More than twenty years ago while walking through a
Mexican-American neighborhood somewhere in San Antonio, Texas, a good
friend and I passed by a house whose front yard had become a cluttered gallery
of homemade concrete folk art. Scattered within this fantastic scene were real
mesquite trees, shrubs, vines, a dwarf tree or two, and potted plants and flow-ers. Narrow paths tried to make their way through the clutter but were soon
defeated. The lot was small, but oh so intense. The clutter wrapped around
both sides of the house to create an even bigger heap of the backyard. This
scene was from long ago, and now I cannot remember if the figurines and
other odd, concrete sculptures contained a set of themes that may have unified
this enormous, wild collection. Such a poor thing my memory is, but what I
distinctly remember to this day was a sign over the doorway of the house. It
announced the artist’s name, and this was followed by the word “maker.”
Makers; the process of making; made things as cultural displays or perfor-
mances; the economic, social, and political contexts of made things; the circu-
lation of such things through the imaginations of a community and a
culture—these issues intrigue me, and thus they constitute major themes
inside this book.

This book addresses at least two levels of “making.” At one level, I critique
the making of ethnographic texts, this book in particular. For instance, at
times the book negotiates a dialectic between assertion and simultaneous criti-
icism of that assertion. Such a negotiation might all too easily become a kind of tortuous path, but, fortunately, I do not follow such a route throughout. Indeed, what interests me more is how humans “make” an order. In order to explore this idea, I compare rather glibly the “ordering” of a text and the “ordering” of a society. I find both sorts of ordermaking paradoxical. I assume that there is always a need to make an order, and yet the process entails ordering something out. The result of this action is that a flaw, a fault line, is implanted in whatever has been ordered, and the flaw has the potential to collapse the structure that harbors and maintains it, whether that structure is the self, a text, or a social system. This assumption weighs almost mythically for me, and so I have never fully unearthed how it directs much of my thinking.

At a second level, this book explores how a variety of people made or displayed themselves and how these makings were influenced by systemic power differences. For instance, one of the book’s controlling questions is how can one create respect under conditions of little or no respect? Where I did fieldwork, it seemed sometimes that the difficulty of conditions—or their perceived difficulty—encouraged a kind of hyperbolic need for respect. The result was that some versions of creating respect were incompatible with other versions. Indeed, the book might be understood as a series of vignettes representing how different people created different kinds of respect and then disagreed with each other concerning what was respectable or not.

At this level, as I explore how people made and unmade themselves and how these makings were received by different audiences, the book is traditionally ethnographic. I call the book, then, an ethnography, an ethnography of a Latino/a community approaching thirty thousand who lived in a city I call Angelstown, a city of approximately a hundred thousand located close to Chicago. However, I would like my readers to consider the book a project in the rhetorics of public culture or the rhetorics of everyday life. The first term in particular is my own, but both terms try to name an approach that, consistent with the discipline of rhetoric, is interested in the structured contentiousness that organizes, albeit fleetingly, a community or a culture. I came to this approach because while doing fieldwork it occurred to me that not only uses of language but also a wide range of artifacts and bodily gestures became consistently mobilized during the making of disputes. Those interested in the performative dimension of human action should find considerable compatibility with my analyses of these public ways of displaying disputes. For instance, I interpret the surfaces of public culture—hairstyles, clothing, car decoration, musical styles, talk, the geometries of city streets and street names—as performances, as rhetorical gestures emerging from the desire to persuade others of the propriety of certain identifications and, implicitly, of the impropriety of other identifications. So, the performance perspective evident in both sociocultural anthropology and rhetorical studies is akin to my own mode of analyzing public displays, displays that are deeply connected to asymmetrical power relationships.

A project in the rhetorics of public culture or the rhetorics of everyday life, then, suggests a set of mixed interests in which sociocultural anthropology and rhetoric shade into each other. For instance, like most ethnographers, I attempt to evoke a macro-world by synthesizing a plethora of information. But sociocultural anthropologists will notice a difference between this work and their own, a difference that runs deeper. I suspect, than a reliance on a certain amount of rhetorical vocabulary. That difference has much to do with looking at cultures and communities as systems of contention in which a contentious position does not exist without its structured opposite and the two together have much to do with generating the specificities of everyday life. At any rate, it is my hope that readers will find their sympathies adequately represented in my preferred terms, namely, “a project in the rhetorics of public culture” or “the rhetorics of everyday life.” But beyond my interests in both sociocultural anthropology and rhetoric, there are other intellectual interests: for instance, the empirical research of social scientists in general, Marxist theory, and literary theory and analysis, particularly as these have come to be influenced by cultural studies scholars who excavate the political in public and literary discourse. In short, I see a project in the rhetorics of public culture as a somewhat new approach, one that adopts the fieldwork methods traditional to sociocultural anthropology and blends these with the cultural critique now common among critical ethnographers and theorists, and picks up as well ideas from an entire lineage of rhetorical theorists stretching to classical Greece and Rome.

