

Representation and Complicity in Suburban Migrant Camps: Reflections of a Documentary Filmmaker

John T. Caldwell

I had no business making a film about this world around me, or so I thought. All my academic training had led me to this conclusion. The suburban migrant camps I visited and studied between 1994 and 2001 in San Diego and Orange counties, California, offered an impressive range of ideological traps that any theory-conscious filmmaker or cultural studies scholar would, under most conditions, avoid. The huts of cast-off cardboard and plywood mired in muddy arroyos and ditches, juxtaposed against nearby gated communities of designer homes, offered a classic set of tensions that are now associated with academic cultural analysis and “othering.”¹ Any representations of these camps would be “cross-cultural” assertions; any ethnographic conclusion about what was “actually” going on would conceal an outsider’s vantage point. Any narrative about this world risked being a de facto, even if unintended, theatricalization of these impoverished but resilient worker communities.

I am not, obviously, a member of the indigenous Oaxacan and Mixteco communities that dominated these camps. Nor was I, at least initially, a part of the carefully managed Mexican race-labor caste system imported with these workers from the state of Oaxaca (via plantations in Sinaloa) to workplaces and farms in California. For centuries, these Mixtecos considered the Mexican government, the Spanish occupiers, and the rival, genocidal Aztecs before them as enemies. The Mixtecos spoke an indigenous language and viewed Spanish, their second language, as a colonial imposition, not as an expression of tactical or cultural resistance (as some



Fig. 1. Migrant worker housing, Orange County (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.



Fig. 2. Camp cooking area, Carlsbad hillside (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

view it in the United States). For anyone familiar with the historical emergence of California's Chicano movement, this variant of indigenism was not a familiar linguistic or cultural landscape.

This essay is a confession of sorts, an avowal of complicity (including my own), rather than a simple case study of a media production. The figure of the migrant worker is among the most recurrent stereotypes in border mythology. It is a cliché rejected by critics seeking more positive media images, as well as a stock type accepted as natural (and thus ignored) by almost everyone with commercial interests in the region. Yet the third-world living conditions of residents of places like Loma Bonita, Kelly Camp, and Rancho de los Diablos have made them difficult to ignore. The problem of the migrant worker is not as easily avoided as the clichés of media stereotyping (see fig. 1 and 2.).

My personal connection to the problem seemed distant at best, based on a related labor experience rather than on ethnicity or race. I had been a seasonal farm worker over six years in a very different part of the country.² But this experience did not fully prepare me to understand the many layers of complicity at work in the settlements that made up the suburban campo in



Fig. 3. Concealed hut with laundry, below Carlsbad housing development (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

southern California—or to easily isolate culprits in the ways that the documentary genre historically has done. I was familiar with insights from the emerging field of border studies, yet the worlds in these camps didn't seem to jive with some of the more optimistic formulations of border spaces (see fig. 3). I was also familiar with the methodological prescriptions of postmodern ethnography, and attempted to deploy them in the field, but these too, at times, seemed but straightjackets. I finally came to question the intellectual function attending these approaches, and to acknowledge that I too was a part of the socio-commercial fabric that keeps these camps in place.

Since the pioneering “participatory” strategies of Jean Rouch in the 1950s and 1960s, and the media “effacement” and “self-representation” tactics of Sol Worth in the 1970s (some of the very reasons I got into film as a student in the first place), visual anthropology and film theory have worked hard to exorcise both the problematic position of the documentarian on the one hand and the centered colonial pretensions of the ethnographer on the other (Eaton 1979; Worth and Adair 1972). I came to the camps armed with the tools and tactics that have come to stand for postmodern and post-structuralist ethnography—mostly prohibitions about what *not* to do—and set about trying to intervene in this abject situation in some meaningful way (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Trinh 1989). This essay summarizes the process I used to try to work through the theoretical baggage that I dragged into the field. The film that resulted—*Rancho California (por favor)*—set out to use what has become the new theoretical orthodoxy to understand the broad forms of social complicity and consensus that have maintained and kept these camps in place for many decades.³

In order to fully consider the theoretical issues and methodological problems raised by this media field work, it is useful first to look more closely at the specific ways that the landscape is organized and that raced bodies are managed in the region. Both of these racializing activities work—through broad social consensus—as integral parts of the economy of what I began to see as a new suburban plantation culture. Confronting this spectacle was one of the reasons I ended up making a different film than the one I'd set out to produce.

