Three Types of Traffic in Tijuana: Heteronomy at the Mexico-US Border

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> Pero si en Tijuana ya no hay delitos de alto impacto!!!, como puede ser posible eso?, que des.madrito era la via rapida esta mañana, puedo apostar que muchos de los que estaban ahi varados en el trafico, son de los paleros que dicen "a mi no me afecta, se matan entre ellos" aha!! si y por culpa de alguien que decidio colgar a un malandro de un puente, pues muchos llegamos tarde a los trabajos . . . lo bueno es que no afecta eeeh.
>
> [But how could that be, if in Tijuana there are no longer any high impact crimes!!! What a royal mess the Rapid Way (an urban freeway) was this morning; I'd be willing to bet that plenty of the people stranded there in traffic were those shills who say, "It doesn't affect *me*; they kill each other among themselves." Uh-huh!! Right, and thanks to somebody who decided to hang a thug off a bridge, well, lots of us got to work late . . . the good thing is, it doesn't affect (us), riiight(?)]

The above post appeared appended to an online article in a local newspaper in Tijuana, across the US-Mexico border from San Diego, California (Andrade 2011). The article announced two more *colgados* that morning: two more corpses hung off an overpass on one of the city's main thoroughfares. It came out already

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three years after Tijuana's homicide rate had doubled with the eruption of President Felipe Calderón's so-called war on drug trafficking (Secretaría, n.d.), and thus toward the end of a period often referred to locally as the *racha de violencia*, the spell or streak of violence.

Strikingly, the comment posits the rather banal experience of being stuck in traffic as the point at which the *racha*'s "impact" at a collective level can no longer be denied. However spectacular the corpse hung for display, its capacity to "affect" the city lies primordially in its capacity to affect traffic. The comment, though, does not just reveal an economistic approach to urban life that would make getting to work on time "our" supreme value.[1] As this observer describes it, the scene on the freeway dramatizes a drastic divide between autonomous agency and utter subjection, confronting the two as polar opposites with no possible in-betweens. The automotive public is frozen in place, immobilized by the unequivocal "decision" of a single, anonymous "somebody." Before his agentive force, drivers are simply "stranded" while the state, which arrives late on the scene, cleans up after the author of the deed.

As painted here, the *racha* posed a fundamental challenge to the agency of "we": a collective subject that stands as the implicit ground of this online comment, encapsulating at once its author, its projected readership, and the automotive public it describes. In this essay, I argue that such heteronomy—subjection to an external power—does not simply result from a deficit of personal or collective agency. Instead, the heteronomy of both "we" and "I" takes shape performatively, in subtle cues of language and interaction. Seen through these details, the *racha* emerges as a crisis of agency that gripped senses of we-ness in Tijuana, even as it was grounded in multiple micro-crises in which individual autonomy seemed to slip uncontrollably into subjection. Crises large and small, though, had roots not just in the immediate context of violence but also in Tijuana's condition as a border city premised on transnational traffic of all sorts. The *racha* as a public experience, I argue, must be understood in light of longer-standing tensions around autonomy and heteronomy in relation to contemporary capitalist mobilities at the border.

Two main kinds of transborder traffic set the backdrop for the *racha* as a crisis of agency. Tijuana's assembly-plant industry works on the principle of "just in time": the idea that production can be maximized if materials arrive just as needed (Ohno 1988). As they move about the city, both professionals (Yeh 2017) and line workers (Lugo 2008: 127–32, 180) tend to economize their time and valorize speed

1. Compare Michael Fisch (2013) on the dehumanization of train-track suicides in Tokyo.

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in ways that reflect how they do so at work. In contrast, drug trafficking tends to valorize violence as an avenue for the control of movement and, through it, profit. My primary focus, however, will be on tropes of heteronomy in relation to automotive traffic. Their setting in the online post above was no idiosyncrasy; people often narrated contact with the *racha*'s violence as something that happened while driving. In the *racha*, I suggest, automotive traffic emerged as a site of triangulation, where anxieties over heteronomy in relation to both speed and violence—anxieties originating in transnational industry and drug trafficking, respectively—became properly public, influencing and reformulating imaginaries of the urban "we."

The *racha* as a public phenomenon was thus inflected by various strands of orientation to autonomous agency, each associated (though not exclusively) with the three types of traffic noted above: the individual control involved in neoliberal capitalist practices for economizing time; the role of violence in establishing the autonomy of the sovereign, but in a context in which sovereignty has been decentralized from the state; and the liberal-cum-republican tradition of the honorable, upstanding citizen, still strong in Mexico when it comes to attitudes toward the public sphere.[2] Each of these strands poses autonomous agency as an object of desire, but one that can easily slip out of reach. In the narratives, remarks, and interactions I present, speed and violence intertwine as treacherous enticements, promising agency but resulting in subjection. By drawing tropic connections between three very different types of traffic, people during the *racha* at once enacted their own personal crises of agency and gave performative shape to the heteronomy of "we" itself.

Heteronomy

Autonomy has long been an obsession for the liberal-cum-republican tradition that, in the *racha*, provided the larger matrix for speed and violence to come together and reshape collective subjectivity. Since the seventeenth century, liberal political theories in particular have staked a tremendous amount on the "I" of the citizen—on its ability to act as an independent agent and make decisions based on its own free will and capacity for reason. Only a "we" composed of such "I"s, it has been argued, can produce a reasoned consensus capable of curbing state power (cf. Habermas [1962] 1989).