And speaking of that classical tradition, let me say a few words about the notion of making and how it may have been viewed by Aristotle and Plato. For Aristotle, tekhnē, “art” or “craft,” was associated with “a reasoned habit of mind in making something.” For Aristotle, rhetoric was an art, and so was architecture. For Plato, gymnasiums training and shipbuilding were worthy arts, but rhetoric, instead, was more of a knack that offered cheap gratification. But let me amplify this notion of tekhnē further because I find the concept important. For Aristotle, tekhnē was associated with ability, capacity, and skill. Most significantly, art “as a reasoned capacity to make something” was concerned with that something’s “coming-into-being”; hence, art was “not the product of artistic skill but the skill itself.” I am skeptical of our ability to cap-
ture fully Aristotle's perspective on these issues and even more so his entire culture's, and I am even skeptical of using Aristotle or Plato to represent the bulk of classical rhetorical theory. Despite my caution, I still hear a valuable hint coming through that might be of interest to many: Has this ancient concept of tekhnē or art evolved in the modern world into something more debilitating, a cleavage, say, between artistic skill and other skills? The detritus of romanticism, particularly the idea of the alienated and sacred artist, survives in the modern fetishization of the art object. With such fetishization, art becomes aggrandized, a product of the mysterious, irrational, creative, and individual mind; in contrast, mundane skill becomes a product of generic minds. I am using the notion of tekhnē here to level that fetishization and to see the art in mundane skill and, more significantly, in day-to-day life. And there is, of course, the tekhnē of doing fieldwork and the tekhnē of writing ethnographies. I haven't heard this concept of art represented in the acrimonious debates that have occupied some sociocultural anthropologists, for instance, the so-called scientists versus the so-called postmoderns, the empiricists versus the subjectivists and/or literary types. The notion of art that gets pitched back and forth among these debaters is the more modern, narrow variety: art as high art or art as fiction. Why not, instead, level the concept of high art and recover another sort of art, one that is not dressed in prestige but that names, nevertheless, an intrinsic aesthetic or crafting that underlies the practices of everyday life, including the making of research. Call it tekhnē, “a reasoned habit of mind in making something.”

A few words about the title. There were two gentlemen in the community whose real names were Angel, and so it is for them that I have titled the book (Angels' Town) and named the community. I have chosen to write openly about one of these men, Don Angel, but the other Angel must remain obscure, although I have named him in this paragraph for the first and last time. I met the first Angel in 1990 at the beginning of my second stage of research; I met the other Angel toward the end. The first Angel, a more traditional man, a chero, was described as a saint by the retired priest who had hired him to tend the garden that flowered a grotto next to the church buildings. The other Angel would never be called a saint, for he has spent much of his life as a powerful underworld character. These two figures represent the lightness and darkness of this text—its comic side, its tragic side. Their lives, however, have been much too complicated to be imagined as allegories of lightness and darkness, and, therefore, it is important not to reduce their remarkably different worlds to just those categories. Everyone else in this text has a pseudonym, including the second Angel who will soon acquire one so
They have heard something from me or about me, but their ear is not placed close to my heart, where I am whatever I am. Therefore, they wish to hear me confess what I am within myself, where they can extend neither their eye nor ear nor mind.

—The Confessions of St. Augustine

For some time now, a favorite image of mine has been the collection basket. When I was a little boy growing up in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, my mother would take us to Sacred Heart Catholic Church, the town’s “Mexican” church in Mercedes. Inside the church, the main statue was that of Christ with an oversized heart fully exposed, dripping blood. His left arm gestured gently away from his body; his gaze looked just beyond the gesture. In another context, the vividness of the statue would have been tasteless, a bit overdone, perhaps campy in the eyes of some. But the purpose of such vividness—as I reflect on it now so many years removed—is to reanimate that which is no longer noticed. The hope, I suppose, is to startle an audience from its slumber: Christ as throbbing heart opens into the present, alive, in order to recover the vividness of a past message before the present can close again over its own wound, as it always does, to become the forgotten past, again.
But I particularly remember the collection baskets in the church, their long handles. When the time came, four men, two per pew, would thrust them before us at chest level, and we would drop our money and envelopes in. The collection basket becomes a metaphor of an individual who moves at the level of the heart, and so much is dropped into her or his life.