Socio-commercial Complicity, Landscape, and the Raced Body

From 1994 to 1996 I visited migrant camps in this region, met residents, and considered the imaginative ways that the migrants created workable living spaces and small communities. I was immediately struck by the



Fig. 4. Visual art and iconography in the camps (female figure adorning campesino's hut, north county San Diego) (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.



Fig. 5. "Recuerdo", journey narrative depicting migration from Oaxaca to California and religious imagery (crayon, paint and pencils on 6'x10' latex covered plywood) (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

creativity involved in designing and assembling these home fronts. Many of the huts were adorned with hand-drawn and painted art (see fig. 4), some of which depicted long journey narratives from Oaxaca (see fig. 5), while others displayed collages and assemblages combining religious iconography with U.S. commercial and advertising imagery. I met migrant camp teenagers, who played “black rap music” even as they showed off and performed on discarded musical synthesizers. I also found that the creative use of television and video was widespread, even in these meager camps. Of course these things easily fit a set of theoretical categories that I’d been primed by my training to appreciate: outsider art, cultural poaching and hybridity, and alternative media on the margins. But even the availability of self-representational videos and efforts by the migrants seemed to pale in the face of the impossible living conditions that defined these spaces; the fouled water, the waste, the over priced food from catering trucks, the plywood shacks and plastic tarps.

Having made contact with several indigenous community workers through this process, I offered to provide video production resources from the University of California at San Diego for projects that the communities in the region might want or need. In response to requests that followed, I began working with my partner Devora Gómez on a food security and organic garden project in 1997 in nearby Escondido, where Devora’s family lived. This project involved door-to-door interviewing, focus groups on nutrition, and improvisational scenes and narratives acted out by residents intent on addressing systemic problems of poor nutrition in the community. The resulting community organic garden proved productive and successful, and the videotape, *Amor Vegetal: La Cosecha Nuestra*, was completed and distributed as planned in 1998 (see fig. 6 and fig. 7). Both the garden community and the video production are discussed in detail in an article published elsewhere (Caldwell 1999–2000). This same approach—community participation, improvisation, and a teach-the-teacher methodology—was used in a project on domestic abuse in the community as well, although this other project (entitled *Pro-Familia*) was not edited or distributed publicly.

Repeated comments about the project by city leaders in Escondido made me realize, however, that the relative success of the grassroots Escondido projects could be assimilated within the dominant order of the region, and this kind of conservative city boosterism came to bother me. Successful change (like the emergence of the Cosecha Nuestra community in Escondido) will always involve specific, local conditions. Yet that very specificity seems easily

absorbed within a broader political-economic system that uses such projects to sell prospective homeowners on visions of happy multiculturalism, humane forms of diversity, and—for those others that need assistance most—benign self-help. The landed, commercial, racial formation in California seems to work by endlessly creating and promoting neat little identity “boxes” and managing them by constant attention to proximity. Bounded, racialized spaces, low-income neighborhoods, and nearby migrant camps—all potentially disruptive forms of difference—are made to be epistemologically,



Fig. 6. Community garden preparation, La Cosecha Nuestra community, Escondido, California (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.



Fig. 7. Family garden plot, La Cosecha Nuestra community, Escondido (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

but not physically, “somewhere else.” In my mind this recognition made the completion of the other film—the one I had originally set out to produce on the raced landscape (*Rancho California*)—more imperative than ever. The local actions of alternative media projects such as those in Escondido might be best understood, I reasoned, by clarifying the context or the broader systemic conditions that persistently work to manage local forms of difference.