2. Republicanism and liberalism have not always been clearly distinct in Latin America. While republican traditions remain fundamental, neoliberalism in Mexico today has meant a renaissance of rather classically liberal ideologies of publicity. I emphasize one or the other as they resonate with the materials I discuss.

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A recurrent fear, however, plagues liberal theories of we-ness: when caught up in a group, "I" may lose its autonomy.[3] This vein of doubt came into its own in the late nineteenth century, with the advent of mass society. Early crowd theory elaborates on the frightening scenarios that the loss of autonomy of "I" might result in: random violence, looting, political mayhem, and more. Again and again, these works worry over and work through the experiential loss of agency on a mass scale, the apparent subsumption of the self to strange forces. In 1895, Gustav Le Bon fretted over "the substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals" (2001: 1); Elias Canetti's landmark work of 1960 echoes the same idea: "Suddenly everywhere is black with people. . . . Most of them do not know what has happened and, if questioned, have no answer. . . . They have a goal which is there before they can find words for it" (1962: 16). As Rosalind Morris sums up, "The crowd is a context in which one can become subject to powers that exceed one" (2008: 250). The paradox is that, for this literature, crowds are also a fertile site of social energy, a sort of baseline whence a newly vital citizenry may arise. Though they are antinomies, crowds and liberal citizenries are tightly linked figures. Each tends to morph into the other.

Crowds and citizenries weave together not just as linked ways of representing large groups but, more subtly and mercurially, in the constitution of the individual. In William Mazzarella's words, "the strenuously achieved autonomous liberal subject" (2010: 698) is by the time of Kant already "a paranoid subject—constantly scrutinizing itself for evidence of the seductions of heteronomy" (ibid.: 703). At this level too, opposites tend to morph into each other. How to know that the liberal subject is always already awash in external forces, how to prove his or her triumph over them, if not by slipping every once and awhile into them? What if the slippage is more than just a bit? How much is too much—and for whom? More trickily still, can autonomous control not become itself an addiction to which one is helplessly subject?

In this essay, I extend the insights of performative, language-based studies of the public sphere to the problem of heteronomy as integral to liberally oriented senses of both selfhood and collectivity. The idea of "publicity as [a] communicative effect" (Cody 2011: 42) received impetus with Michael Warner's proposal that publics be understood as "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (2002: 90). But reflexive "we"s and the "I"s that compose them can

3. Hannah Arendt (1958) is particularly compelling in this regard because for her the specter behind the disindividuation of "I" was totalitarianism.

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have very different characters. When do their claims to autonomy hold; when do they appear rather as heteronomous crowds? If autonomy comes to life in the ability to posit an upright "I" and claim one's actions as one's own, heteronomy is not merely what happens when those claims fall flat. Like any performative, autonomy depends on given felicity conditions (Austin 1962), but infelicitous conditions can propitiate performances *of* failure and divergence from liberal ideals of selfhood and collectivity. Heteronomy is enacted, for instance, when an online commentator frames a *colgado* as unilaterally inflicted on "us," cutting short "our" modest yet autonomous efforts to get to work. It is not precisely in the cars stalled upon the freeway that this public becomes a defenseless crowd; it is, more crucially, in repeated performative gestures like this online comment.

When I write of *agency* and its lack, then, I am referring to the "ethnopragmatic level" (Duranti 2004: 454) at which agency and subjection are culturally construed and projected in one or another concrete situation. If language provides basic resources for the construal of autonomous agency (Ahearn 2010), then heteronomy does not simply emerge in the absence of such cues but has its own markers as well: grammatical object and passive verb forms, for instance.[4] Attributions of agency and subjection are integral to interaction; they can be implicit or highly elaborated and at issue. They are, however, always incomplete and partial, and they can only by degrees fit emerging events to the satisfaction of participants. As Paul Kockelman (2007) points out, the determination of unfolding events most often rests on far more complex institutional and material assemblages than our folk theories of agency take account of. In the face of this complexity, both autonomous agency and heteronomy must be regarded as performative achievements, ever unstable and of the moment.

In this light, the autonomous agency of liberal political theory emerges as a fetish: a site of inordinate affective investments, inflated expectations of practical returns, and exceptional vulnerability to puncture. This structure of desire and disappointment propitiates an affective oscillation, driving the slippage between crowds and citizenries noted above. In Sigmund Freud's foundational formulation, fetishes provoke a mixture of "tender and hostile treatment" (1963: 219) as they alternately offer and withdraw fulfillment. Under historical conditions that threaten fetishistic investments in rational publics and autonomous individuals,

4. In linguistic terms, heteronomy or subjection might be labelled *patiency*, after the grammatical role of the patient. In Yeh 2017, I explore how people mobilize linguistic resources to posit agency and subjection in relation to speed and violence in Tijuana.

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then, the threshold dividing these from their heteronomous others can become radically undecidable (Derrida 1986: 209–11). Here, heteronomy can emerge as a performative projection in its own right.[5]

Mexico today provides just such conditions. Economic prosperity after World War II buoyed the sense of national progress, of a state-led project in which citizens could take part. That sense disintegrated rapidly with a series of currency devaluations, the most memorable of which was in 1982. National sovereignty and personal autonomy suffered alike: amidst economic crisis, the felicity conditions for both evaporated (Lomnitz 2003). Neoliberal policy making, as well as the spread of neoliberal commonsense (Leal 2016a), have not provided a robust basis for a new national project. Tijuana is a direct effect of this historical collapse of the Mexican nation-state as a form anchoring individual aspirations and desires: as the economy folded in the 1980s and early 1990s, transnational enterprise boomed, and escapees from the south flooded the city. Within Mexico, Tijuana thus epitomizes the neoliberal bet on a sped-up, flexibilized economy, in which responsibility for survival falls ever more heavily on the individual, even as conditions for assuring such survival are ever more precarious. These are the basic conditions propitiating the exaggerated oscillations between autonomy and heteronomy manifested in this essay's ethnographic examples.