I remember one Sunday a very drunk man at some point during the service started walking on his knees from the back of the church. He was filled with catastrophe and perverse ritual. He chanted something, perhaps the rosary, in Spanish, of course. Perhaps he beat his chest rhythmically. I do not recall now. He kept shuffling forward on his knees until he reached, more or less, the front third of the church. We were astonished. The men who wielded the baskets, always so dutiful, came finally to pick him up and remove him from the church. Our layers of propriety rustled back into place on the surface of our lives, and our vulnerability was once again clothed.

The collection baskets and this man—who, seemingly, sought deliverance from brokenness through ritualized penance—are now juxtaposed in this text. They tell me something about the ethnographer. I have passed like a collection basket before the lives of others. During interviews and conversations, during incidental moments, others placed something inside of me. This book is an emptying of the basket. What purpose will their donations serve? But the image of a basket as passive receptacle collecting reality is, of course, unbelievable. In contrast to the basket image, much of this chapter will describe me as somewhat like that muddy, distorted man making odd gestures, this book being one.

Let me now expose something of my own ethos by making an autobiographical gesture in this chapter, the sort that ethnographers have been requesting for over a decade. I want to do this because, as a rhetorician, I am always concerned with the densities of a text and how to open these to scrutiny, and certainly one of the most significant densities concerns the writer's ethos, which is typically understood as a person's moral character or disposition. Before exposing my own particular disposition, however, I want first to look more carefully at the concept of ethos itself. By calling ethos a characteristic of texts, I am calling attention to the crafting of ethos and suggesting that a writer's ethos is the "appearance" of ethos and that I do not know what ethos might be as a "reality" somehow separate from its appearance. As one might expect, in the discipline of rhetoric the problem of ethos is muddy with ancient and contemporary commentaries. For the purposes of this chapter, however, what I wish to emphasize is how ethos is bound up with logos (in its most ordinary sense, "word," "reason," or "rational argument"). In other words, the rational argument does not necessarily persuade when reason is made pure. Indeed, rationality, the pure kind, does not exist outside the soup of human affairs. In matters of persuasion, then, character plays an important role. In some cases, one might even say that the carefully deliberated argument is itself a sign of character. However configured, the central point is that ethos and logos—or character and a rational knowledge claim—are linked so that knowing something of a person's character helps us to judge that person's knowledge claims. We can say this more enigmatically: logos is layered with ethos and ethos is layered with logos.

In the discipline of sociocultural anthropology, the weave of logos and ethos is tighter than anyone, to my knowledge, has fully explored. If a kind of reconceptualization of sociocultural anthropology were to occur via rhetoric, it would entail much more than an examination of the rhetorics of ethnographies. Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives* and James Clifford and George Marcus' *Writing Culture* are two texts along with others that have entered anthropology rather flamboyantly and confrontationally by pointing to the importance of the textual dimension in the creation of anthropological knowledge. But a full mobilization of the discipline of rhetoric, if it is to serve/disturb anthropology, entails more than a rhetorical examination of texts. Such a mobilization would also see rhetoric operating outside the text, for instance, in the helterskelter of fieldwork. If we think of fieldwork as thick with representations and displays—as anthropologists interested in performance often do—and if we further note that the discipline of rhetoric has been historically concerned with display, calling it an entire branch of rhetoric, *epideictic*, we might begin to sense how we might talk about the rhetoric of artifacts, rituals, cultural institutions, informants, texts, architecture, public and private spaces, silence, and so on. Sociocultural anthropology, then, is rhetorical long before its texts, its ethnographies and theoretical treatises, come into being because the cultural stuff that becomes a fieldnote is rhetorical, as is the fieldnote itself.

In being noticeably rhetorical, sociocultural anthropology, more so than the natural sciences perhaps, is defined by the dependence of logos upon ethos. For instance, data gathering may have as its purposeful end the creation of logos, but it can only get there through the creation of an ethos. In fact, sociocultural anthropology carved out its distinctive procedures in large part because of the problem of ethos. By "distinctive procedures," I refer to the fact that the modern ethnographer is now largely defined as one who lives with others over a long period of time, and this definition acknowledges that the process of coming to know a person—hence, the right to make a knowledge claim—is deeply intertwined with the creation of ethos, an ethos that is acceptable to the Other. One's credibility or character is created during miniscule moments of
interaction, each moment interpreted consciously or not so consciously by others. Within this corpus of interactions, interpretations, and reinterpretations, the organic shaping of an ethnographer's ethos occurs. Obviously, such shaping takes time, and the apparent shape of the ethnographer's ethos will tell the Other, who is also always establishing his or her ethos, what to share and what not to share from the otherwise secreted community. In fact, I have often suspected that the reluctance and inability to fully systemize ethnographic inquiry in order to make it more machinelike in the production of anthropological logos has much to do with how ethos saturates the moment of inquiry, and this is a condition that the natural sciences face differently and less conspicuously. My central claim, then: The persuasiveness of the ethnographic knowledge claim is constituted through and through, both in the moments of fieldwork and the moments of the final text, by ethos.9