One initiative in particular, during this extended period, evokes the complicated ways these forms of racial management work. I set out with Arturo Gonzalez, a community health worker who was also the Mixteco coordinator of the organic garden project in Escondido, to document conditions as he provided assistance in a large, remote, fenced-in labor camp located between the suburbs of Pala and Fallbrook. Arturo needed video documentation for his supervisors at the San Diego Clinic, thirty miles away, in order to justify continuation of his job and support of this aid route. And I needed to better understand the economic and ecological conditions of the camps and the region.⁴ On one occasion, after hiking a half mile or so away from the road, we passed and chatted with several men who were bathing and washing clothes in the creek as well as drinking from it. Carrying bags of illustrated teaching materials, Tylenol packets, antiseptic, and condoms, we headed alongside the creek in the arroyo. At a slight elevation above the creek we came upon a group of six or eight plywood shacks, and stopped to unpack. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness under this canopy of trees, I realized that there were at least twenty more shelters scattered up and down both sides of the ravine among the trees and brush. Several residents approached as Arturo announced the opportunity to hear about farm-related health and safety issues. As he described how to care for lesions and sores, several listeners pulled off their socks and T-shirts to show Arturo wounds that had been infected by poor sanitary conditions and employer pesticide use. Pesticides sprayed over the fields in which these workers hoe and harvest guaranteed that toxic solutions would enter their bloodstreams as well as the crops they tilled.

When the lecture turned to sexually transmitted diseases, more young men, approximately fourteen to sixteen years old, approached the group. Arturo discussed proper use of condoms and how to have safe sex, and listed the physical signs and symptoms of STDs. Ranchers allow prostitutes from Oceanside to enter and service the men and boys in the camps for \$10 per sexual act, the equivalent of two hours’ wages, each Monday evening after the workers have been paid. Since condom distribution is not part of the payday ritual, a disease can be passed to six or eight men in

a single night, as well as to the sex workers. This may have helped to explain why many of the boys seemed listless and sick, with puffy faces and cold sweats. Many, I learned later, indeed had STDs. Arturo was giving out Tylenol. But they needed antibiotics.⁵

After two hours of discussions up and down the creek—about hometown villages, girlfriends, and families back in Oaxaca—we hiked out of the arroyo. As we neared the edge of the ravine two workers hustled past. One stopped to explain the need to fill out documents for return to the rancher. He said that they were W2 forms for the IRS. At that point the logic of this entire enterprise began to make some sense. This camp was meticulously managed from the outside. Arturo explained the cruel absurdity of the situation:

For the people who live here in the hills, there are taxes. These workers don't ask for government benefits. They don't. They [go] solely from their house to work, and are living here in the hills. And what benefit do they ask of the government? None at all. The U.S. government thinks that they are the ones that are asking for benefits. That they are the ones asking for things—like food stamps, and Medi-Cal, and all that. And in reality, it isn't like that. But these people pay taxes—and live here in the hills. And sometimes, they are accused of many unjust things, right?

This was the genius of California's farm economy: a system that needs cheap agricultural labor, but that also needs to ensure that the labor force is invisible and that workers move on quickly when they're not needed. The camp workers' situation also provided an effective counter-argument to the anti-immigration tirades that had originally sparked my interest in these projects back in 1994. Not only were most of these migrants here legally, with green cards, but all of them in some camps were paying Social Security and income taxes—and receiving absolutely no benefits in return.

When I started visiting the area during the debate over Proposition 187 in 1994—often called the anti-immigration bill for seeking to prevent undocumented workers from receiving public services and requiring civil servants to report on those seeking such services—North County had many worker encampments with shacks housing entire families. When the living conditions of these mothers and children became a public embarrassment to the cities of Carlsbad and Oceanside, federal housing grants were used to relocate the largest of the communities to apartment complexes in nearby Vista. What I had witnessed between 1994 and 1998, then, was a sexual politics: the systematic elimination of women and families from the

North County camps, and as a consequence, the “masculinization” of the camps. While mothers and crying children may provoke guilt in civic managers, young men suffering in poor conditions apparently do not. Young teenage boys are very useful as transient and temporary labor. Camp residents in the mid-1990s worked to gain residency as families in the United States, but many of the Mixteco adolescents now work in California in order to send wages back to parents in Oaxacan villages and mountains.

