

Natalie Vinski, "Looking Closely at a Life in Adam's County," December 6, 1998

Tomas' car appears as a nondescript sedan; an old Buick maybe, a dull charcoal slate color. He drives it carefully, just five miles over the speed limit, up and down and around the winding country roads of south central Pennsylvania. Anonymously, he winds around the orchards, keeping to himself, avoiding unnecessary attention. His expression stays stem, and unemotional.

**"Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically
for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation
makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity
we don't identify with the Anglo- American cultural values and
we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values.**

We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness.

**I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes one cancels out the other and
we are zero, nothing no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo
soy'*"**

{Anzaldua 63}.

Tomas lives in the United States illegally. He is an agricultural farm laborer. He works in the apple orchards of Adams County, Pennsylvania. Two years ago, Tomas and his three brothers left their families and their rural Mexican pueblo and headed to the U.S. to find work. Crossing the border was easy, he says, the men were lucky, they were apprehended by INS only four times, on the fifth time they crossed safely into California. They drove cross country to Pennsylvania. His brother in-law got stopped for speeding on the way, showed fake identification, and luckily got away with no more than a large fine. Tomas does not have a U.S. drivers license and his social security number is false. His only identification is a hand-typed card from the local social service agency where he takes English classes. He knows he cannot afford to be stopped by the police. Sometimes Tomas feels as if he is driving an invisible car.

**ASurrounded by images that exclude them,
included in images that seem to have no real social power,
ethnic communities come to feel that they never quite exist
and never quite vanish@ {Lipsitz 134}.**

Tomas has lived here for a time, so it would be assumed that by now he might feel slightly comfortable on this turf and in this society. But Tomas cannot pinpoint his place in American

society. All around him he is bombarded with images of what America is, what Americans look like, but he cannot see a representation of himself among them. The Hispanic community of Adams County is only where he does feel somewhat at home. But the community is not accepted by much of the larger population of the county. The community is ignored, pushed aside, or looked negatively upon. As the community struggles to make a place for itself, Tomas and his kindred must feel as though they are floating on a separate plain.

ACradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures,

straddling all three cultures and their value systems,

***la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war.**

Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like

others having or living in more than one culture,

we get multiple, often opposing messages.

The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of references

causes *un choque*, a cultural collision@ {Anzaldua 78}.

Tomas is a complex personae and he has a life story and a personality that is as interesting as any other American citizen. It is a tremendous waste to leave him hovering, shunned and invisible from the rest of society. In reaction to this isolated position, a position of conflict and cultural collision, he creates a unique, pluralistic self-identity. Gloria Anzaldua, author of *Borderlands-La Frontera* and George Lipsitz, author of *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* look to the past to explain the ways that contemporary Mexican immigrants may navigate issues of identity. Both authors focus on the Chicano movement of the 1960s to explain how Mexican immigrants design, utilize and celebrate, their own new culture in the United States. Although the men of Tomas' generation may not have the same issues influencing their own creation of culture, it is clear that both generational groups share unifying qualities. Namely, both groups utilize popular culture to compliment and influence the original culture. The new culture is pluralistic, a product of Mexican, American, traditional, modern, popular, individual and various other sources.

In 1960s Southern California, the Chicano movement was in full force and the development of cultural trends seemed to be a reaction to the complex pluralities of the city streets {Lipsitz 146}. The hard life of the barrio inspired new styles and traditions. Car customizing and cruising became the outlet for the energies of young Chicano men. Car-club *chulos* not only focused on their cars to display their quest for fun and good times, but a desire for the good life of material success {Lipsitz 147}. Furthermore, the car culture "provided a means for satirizing and subverting ruling icons of consumer society. Just as car customizers 'improved' upon the mass-produced vehicles from Detroit," popular Chicano rock songs began to celebrate Mexican-American appropriations of automobiles as a community ritual to the greater American society.