Tijuana also offers longer-standing incentives to heteronomy, though. Negative stereotypes have plagued this city since its early years of Prohibition-stimulated growth (Berumen 2003); demonized by both countries, for each it represents the other's hopeless subjection to base urges. Anticipating Mexican prejudices, *tijuanenses* may try to reverse the stigma and claim the superior aspects of US-style modernization. Echoing the online comment above, middle-class people in particular consider themselves a hardworking, law-abiding bunch, carrying on at a good arm's length from the illegal trafficking that, since well before the *racha*, has perpetuated the "Black Legend" of vice and crime begun in the 1920s. They consider themselves, that is, a rather exemplary citizenry.[6] Looking north, though, the United States as the emblematic land of law and order may seem either unattainable or not so desirable after all. The call to (neo)liberal order as well as the

5. To grasp the strength of liberal fetishisms in Latin America, it is important to understand the central role liberal theories have played here, despite their obvious failure to describe social realities (Hale 1986). It is also important to note liberalism's historical depth in the region, beyond its ideological enshrinement as described by Hale. See Galante 2004 on the historiography that "defends the existence of a Spanish liberal tradition" (182; my translation) running back to colonial times; on nineteenth-century popular liberalisms in Mexico in particular, see Knight 1985 and Thomson 1991.

6. On middle-class Tijuana's liberal orientation to publicity, see Yeh 2012.

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impulse to disinvest from it is all the stronger given that across the border lies "America's Finest City": exceptionally white, exceptionally prosperous San Diego. The contrast between San Diego and what many in Tijuana see as the patent and prodigious disorder of their city fuels dreams of civic order and renewed efforts to achieve it—but also performative gestures of release from what "we" are supposed to be.

The rest of the essay unfolds in three parts. First, I sketch how people frame automotive traffic in Tijuana as a site where autonomy slips into heteronomy. Next, I discuss the figure of the drug trafficker (Astorga 1995; Edberg 2004; Muehlmann 2014), commonly understood to stand at the root of cartel violence, in relation to automotive traffic during the *racha*. Finally, I explain how this figure exaggerates popular practices of violence and honor, and I explore an ethnographic example that uses these practices against the heteronomy of speed. This example returns us to the significance of getting to work on time in a context dominated by transnational industry's "just in time." In each section, I focus on short narratives, offhand remarks, and interactions that, read carefully, reveal the performative positing of agency and subjection for both "we" and "I" and bring into focus the ambiguities that, during the *racha*, came into full bloom.

Automotive Traffic in Tijuana

Car culture in northern Mexico is nothing new, nor does owning a car mark a gaping social abyss as it does so palpably, for instance, in Mexico City. Indeed, the ubiquity of cars, the historical depth of driving, and the ways in which this history has been so intimately tied to the United States are important factors in Mexican perceptions of the country's border cities as Americanized. Josiah Heyman (1991) argues that deportees brought driving and car-repair skills back to Sonora (along the border with Arizona) in the late 1920s and 1930s, and that they have been integral to working-class Sonoran life since; writing also of Sonora, Natalia Mendoza Rockwell notes that the car is "one of the privileged forms of being in public" (2008: 111; my translation). Thanks to the spill-over of secondhand goods from the United States as well as more lenient importation policies (McCrossen 2009), automobiles are much more accessible at the border than farther south (Hill 2009). Tijuana's relative prosperity means cars are especially available, facilitating the development of a variety of automotive subcultures: bikers and lowriders (Del Monte 2014), classic Volkswagen clubs, even aficionados of championship desert racing. As a whole, the city is intensely automotive. By the 1970s, 75 percent of households owned a car, against 10 percent nationally (Price 1973:

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80). Public transportation certainly plays a prominent role, but in the context of Mexico, Tijuana's automotive public is remarkably substantial and diverse—even people of quite precarious means may boast a vehicle.

Socioeconomic class, then, does not so much distinguish an automotive public, as shape differing automotive sensibilities.[7] For Tijuana's middle classes, the ubiquity of cars plays into stereotypes of Tijuana as a site of US-style modernity, but these stereotypes vacillate between that modernity's utopic and dystopic potentials. Though car ownership has expanded all over Mexico, and congestion is a problem in many places, in Tijuana traffic jams are often blamed on a kind of excess of consumer democracy—cars are, it is said, *too* accessible, given the government's inability to keep apace of demographic growth. It is not just the infrastructure, however, that is unprepared for democratic driving. For middle-class drivers, automotive traffic is a privileged site for the performative embodiment of the national "we."