Crops are seasonal, and California works hard to produce an indigenous work force that is just as seasonal, moveable, and invisible. Boys pick the crops, then are sprayed with pesticides. Boys till the fields, then are provided sex workers who circulate STDs to one and all. Boys are lodged in creek beds, then given drinking water laced with fertilizers and organophosphates. If working conditions and pesticide poisoning don't limit their tenure on the ranch, the ravages of disease will. Worker migrancy and mobility are guaranteed by regulating the male working body, by managing the in-flow and out-flow of bodily fluids. The perfect economy plays out here: these workers give California much of its muscle in the global economy. One of California's biggest “crops” is a homeless workforce meticulously regulated in the arroyos—with gates, chain-link fence, pesticides, STDs, and W2 forms. When the workers' commercial usefulness is exhausted, homeowner organizations enjoin “abatement” contractors (as they are called) to clear and raze the camps.

Experiences like these made me realize that the space between Los Angeles and Mexico does not just include a sequence of borders and lines. Satellite worlds of color also ring the centers and garden spots, and serve as racial “off-worlds” for enclaves like Del Mar, Rancho Santa Fe, Carlsbad, Le Costa, and Coto de Caza in San Diego and Orange counties. These off-worlds ignore academia's comforting clichés about documentary: that crisis is scripted, that ethnography is (a kind of) theater, with its victims displayed like trophies.

All sorts of cultural negotiations were taking place in the camps, many of them spearheaded by Mixteco organizers from the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional. Through Mixteco organizers like Arturo Gonzalez and Sergio Mendez (both featured in the films *Amor Vegetal* (see fig. 8) and *Rancho California*), the Frente offers one of the most effective strategic models for “indigenous transnationalism” available.⁶ I came to see the work of the Frente not just as a model for constructive change in the face of globalization—one of their challenges—but as a model for alternative media as well.



Fig. 8. Production still from improvisational video scene, *Amor Vegetal* video project on “food security,” Escondido, California (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

According to Mixteco organizer Sergio Mendez, “The Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional is the *only* organization that represents the interests of migrants today. There have been other groups, from other states ... but they only have their clubs for get-togethers ... to party. We don’t. We do organize, politically.”⁷ Sergio emphasized the importance of political *self*-representation and *self*-organizing—based on the specific ethnic and racial identity of indigenous Mixteco workers from Oaxaca—rather than dependence upon coalition activism or representation by other Latino groups or labor union organizations in California. Describing the Frente’s activism, Sergio recounted:

We’ve entered the ranches ... and the Ranch foreman says: “I don’t want you around here. Leave.” O.K., we leave. But we also ... ask to see the bathrooms and the water. If something is needed, we tell him “this is needed” or “this is missing. We would like for you to do it.” ... We say we will be around later to take a look again. But there are also some odd owners who don’t want to do anything. When this happens, we fill out a report and send it to CalOSHA.

Sergio also remarked on the lack of legal teeth in such interventions: “But CalOSHA doesn’t do much either. We can’t give out the fines. It’s CalOSHA that hands them out.”

