Von must literally position himself in the place of those bodies “from whom [the pain]

\begin{footnotes}
\item[194] Ibid.
\item[196] Ibid., 19.
\item[197] Ibid., 20.
\end{footnotes}
originated…”" Ultimately, then, the materiality of poverty can only really be verified or recognized when it marks white bodies.199 The bodies of tijuanenses, again, are forgotten and obscured.

But what happens, then, when the bodies of tijuanenses are not forgotten but instead purposefully left out? What do pictures of poverty express when the body, which oftentimes acts as the icon or sign of poverty, is excluded from the photographic frame? Does the spectator’s “line of orientation” or “subjective security” break or rupture?200 Does the photograph, then, fail to animate the spectator’s subjectivity in light of the fact that it purposefully fails to picture what Barthes refers to as the “detestable body”?201 Does the complicity of racial ideology and visual technology come into question with this type of strategy? These questions, and others, help frame the next chapter, which shifts our attention to the photographic work of Tijuanense photographer Ingrid Hernández.

198 Urrea, Across the Wire, 28.
199 As well, I would argue that Urrea uses a similar literary strategy of identification for his readers in other sections of his narrative. For example, in one early vivid section of Across the Wire, Urrea often utilizes the second person perspective and its consequent pronouns, “you,” “your,” and “yours,” while he recounts a devastating journey from southern Mexico up to Tijuana, only to then end up living and working in the Tijuana garbage dump. As he later writes, “You’re a garbage-picker in the Tijuana dump.” Urrea, Across the Wire, 12-19. Urrea, By the Lake of Sleeping Children, 13.
200 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 212.
201 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 18.
Unsettling Photography: Ingrid Hernández, Suspended Spectatorship, and the Haunting of Space

“But there exists other values that fit only my forms.”

– Frantz Fanon

When Ingrid Hernández’s grandmother Alicia decided to move to Tijuana with her six children and husband during the 1950s, she did so to leave behind a precarious situation in Mexico City. Already widowed twice and having a difficult time finding work in the capital, she decided to instead go north toward the border, toward Tijuana, where there were “a lot of opportunities to work…” She carried one box of clothing during the trip north, and when they got to Tijuana, they rented a small place where the entire family slept in one room. They found work in the tourist-driven restaurant industry and, after a few years, Alicia decided she wanted to open up her own establishment. She borrowed money, chairs, and tables and eventually was able to open the doors of a restaurant she called Licha’s Place. It was right down the street from the famous Agua Caliente Racetrack in Tijuana, near the large fork in the road where Paseo de los Héroes and Bulevar Agua Caliente, two of Tijuana’s largest streets, intersect. Because of its proximity to the racetrack, then, the regular crowd at Licha’s Place was a motley assortment of Jockeys, TV personalities, artists, American tourists, and locals—all with an itch to gamble.

Licha’s Place was also Ingrid Hernández's childhood home. She grew up there with her grandmother and with one of her uncles. They shared the basement space

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underneath the restaurant. That space served as living room and bedroom, while the first floor, where the restaurant was, acted as kitchen and dining room. Hernández remembers, “Ahí tuve mis fiestas, ahí me regañaba mi abuela, ahí tuve todo eso que tiene que ver con la parte intima y personal de las familias, pero ocurría en un espacio público.”

Perhaps this type of living arrangement, which Hernández has called “a little unstructured,” is what she means with her claim that Tijuana is “anomalous in a normal kind of way.” And, as Fiamma Montezemolo suggests in a recent interview with Hernández, perhaps this “house” is the force that drives her photographic art practice today, leading her to focus her camera's lens on the exterior and interior spaces of some of Tijuana's poorest homes.

Ingrid Hernández’s photography serves as the focal point of this chapter. Although Hernández’s catalogue is vast, for the purposes of this thesis I narrow my examination of her work to her photographic project entitled Indoor. Ultimately, this chapter aims to configure Hernández’s photographic work as a direct counterbalance to the work of Lueders-Booth from the previous chapter. If, as Shawn Michelle Smith argues in Photography on the Color Line, “each photograph enters a visual terrain that has been mapped and codified by other photographs,” then the terrain that Hernández’s

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203 “That’s where I spent my holidays, that’s where I was scolded by my grandmother, that’s where I experienced all those things that are associated with the intimate and personal aspects of family life, only they occurred in a public space.” Christian Zúñiga, “Fotografía y realidad social. Tres fotógrafos de Tijuana,” (unpublished working paper presented at the Tercer Congreso Internacional Facetas, Facultad de Ciencias Administrativas y Sociales de la Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Ensenada, June 6-9, 2011). http://www.ingridhernandez.com.mx/sites/default/files/downloads/ponencias/christianzuniga.pdf.


images pass through is certainly one that has been, to a certain extent, “mapped” and “codified” by the photographic work of John Lueders-Booth.\textsuperscript{206} Seeing as their photographic productions occupy a similar \textit{visual terrain}, then, they are bound together in many ways—in terms of place, subject matter, and, in some respects, in the processes of their production. As such, I hold their projects together for a comparative analysis, or as “visualities-in-relation.”\textsuperscript{207}

In using this analytic strategy, I invoke both Shawn Michelle Smith’s \textit{Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture} and Ruby Tapia’s \textit{American Pietàs: Visions of Race, Death, and the Maternal}. In her study of the photographs that W.E.B. Du Bois compiled for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Shawn Michelle Smith models a “critically comparative interpretive visual methodology…”\textsuperscript{208} This methodological approach, Smith argues, allows one to “find photographic meaning in the interstices between [images], in the challenges they pose to one another, and in the competing claims they make…”\textsuperscript{209} Likewise, Ruby Tapia’s study of race, death, and the maternal makes a compelling case for the generative possibilities of juxtaposing visual objects, particularly as this juxtaposition helps to uncover differences that speak to the material relations of race. Focusing on the maternal body, Tapia argues that examining the relationships and dissimilarities between images of motherhood provides the analytical scaffolding necessary to “reveal the ideologies that

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{207} Tapia, \textit{American Pietàs}, 14.
\textsuperscript{208} Smith, \textit{Photography on the Color Line}, 3.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
differentially fix maternal bodies in material and discursive proximity to racialized threats of annihilation and promises of resurrection.”\textsuperscript{210}

If we understand the logics of a \textit{comparative interpretive visual methodology} or of \textit{visualities-in-relation} through Barthesian language for just a moment, then we could argue that their focus is on the \textit{observed subjects} of the visual objects in relation or juxtaposition.\textsuperscript{211} In other words, in order to reveal how bodies are racialized and “differentially fix[ed],” the primary point of emphasis is, logically, the bodies depicted and represented. And this is, of course, as both Smith and Tapia show us, a generative approach.