"Here we are, again in disorder!" crowed the director of an orphanage, as he pointed out how the lines of cars waiting to cross the border ran diagonally across the lines painted on the asphalt.[8] Wondering why traffic was suddenly, midday, barely inching forward, an engineer and I finally passed the accident that was not blocking traffic per se but simply attracting curiosity. "That's the way we are, *mitoteros* to the end!" she exclaimed. *Mitote* refers both to events that generate crowds and to the crowd itself, with its noisy energy, and a *mitotero* is a heteronomous addict of such crowd formation.[9] These remarks are affectionate, but reflexive commentary on traffic tends on the whole toward lament. Such comments are ubiquitous as one moves in traffic; they often draw comparisons with the United States. Here what is at stake is not just the excessively rule-bound nature of US driving but, it is said, the Mexican driver's capacity for instant adaptation: upon crossing the border, he or she buckles the seatbelt, doesn't tailgate, and stops at the white line. But as soon as he or she returns to Mexico, that driver is right back with everyone else creating *caos vial*, road chaos.[10]

7. In Tijuana, driving is much less marked as a male practice than in southern Mexico. Women do participate in automotive practices on different footing, but as the ethnographic examples will reflect, this mainly manifests in more restrained performances of orientation to similar values. Class, not gender, is the factor splitting the city's "we"s and that I consequently attend to most.

8. Where the Spanish is not provided, ethnographic quotes are close paraphrases.

9. *Mitote*'s root is Nahuatl. According to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española (N.d.), *mitote* still refers to a collective indigenous round dance.

10. Note these are performative characterizations. Traffic in Tijuana is quite tame compared to many places, just as San Diego is not so perfectly lawful either. See Vila 2000 on cross-border stereotypes of difference.

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This kind of running commentary represents traffic as a site of political community passed up, liberal citizenship and civility spurned. Much as Erving Goffman noted, thanks to the play of expectations and obligations that pervades vehicular traffic, people constantly extrapolate from it in such a way that the rule of law itself seems at stake in the slightest infraction (1971: 97). In traffic, the driver immerses him- or herself in a moving "we" apparently mediated neither by rational debate nor broadcast communications but by the flicker of glances and signals, mutual agreements undertaken or rejected as one car waits or cuts another off at a four-way stop. "Uno y uno" (one by one), read signs at such stops in Mexico, admonishing the civil alternation that here becomes the mark of equal citizenship recognized. At stake in such alternation is the balance between the autonomous purposiveness of each driver, which traffic tends to highlight. "On the road," Goffman writes, "the overriding purpose is to get from one point to another" (ibid.: 8). Everyone is recognized as having a goal, and as being engaged primarily in achieving it.[11]

That people are thinking of how law backs this civil citizenship, of how it is everywhere emergent in driving, is borne out by the frequency of commentary. Or rather, they are thinking of lawlessness, the gap between embodied norms of automotive interaction and the ideal order of a law-abiding society. Even as they drive, their comments indicate, they feel themselves slipping across that gap. It is as if, in traffic, people succumb to something. "They don't know how to drive; they're barbarians," a journalist friend (who does not drive) likes to repeat, separating himself from this force. Middle-class drivers not only speak of what happens to the subject in traffic in these terms; they act them out. Inés is a sweet-tempered elderly woman who highly values the principles of liberal citizenship: always votes, always watches the news, would never pay a bribe. Behind the wheel, though, she indulges: "¡Quítense, hijos de la chingada, que ahí les voy!" (Get out of the way, motherfuckers, here I come!). Though cause for nationalist lament, road rage can be performed with gusto.

Each of these remarks reformulates and re-creates a widespread trope of heteronomy behind the wheel. One paradigmatic statement of it, which homes in on speed as the provocateur, is the prayer "Que no me arrastre el vértigo de la velocidad" (May the vertigo of velocity not drag me in).[12] In Tijuana, this "vertigo" is

11. There are, of course, practices of aimless driving, but cruising is not a major genre of driving in Tijuana today.

12. I spotted this on a printed card stuck on a taxi driver's dashboard in the southern state of Michoacán. Here, Catholicism (much weaker in Tijuana) may still waylay the forces of heteronomy.

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taken to be thoroughly Mexican. While Goffman pointed out "a widespread sense that [in traffic] it is all right to break a rule if you can get away with it" (1971: 7), people in Tijuana represent this as being true only in Mexico. As in the long and tortured literature on the national character, Mexico appears as a deeply atavistic force, at once impinging on one from without in the incivilities of others and welling up from within (see Leal 2016b and Yeh 2015).

Contra *tijuanense* nationalists, though, the trope of heteronomy in traffic has broader roots. In the United States, traffic has long been portrayed as the site of a twin breakdown: that of the civil citizen and of the orderly collectivity that depends on this figure. Disney's 1950 short *Motor Mania* helped found this stereotype; it circulated widely in Mexico and was brought to my attention by a Mexican colleague (my thanks to Antonio Azuela) as an important precedent for contemporary attitudes in Tijuana. Goofy stars as Mr. Walker, "a typical, average man, considered a good citizen . . . courteous, punctual, and honest. . . . But once behind the wheel, a strange phenomenon takes place. Mr. Walker is charged with an overwhelming sense of power. His whole personality changes. Abruptly, he becomes an uncontrollable monster, a demon driver." After showing the ravages drivers like him cause, the havoc, pile-ups, and accidents of inconsiderate motoring, the narrator wraps up: "Let this be a lesson, Mr. Walker. Drive safely. Play fair. Give the other fellow a break—" when Mr. Walker himself breaks in, "Aw, shut up!" and again speeds off.