I do not remember the book, author, or when I read it, but part of the lore of ethnographers is that their ethos, in part, is a product of living and viewing from the periphery. Their peripheral status is often evident when in their field sites, but it is also evident in their relationship to their own culture. Perhaps this feeling of living at the periphery is part of the cord that connects ethnography, embarrassingly or otherwise, to nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century alienation/cultural critique.10 The drunk man shuffling up the center aisle was also on the periphery. But his peripheralness became most evident as he performed one of the central grotesqueries of Catholicism. What is more central to Catholicism, images of the compassionate Christ or the tortured Christ? The drunk man chose the tortured Christ as center, moved himself bodily into it, and at that very moment placed himself outside the limits of propriety. Said differently, as outsider he was drawn to the iconography most deeply inside a particular community, and in finding that private center not often made public, he set off a communal shock wave that exposed everyone’s private longing and suffering, and for this he was pushed even further toward the periphery and literally placed outside the church. This reaction, more than likely, only intensified his self-definition as tortured outsider and his longing for redemption. Of course, my interpretation is but a projection of his originating motives and the public’s reactions to his bit of theater. In my scheme, this man had a special and brave, albeit fleeting, knowledge that emerged in part because of his conflicted role as insider/outside. Ethnographic knowing is a different sort of knowing; nevertheless, there is a shared theme of outsiders coming to know the insides of things, and I find this theme compelling.

I want to make clear that my own ethos contains a certain socioeconomic and cultural nervousness. These are odd demons that have helped place me on the periphery of two groups of people. I believe that much of this book’s ethos is entangled with these demons. I was born of Puerto Rican parents and raised in south Texas. I was the son of a farm manager, a Ph.D. horticulturalist, who was pragmatic and a highly skilled technician. The workers on the farm were Mexican, and they called my father el patrón. To this day, I retain a mostly Puerto Rican accent when I speak Spanish, which means I kept myself apart from the Mexican-American Spanish around me, and now I do not speak Spanish as easily as I speak English. Here are clues of human distances that even now cause me discomfort.

My family embodied a more or less patrician sensibility. The desire to be patrician is, perhaps, more accurate. Imagine this set of colonialist-like images, images that may have seemed odd in a United States context but approximated the images in which my mother and father were raised in Puerto Rico: Our large house on a hill at the eastern corner of two thousand acres of citrus trees, twenty to thirty workers and their families living at some distance in a kind of village where the farm equipment was located, the wife of one of the workers becoming an occasional housemaid, and a worker occasionally coming up the hill, embarrassed, with some personal problem. Unlike my family, I had trouble with the role I was to follow. When workers would be sent by my father to do yard work around the house, I would hide. Until my midteen years I was noticeably ashamed of my “workless” state, embarrassed by class differences even though I acted them out daily by simply being who I was. Because the owners of the farm lived five hundred miles to the north in Dallas, we were, in effect, the source of authority for a number of people. Our authority was less than it appeared, however. For instance, we did not own the house. It too was farm property, and our infrequent visits to the Dallas owners were awkward, for the owners represented real American wealth and power that far surpassed possibilities in Puerto Rico, and this realization seemed to undermine our authority back home in Mercedes. I remember my mother as deeply self-conscious of her Spanish-accented English, a sign of her difference, or afraid that her actions would betray a lower station in life and somehow reveal in front of all the Dallas owners some essential buchinche-like (disorder, common gossip, typically associated with the uneducated) qualities that in her mind followed Puerto Ricans wherever they went. These at least were the feelings of a young boy, and now these are the thoughts that those feelings have become.

I write least well about reality and much better about the perception of reality, the perceptions mentioned here and many more: for instance, perceptions of my schooling successes in contrast to the schooling disappointments of others whose latinidad I shared but with a difference; perceptions of Dallas as very
white, rich, and air-conditioned—again, a difference, but this one generated a
different courtship in which we were the petitioners and they the granter of
white-gloved favors. I was then and continue to be a nerve attached to these
sorts of differences. Then, I had mostly feelings at my disposal. Now, I also have
theory and lots of words, words that want justice to weight them. This book is
attached to the other side of the same nerve. One of its desires is to make
amends for the distances that placed our family on that hill, many more fami-
lies below, and precious few families five hundred miles to the north. Surely,
if this book is able to make amends, it is because of certain negotiating skills
that were cultivated under conditions of difference and distance.