However, as we’ll see more specifically in the coming chapter, the work of Ingrid Hernández compels us to adjoin to this an examination of Barthes’s “subject observing”\textsuperscript{212}—the spectator of the photographs. Put differently, an analysis of the \textit{visualities-in-relation} in this chapter—Hernández’s and Lueders-Booth’s photographs—is made only more robust through attention to the ways in which those visualities can be differently observed or looked at. As such, I focus my attention not only on the differences between these photographs—specific aesthetic and conceptual differences \textit{in the work}—but also, and perhaps most importantly, on how those differences come to bear on the terms by which a spectator engages with each photograph.

If, as we saw in chapter 1, Lueders-Booth’s photographs ultimately serve as the completion or the realization of what Gerhard Richter has called the spectator’s “identity-

\\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{210} Tapia, American Pietàs, 14.}\]
\\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{211} Barthes, Camera Lucida, 10.}\]
\\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.}\]
seeking gaze,”—in other words, as vessels for the white spectator’s power of self-making—then I’d like to suggest that Hernández’s work unsettles this type of spectatorship by refusing to capitulate to the demands of white self-making through the body of the racialized “other.” Rather than quick identification, which serves to fortify the subjectivity of the spectator, Hernández’s photographic work suspends or delays the act of spectatorship, makes it a matter of waiting by insisting that the spectator inhabit a space of pensiveness—as Barthes might call it—or, to invoke Fanon, the space of the interval.

To put a finer point on it, I linger on these notions in Barthes’s and Fanon’s work just a bit. In Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, Roland Barthes, in part, delves into what he calls photography’s “critical power” and contemplates what types of photographs are “critical enough to disturb.” When Barthes uses the phrase “critical enough to disturb,” what I understand him to mean is that certain photographs serve to interfere with normative modes of perception to ultimately unsettle dominant modes of thought. In other words, Barthes seems to imply that certain photographs can act as catalysts for “critical” thought, awareness, inquiry, and reflection. As such, he briefly explores the differences between photographs whose primary function is to “shock” and “surprise” and photographs that, on the other hand, provoke pensiveness. Barthes refers to the photograph that provokes only shock as the “unary photograph.” The unary photograph—“like a shop window which shows only one illuminated piece of

214 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 38.
215 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 140.
216 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 36.
217 Ibid., 40.
jewelry...completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing...”—ultimately fails to produce pensiveness because its aim is singular: shock. When a photograph, however, produces pensiveness, its aim and meaning are not singularly driven. Instead, the pensive photograph is open. The possibilities of its perception are multiple and varied, and this is the type of photograph that is “critical enough to disturb.”

“Ultimately,” Barthes reminds us, “photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks.”

Similarly, Kara Keeling’s re-reading of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* illuminates a space that, like the pensive photograph, remains open or, “swimming with possibilities and, less perceptible but no less immediate, impossibilities.” This is the space of the interval. Here, the details of Keeling’s arguments and observations about Fanon’s explication of cinematic spectatorship—which we can then relate to photographic spectatorship—helps us to understand the space of the interval more clearly and thus are worth more attention. In her book, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, Keeling spends considerable time excavating through Chapter 5 of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, which is entitled “The Fact of Blackness.” She offers an alternative reading of key passages and argues that “The Fact of Blackness” is more than an investigation of the experience of the black man. Instead, it is a “delineation of the set of constraints and limitations that colonization

218 Ibid., 41.
219 Ibid., 36.
220 Emphasis in original. Ibid., 38.
places on epistemological and ontological projects more generally.”\textsuperscript{222} One such limitation that Keeling discusses in depth is the “temporality of colonial existence.”\textsuperscript{223} In terms of its relationship to blackness, Keeling, following Fanon, argues that this temporal structure is cyclical and closed, and thus limiting: “past images, stories, and the like constantly overwhelm perceptions of his present...[the] circuit thereby created seems to be closed—there is no possibility of a conception of a future that could be different from the colonial past.”\textsuperscript{224}

And yet, Keeling recognizes in Fanon’s writing a time and space, in the interval between the completion of each cycle, that is open and, as she says, “swimming with possibilities...”\textsuperscript{225} She recognizes this by bringing together Fanon’s definition of himself (“I would say that I am one who waits.”\textsuperscript{226}) with his description of cinematic spectatorship (“I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me...”).\textsuperscript{227} For Keeling, Fanon’s use of the word, “wait,” is important. “Waiting can connote not only expectation or anticipation,” she writes, “but also a sense of enduring without something expected or promised...[and] the sense of enduring also foregrounds the way that the time Fanon posits in the interval, just before the film starts, is open.”\textsuperscript{228} For Keeling, it is this waiting that holds open the

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{226} Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, 120.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{228} Keeling, \textit{The Witch’s Flight}, 38.
possibilities for the impossible. The interval, this space of waiting, like Barthes’s pensiveness, then, becomes “critical enough to disturb.”

In this way—by making spectatorship a matter of waiting, a pensive act, a suspended act in which the viewer of the photographs endures “without something expected or promised,”—Hernández’s photographs shift the terms by which a viewer engages with photography. This shift is ultimately predicated, of course, on several aesthetic and conceptual choices that Hernández makes. As such, this chapter proceeds by way of briefly surveying some of those choices and strategies and highlighting how each specifically differs from Lueders-Booth’s work—which rather than wait, gives instant identification; rather than endure, offers exactly what the spectator expects or demands.

It’s worth mentioning, as well, that the last section of this chapter briefly pays attention to one very important difference: what Hernández’s work tells us about the city of Tijuana. This difference is significant to mention insofar as it speaks to larger issues concerning the way academics, cultural critics, curators, and others north of the border approach the city. If, for example, Lueders-Booth approaches and pictures Tijuana through a pre-formed, ready-made rubric—one that hopes to incorporate the city into the visual terrain of poverty previously mapped by other social documentary photographers—then Hernández’s picturing of her city unsettles that approach by radically diverging from it. Before moving on, however, the next section of this chapter seeks to briefly contextualize Hernández’s work.

229 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 36.
**Through My Camera**

Ingrid Hernández was born in the old Hospital Civil in Tijuana in 1974.\(^{231}\) In an interview with anthropologist and artist Fiamma Montezemolo, which was published as part of the 2012 anthology, *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border,* Hernández briefly retells a bit about her upbringing in Tijuana. She says:

My story is a typical tijuanense story about migration, a very female-oriented story about hard work, but still my story is quite an anomaly…I was raised with a different type of family, not the kind that my classmates at school had: they had a dad, mom, siblings, and generally they all lived together in the same house. I lived in the restaurant with my grandmother and an uncle...So I saw my mom and my brother on the weekend every now and then, but sometimes more time would pass and we wouldn’t see each other for weeks. I related to my mom and my brother in a weird way, like we were just relatives, like cousins.\(^{232}\)

About her childhood home, Licha’s Place, Hernández recalls:

I never lived in a house that was, say, normal. All kinds of people would come to eat there...For me, public space was my space, it was an addition to what was my own. I felt like the street was part of my house and part of me, because my house in reality was a very large room that was under the restaurant. There was no separation between the living room and my bedroom. There was a bed with a bookshelf and an armchair that was part of the living room. There was no dining room or kitchen because we ate in the restaurant. There was no bathroom inside; the bathroom was outside. It was a little unstructured. Well, to be honest, it wasn’t exactly a home!\(^{233}\)

These brief excerpts from Hernández’s interview with Montezemolo help us begin to understand a bit about Hernández’s interests in space, homes, and family/domestic life. The way she discusses space is particularly interesting, as notions of public and private space seem to almost blend together in her retelling of what it meant to live in a place that

\(^{231}\) Christia Zúñiga, “Fotografía y realidad social. Tres fotógrafos de Tijuana.”
\(^{233}\) Ibid., 241.
was both a home and a restaurant. It’s no surprise, then, that many of the themes Hernández explores through her camera revolve around ideas of space and the home. But how did Hernández become interested in photography and in the particular homes she pictures?