Theoretical Complicity and the Raced Body

The process of working and filming in these environments during these years made me painfully aware that the tripartite set of informed, participatory, and deferential approaches to filmmaking that I had dragged into the field had become suspect. I considered the ways that effacement tactics, othering prohibitions, and curatorial border celebrations can potentially stand as acts of complicity in their own right. First, the “give-the-camcorder-to-the-*indigenes*” conceit, adopted from Sol Worth and others, explicitly celebrates notions of self-representation. Yet the announcing and “staging of effacement” by the outsider in these situations can also serve as the worst form of hand washing. Showcased self-effacement, for example, can deny the integral role or presence of the filmmaker, who avoids—and thus helps to maintain—the local political status quo. Perhaps, in this regard, the compositional tendencies of Worth’s Navajo filmmakers were less a reflection of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis (his contention) than they were evidence of something far simpler: of rudimentary and inevitable difficulties in exposure and camera handling that *anyone* learning to use a 16mm Bolex will face. Although Worth’s important work stimulated subsequent community projects elsewhere, the actual films that resulted served mostly as university museum pieces—as ways to proof-text theory back east.

I tried to work through this traditional wisdom early on in the project, and was particularly interested in finding examples of self-representation in the arroyos. A Oaxacan migrant worker named Modestio proudly videotaped the ramshackle home of his four children in a camp of approximately eighty residents in the suburbs of Carlsbad (see fig. 9). At first, my partner and I noticed the careful ways that families such as Modestio’s negotiated the tough living conditions on this hillside. When we visited, his wife had just given birth one week earlier, and a van from the Vista clinic was waiting across the creek to give her an obstetric exam as we talked. Modestio narrated his video tour with the ostensible contentment that one might expect a worker to show when talking to newcomers like us: “There are a lot of families and children here. Yes. Everything is fine here.” But he also invoked an optimism about his children’s futures that



Fig. 9. Migrant camp resident filming with a camcorder in “Kelly Camp” (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

was much less like the “resistance” proposed by border artists and theorists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2000), and much more like the American dream of upward mobility that one might expect in homes at the top of the nearby hills.⁸ Other residents consistently underscored this sense of upward aspiration and did not express the kind of critical resistance that academics frequently expect of the marginalized.⁹ Modestio continued, when questioned about his landlord, to sketch a benign image of the camps: “Ah, yes. The patrón here is my ‘father.’ He helps us a lot. And gives us his hand. Whenever I need something, he helps me.”

Modestio claimed images of himself on camera with very real accomplishment and pride. He had, after all, provided for a family against impossible odds. But he also called his slumlord “father.” Had Modestio consented to his patrón’s dominance? Was the master’s racism now inside of him, as Franz Fanon suggests? Then again, who was I to question Modestio’s ambivalent love for the patrón? No one else in California was offering this many square feet of concrete for his children, for even fifteen times the rent. Including me. So even raising the issue would be a cruel move on my part.

I came face to face with another side of the patrón, an “enabling” but no less ambiguous side, in a very different camp in Orange County known as Porterville. As I discovered, far from seeing the boss as a slumlord, camp

residents saw Sam Porter as their lone protector against nearby homeowners and developers who wanted the domestics and gardeners they hired to live anywhere but next door. The developers sold all of the homes around the camp by promising that Sam's "open land" would be cleaned up and turned into a park, even though no discussions to this effect had ever taken place. To cut off access to Porter's ranch, the homeowner association put up steel gates, which made it impossible for children in the migrant camp to go to school or for adults to get groceries. Legal wars against the county and developers led to Sam's stroke, but his insistence on the right of underpaid workers to "informal housing" kept the walls of the surrounding gated community very high, and its gates very closed. Sam's bitter advocacy on behalf of the migrants, and the migrants' allegiance to their patrón, made me question the wisdom of targeting only the landlords as the villains in this scheme.

Who was I to pull this one string out of the web of complicity—the ways workers might rationalize subservience or make racism internal in their own representations—without noting the ways the same relationship also made their very survival possible? Increasingly, interactions with migrants and landowners like Modestio and Sam Porter made me uneasy about facile or apparently autonomous displays of "self-representation." Acts of filmmaker self-effacement, including the simple or naïve distribution of camcorders for the purpose of migrant self-representation, cannot easily accommodate the kind of determining contextual information that is so important to understanding the perverse and extensive logic of *patronismo* in contemporary California (see fig. 10 and fig. 11)