As a horde of demon drivers, automotive traffic represents a strange variant of the crowd. Sealed within their vehicles and yet in dynamic, even frenetic contact with the rest, drivers are at once in control of a powerfully swift machine and out of control, maddened by that very experience even as they are captive to all the other vehicles moving about them.[13] In face of velocity's vertigo, autonomous agency is at once pumped up and undermined. As middle-class drivers in Tijuana attribute heteronomy to others, act it out themselves, or claim it as "our" national propensity, they constitute their "I"s and "we"s in an intensely ambivalent back-and-forth between the assertion of autonomous agency and its hollowing out. The trope of velocity's vertigo circulates internationally, but in Tijuana, it articulates the pitfalls of modern mobility not just for individuals but also for the national "we" itself. Of the performative gestures I have reviewed, Inés's ironic battle cry most perfectly poises her at the tipping point between autonomy and utter loss of self-control: "¡Quítense, hijos de la chingada, que ahí les voy!"

13. In a jam, one's subjection to the whole becomes palpable, a physical block against which the individual can do nothing and yet which one is part of. It is a figure of autonomy turned to heteronomy, the regularly resurgent "specter of a mobility exhausted by its own excess" (Morris 2000: 243).

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Traffickers in Traffic

During the *racha*, automotive traffic became the site of another kind of heteronomy. In narratives of violence, traffic was a consistent theme. It came up in stories about bodies seen by the side of the road or abandoned, shot-up cars; in note of military convoys and unmarked vehicles; in the fear of shoot-outs, executions, and kidnappings carried out in traffic; and in tales of SUVs full of armed men pulling up next to one at a stoplight. Though these stories described a time understood as exceptional, they were like ordinary discourses on automotive traffic in that they posited it as a site where, through the experience of heteronomy, a sense of collectivity emerges.

On a visit to Chicago in 2008, Edith—a professional in her mid-twenties—told me how she felt relief from the crime and violence of Tijuana. "Aunque no quieras, te afecta" (Even if you don't want it to, it affects you), she sighed, echoing the language of this essay's opening online post. To illustrate, she picked a recent riot in the prison near her house. Previously, we had discussed the probability that the riot was in fact a cover-up for a massacre.[14] What mattered to Edith, though, was the way it disrupted the flow of traffic in the area. By using the impersonal *you* of anyone who inhabits Tijuana, she presents automotive traffic as the site where violence "affects" the collectivity.

Here as in the opening post, "we" good citizens are clearly separate from the forces assailing us. This time, though, the autonomous agency behind those forces goes unremarked. In the following online comment (appended to Valle-Jones 2011), it becomes ambiguous: "Ya no estoy al pendiente de la radio para saber si, por donde voy a circular, hay alguna balasera [*sic*]" (I no longer have to be checking the radio to find out whether, where I'm going to circulate [in my car], there's some shoot-out going on). In this case, the small calamities thrown up by the *racha* appear as a kind of weather that comes and goes, and to which one is subject. One tries to prepare oneself against them, but preparedness is an art based on a vivid awareness of its potential for failure. Shoot-outs interrupt and divert the city's flows, diminishing drivers' capacity to decide their own movement. They blossom spontaneously and unpredictably, as if they were an agentless force.[15]

14. While the official tally of dead stands around twenty (Marosi 2008), I have heard estimates of two to three hundred from several people connected with events at the prison. They alleged that the massacre was perpetrated by the state government. Hints of this possibility were discernible in the news at the time.

15. *Racha* literally means "gust of wind." Note that weather predicates are famous for their lack of an agentive subject (e.g., "*it* is raining"; see Eriksen, Kittilä, and Kolehmainen 2015).

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These examples posit an absolute distinction between the source of violence and an implicit "we" that coheres in its heteronomy, but their attributions of agency are ultimately ambiguous. Traffic makes of murder something collectively experienced, but in the same form as any rush hour, any accident, any official roadblock. As one young man told me, almost in triumph, yes, he had encountered (*le había tocado*, literally, he had been touched by) a *colgado*—"pero el tráfico nomás" (but just the traffic). In framing automotive traffic as the site where "we" is "affected," these remarks subtly deflate the killers' agency, equating the *racha*'s effects with those of traffic accidents.

The figure of the *colgado* speaks to this link between automotive traffic and the drug trafficker's ambiguous agency. Despite the fact that there were not as many in Tijuana as elsewhere, they were, for some time, almost unanimously invoked to emblematize the *racha*. The most remembered *colgado*, in fact, was the municipal chief of license plates and licenses. His post accents the usurpation of state authority over the domain of automotive traffic in particular. Even above the act of killing, the "decision" that the opening online comment mentions is full of sovereign violence (Schmitt 2005). It replaces state authority with the *colgado* as a serial injury inflicted on the automotive public. Instead of the literal crash, one driver after another undergoes the shock of encounter with the corpse, which, as news articles frequently emphasize, hundreds if not thousands are forced to see and even drive under. And the *colgado* inflicts itself serially; it goes on inflicting itself, several people told me, because nobody dares to report it. Again, the statement contrasts the public's omission, its inability to act, with the trafficker's agency. Like the *colgado*, the public is inert. The *colgado*, however, is an inverted image of the trafficker as agent, for *colgados* are usually understood to be criminals themselves. The exalted agency of the killer may turn at any moment, then, into the absolute subjection of his victim.