Hernández’s interest in photography emerged in two stages. The first stage of her interest began in her youth, and the second materialized years later. When she was 15, she says, she enrolled in small, local photography workshops and began to carry a camera with her. She rode her bicycle around the neighborhood and would stop to take pictures of homes: “my neighbor’s houses, all of them from the outside, nothing from the inside.” After a while, she decided to focus on pictures of people, mostly her friends: “So I did portraits, but that was only for a short time.” This affinity for photography, for using the camera as part of her exploration of her neighborhood space, marked her adolescent years.

However, when Hernández started college at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC), she left photography behind. Her emphasis for the next handful of years shifted. At UABC, Hernández studied Sociology. After finishing her undergraduate degree, she then matriculated at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in its Environmental Management program. Hernández admits to not having enjoyed her graduate program at COLEF. As such, she began to pay more attention to creative projects and, in particular, to the camera she had years earlier left behind. Here, then, is

\[234\] Ibid., 243.
\[235\] Ibid.
\[236\] One possible reason for this is that established art and photography programs and departments did not become part of Tijuana’s academic institutions until much later; only recently, in fact.
where Hernández’s second stage of attention to/interest in photography inaugurates. After she completed her graduate degree, she sought out and was given opportunities to work on creative projects.

More specifically, Hernández worked on two projects that she has described as influential in determining to focus more of her work and attention on photography. Interestingly enough, both projects were documentary film productions. She was a producer for *Que suene la calle* (2006) by Itzel Martínez and a production assistant for *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006) by Sergio de la Torre and Vicky Funari. *Que suene la calle* is a documentary film that follows the lives of four young women struggling to survive on the streets of Tijuana, while *Maquilápolis: City of Factories*, as Tarek Elhaik describes it, “explores the daily lives of women who work in Tijuana’s maquilas (assembly plants located in so-called free-trade zones) through poignant interviews, and reflects on the state of the factory economy and culture in contemporary Tijuana.”

These two experiences had a major impact on Hernández insofar as they helped solidify her return to exploring different spaces of the city, pressed her to consider issues of representation, and exposed her to what architect and writer Teddy Cruz calls an “urbanism of emergency.”

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238 Although a more thorough and critical analysis would be required, both of these films, to a certain degree, explore issues of representation and self-representation by handing the video camera over to the subjects of the film.

out, “el interés sobre este tema surgió en ella cuando apoyaba en la realización de un
documental…y observó las construcciones realizadas por los habitantes de esta zona.”

Hernández herself recalls this:

> These jobs took me back into urban space and into close contact with people…once
> again, I started to relate to the city through my camera. I went out in my car—not on my
> rollerskates or my bike anymore—and took pictures of the city: the houses, the
> neighborhoods, the mountains covered with never-ending buildings. I remember I went
> out to the edges of the city to find out where it ended, what it was growing into, how it
> was growing, what it was like.

Hernández’s photographic interests, then, although certainly present in her younger years,
really began to flourish during this time.

But Hernández wasn’t the only one with an interest in the ways that Tijuana was
developing, particularly in its quickly expanding irregular settlements. In fact, these
irregular settlements are a large component of what tijuanense writer and architect René
Peralta has described as “La Nueva Tijuana, the New Tijuana.” Peralta argues that this
“Nueva Tijuana” has recently garnered much attention, especially from folks north of the
border. “New Tijuana,” he writes, “became the poster child of informality, where
academics, artists, and social scientists catalogued, documented, and photographed the
creative methods of construction, resiliency, and survival.”

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240 Translation: “The interest in this subject [photographing irregular settlements] came about when she
worked on the production of a documentary…and she witnessed the buildings constructed by the
inhabitants of this area.” Patricia Blake, “Expone vivienda en fotografía,” *Frontera*, accessed January 27,


242 Peralta points out that much of Tijuana’s population lives in these types of settlements—a population he
describes, in part, as “immigrants from diverse socioeconomic levels and distinct regions of the country,
with each bringing their own customs and traditions into a mix of tastes and fantasies in the city…” René

243 Ibid. More analysis on the competing discourses around the Tijuana’s “informal” and “irregular”
settlements is required, however. A certain strand of these discourses—set forth by journalists, curators,
While Ingrid Hernández can perhaps be grouped together with others who have expressed an interest in “New Tijuana,” I would argue that her approach toward picturing these fast-expanding areas of the city differs greatly. Rather than employing a framework that celebrates the creativity and resiliency of these residents or that leans toward exoticism and exploitation—both of which seem premised on short levels of interaction and, to quote Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez, tend to “reduce the complex realities of place to a set of markers”—Hernández’s interactions are instead “born out of the quotidian” and invested in picturing “the drama embedded in the reality of the everyday.” This sort of approach requires a different methodology and way of picturing—one that, as we shall see, differs from that of John Lueders-Booth as well.

**Color, Truth, Power, and Photography**

Before moving on to what I see as some of the dissimilarities in the photographic works of John Lueders-Booth and Ingrid Hernández that, as mentioned, dramatically shift the mode of spectatorship, this section briefly explores a few other differences in their work. To be clear, I don’t mean to suggest that the differences discussed in this section are somehow inconsequential. Indeed these differences—how Hernández and Lueders-Booth seem to conceptualize photography’s truth-telling imperatives, the aesthetic academics, and artists—seems uncritically celebratory. One could argue, in fact, that the celebration of ingenuity, creativity, and resiliency (oftentimes presented as a “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” type of story) exemplified by the residents of these irregular settlements problematically parallels dominant neoliberal discourses that stress individual responsibility and overlook or deliberately conceal larger structural issues and concerns.