Throughout the later part of the decade and into the 1970s, the low-rider car customizer culture began to surface, influenced heavily by the new consciousness of the Chicano and Black Power movements, and charged by increased political activism concerning the War on Poverty, the Vietnam War, and the repressive policies of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The inside of Tomas' car is pristine and smells like vanilla air freshener. The outside, though neat looking with small patches over rusty points is ambivalent, giving no clue to the mileage of the car nor its driver. The exterior of each appears rough and uncertain, suggesting the harsh pasts they may have experienced and the mysteries of what lies within their interiors. Tomas may wish the exterior of his car was invisible, but he fills the inside with a selection of talisman. This is Tomas' own car, his own space. He may share a room in a labor camp with three other brothers and a bathroom with ten other men, but this car is his own. Like the Californian Chicanos a generation before him, he customizes his car to reflect and express himself

Hanging from Tomas' rearview mirror is a rosary made of light pinkish stones. Though he says he doesn't go to mass very often since he moved here, Tomas says that he was raised a Catholic and still considers himself one today. Following my eyes upward, I see a colorful paper pasted to the ceiling of the sedan. It is an iconic picture of la Virgen de Guadalupe Hidalgo, the *la Santa Patrona de los mexicanos*. In my best Spanish, I ask Tomas why he has the picture of the Virgin in the car. He replies that he was born to a family who believes in the Virgin and when he was a little boy, he was taught to pray to her when he was upset. Now he says he keeps her image in his wallet and in his car for protection. He keeps the image of his home town's church's saint in his wallet as well. Tomas also keeps a dry Palm Sunday frond tied in a loose chain around the gear shifter of the steering wheel. He thinks he should go to church more often.

To Tomas, displaying the material items associated with his religion is almost more important than his spiritual beliefs or practices. The religious images, displayed in a tangible exhibition, are more cultural and social statements than spiritual ones. Gloria Anzaldua states, "Today *la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and the culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. To Mexicans on both sides of the border, *Guadalupe* is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middle-class. Guadalupe unites people of different races, religions languages... *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is the symbol of ethnic identity and tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanomexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess" {Anzaldua 30}.

On the front windshield, Tomas has a small plastic silhouette of a naked woman connected to a spring and a suction cup. As his car bounces along, the silhouette shakes back and forth. When I asked Tomas what this toy was and what it is for, he just shrugged and called it "a Mexican decoration". To us the doll was offensive and derogatory; to him it is a common ornament. Tomas has said many times that he does not understand the woman's role in American culture. He says that in Mexico, a child's parents have total control over their son or daughter until they are married. Tomas tells us the customs of everyday male and female interaction in Mexico. As we walk along the sidewalk, he insistently moves to my other side, to be in the position closest to the curb, closest to the traffic, closest to the danger. Before a group of us decides to go out for a

meal, he makes sure to tell us that he will pay for our meal. I agree and offer to pick up the tab next time. But he refuses. In Mexico, he says, it is insulting to a man to have a woman offer to pay for him. To be seen having a woman pay for a man's meal in a restaurant is the most severe of social embarrassments for the man. Even with a group of mixed female and male friends, even in the United States in an American establishment, Tomas refuses to break the custom. It is embedded in his cultural upbringing.

Gloria Anzaldua explains how the modern meaning and concept of the term macho has become an Anglo invention. She says that for men like her father, being "macho" meant being strong enough to protect and support her mother and herself, yet being able to show love. This is the polite chivalry I see displayed in Tomas' actions and attitudes. But through candid conversations with Tomas and with intimate conversations with Mexican women, I have caught a glimpse of a more frightful, less chivalrous, display of male power: stories told in hushed voices of a woman who stays in a battered women's shelter because her husband hits her; the working mother who tells me her husband demands a full home-cooked Mexican meal because he doesn't care for American boxed food; the women who proudly tell me how thankful they are that they have "good" husbands, ones that never drink, as if they had luckily beaten the odds of marrying a "bad" man. Gloria Anzaldua expands on this increasingly common phenomena, "Today's macho," she says "has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His "machismo" is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance. The Anglo, feeling inadequate and inferior and powerless, displaces or transfers these feelings to the Chicano by shaming him. In the Gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame" {Anzaldua 83}.

We need to stop by Tomas' camp to drop off his car. He tells me that he is worried to bring us women there. He says that his co-workers rarely see women, that it is a Saturday afternoon and that they will be relaxing and drinking. He does not want us to feel uncomfortable.

"The loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo

which leads him to put down women and even brutalize them.

Coexisting with his sexist behavior is a love for the mother

which takes precedence over that of all others.

Devoted son, macho pig. To wash down the shame of his acts, of his very being,

and to handle the brute in the mirror,

he takes to the bottle, the snort, the needle, and the fist@ {Anzaldua 83}.

Tomas has told us before that there are drugs in his camp. He says that he does not use them. He also says that he rarely drinks. When we go to his camp, no one looks our way. The eating room is clean and bright and Tomas' brothers play pool quietly. They softly shake our hands and barely look us in the eye.