I do not wish, therefore, to critique the distances that I have described by
arguing for utopian brother/sisterhood. Distance serves a purpose. Besides, I
rather like distance, perhaps because I have accommodated myself to it. To a
certain extent, distance has become a way of life that enables tenderness. One
starts to find the inside of what it means to live at a distance, and there is at that
moment a kind of bounty, for we are in contact with one of the deep wounds of
everyone. By voyaging through the feeling of distance, one can start to under-
stand the intensity of the drunk man at Sacred Heart Church, if not the spe-
cifics of his life. Was he not distanced from himself, perhaps someone else as
well, and a community to which he wished to belong?

This distinction between intensity and specifics interests me. This ethnog-
raphy contains a set of specifics that I could not have understood if I had not
lived ethnographically in a particular place at a particular time, but how does
one understand, indeed, experience, the emotional intensities of people, their
desires, envies, and resentments? Renato Rosaldo talks of having to experience
the intensity of personal grief before fully understanding the motives for head-
hunting among the Ilongots.11 I am saying something similar here, although I
do not wish to compare anyone's experiences, much less mine, to those of Ro-
saldo and his extraordinary encounters with grief. But I have been elaborating
in this chapter a set of emotional intensities that did not originate at the field-
site but long ago, at the moment of birth. Indeed, the fieldsite first magnetized
me because of these intensities, and so I cannot remove them from my text, nor
do I wish to. In short, in this book the analyses that at times look hermeneutical
and at other times like social science, are deeply embedded in the intensities of
particular feelings that over the years have not dissolved but have become, to a
significant degree, the core of a worldview, an interpretive frame, a heuristic.
These intensities, then, have coursed through this project, from fieldwork to
text, and through this ethos I have made a certain logos.

But there is still more to talk about concerning ethos than what I have re-
counted here. In particular, I would like to broaden further the notion that eth-
nographic logos depends on ethos. My strategy for doing so will be to examine
three recent fieldsites as exerting a special magnetism, or, if one prefers, as an-
swering a deeper pattern in an ethnographer's life. This deeper pattern, I take it,
is part of the ethnographer's character or ethos. What I wish to maintain is that
my description above of a connection between early-life experiences and a later
fieldsite where professional work gets done is not just a subjective account.
Other ethnographers, I believe, have said something similar.

I note, for instance, Nancy Scheper-Hughes in Death Without Weeping:
“[I]n writing about the [sugar] cane cutters and their families of Bom Jesus de
Mata [Brazil], I am also trying to reach out and touch the fading images of
those sugar workers I knew as a child” growing up at the foot of the Domino
Sugar refinery factory in a working-class neighborhood of Brooklyn, New
York.12 I note also Ruth Behar in Translated Woman: “[M]y work with
Esperanza, the Mexican street peddler, was also a bridge to my own past [one of
her grandfathers was a door-to-door peddler of blankets and men's suits in Ha-
vana, Cuba] and the journey my family has made to shift their class identity.”13
I note, finally, Smadar Lavie in The Poetics of Military Occupation who de-
scribes her work among the Bedouin of the South Sinai as being, in part, an at-
tempt to recuperate the heritage of her grandmother, a Yemeni Bedouin, a heri-
itage that had almost disappeared beneath the family's identification with its
European and Jewish origins.14

I could go on with many more examples, but what is one to make of these
ongoing patterns connecting early life to professional life that ethnographers of
late are willing to see? Uncovering the connection between fieldsite and some
deeper life-pattern of the ethnographer's has become a minor trope in the cur-
rent moment of ethnographic writing. Does it suggest the emergence into eth-
nography of a certain sentimentality, or at least confessionality, that violates an
older positivist or a more recent Marxist sensibility? I don't think so. The eth-
nographies mentioned above are too clearheaded, too politically committed,
too aware of power differentials to sustain the glaze of sentimentalism. More-
ever, the confession is a genre whose self-absorbed persona never leaves center
stage—and, again, this mode is very different from the sorts of ethnographies
that I am thinking about.15

I suspect that what I am pointing to—fieldsites that ethnographers ac-
knowledge as somehow continuous with or answering some life-pattern—is part
of the unacknowledged history of ethnography. For it would seem that the
ethnographic process of observing the world and making sense of it requires
making tenuous negotiations between knowledge claims and memory, partic-
ularly the memory of very old experiences whose details have been forgotten, a memory that functions more as a sounding board for recognizing what is important and for providing an assurance, probably based on feeling, that a given claim is true or real. Knowledge, then, would seem to get made in relationship to the sort of memory that I am pointing to here, one that functions very deeply and would seem to be inseparable from one's character or ethos. This sort of memory or character or ethos that helps to verify and shape knowledge suggests that knowledge is, in part, autobiographical and, similarly, that the fieldsite in very subtle ways, not literally so, is also autobiographical. Let me broaden my argument even further: The real fieldsite observed by a knowledge-making ethnographer eventually becomes the fieldsite of a text, which is the only fieldsite an audience comes to know. Part of the transformation of the first fieldsite into the second is through negotiations that become explicit between observation and memory, between brand new experiences and very old experiences, and it is through processes like these that real fieldsites become understood both as objects of knowledge and as extensions of a life-pattern or ethos. A fieldsite, yes, is a real place to make a certain logos, but as this real fieldsite becomes the fieldsite of the text, which is a somewhat different thing, all kinds of sense-making machinery gets mobilized, machinery that is meant to persuade through any means available. Logos is one means, and ethos, which saturates the moment of inquiry in the sorts of subtle ways that I have tried to outline in this chapter, is, for most readers, its largely invisible partner.