246 Cruz, “Practices of Encroachment,” 189.
choices they make in their shooting, and the processes and/or methods by which each photographer produces their work—are crucial and important to point out because they help us to understand “the challenges they pose to one another,” and, “the competing claims” each photographer makes.²⁴⁷

At a very basic level, we see a difference in terms of their choices to shoot in either black-and-white or in color. Beyond a simple aesthetic choice, however, I would suggest that this difference also helps to underscore the divergent conceptions that Lueders-Booth and Hernández have about the “nature and status of the photograph,” and, in particular, photography’s truth-telling imperatives and abilities.²⁴⁸ Despite previously shooting in color, John Lueders-Booth’s Tijuana photographs are all shot in what Ruby Tapia has called the “aesthetic of black-and-white realism.”²⁴⁹ This choice, then, was a conscious one for Lueders-Booth—one that I have suggested he made because his photographic work in Tijuana was premised on the ready-made rubric popularized by previous social documentary photographers, all of whom shot in black-and-white.

However, this choice is important for other reasons as well. In his book, Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma, Ulrich Baer points out that black-and-white in photographs can oftentimes serve as the “code for authenticity.”²⁵⁰ Furthermore, and building on the work of theorist Vilém Flusser, Baer goes on to argue that, “Black-and-

²⁴⁷ Smith, Photography on the Color Line, 3.
²⁴⁸ John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 60. Tagg’s study is particularly useful in terms of understanding how the relationship between photography and truth is inextricably linked to what he calls “emerging apparatuses of a new and more penetrating form of the state.” Likewise, Benito Vergara, Jr. argues that the link between photography and truth is inextricably tied to the expansion of colonialist ideology. Vergara, Displaying Filipinos, 3-14.
²⁴⁹ Tapia, “Race, Class, and the Photopolitics of Maternal Re-vision,” 387.
white photographs…create the illusion that the world, when broken into black-and-white, and thus perfectly opposable elements, ‘would be accessible to logical analysis’.”251 In other words, the choice to shoot in black-and-white can be read as somehow related to the “illusion” of a “perfectly opposable” world—one we can attain knowledge about and understand. In the context of Holocaust photography, which Baer, in part, focuses on in his book, the notions of good and evil express this opposition, and, as he argues, find their “representational correlates in black-and-white photographs.”252

Looking at Lueders-Booth’s photographs through this logic, then, I would argue that the choice to shoot in black-and-white serves to underscore the opposition of another set of abstractions: true and false. In other words, the underlying assumption for Lueders-Booth when he shoots in black-and-white seems to be that a black-and-white photograph is somehow truer than a color photograph—truer in the sense that the black-and-white image, unencumbered by the distractions that color might provoke or invite, seems to provide a more direct connection between the photograph’s subject, the photographer’s intention, and the spectator. In this sense then, Lueders-Booth’s decision to shoot in black-and-white becomes a bit clearer for us, insofar as it highlights Leuders-Booth’s investment in the camera’s ability to capture the truth of a situation or scenario. This type of investment, however, not only reifies photography, the photograph, the photographer, and the spectator as either tools or witnesses for truth, but also makes photography into what Benito Vergara, Jr. describes as a “privileged mode of obtaining knowledge.”253

251 Ibid., 151-152.
252 Ibid., 152.
253 Vergara, Displaying Filipinos, 4.
Ingrid Hernández’s aesthetic choices, however, seem to be driven by a fundamentally different understanding of photography. If Lueders-Booth believes in the camera’s ability to capture the truth of the tijuanense situation—and, as a result, move the spectator/witness to action—then Hernández’s photography goes in a different direction entirely. Rather than recognizing photography as a tool of truth, Hernández ultimately sees photography and photographs as constructions. The language that she uses to describe her work—both on her website and in interviews—is very telling in this regard. In the “Statement” section of her website, for example, Hernández describes her work in the following way: “*Construyo imágenes* que invitan a la contemplación de los espacios acentuando el orden y el modo en que se acomodan los objetos dentro del entorno doméstico.” As well, other sections of her website echo this idea of construction with phrases such as, “...la idea es *construir una imagen*...” and “...busco *construir una imagen*...” In these examples, it becomes clear that photographs, for Hernández, are not “index[es] of social ills,” but instead *constructions* of and by the photographer.

Additionally, Hernández’s understanding of photography as constructed becomes evident in the language she uses in interviews. In a conversation with Fiamma Montezemolo, for example, Hernández says, “I’m not interested in holding myself up as a spokesperson that has arrived to reveal the truth to my audience, those people who have not been in contact with the families I work with and who want to know something about

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255 Emphasis added. Translation: “…the idea is to construct an image…”
256 Emphasis added. Translation: “…I seek to construct an image…”
them.” In this statement, Hernández not only makes a clear renouncement of the role of the photographer as “spokesperson” for “truth,” thus unsettling common and dominant conceptions of photography’s direct relationship to truth, but she also uses the word, “audience,” to characterize the spectators of her photographs. Whereas the spectators of Lueders-Booth’s photographs are consistently positioned as *witnesses* to the photographic truth of tijuanense suffering, Hernández unsettles this by positioning the spectators of her photographs as “audience,” which only serves to emphasize the constructedness and performativity of the photograph and of photography. When we think of photography in this way—as a construction or performance—Hernández’s choice to shoot in color, then, might serve as a counterbalance to the preponderance of black-and-white photos that abound in poverty’s photographic archive. In other words, if the *audience* of the photographs of the poor has become accustomed to a black-and-white aesthetic, then to shoot photographs of poverty in color works to both unsettle those expectations and bring into focus the constructedness of those representations.

Another important aspect in which Lueders-Booth and Hernández differ is in their method of producing their photographs. This difference ultimately hinges on dissimilar power dynamics between the photographer and his or her “subjects.” We saw in chapter 1 that Lueders-Booth was introduced to those he pictured by Pastor Von and Luis Alberto Urrea. This type of introduction, I suggested, meant that the power dynamics were inevitably slanted in Lueders-Booth’s direction. In other words, although Lueders-Booth may have felt free to photograph who, what, and where he pleased—because he, as Luis

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Alberto Urrea claims, was “welcomed…into their kitchens and bedrooms, their churches and their bathrooms”\textsuperscript{259}—he did so with a certain level of inherent authority.

Urrea, on the other hand, seems to go to great lengths to argue that the relationship Lueders-Booth had with the Tijuana garbage pickers was one established and based on a certain level of egalitarianism or equity. He points to the amount of time that Lueders-Booth spent in Tijuana—1990 through 1998—as indisputable evidence of some sort of genuine relationship. Although in the aggregate, it would seem that one could make the argument that Lueders-Booth spent a significant amount of time in Tijuana, it’s important to not lose sight of the fact that these trips to Tijuana were intermittent and made specifically for the purposes of picturing the people and spaces of the garbage dump. Urrea also tells us that, at some point, Lueders-Booth began to take portraits of the families and that he left the portraits as gifts for them. “Many of these,” Urrea informs us, “were the first portraits they had ever sat for, and in many of the shacks in the barrio, you will find 8x10 and 16x24 black-and-white fine art prints tacked to the walls.”\textsuperscript{260} Rather than read this gift, however, as evidence of Lueders-Booth somehow winning over the families of the Tijuana garbage dump—and somehow leveling the power imbalance—or as some sort of consent on the part of the subjects of the photographs, it’s also possible to instead read this gesture on Lueders-Booth’s part as a demonstration of his inherent authority.\textsuperscript{261} In other words, the family portraits he made in Tijuana seemed to be his idea

\textsuperscript{259} Lueders-Booth, Inherit the Land, ix.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{261} In a chapter entitled “Seeing Sentiment: Photography, Race, and Innocent Eye,” from her book Tender Violence, Laura Wexler makes a similar argument about a portrait of an African American nursemaid, holding her white employer’s baby. Even if a copy of the photograph was given to the nursemaid, argues Wexler, the decision to take the photograph was ultimately that of her white employer—George Cook—as a way to demonstrate “his public role as an upper class white man in Richmond.” (83)
and thus serve as products and proof of his benevolence. Ultimately, then, Lueders-Booth’s Tijuana garbage dump photographs are produced and marked by an imbalance of power.