We hang out with Tomas and his friend Sahid at a community park in Biglerville. The men park their cars side by side and not ten minutes go by before they decide to break out the music. Tomas reveals a trunk full of items— a jug of coolant, five long-handled pruning shears, and various other auto parts. Taking up the bulk of the space, however, is an enormous music speaker. Out of nowhere the men produce various CDs, they explain to us the various types of Latino music and play a sample of each one. The bass and the speaker are pumping, Tomas looks over to the park grotto where Anglo church people seem to be having a picnic. "Will they mind?" he asks. The men decide to teach us the different dances, salsa, *banda*, *merengue*, and *romantico*, each has its own style, its own set of movements. They promise they will take us dancing in clubs in Harrisburg that have Latin nights. I find it difficult to catch on, my body feels uncomfortable in the intimate positions, and the maneuvers and rhythms seem unnatural to my body.

Jose E. Limon, author of *Dancing with the Devil- Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*, claims that the Mexican Americans' passion for dance is a cultural comment. The entirety of the book focuses on dance as a social commentary, a way for Mexican immigrants of working class status to address cultural differences in a society where they are socially isolated and marginalize, "the overemphasis on the verbal and the technological in the United States undervalues dance for the population at large, but as a consequence many subcultures exist which overvalue dance precisely on this account" {Limon 162}. Similarly, the Hispanic community of Adams County may use dance. Limon points out that "in the city of Juchititan, Oaxaca, Mexico, privileged upper class groups cling to their dance as a symbol of cultural identity in a milieu which has become heterogeneous and threatening". He sees that in South Central Texas, Mexicans may dance as couples, "in a counterclockwise circle that perhaps symbolically suggests group cooperation and protection against the 'outside=" {Limon 162}. In a sense I did feel excluded when I could not catch on to the dances that the Mexican men were teaching me. As an American, I take it for granted that I feel comfortable in most of my daily experiences, but in this case, I was in a situation that I was not a natural part of. In this case, I was the outsider, the one who is excluded, and Tomas and Sahid were the insiders, the one's who were included. Limon also cites other anthropologists Bernard Siegel and Hanna who see dance as a possible, "defensive structuring in which members of society attempt to establish themselves in the face of felt, external threats to their identity. {Limon 163}.

Tomas has a hat with the Philadelphia Eagles logo on it. He also has a turtleneck with the emblem of the San Jose sharks. He says he likes sports. He lists *futbol americano* as his favorite. On a shopping trip with Tomas, his eyes wander the winter coat section of the department store and land on the brightly colored sports Starterjackets. He lifts a bulky black and gold coat off the rack and asks our opinion. He says that it looks warm and says he likes the colors, but it is doubtful that he recognizes the team. The weather in South Central Pennsylvania can be harsh. The snow and rain produce a climate that is much different from that of Tomas' hometown in

Mexico. He must make adjustments to the colder temperature, and picks a coat that will keep him warm.

Each time I meet with Tomas, I look for a pattern in the type of shoes he wears. He is wearing his heavy soled work boots when I tutor him in ESL classes. The leather is crackled with mud from the orchards; he only has time to quickly change his shirt after work before he leaves for class. On rainy days, and weekends, he wears worn gray tennis shoes. On Friday nights he comes to class in his off- white pointy cowboy boots. He says doesn't wear his cowboy hat, because no one in Pennsylvania wears them. Wearing the boots is not simply a daring fashion risk. It becomes a social risk. To many Americans in Adams County, cowboy boots are the symbol of farmwork, of "country" style and living. On the other hand, Tomas takes pride in his work as a farm laborer both here, and especially in Mexico. In Mexico, boots are a practical necessity and a popular fashion. By wearing his boots in Pennsylvania, Tomas is showing his pride in his self identity. Tomas knows that other Mexicans will see his boots, know who" is and admire him. He also knows that other Americans may see his boots, know who he is, and pass a negative judgement.

In the mall, we browse the shoe aisle and Tomas holds up a pair of heavy black Nikes that he likes. I ask Tomas why he admires this particular brand and why he likes this shoe. He says he only wears Nike tennis shoes and points out the features, the air bubble in the soles, the black lace guards and the high tops. As a young man living in America, he is inevitably bombarded by volumes of advertisements and marketing ploys by companies proclaiming their tennis shoes and other products. He watches TV; he knows about Barney. he knows about rapt of course he sees the commercials that shout and show that American athletes, American men, should wear various brands of tennis shoes. Tomas and other young men take the material goods presented to them and transform them into their own, "created artifacts from diverse cultures blend together into a seemingly contextless homogenized mass, encountered independently from the communities that gave birth to them" {Lipsitz 135}. Tomas makes the individual choice. He chooses the Nike shoes and makes them his brand. They, along with his cowboy boots become both personal and cultural statements.