In Tijuana's context of anxiety over capitalist modernity and the kind of mass sociability that comes with it—always, apparently, insufficiently liberal, insufficiently autonomous—the trafficker appears at first as supreme agent, absent from the effects of his decisions, capable of controlling traffic instead of being controlled by it. His agency is inflated, "ours" utterly deflated. However, his agency is also wrapped up in a dizzy oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy. The difference between killing and being killed is at once absolute and highly unstable: in an economy of violence like the *racha*'s, killing does not routinize one's role as killer, instead, it invites the possibility of one's own death. Autonomy and heteronomy turn into a zero-sum game—your autonomy is my heteronomy—and an inflationary cycle of violence kicks in.

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Given this instability, the apparent divide between the subjected "we" of the public and the "they" who kill is ultimately not so stable either. There is a revealing point at which the sinister "they" of the traffickers comes strangely close to the "we" of the automotive public. This point is the figure of the trafficker himself as maximal expression of road rage and embodiment of its darkest implications—the same road rage usually presumed typical of drivers in Tijuana, and that so many otherwise harmless individuals revel in. One young professional went so far as to explain the entire *racha* to me as a matter of such self-authorized buffoons throwing their weight around; to back up this analysis, he told me how a man he presumed was a trafficker had threatened him with a gun for what he described as a polite honk. More broadly, the figure of the trafficker in traffic circulated in the oft-repeated admonition not to react in an automotive altercation, since the other party might be a drug trafficker and "those people kill over nothing."

As soon as one imagines traffic populated by these figures who will cede to no one in their own purposiveness, in the autonomy of their own movement, and who will even kill to defend it, middle-class performances of road rage become a kind of mimetic contagion of the most violent potentials one imagines circulating in the medium one has joined. The "they" who kill each other among themselves merges with the "they" who drive like barbarians, who were never clearly distinct from "us" law-abiding citizens but menaced to emerge from within us at every turn. The admonition not to react characterizes the trafficker as the culmination of the traffic crowd's regressive tendencies. His inflated agency is, ultimately, as suspect as Goofy's—his acts are evidence not of autonomy but of a profound lack of control. The figure that at first blush appears as autonomous agent supreme, author of shoot-outs and *colgados*, ends up as an effect of the system, the most hapless and pathetic victim of the heteronomy that automotive traffic supposedly brings out in "we Mexicans."

From Road Rage to "Just in Time"

If the trafficker's exercise of violence seems at first to augment his agency, this is not just because he usurps state authority. It is also thanks to a republican tradition in which violence can stand as a call to civility and a performative resource for establishing the citizen's honor. Here, autonomous agency may seem less ambiguous—but in Tijuana, this kind of violence can link to concerns not just about propriety on the road but also about heteronomy in the face of a specifically neoliberal imperative to speed.

Ciro is a blacksmith in his sixties; he has no home and house sits or squats in

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friends' yards, but he does have a dilapidated old van. As he gave me a ride home one day, bouncing along an unpaved road between two peripheral districts, he regaled me with tales of altercations in traffic. Once, at a stop on a narrow street, a pedestrian asked him for directions to the city's shelter for migrants. The driver behind, however, became impatient and shouted something, which prompted Ciro to take out his machete and use its butt to dent the hood of the other man's car: "I was performing a social service!" he exclaimed. It is thus in terms of civic duty that he explains the necessity of violence.

Ciro's action is not unlike that of twenty-something Teo when he reported with satisfaction how he had used my car's club (an antitheft device) to threaten to bash in the kneecaps of a man who had cut him off in a small pickup. Teo was then working construction, but his history of both gang activity and involvement in organized crime informs this incident. On other occasions, he would wax poetic on the problem of reputation. "Walking in the 'hood is an art," he told me, illustrating details of posture and gait, a certain slow swing of the shoulders, and underlining the need to keep one's hands in one's pockets so that others never know what weapons one might be packing. Such a carefully pitched performance must occasionally be backed by displays that verge explosively into violence itself, and the incident involving my car (borrowed, for the record, without my permission) exemplifies this kind of maintenance work. Such practices are most often associated with arenas where the audience consists of known individuals. Though this confrontation took place down the street from Teo's house, the very name by which he called the club suggests how the violent defense of honor is not restricted to the neighborhood but shapes stranger sociability broadly for him: the *aplacamensos*, the "queller of idiots."[16]

Ciro takes out his machete in defense of civic duty, but also in defense of the civility due him as a gentleman performing an act of courtesy.[17] Thus he sets himself above the crowd with its rude impatience: the "idiots" who from time to time need quelling. This reaction resonates with long-standing practices in Mexico. Writing of 1930s Mexico City, Pablo Piccato (2001) shows how working-class violence, recurrently framed by elite observers as popular bloodlust, in fact responded to a sociocultural context in which honor was a prized good to be defended at all costs, with grave consequences should it be sullied. Moving back

16. From this perspective, the random self-aggrandizing violence of traffickers that middle-class drivers fear and denigrate appears to follow a logic of honor originally germane to communities of known members, but run amok in a mass society where recognition cannot be assured.

17. Note how the Spanish *caballero* (gentleman) is synonymous with "knight," thus resonating with older codes of chivalry.

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in time to the late nineteenth century, he finds similar values among the elite journalists and politicians who forged the country's high liberal tradition (2010). As the state moved to consolidate its monopoly on legitimate violence by criminalizing dueling, elites continued clandestinely to engage in the practice—just as violence is key to establishing state sovereignty, it can work to assert the autonomous agency of an individual, and these elites still needed to prove their "I"s with violence. Fast-forward to today's urban masses on the road. Anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz writes that in Mexico, "there is no social contract for the crowd; there are only gentleman's pacts among persons" (2001: 60). Avoiding eye contact, one can "drive with presocial Hobbesian rules" (just the idea middle-class drivers in Tijuana at once delight in and lament). In this context, the contemporary gentleman has not just license but, indeed, the obligation to defend his honor with violence.