Ingrid Hernández’s photographs, on the other hand, are produced in a very different way. Her method of production also entails an investment of time; however, her level of engagement seems less superficial. “This is another thing that I look for in my work,” she says, “to get to know people, to know the city beyond what is superficial.”

As such, she spends time wandering through neighborhoods, introducing herself and building personal relationships with people that also call the city home. And although some scholars have characterized Hernández’s approach to photography as “sociological” and “socio-anthropological...almost ethnographic...” it’s important to note that her approach isn’t premised on the imbalance of power that ethnographic encounters have historically been associated with or on the conceit that her “ethnographic” observations are somehow “pure observation, pure inscription, evidence for the archive.”

Instead, Hernández’s *ethnographic* approach troubles and unsettles these associations. Hernández eschews observation for interaction, and in the process unsettles the power dynamics of the photographic encounter. She says, “We exchange perspectives. The people also get to know me, because you can’t just go somewhere and expect to listen to their stories without sharing your own. My work is the product of a...”

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262 Montezemolo, “Bioethnography of an Artist,” 245.
relationship, and so that’s why I am always telling my story too.”

Hernández even claims that the process or the method of her photographic production is much more important than the actual images. In an interview with journalist Gerardo Ortega, for example, Hernández is quoted as saying: “Para mí, la parte procesual de mi trabajo es incluso más importante que la misma fotografía…desarrollo una relación de involucramiento con la gente, de charlas, de entrevistas informales, de intercambio de opiniones…”

Hernández’s approach to photography, then, differs greatly from Lueders-Booth’s approach. Whereas Lueders-Booth is introduced into the environment and thus carries an inherent authority into his encounters in the Tijuana garbage dumps, Hernández wanders, introduces herself, and interacts through a certain level of exchange. His freedom to take pictures is immediate at the moment of introduction, whereas hers is built through time. Whereas Lueders-Booth’s trips into the Tijuana garbage dumps were made explicitly for the purposes of photographing those who lived and worked there, Hernández’s method of interaction quite often eschewed the camera entirely. On many trips, she admits, she never used her camera at all. On some trips, she never even brought the camera along.

The next section of this thesis pays sustained attention to perhaps the most apparent and significant difference in the photographic work of John Lueders-Booth and Ingrid Hernández: whereas Lueders-Booth’s photographs abound with images of poor bodies—men, women, and children—Hernández’s images are marked by the lack of any

266 Montezemolo, “Bioethnography of an Artist,” 249.
267 Translation: “For me, the procedural aspect of my work is even more important than the photograph…developing a relationship of involvement with people, through talks, informal interviews, and exchanging opinions…” Gerardo Ortega, “La fotografía es una forma de actuar sobre el mundo,” La huella del coyote (LhdC), 17.
human bodies. What do pictures of poverty express when the body, then, which oftentimes acts as the icon or sign of poverty, is excluded from the photographic frame?

**Stacked, Layered, Organized, and Haunted**

The specific set of photographs that constitutes Ingrid Hernández’s *Indoor* project has been presented both on gallery walls and as part of a book project that Hernández published through the Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT) in 2008. These photographs are the focal point of this particular examination. A quick survey of this project makes it strikingly evident that in spite of the fact that Hernández pictures homes—the interior or indoor spaces of the home—the people that have built or live in the homes never populate her pictures. Rather than the icon of the body, as we continually get in the work of Lueders-Booth, Hernández’s images focus on objects and things: objects stacked and shelved next to and on top of each other, stuffed boxes, the crowns or tops of rounded chairs, dishes drying on a rack, the bottom half of a curtain hanging in a doorway, cracks in doors spaces, and markings on walls.

Figure 2.1 is a good example of the images that Hernández includes in her *Indoor* project: a vibrant blue wall; a plate and a cup sit on what appears to be a vinyl-upholstered chair; the seat is upholstered in black, while the back of the chair is upholstered in a floral pattern. The chair sits next to a bed, which might suggest that it doubles as a nightstand; although, at the moment it appears to also be acting as an

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impromptu dining space. To the right of the frame, we see the edge or corner of the bed. Like the back of the chair, the headboard of this bed is upholstered in a floral pattern. The bed appears to be made; a striped pillow and a paisley patterned comforter decorate it. Like the tableware stacked on the seat of the chair, we also see a stack of books resting on top of the headboard. A TV remote sits on the bed to the right of the frame.

The “subjects” of this photograph, then, are the stuff of daily life: a chair, a bed, books, tableware, a television remote. In this sense, then, this photograph works well as a paradigmatic example of Hernández’s work. And this strategy of picturing only objects and things is, of course, a deliberate strategy for Ingrid Hernández—one that she sees in direct conversation and as a direct counterpoint to dominant modes of picturing the poor. She says:

> My intention is to make a photographic representation that is very different from the stereotype of poor places that we see in social documentary photography; this type of representation ends up provoking pity and sympathy because the spaces it portrays, while I am looking for an approach that is more focused on the details of the objects, on the way that furniture is arranged inside the house, on whimsical ways of putting shoes in the closet...\(^{269}\)

Yet, even though Hernández focuses on objects, I’d suggest that the trace or haunting of the human presence is still felt and visible. In other words, “that which appears absent,” as Avery Gordon argues, “can indeed be a seething presence…”\(^{270}\) In the above photograph, for example, the space is haunted by the *seething presence* of its inhabitant in very particular ways. For example, we can infer from the books, the tableware, and the television remote, all of which are near or on the bed, that this

\(^{269}\) Montezemolo, “Bioethnography of an Artist.” 244-245.

particular space is one of both relaxation and recreation for this particular person. That they are perhaps eating near or on their bed might speak to the lack of a formal dining area in this person’s home, or perhaps simply to their inclination to eat in bed, possibly while watching television. What Sara Blair has called the “auratic imprint of [the] lived experience,” then, becomes evident in this image.\(^{271}\)

In a certain sense, these scenes of interior home spaces are transformed into observations about the ways particular people, in spite of their absence in the image, live their lives through their unwitting and whimsical acts of ordering, layering, stacking, shelving, and displaying objects—through what Hernández refers to as a person’s “intimate gestures” expressed in and through objects.\(^{272}\) So, as much as these images are about objects and things, they are also still about people.