Let me shift from one kind of autobiographical gesture to another, from a set of notes about my own ethos in this text and the role of ethos in ethnographic inquiry to a brief explanation of how this text was made. There were two distinct stages in the making of this project. The first stage began with fieldwork, which lasted from February/March of 1987 to August 1988 and was completed as a dissertation in the English department of the University of Illinois at Chicago. The second stage, which I will discuss shortly, began when I returned to the fieldsite during the summers of 1990 and 1991 and has continued off and on to the present. My involvement in Angelstown, however, started in 1981 when my family and I moved there while I attended graduate school in nearby Chicago. Living in Angelstown, I was an active member in several Latino/a organizations. As a representative of these organizations I participated, for instance, in more mainstream organizations, such as school board committees, and for a very brief time, on a city-sponsored Image Task Force. In some ways, my research began as an extension of my activism, but I should also say here that throughout my life my own activism has always been compromised by a certain desire to know as completely as possible the positions of the other side and a willingness to sympathize with the Other.

One project that helped launch the first stage of fieldwork and continues to influence my thinking was an oral history project of Mexican immigration to Angelstown that was funded by a small grant from the Illinois Humanities Council. Two other researchers, Irene Campos-Carr and Susan Palmer, who in different ways were more knowledgeable than I of Mexican immigration history and Angelstown's Latino/a communities, and I used this grant to construct a portrait of the history of Mexican immigration to Angelstown. This material plus more has been radically transformed in order to produce the second chapter of this book.

The first stage of fieldwork was devoted to understanding the oral and written language characteristics in the homes of three mexicano families. I focused on the children in these homes and how they were acquiring language, particularly English, but I was also interested in adult language uses. Working with the English department's sociolinguist, Marcia Fara, I had acquired an invaluable understanding of the language characteristics of American communities and their similarity or lack of similarity to the language of schooling. Following the leads of Shirley Brice Heath in Ways With Words and Ron and Suzanne Scol- lon's Narrative, Literacy, and Face in Intercultural Communication, my work was directed mostly toward an audience of literacy specialists and was meant to have educational implications, although I decided early on to spend almost all of my time inside the homes of these families rather than in the schools. With each family, I took on different roles: a child's tutor, one who takes children to a park to play baseball or to a museum in Chicago, a builder of Halloween masks, a translator for adults, one who helps adults compose official letters, a friend who passes the time talking or watching TV, and so on. In time, I gathered over three hundred pages of elaborated fieldnotes, ninety-one cassette tapes filled with formal and informal interviews or ongoing conversations, and over a hundred documents consisting of children's writings and drawings or items read and/or written by adults.

In the summers of 1990 and 1991 and as a member of the rhetoric faculty at the University of Iowa, I returned to the fieldsite for lengthy stays, and the second stage of fieldwork began. During these stays, a series of transformations occurred. These transformations continued during shorter trips, which typically occurred over weekends after the summer of 1991. All of these trips were made with Edmundo Cazavos, my research assistant, who is Mexican and, hence, far more fluent in Mexican Spanish than I am. Edmundo's personal skills and his sensitivity toward the verbal art of Mexican Spanish have deeply influenced
this text. When we made visits, our base for conducting research was a rear
apartment rented by Don Angel, a main character in this text, and a variety of
his male roommates who came and went over the years. Don Angel was renting
from one of the original families from the first stage of fieldwork. By 1991, an-
other research assistant, Dan Anderson, joined us. Whereas Edmundo helped
me understand the Mexican aspects of this text, Dan helped me understand
theoretical aspects as well as city leadership.