A second tendency in the current theoretical orthodoxy, worn-out elaborations of the "you can't represent the racial other" theory, also became increasingly suspect in my mind, even as this "othering prohibition" has created celebrity opportunities for the various academics espousing it. Such approaches tend to displace engagement with the lived worlds of uneven power, social relations, and subjugation in the field (and in front of the camera) in order to cultivate the academic professional's own spotlighted and staged discursive subjectivities. While justified philosophically, perhaps, this form of analytical self-absorption and reflection can short-circuit important questions about what, then, one can point the camera at, or how one can engage with any reality in the lived world outside of the filmmaker. Totalizing reflexivity of this sort serves as a sorry substitute for actual media fieldwork.¹⁰ Far from being profound, this intellectualized assertion about othering and reflexivity is actually a rather *remedial* first step for anyone involved in media production, anthropology, or cultural work.



Fig. 10. Gateway of designer-home community near entrance to camp arroyos (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.



Fig. 11. Roadside sign with directions to Mixteco migrant camp (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

Third, even the optimistic tenets of “border culture theory,” while arming activists and artists with very real and effective tools for cultural resistance, seem to apply best (or mostly) to those fortunate enough to bring MFA degrees and enough cultural capital to border regions to make detritus a celebratory rather than indictable opportunity. I had a hunch that the art world/culture studies spotlight placed on the few miles that separate San Diego and Tijuana across the overt U.S.-Mexico border offered curatorial opportunities that were largely absent from the very different “border culture” cultivated thirty miles away in North County San Diego. Although largely off the curatorial/scholarly radar, this “other” border region (an area that stretches from Del Mar, Carlsbad, and Oceanside on the north coast to Vista, San Marcos, Fallbrook, and Pala inland) seemed to me to be as important (and perhaps more significant racially) than the official and critically sanctioned border zone to the south.

These three theoretical tendencies—effacement tactics, othering prohibitions, and curatorial border celebrations—all make it somewhat difficult for scholars or filmmakers to talk across popularized racial identity categories. All of these intellectual tactics turn out to be quite analogous to and compatible with the very system of commercial exploitation and racial segregation (and near slavery conditions) that prevails in North County. Tactical forms of academic effacement and deference encourage identity insularity and a false sense of autonomy. This theory-informed compartmentalizing of race identity cultivates notions of self-analysis as culture (“this ethnography cannot be about anyone else”). Such a stance is very much like the driving logic of the suburban campo as well. Equally preoccupied with sanctioned, private identity boxes, everyone in the broader region also finds ways to say that the squalid camps next door are about someone else’s identity, are someone else’s fault, are someone else’s responsibility (see fig. 12 and fig. 13). This ubiquitous and almost rote display of irresponsibility is very much analogous to the stance presupposed in academia. In fact, the elaborate system of racial domination and labor abuse in suburban California is the responsibility of anyone involved in the cultural economy of the region—even the theoretical hand washers.

Postscript: Speaking Outside of the Theory-Orthodoxy Frame

The suburban campo in North County maintains its system—maintains order—by regulating who sees and who gets to be seen. And this process is mapped onto workers by their placement in a vertical hierarchy. Gated



Fig. 12. Walls of gated designer home communities ringing the bluffs above Carlsbad migrant camps (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.



Fig. 13. Warning signs in utility right-of-way, zoned as *defacto* “no-man’s land” suitable for campesino habitat (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

designer-home communities above are like the classic “city set upon a hill”—a placement that gives all the camp residents below a vision of “us seeing them, seeing us,” and that raises the ever-present possibility of being watched.¹¹ One incident demonstrated just how dangerous this form of vertical-optical segregation could be when those who are elevated cross-over into the low-lands below. On July 7, 2000, eight teenagers from Mount Carmel High School in Rancho Penasquitos dragged five elderly migrants from their camp huts, beat them with pipes and stakes, and shot them each with pellet guns. One of the teens pitchforked each of his victims. The hand-wringing by civic leaders in Carmel Valley and Rancho Penasquitos that followed pointed to Nazi and hate literature imported from the “outside” as a cause of the hate crimes. Yet the flesh wounds of those hospitalized showed something very different. These teens had merely transferred the now-habitualized geographic marks and barriers of North County onto and into the tactile landscape of the workers’ skin. The attack occurred in McGonigle Canyon, site of the original Rancho de los Diablos camp. The camp’s celebrated abatement and relocation five years earlier had been widely reported as evidence that the camps were now “history.”