But, importantly, these images don’t picture the body, and this strategy of not picturing the body—of focusing instead on what writer and curator Lucía Sanromán calls “the space left vacant by the resident’s absent body”\(^{273}\)—is critical in terms of my argument that Hernández’s photographs ultimately change the terms by which a spectator engages with photography. As we’ve already seen, the observed subject and the subject observing inhabit different and differentially fixed positions. Oftentimes the subject observing, the spectator, exercises the power of observation as a racialized “power over others…”\(^{274}\) In other words, the differentially placed relationship between the spectator and the subject of the photograph is one that, at times, revolves around the spectator’s

\(^{272}\) Montezsemolo, Bioethnography of an Artist,” 245.
\(^{273}\) Sanromán, “¿Todos somos ciudadanos?” 228.
\(^{274}\) Nguyen, The Gift of Freedom, 90.
power of self-making. Lueders-Booth’s photographs, as we saw, ultimately serve to realize this power or demand. On the other hand, I’d argue that Hernández’s work unsettles this type of spectatorship by refusing to capitulate to the demands of white self-making through the body of the racialized “other.” Rather than identification, what we see as the result of the photographic relationship produced by Lueders-Booth’s work, Hernández’s photographic work haunts and thus provokes pensiveness. Or as Avery Gordon has put it: “[b]eing haunted draws us…into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition.” In other words, one key difference between Lueders-Booth and Hernández is that Lueders-Booth’s photographs lean on the iconic figure and body of the poor person in order to provide what Avery describes as cold knowledge, or what I understand to mean a form of uncritical identification with the subject of the photograph—which, as we saw in chapter 1, ultimately serves to make the photographic encounter primarily about the fortification of the spectator’s subjectivity—while Hernández instead forces the spectator into what Avery calls transformative recognition, or what I understand to mean a critical space of reflection where one, as spectator, isn’t invited to identify with the poor, but is instead compelled to consider, interpret, and think in different ways.

Hernández herself parallels this when she says that her work “is not voyeurism, but involvement.” Involvement, of course, entails a different type of spectatorship. Not a quick spectatorship premised on cold knowledge, but a spectatorship that foregrounds Fanon’s notion of waiting by suspending demands and opening itself up to transformative

275 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 8.
recognition. Involvement, too, entails a different kind of photograph. Not the unary photograph that Barthes theorizes, not a tautological image, not an image based on quickly recognized icons, but an image that, as historian Vicente Rafael points out, “peel[s] away from one’s expectations.” These are the types of images that Hernández provides and the types of images that Barthes might argue are filled with critical power.

A brief look at two of Hernández’s photographs (Figures 2.2 and 2.3) will help to further make this point. Again, these images are devoid of bodies. In this way, they peel away from what we as spectators have come to expect from images of the poor. What we’ve become accustomed to, or rather what the iconic images have trained our eyes to expect—all in black-and-white—are images of sullen and grimy faces amidst the mire of poverty; pictures of the “disorderly crowding of foreign bodies” squeezed into a small shack of a home; resilient and surviving faces; smiling children too young to fully grasp the magnitude of their situations. Instead, Hernández’s images provide us a much different view of poverty. Rather than allowing us to recognize poverty through the body of the poor person—providing a privileged view of the subject/icon of poverty, which ultimately provides us some level of subjective security—these two photographs force us to meditate on poverty through its extension in lived space: a kitchen sink and a dining table. In other words, these photographs—a sink, dishes, and decorations against a pink

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277 In her book, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, Nicole Fleetwood sets forth her notion of “non-iconicity” against iconic images of black life. By iconic, Fleetwood refers to any image that “can be transplanted to new arenas that both displace its historicity and abstract certain values, feelings, or ideas associated with its historical context to new audiences and settings.” (37) In contrast, the “non-iconic” refers to an image that documents the “seemingly ordinary moments and happenings” of everyday life. (38). In other words, the “non-iconic” image belies essentialist interpretations, as it records specific, what some might call mundane moments. Ingrid Hernández’s photography, especially her *Indoor* project, serves a similar “non-iconic” function.

278 Rafael, *White Love*, 77.

279 Blair, “Visions of the Tenement,” 75.
wall; a table and its condiments, two chairs, and a scuffed pale blue wall—are less explorations of the impact of poverty on individuals and more investigations of how the violences of poverty have shaped these spaces in unique ways.

As well, some might argue that these types of photographs trigger identification either through the objects themselves or through the space we as spectators now share with the actual inhabits of these homes, I would argue that this is not the case. Yes, we photographically inhabit the same space as the person(s) who live(s) in the home, and yes we might recognize the objects they use as objects that we as well use. Yet the objects we can identify and the spaces we inhabit through the photograph are objects and spaces that are already invested with unique meanings: they’re placed, stacked, layered, and organized in particular ways for particular people. In other words, the photographs are filled with what Blair has called a “density of impressions”\(^\text{280}\) that speak to different modes of living. These modes of living cannot be appropriated as our own, as we can’t identify directly with the bodies that inhabit them, but can only—through suspending our expectations and demands, as these photographs force us to do—recognize and consider them.

These photographs, as mentioned earlier, have been both presented in gallery walls and in book-form.\(^\text{281}\) Here, I’ll briefly discuss how Hernández’s method of gallery presentation also shifts the terms by which a spectator engages with photography. In

\(^{280}\) Ibid.

\(^{281}\) In terms of how these photographs appear in the book-form, it’s interesting to note that Hernández decided to separate the images from their titles/captions. Hernández saves all of the titles and captions for the very last pages of the book. The images, then, are represented on their own. However, this separation of visual text from caption, I would argue, also prompts a different type of spectatorship by encouraging an interactive viewing of the book. In other words, the viewers of the book of photographs have to continually flip back and forth. Interestingly, this type of interactivity is unnecessary with Lueders-Booth’s *Inherit the Land*, as his book is entirely devoid of any captions and/or titles.
other words, when tasked with displaying these photographs on a gallery wall, Hernández makes very specific choices about how to present them. These choices, I would argue, are ultimately aimed at suspending the act of spectatorship—or perhaps extending or drawing out the act of spectatorship—which forces the gallery spectator into a critical space of pensiveness. In effect, then, Hernández’s presentational strategy destabilizes common modes of gallery spectatorship, what Chilean-born installation artist Alfredo Jaar has described as, “mov[ing] every few seconds from work to work, image to image.” If this is the case, Hernández’s mode of presentation doesn’t easily allow for this.