"Popular Culture in actuality represents a complicated cultural strategy

designed to preserve the resources of the past

by adapting them to the needs of the present {Lipsitz 137}.

Tomas' car has bench seats and a big front engine like the kind in the cars my grandfather used to drive. And perhaps it is appropriate, as Tomas looks far older than his twenty one years. Only looking past the dark beard and moustache do I see the face of a young man not many months older than myself. Only by catching a second glance past his sharp eyes can you glimpse the wit and intelligence so apparent in his sense of humor. Even with my poor comprehension of Spanish, I can tell that Tomas is quick with words and jokes. He carefully observes his surroundings in each new situation, a trip to the bowling alley, a visit to a college fraternity party. It amazes me that his vocabulary is so diverse, and that already he is utilizing American slang words in his conversations. At times he will blurt out the most random of English

vocabulary words with a side comment in Spanish, making a bilingual joke. For example, Tomas once asked me where I lived and I replied "Pittsburgh". He then asked me how to pronounce the English word "father-in-law" and then proceeded to tell me that his father-in-law lives in Pittsburgh. It took me a second to catch on to the harmless joke. Tomas was joking that I was his wife and that my father was in fact his father-in-law. Well, maybe you had to be there. In *Dancing with the Devil*, Jose Limon devotes an entire chapter as to how with Mexican American lower class males in southern Texas, "culturally distinctive jokes and banter play a significant role in constituting Chicano culture, both as a form of resistance and as a source of positive identity" {Lipsitz 125}. Among themselves, the men use humor and playful word-fighting to express brotherly affection and allegiance.

Before Tomas, the Chicanos too, explored the possibilities of intermixing both Spanish and English in written and spoken communication, "For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language with terms that are neither *espanol ni ingles*, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages" {Anzaldua 55}. The combination of languages became a new, unique creation in itself. "Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicano's need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest- for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East" {Anzaldua 55}. By creating and utilizing their own language, Chicano people were able to give themselves a concrete basis of support for organization and unification.

Anzaldua expresses how it is difficult for her people to determine what even to call themselves, how words and names possess various complex connotations and definitions, "*Nosotros los Chicanos* straddle the borderlands. One side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos' incessant clamoring so that we forget our language. Among ourselves we don't say *nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los espanoles, o nosotros los hispanos*. We say *nosotros los mexicanos* {by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexico: we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one}. We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado*. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican is a state of soul- not one of mind, not one of citizenship@ {Anzaldua 62}.

Tomas has a colorful silk shirt that he wears on special occasions. It is vibrantly colored and on the back is the image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* with the word Mexico above it. The shirt is loud. It proclaims Tomas identity. He says it cost him over sixty dollars. In this same conversation he says that in his town in Mexico it takes a week's worth of wages to purchase a hamburger.

By wearing the shirt with the image, by listening to the traditional music and by using the American slang words, Tomas is negotiating his cultural identity as a Mexican immigrant to the United States. "Unable to experience either simple assimilation or complete separation from dominant groups, ethnic cultures accustom themselves to a bifocality of reflective of both the ways that they view themselves and the ways that they are viewed by others" {Lipsitz 135}. By

utilizing the differences of the two cultures to his advantage, Tomas is showing a tremendous amount of self-sufficiency and strength. Anzaldua also relates how Mexican Americans accept and bravely use difference and complexity as a constructive resource. "The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be American from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode- nothing thrusts out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" {Anzaldua 79}.

Though the car is clearly an old model, and was probably used before his ownership, Tomas is proud of his vehicle and treats it with care. At the gas station I point out that the lower octane gasoline is cheaper and I say it is what I put in my car. But he only fills up with premium and says that is what is best for his car's engine. Without shame, in a matter of fact way, he says that maybe my car is different, maybe newer. Tomas gives no excuse for his car, he does not give an apology for its age or its miles. The car is a reflection of him, "A multivocal and contradictory culture that delights in difference and disunity seems to be at the core of contemporary cultural consciousness" {Lipsitz 135}. As his car rolls on, a conglomeration of parts, some old, some new, some American, some Mexican, Tomas' identity evolves, an identity that thrives on difference.

Sources

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands- La Frontera- the New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

Limon, Jose E. *Dancing with the Devil- Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.

Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

Gomez, Tomas. Personal Interviews. October through December, 1998.