After a convoluted series of criminal and civil trials and appeals, a set of convictions and sentences were handed down in the migrant beating cases in July 2002. Prosecutors succeeded in trying the youths as adults under the recently passed Proposition 21, a statute that allowed stiffer measures in response to particularly violent crimes. Ironically, the proposition, which had drawn strong support in the election from the conservative population of Rancho Penasquitos, created a public crisis once it was applied to teenagers from the very same suburb. Largely conceived as a means to control the outbreak of gang crime by adolescents in urban areas (read “adolescents of color” or “ethnic minorities”), the measure boomeranged when applied to white teens. Their lawyers and parents dragged out every possible emotional appeal before ultimately losing in the California Supreme Court. The beatings and the court cases that followed showed the pernicious ways that culpability, complicity, and accountability are managed as part of the racial order, by the tactical assignation of either “infantilism” or “ageism.” While most of the beaten migrants were elderly, their teenage assailants treated them as faceless and infantile, even as Prop 21 was launched to forcibly “age” dangerous ethnic-minority teenagers to adulthood. Meanwhile, the parents and defense lawyers representing the white teens offered endless explanations of childhood behavior and innocence in response to the law. The convoluted logic at work in this case can

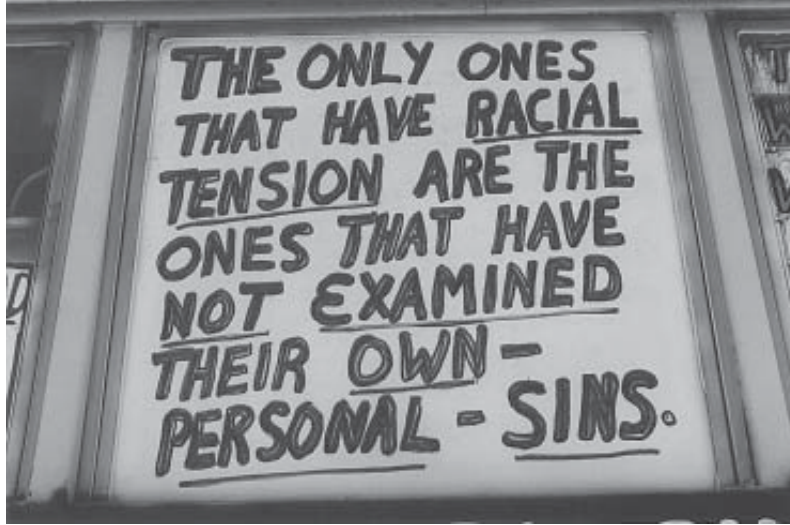


Fig. 14. Warning sign about racism, near Fallbrook and San Luis Rey area, North County San Diego (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.



Fig. 15. Carmel Valley and McGonigle Canyon migrant camps, "abated," then redeveloped near subdivisions as "wildlife restoration" zones (2003). Photography by John Caldwell.

only partially be engaged and understood within the now-standard constraints of postmodern theory, restrictive prescriptions about participatory production, or totalizing forms of ethnographic reflexivity. The layered and raced juridical and semiotic play of infantilism and ageism at the root of these migrant beating crimes—much like the perverse and distributed psychology of the patrón discussed earlier—has real-world consequences, ones that are frequently abusive and often violent. Such issues, like the racial landscape of the migrant worker camps in the suburbs in general, demand that participants, scholars, and filmmakers speak across the safe and neat identity boxes now sanctioned by the economy and celebrated by academic theorists. (see fig. 14 and fig. 15) Such things demand that observers and analysts identify their own voices and positions, even in relation to (or especially in relation to) tactical forms of racial essentialism that groups like the Mixteco Frente successfully deploy. To do otherwise, I would argue, is to participate in some way in the broad consensus that keeps the camps in place.