In a gallery space, Hernández oftentimes presents her photographs in triptych or diptych form. Often, the triptych or diptych depicts the same space from a different angle, or perhaps a more extended view of the same room/space. Figure 2.4 is a good example of this presentational strategy. The space depicted is the same room from three slightly different angles. Each image abounds with objects: shelves, layers of clothing, clusters of trophies, hanging bags, stuffed boxes, a dresser, a television, a VCR, pages of magazines tacked to the walls, etc. If we pay attention to the objects alone, then the fact that so many objects are present ensures an extended engagement with each image and with the triptych as a whole.

Beyond the mass of objects and the presentation of the images in triptych form, however, Hernández’s composition in each image, and as a group, also ensures a more drawn out spectatorial engagement. In particular, Hernández’s compositional use of lines

283 A triptych gallery presentation essentially places three photographs right next to each other with one caption. A diptych does the same with two photographs.
in these photographs compels us to consider the multiple objects displayed, stacked, and organized in each image. Additionally, the way in which some of the lines in each image seem to extend beyond the individual photograph, and thus connect all three, forces the spectator into a more engaged process of viewing. In this grouping of photographs, the compositional use of lines acts as a guide for the spectator’s eye, as a way to direct the movement of the eye.

For example, the most prominent lines in this triptych are the horizontal lines in each image. The image to the far left of the triptych pictures a shelf or perhaps a bookcase. The middle shelf here guides the spectator’s eye from left to right, and, in the process, the gallery viewer has an opportunity to consider the objects that are stored on the shelves: a few purses, plastic bags, cardboard boxes, and clothing. The horizontal line that the shelf creates connects to the horizontal line that is created by the stand on which the TV and VCR sit. And, although we’ve reached the far right edge of this first image, the horizontal line continues onto the second image by way of the wooden beam that cuts across nearly the full width of the photograph. As our eye follows the lateral trajectory of this wooden beam, we consider the objects that are placed or hung on it: a series of bags—what appear to be gift bags, a tote bag, and a few purses—catches our eye first. We then focus on the cluster of trophies that’s been placed on the beam, on top of what appears to be a tropical patterned cloth. Our eye also considers the frames and torn out magazine pages that hang or have been tacked onto the wall. Perhaps more than the two other images that make up this grouping, this middle image captures what Hernández calls the intimate gestures of those who occupy these homes. “These spaces,” Hernández says, “clearly show the whims and the gestures that people deposit in objects...[t]he result
is a kind of photography that puts the emphasis on the arrangement of the objects...and above all, what I think is the result is that I highlight intimate gestures, the unique ways of arranging and relating to the object in question.”

As we reach the right edge of this second image in the series, the horizontal line is extended on and into the final photograph in the triptych. Here, it extends by way of connecting to the line that the bed and then the dresser help create. Again, in the process of following the trajectory of the line, our eye considers the objects we come across: a pile of clothing on the bed, a headboard that appears to have been decorated with various stickers and perhaps smaller images cut out of magazines, a heart-shaped pillow that hangs on the wall, a stuffed animal just above that, a vase and flowers on the dresser, and what appears to be a valentine basket of some sort. Ultimately, Hernández’s compositional use of horizontal lines, in particular a horizontal line that connects all three images, holds and directs the viewer’s attention. It allows the spectator to carefully consider the objects in each image—the ways they’re placed and organized.

When we consider, then, both the composition of each image as well as the fact that they’re presented in a gallery space as a triptych, I’d suggest that Hernández deliberately forces spectators into that space of waiting and engagement. The triptych form forces the spectator to spend time closely examining the details of each image, uncertain, perhaps for a while, about what it is that he or she is seeing. The horizontal lines direct the spectator to consider the richness, in terms of object, of each image. The grouping suspends the act of spectatorship, and thus the act of identification. What the

284 Montezemolo, “Bioethnography of an Artist,” 245.
spectator instead gets here, then, is an opportunity for pensiveness, which, as Barthes and Fanon showed us, is a critical space.

Cracks in the Mirror

Another way to view Hernández’s photos is through the frame of the city that they picture. Put simply, what do Hernández’s photographs tell us about the city of Tijuana? And, as an extension, what can Tijuana help us begin to understand about our present moment? As expressed earlier, Tijuana has often been discussed through stories, ideas, myths, rumors, and pre-formed theories. Oftentimes, particularly for U.S. academics, journalists, cultural critics, and curators, for example, Tijuana serves as the fulfillment of something that was fabricated north of the border. The starting point for these types of examinations of Tijuana, in other words, is not in Tijuana. We see this with John Lueders-Booth’s photographs. He recycled a ready-made rubric that was popularized by American social documentary photographers decades before he even met Luis Alberto Urrea, and the thought of photographing Tijuana developed.

This is why, I would argue, we see such stark differences between the visualities-in-relation that I have examined here: because Hernández’s starting point, unlike Lueders-Booth’s, is in Tijuana. In other words, the animating concern for her is not what Tijuana helps to illuminate about the privilege of the United States, for example, but rather, as Fiamma Montezemolo has asked, “Qué dice Tijuana de sí misma?”285 At one level, then, this seems to be the question at the center of her project—a sort of guiding

principle that accompanied her during her wanderings around the city. Viewed in this way, we can understand why hers was a specific engagement with the materialities of tijuanenses’ lives in irregular settlements.

And, in so doing, she accomplishes a few important things. First, she forces us to pay attention to the theories and underlying assumptions that we as scholars north of the border have brought with us into Tijuana. Rather than try to locate the essence of what Tijuana is and try to capture it in one shot or with one theory—as a “transborder metropolis,” as “one of the greatest laboratories of postmodernity,” or as “a new cultural mecca”—Hernández instead gives us slivers of the multiplicity of Tijuana’s lived experience. Her photographs remind us that Tijuana is ultimately a constantly changing city—a city always in flux, a city re-imagining, re-inventing, and re-focusing itself; re-imagined, re-invented, and re-focused everyday by its residents and its passers-by. As tijuanense writer, blogger, and radio DJ Rafa Saavedra also reminds us, “Tijuana no se queda quieta, se mueve, se esta moviendo, por eso es tan dificil asirla y por eso es tan facil ponerle etiquetas.” In that sense, then, Hernández helps to unsettle dominant

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287 This phrase, translated into English, was written by scholar Néstor García Canclini in his now famous *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, and has come to be one of the most well-known characterizations of Tijuana. Quoted in Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, “The Factory of Dreams,” in *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 15.


modes of thinking about Tijuana that stamp it as this or that simply by reminding us that, as Montezemolo puts it, “Tijuana no es Tijuana y lo sabe.”

Secondly, Hernández’s photographs, by showing us the multiple and varied ways that the city of Tijuana is lived, help bring into greater focus what Iain Chambers calls an unsettled modernity, or “a modernity that no longer merely mirrors a single reasoning.” This is what Heriberto Yépez means as well when, discussing Hernández’s work and the way her photographs sometimes appear to capture the chaos of objects in a home, he writes that “lo caótico...no es señal de falta de orden, sino de un orden desconocido hegemónicamente.” In Tijuana, and through Hernández’s photographs of the city, we see “unregistered tempos and spaces that deviate and befuddle the accountable logic of linear time, of progress…” In other words, and to borrow a phrase from Laura Wexler, Tijuana helps to “expose cracks in the mirror of history.”