My original intention for reentering the fieldsite was to broaden my under-
standing of the workplaces of the adults I had come to know and to reconceive
the community more richly by, for instance, doing research inside many of the
community grocery stores and businesses. My intention, at first, remained so-
ciolinguistic, but I was quickly losing interest in educational implications be-
cause literacy as a scholarly concentration did not seem to allow the broader
cultural examination that I aspired to. In short, I found myself moving away
from sociolinguistics and toward what I have already described as a project in
the rhetorics of public culture or the rhetorics of everyday life. Increasingly, I
began to practice semiotic and/or rhetorical readings of cultural material, em-
phasizing how one set of cultural materials (Latino/a) interacted with other sets
(Anglo, African-American, and so on). Moreover, I realized more clearly the
porousness of communities and the slippery task of defining such theoretical
constructs as “culture” and “community.”

In sum, I began to imagine ways of talking about socioeconomic and power relationships by reading rhetorically
the minutiae of life. If in 1987 I had seen written texts as discrete objects, in
1990 I began to see a written text as a sign system embedded in other sign sys-
tems and interpreters of the text as both signs and signers. In addition, I began
raising questions of representation, not only my representations of others in a
book but also the representations of one people by another. In short, I was aban-
doning the gaze of the educational expert who measures an instance of oral and
written language according to its proximity or distance to a schooled norm. In
contrast, becoming a rhetorician of public culture was more satisfying because it
entailed a sensitive detailing of the minutiae of life as these get divided by the
borderline of power difference. In short, Heath as a theoretical lens had been re-
placed by Michel de Certeau. This new perspective generated more than two
hundred pages of elaborated fieldnotes, over two hundred slides, approximately
sixteen hours of videotape, another eighty hours of formal and informal inter-
views and ongoing conversations, and an uncountable number of city docu-
ments, newspaper clippings, and street gang texts (to name only a few).

Earlier, I listed the researchers—Edmundo, Dan, and I—and one of the
text’s main figures, Don Angel. In so doing, I wish to emphasize the conditions
that led to a very male-oriented project. The researchers were male, those
whom we had easy access to were males, and the crowded living conditions en-
couraged a male humor and worldview. In one sense, although I do not wish to make too much of this, the male in Anglestown’s Latino communities was very
 conspicuous. For instance, those who had amassed noticeable wealth—namely
grocery store owners and owners of small businesses—were by and large male;
similarly, those who were most noticeable among the youth—namely street
gang members or those who drove “thumpers” (cars notable for their loud
sound systems, particularly the “thumping” bass that sometimes can be heard
long before the car is seen, and sometimes notable for “hydraulics,” which
allow the body of the car to move in a number of directions)—were also typi-
cally male. In this sense, the fieldsite had an obvious and accessible surface:
maleness. Accessing that which was beyond maleness was sometimes difficult.

An anecdote: One afternoon I decided to take pictures of teenage girls who
“put up the bangs.” “Putting up the bangs” referred to a hairstyle distinguished
by a high crest of hair that rose from the forehead and curled just at the top of
the peak. The style at that time was a semiotic marker quite popular among
teenage girls in the neighborhood, and sometimes it indicated alliances to male
gang members or female street gangs. Typically, the hairstyle was part of an
overall wardrobe. I was trying to collect a series of these pictures to juxtapose
with the equivalent male style. After “cruising” a variety of neighborhoods, I
saw a group of five or six girls with “bangs up” and dressed, moreover, in the
colors, black and gold, of the Almighty Latin King Nation. I turned the block
and came around again. I stopped the car, got out, and approached, camera in
hand. My highly direct walk, age, clothes, gender, and the fact that they knew I
had turned around were my semiotic markings—and they bolted. For me, the
scene summarizes how I remained on the periphery of many forms of female-
ness. I knew many adult women, those who worked on assembly lines and the
dughters of several families, but I never came to know as wide a range of
women as I knew of men. Moreover, I suspect that gender differences explain
why I rarely entered the same depths of conversation with women. If the field-
site’s surface of life, maleness, was relatively accessible, another surface, a more
oppressed one (I leave the word “oppressed” even though it does not capture
my experiences in Anglestown with more subtle male/female relationships)
was less accessible.

In admitting that in this project the ramifications of gender difference are
not as clear as they might be, I hope to further emphasize my skepticism about
the essentializing instinct that lies behind such phrases as “a culture” or “a community” and the effort to “interpret a culture.” Such phrases are empty, such efforts futile. Better put, such phrases and efforts are rhetorical tropes and ploys by which ethnographers create their images of a stable logos, “rational argument,” “rational knowledge claim.” Michele Rosaldo, for instance, was very aware of how these key terms function rhetorically to construct knowledge: “Cultures, like ‘personalities’ are descriptive tropes, lent conviction by their power to illuminate the activities of individuals or groups and organized by our assumptions concerning people and society.”