If, in the late nineteenth century, dueling posed a challenge to a state that was rapidly consolidating itself for the first time since independence, today's traffic altercations bespeak an opposite tendency: sovereignty's decentralization. During the *racha*, violence increasingly appeared as a resource anyone could use to try to re-found, in the same gesture, both the social order and the autonomous self.[18] This violence may not institute law, but if it institutes respect, it does so precisely in default of law. "If they *were* police, I'd respect them," Teo insisted. The civil driver likewise understands himself to be alone in the crowd, where rules do not hold; it is the absence of liberal law and the prevalence of crowd behavior that authorizes violence. As with the commonplace that drivers in Tijuana are "barbarians," civilization proper takes a liberal form, and it is only in the meantime of its coming that the violent institution of civility makes sense. Law is at stake here, though deferred, and vigilantism is not far off. Compare this early twentieth-century *corrido*: "¡Qué bonitos son los hombres / que se matan pecho a pecho, / cada uno con su pistola, / defendiendo su derecho!" (How beautiful are men / who kill each other face to face / each one with his pistol / defending his rights!; Paredes 1976: 78). These ballads of border conflict are the main historical root of the contemporary mythology of the drug trafficker (Ramírez Pimienta 2011; Valenzuela 2003); vigilantism is thus a key theme shaping ideologies around trafficking. The Templar Knights (or Gentlemen; a cartel in the state of Michoacán),

18. For liberal political theories, social order rests on the reciprocal relations between *the* sovereign and the little sovereign that is the individual. The state guarantees property and a certain predictability, while citizens' free determinations guarantee the legitimacy of the state. The immediate authoritative precedent for the performative use of violence to reestablish sovereignty was President Calderón's use of force in response to the serious deficit of legitimacy with which he took office.

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for example, insist that their activities are not cause for suspending the rule of law but a provisional solution to its nonexistence.[19] Theirs is the myth of the lawmaker.

Teo and Ciro may not aspire to so much, but their acts too are full of all the ambiguity Walter Benjamin (1978) described between law-founding and law-preserving violence, all the extimacy, or simultaneous externality and intimacy, between the beast and the sovereign (Agamben 1998; Derrida 2009).[20] As they narrate their aggressions, Ciro's machete and Teo's club appear not as slips into a latent crowd nature but as forceful calls to civility that keep the liberal alibi close. This use of violence to performatively establish the autonomous citizen is intensely masculine, but as women join the public terrain of automotive traffic, they participate in this logic as well.[21] Susi, the object of violence in a traffic altercation, embraces its call to civility and liberal order. Suggestively, though, she turns the ethics of violence into a critique of speed and the heteronomy it can provoke.

Susi is a young housewife from the well-to-do working class; her husband, a freelance engineer, drives a pickup while she has her own beaten-up old sedan. An ardent born-again, Susi told me of a "lesson" God recently sent her. When she was first married and still finishing high school, she became accustomed to being very short on time. "Voy *justo*," she said. "I go *just* on time. I know exactly how long it takes me to get from here to there, seven minutes, eleven minutes, and I don't leave myself any margin to get there a little early. I have my time well measured [*bien medido*]." She had become, consequently, an uncivil driver. If she sees some pedestrians, "no les doy el pase" (I don't let them go first). One day, again in a rush, she had just squeezed into a tight parking spot when a woman came up and told her she had scratched her car. Susi had noticed nothing, so she rolled her eyes and left. Once across the street, though, toddler in hand and with too much traffic to return, she saw the woman calmly using her key to scratch a big circle all the way around Susi's car. Susi was outraged but could do nothing; it was her husband who, upon hearing the story, quietly asked, "And what have you learned from this?"

19. See cartel leader Servando Gómez Martínez's (2013) declaration, where he explains that "se necesita establecer un estado de derecho en Michoacán" (rule of law needs to be established in Michoacán).

20. Lomnitz draws on the trope of the beast to describe the oscillations of civility in Mexico City traffic: "The driver . . . seeks anonymity in order to act like a wolf, but becomes a gentleman with eye contact" (2001: 73).

21. On the historical gendering of the public sphere, see Habermas 1989; on its gendering in Mexico, see Piccato 2010.

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Focused on the perfection of her own purposiveness, the maximization of her own control, Susi forgets her manners. To be a citizen, she must hold purposiveness, the controlled projection of herself forward in space and time, in tension with civility, respect for the other, and thus, quite literally, self-restraint: she must wait. But, absorbed by the precision of "voy justo," she forgets herself. With these words, she repeats one of the favorite catchphrases of Tijuana's assembly-plant industry: "Just in time" (JIT), the basic goal guiding Taiichi Ohno's (1988) "lean" approach to manufacturing. Edith, whose middle-class attitudes I have already drawn on, exemplifies the allure of JIT, for she is an international buyer of parts for a television factory. From seven in the morning to seven at night, she times her purchases so that they will flow across the ocean from Malaysia, China, or Japan all the way to Long Beach, down across the border, and into the assembly plant just as they are needed. Standing at the factory gate, Edith is the timing mechanism coordinating a massive global system (cf. Pemberton 2009), and she is, as she likes to declare, entirely caught up in her work. Time flies for her; she doesn't notice the long hours. It is no coincidence, in this city of globalized flows, that Susi the housewife should feel her agency in traffic in much the same terms in which Edith feels hers at work.