Those cracks in the mirror ultimately reflect back ways of living and being that cannot be fully understood by dominant logics, but are nevertheless present; Hernández pictures them for us. This, to me, is what Fanon means when he writes, “there exists other values that fit only my forms.” And, “[l]ike a magician,” Fanon writes, “I robbed the white man of ‘a certain world,’ forever after lost to him and his…”

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290 Translation: “Tijuana is not Tijuana, and it knows it.” Montezemolo, “Tijuana becoming rather than being,” 108. I understand this phrase to be arguing that there isn’t simply one Tijuana, but many. Tijuana is lived differently by each of its inhabitants. Therefore, to make a claim that Tijuana is this, for example, is useless when Tijuana is also that or the other thing to other people. In that sense, then, Tijuana is not Tijuana. And, of course, it knows it.


294 Wexler, Tender Violence, 6.

295 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 128.
the objective world of farms and banana trees and rubber trees, I had subtly brought the real world into being.”296 This, to me, is what Tijuana does. It brings into being worlds and ways of living that are “forever after lost” to dominant modes of thought and being. It prioritizes “values” and “forms” that slip away from the grasp of dominant logics. It continuously reinvents itself in order to avoid the disciplinary grasp—like a magician.

296 Ibid.
To Picture the Present; or, the Possibilities of the Impossible

“In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducibly to my time.”

– Frantz Fanon

This thesis began with a brief anecdote about a picture of Negra, a young girl who lived in the Tijuana garbage dump and befriended Luis Alberto Urrea while he was a missionary with Spectrum Ministries. It ends, now, with another short anecdote that concerns Negra and Luis. This one, however, is not about Negra the little girl in the picture—the barefoot little girl in a brown-gray dress—but about Negra the adult, who has children of her own.

After Luis Alberto Urrea’s first book, *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*, was published, it quickly received much critical acclaim. It won various awards and was named to the *New York Times*’s 1993 list of notable books. As a result, Negra herself gained a fair amount of notoriety. After all, as Urrea writes in *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, his second book, Negra was “one of the heroes of [his] first Tijuana book.”²⁹⁷ She was interviewed for television segments and magazine articles; people of all stripes would come looking for her. In short, as Urrea says it, “Negra [was] famous.”²⁹⁸

Yet, Urrea also quickly points out that despite her newfound notoriety, Negra was not “even near escaping poverty.”²⁹⁹ She still lived in one of the irregular settlements, and her home was still made of recycled garage doors brought south across the border from

²⁹⁷ Urrea, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, 22.
²⁹⁸ Ibid., 23.
²⁹⁹ Ibid.
the United States. This is the context for the conversation that I’d like to share and linger on for just a minute—a conversation between Urrea and the now 25-year-old Negra, which Urrea retells in his second book:

Although she is famous, she is not yet rich—she isn’t even near escaping poverty. Gifts and hope pile up on good days. Toys from the latest radio station Christmas toy drive are still holding together, though conditions in these dirty alleys are hard on things. The dolls have a sort of leprous skin condition, their arms and legs suffering a mysterious patina of gray-brown biological smearing. All the dolls are naked. Things are looking up. Still, when I ask her what she dreams about for the future, she just stares at me.

“What?” she says.

“What are your hopes?” I say. “What do you dream of?”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” she replies.

Urrea’s narrative continues on to talk about a news report he and Negra are about to film together, but in regards to this short exchange, Urrea is silent. He doesn’t say a single word about Negra’s perceived perplexity when asked, “What are your hopes?” and “What do you dream of?” These questions, of course, and as Urrea himself recognizes in the excerpt, are future oriented. Like the photographs of children that we find in John Lueders-Booth’s book, Inherit the Land, these questions attempt to project beyond the present moment—to relegate the present moment to a past cadence. Yet, Negra responds with a blank stare and a statement that underscores the incomprehensibility of the questions’ premise for her: “I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” she says.

I would suggest that this misunderstanding between Urrea and Negra stems not from Negra’s inability to consider the future as an abstract concept, but rather from a fundamental difference in terms of how each theorize their mode of living in the present.

In other words, while Urrea seems to operate through a mode with an eye toward the

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300 Ibid., 23-24.
301 Ibid.
302 Ibid.
future, Negra is focused instead on the present moment. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes the following: “In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducibly to my time.” Negra’s blank stare, it appears to me, carries a similar sentiment.

This is not to argue, of course, that as scholars we should not consider or theorize about the “future.” Instead, it’s to say that I believe we do a great disservice to the present moment when we place it on a collective backburner. Ultimately, a recognition of the very real material violences of the present moment—often enacted, in both explicit and less obvious ways, against brown bodies like those that are pictured and that haunt this thesis—is necessary to not lose sight of. To be primarily future oriented, I’m suggesting, is to risk neglecting the “injustices, or violences, that persist in the present.”

This thesis, admittedly in a very small manner, has attempted to draw attention to one way that those violences that belong to the present are misrecognized or neglected: through the taking and viewing of pictures of brown bodies. My examination, then—of the complicated lines of connection linking racial difference, spectatorship, and self-making in photographs of poor tijuanenses and the places they call home—has sought, in part, to bring to the fore relationships of racialized power that constitute and are constitutive of photography. If, as we saw in this thesis, a picture of the “racialized other” serves to fortify the subjectivity and security of white bodies—or put differently, if it takes white bodies at risk to express the material violences that brown bodies face daily—then that photograph only occludes material realities and violences even while it claims

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to picture them. And if photography is ultimately a space of life and social death, then we must be critical of our present modes of picturing so that we can ensure that our photographic productions and performances—our *intimate gestures*—remain open to the possibilities of the impossible.
Appendices

Appendix A – Images Referenced in Chapter 1 – “John Lueders-Booth’s Ravenous Camera, the Fantasy of the Photographic, and the Violence of Identification”

Appendix A – Images Referenced in Chapter 1

Figure 1.1. John Lueders-Booth.

Figure 1.2. John Lueders-Booth.
Figure 1.3. John Lueders Booth.
Figure 1.4. John Lueders-Booth.

Figure 1.5. John Lueders-Booth.

Figure 1.6. John Lueders-Booth.
Figure 1.7. John Lueders-Booth.

Figure 1.8. John Lueders-Booth.
Figure 1.9. John Lueders-Booth.

Figure 1.10. John Lueders-Booth.

Figure 1.11. John Lueders-Booth.
Appendix B – Images Referenced in Chapter 2

Figure 2.1. Ingrid Hernández, *Untitled*, 2008.

Figure 2.2. Ingrid Hernández, *Untitled*, 2008.
Figure 2.3. Ingrid Hernández, 2008.

Figure 2.4. Ingrid Hernández, 2008.
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