Make no mistake. Increased self-representation by marginalized groups should remain a fundamental goal in media work. Yet self-representation and the need for analysis that acknowledges academic privilege in heterogeneous worlds defined by inter-group domination and servitude are not mutually exclusive goals. To continue to limit ourselves to the same old obsessively provisional, theory-sanctioned production strategies and identity insularities in places like these arroyos can stand, unfortunately, as a form of silence and de facto complicity. Good for the cultural trophy cases back in academe, perhaps, but of questionable value to those left behind in the mud.

Notes

Both of the productions referred to in this essay—the feature documentary film essay *Rancho California (por favor)* (60min., color, BetaSP/VHS, 2002), and the shorter, participatory community video on food security, *Amor Vegetal: La Cosecha Nuestra* (30min., color, BetaSP/VHS, 1998)—are currently in film festival release and are available for rental and public screenings. Contact John T. Caldwell at john@tft.ucla.edu.

1. See Trinh 1989 for a discussion of the problematic of racial “othering.”
2. These experiences, between 1967 and 1976, included seasonal work in harvesting, cultivation, and foraging crops in central Illinois (Greene County), livestock and grain elevator work in southern Illinois (Jackson and Williamson Counties), and grain processing and feed mill work on the Mississippi River in Muscatine Iowa.

3. My years in the campo can be characterized as a succession of starts and stops and direction changes. From the start (1996), I had intended to produce a film on the migrant camps called *Rancho California*. This production was largely put on hold in 1997-1998 in order to produce the community videos *Amor Vegetal* and *Pro-Familia* after I met the organizers for the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional. After completing these projects, I worked to finish *Rancho California*, but with a different set of insights about how the region and its landscape worked

4. The account that follows in the next five paragraphs is adapted from the narration in *Rancho California* and describes conditions depicted in the last third of the film.

5. Arturo explained: "There are ranches that in reality are far from the city, where the bosses don't show any concern. When a person gets sick from some illness ... gonorrhea ... the boss tells him, 'No, that is nothing. Take a Tylenol, and it will pass.' What you should do is work. That's what you should do."

6. I discuss more fully the activities and significance of the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional in a forthcoming article to be published in *Media, Culture, and Society*.

7. The quote is from an interview in the film *Rancho California* (*por favor*).

8. Modestio talked of the importance of education for his children's success, then stated: "I hope that all of my children will study and will learn how to take care of themselves. When they are grown up, if they want to come with me, then they can. When they are older they can make the decision, and get work here."

9. Another women explained the dream she shared with those on the top of the hill, albeit from much more desolute circumstances: "And we were talking. And they asked: 'What do you wish for your children?' And I wished only the best for my children. I can't give them anything. But hopefully, by studying, God will help us. And they will be able to succeed."

10. Simply having a camera in the field means that at some point the filmmaker or media worker has to pick up the camera and shoot something other than himself or herself in front of the lens. In some ways, the camera/recording machine itself is antithetical to total self-referentiality.

11. My initial reaction to the camps, early on, was that they were modeled on livestock management and herding practices. An employer-made videotape on animal husbandry and the care of livestock that had made its way to the Kelly Camp in Carlsbad provided a troubling justification of this analogy: "But some people question whether confinement is good for animals. Confinement does two things. It restricts the movement of the animal, but it also offers protection to the animal.... The animal that's in confinement is not attempting to conceal itself from predators. It is not out searching the countryside for a mate. It's a trade-off." Working in the arroyos over the months, however, made me realize that the migrant workers' situation was less about forced incarceration than it was about the visual and logistical ways that migrants look, are looked at, are concealed, and are ostensibly "sheltered" on the landscape.

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