Writing of Ciudad Juárez, the other main city along Mexico's northern border, Alejandro Lugo (2008: 180) describes how the strictly measured, tightly coordinated time of assembly work leeches out from the factories to characterize the city as a place where life is fast paced and time the supreme social value. For him, the main point of articulation between factory and city lies in the working-class commute (ibid.: 127–32), but professionals like Edith similarly replicate the factories' temporal economizing on the road (Yeh 2017). "Just in time" emerges as a key principle that, as people evoke it in different contexts, bridges apparently separate spheres of urban activity. As precision and speed are fetishized, though, access to them—but also awareness of their pitfalls—is unequally redistributed. Edith is one of the winners in Tijuana's "just in time" economy, and she reaps its benefits: excitement and upward mobility. Susi stands lower down the ladder; before marriage, she worked the assembly line, where heteronomy reigns.[22] The down side of JIT is more evident for her. As she describes her struggles to be a proper citizen on the road, Susi does not narrate herself succumbing to an ostensibly atavistic

22. Of the substantial ethnographic literature on assembly-plant labor in Mexico's northern border cities, Devon Peña (1997) and Lugo (2008) in particular focus on time and timing on the factory floor. In their ethnographies, agency emerges above all in workers' struggles against this system of subjection.

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national "we." Instead, she narrates herself succumbing to speed as a basic value of capitalist modernity at the border.[23]

Conclusion

The trope of automotive traffic as provoking vertigo, at once inflating and undermining autonomous agency, runs through this essay in a variety of guises. In each case, it helps evoke heteronomy performatively, in context, relative to different others and different ends. At the border, automotive traffic becomes a site of comparison with the United States, and performances of the national "we" turn profoundly heteronomous. Vertigo becomes collective. "We" morphs into a crowd, and hopes for a properly liberal public sphere are wrecked.

In the *racha*, this heteronomy took on new meaning, as drivers represented themselves as subject to drug traffickers' violence. However, the trope of vertigo reappears in the figure of the trafficker as demon driver. Again taking shape performatively, this figure throws into even higher relief the Janus-faced, fetish nature of autonomous agency. The trafficker as demon driver is both a revealing weak point in the broader stereotype of the trafficker as agent supreme, and a point of breakdown between the public's ostensibly victimized "we" and "they," the perpetrators of violence.

Finally, when republican ideals of honor and civic virtue are put into action on the road, middle-class people usually take this violence (as with the trafficker as demon driver) as a further sign of heteronomy. Susi, however, reframes these practices as a bulwark against the vertigo provoked by the time economizing specific to Tijuana as a neoliberalized border city of global flows.

Across the essay, tropes of heteronomy connect and interweave distinct realms of practice. As James Fernandez writes, the pragmatic power of tropes comes from the way in which, thanks to them, "quite differing domains are brought together in unexpected and creative ways" (1986: viii). The figurative power of vertigo propagates as a gut sensation, whether in the pleasures of road rage or in wrenching fear. Its proliferation is closely tied to the ways in which capitalist mobilities at the border incite desires for autonomy—in speed, violence, or simple civility—while structurally undermining the felicity conditions for its performance. Given these

23. If factory workers lose out on speed, they also tend to be on the losing end of violence. Melissa Wright (1999) connects the feminization of the assembly-plant industry with the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez.

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tensions, the *racha* quickly potentiated everyday anxieties around autonomy into a veritable crisis of agency, and tropes of heteronomy became more ubiquitous and more extreme than ever.

In Tijuana's neoliberalized economy, the trafficker often appears as a fantasy of agency: the only one who can "ride the tiger of space-time compression" (Harvey 1989: 351), risk his luck on the globalized market, and come out on top. Where "partial sovereigns" (Roitman 1998: 313) proliferate as armed groups war over territory, though, the ambiguity of violence as a way to establish autonomous agency spread. On the road, this ambiguity came together tropically with the problem of speed's dual character as both "index of sovereignty and . . . engine of its encompassment by global capitalism" (Morris 2010: 581)—a problem general to Tijuana as a "just in time" city but that automotive traffic brings to a personal, embodied level. In the intersection between automotive traffic and the violence of the *racha*, the impulse to erect oneself as sovereign played into its opposite: the collapse of control, the diminution of agency, the glomming together of wills into a crowd completely subject to a heteronomous force.

To locate that force in the trafficker is a last-ditch effort to recuperate autonomous agency. If the public is subject, he at least remains self-sovereign. This is the effect, for instance, of the *colgado*: to filter agency and subjection out from each other completely, reestablishing at least the ideal agency of the trafficker. Unfortunately, the two are not so easily separated. If the trafficker kills, he must expose himself to death too, and this exposure comes as replete with ambiguity as speed does. In the *racha*, I would suggest, the trafficker stood at the tip of an inflationary swell, as performative attempts to secure autonomy by killing proliferated (Feldman 1991). The trafficker, however, is not the only one to feel the absorbing pull of speed and violence. Reading across tropes of heteronomy in automotive traffic, speed and violence emerge as twin lures shaping the *racha*. However drastically people opposed them, autonomy and heteronomy remained linked, slipping into each other, and the "we" of the public itself was caught in the down cycle of the fetishistic oscillation that, in Tijuana, defines all three types of traffic.

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