I suspect that to do research in an urban fieldsite characterized by immigration is to give up concepts and interpretive schemes that evoke images of stability. In the field, knowing males better than one knows females is just one sign that one’s interpretations are skewed and not as richly conceived as possible. And yet the mind is constantly provoked to conceive and make sense, or, as I described earlier, “make an order.” Moreover, the very existence of the social sciences depends on the possibility that one can make sense. In my text, I try to make sense, but I also try to deflect the essentializing tendency by openly admitting that my story/analysis is less about a group of people and the meanings inside their heads, as might be found in a traditional ethnography of a people bounded geographically, linguistically, ritually, and so on. Indeed, I have not searched for a collective set of practices, language habits, or inside-the-head meanings that will help me identify the Mexican immigrant community in Angelstwon. At most, I have made use of individually nuanced practices, but even these are not central to what I am writing about. In a strong sense, this text is about the conditions of in-betweenness, an almost unlocatable place. If, for instance, Don Angel and others had interpretations about the practices and beliefs of curanderos, “folk healers,” those interpretations were important to me and were, in fact, distilled from a variety of interviews, but these interpretations did not tell me much about how curandería was imagined by the Anglo middle class, how curandería became a semiotic marker arrayed alongside other semiotic markers pointing to Mexicanness, and how the accumulation of these markers became a political problem for those in charge of the economic revitalization of a city. Nor do these interpretations tell me how the children of Mexican immigrants simultaneously despised yet romantically honored the traditional markers. For the Latinos/as in Angelstwon, living the in-between life was far more than experiencing the polarity of Mexican versus Anglo. The in-between life also occurred somewhere in the complexity of many socioeconomic levels, the assortment of Latino/a communities, the assortment of ethnicities, the varied mix of urban and rural backgrounds, the varied styles of language, the varied levels of education, the varied amount of time spent in the United States, the varied age levels, the varied subcultures—sometimes determined by gender, sometimes determined by one’s legality or illegality, sometimes determined by the split, particularly among youth, between life at home and life on the streets—and all this within the subculture itself of latínidad. It is as if the in-between life consisted of a density of shadows, a density of nuances, traces of the past and present that were difficult to track. My goal in this text is to talk of these contradictions and nuances as they appeared in individual lives. Making matters even more complicated, Arjun Appadurai frames what I call the “in-between life” inside a broader net of cultural flows circulating in a global economy. When looked at in this way, the in-between becomes something more than the middle of oppositions; it is more like a locus registering variables that originate nearby and far away, and it is the mission of this text not only to consider the nearby (the individual within the community of Angelstwon) but also the far away (the global circulation of goods and images).

Exploring the in-between life requires that I concentrate on the proliferation of images and representations that circulated through Angelstwon and constantly search out what might structure the perceived attractiveness or unattractiveness of a given image or representation for a particular person. The main structuring device, as I have said, was a power differential that was largely socioeconomic and divided one set of images from another, thus making them mutually attractive. However, where power resided was also sometimes a matter of individual interpretation, and by saying that power was largely the perception of power, I am saying that power too was not essentialized but part of the network of circulating images and representations. In making such a claim, I emphasize an interest in epideictic rhetoric broadly conceived, an interest that I described earlier and one that will become clearer via the details contained in chapter after chapter.

But I wish to return to where I began (this chapter), to Mercedes, Texas; to a church there; to a citrus farm about three miles north, just off of Baseline Road; to return to the lower Rio Grande Valley, the Magic Valley or the Tip o’ South Texas (as its promoters like to call it), or, as it is also called by those who feel a certain difference, el valle. This location on the American landscape, perhaps not so different from other locations, is a large swirl of social and economic problems that tightens like a corkscrew into the core of almost every Valley inhabitant. Like other places American, however, it is also other than this, for the
consumerism that keeps the American bag of tricks afloat has soothed, ameliorated, and masked here as well. The ethos that appears in this book owes much of its making to el valle of the fifties and sixties. In one sense, the Valley has never been a fieldsite for me, but, in another sense, because so many of its details prepared me for the real fieldsite that became Angelstown, I suspect that it continues to act as a kind of filtering mythos and pathos, a way of seeing Angelstown, of feeling it, of speaking its languages, of knowing it.

2

MAPPING/TEXTING

“The city is a huge monastery,” said Erasmus. Perspective vision and prospective vision constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with.

—Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life

the lay of the land

I begin with a meditation on a map. A map is a representation, an abstraction, “a surface that can be dealt with.” It is the product of an exacting rationality, and it furthers the conquest of system-making over the melange of the everyday. It satisfies what the poet Wallace Stevens called the “blessed rage for order.”

Today, I have a map of Angelstown spread out on the floor in the office where I sit writing. The map is a ward map—and it is large: six and a half by four feet. As I write, I construct a representation of Angelstown, and the map itself is another constructed representation. In short, here are two representations of the same town, a town that has become vaguely exotic because it exists almost two hundred miles away from this office and, most importantly, because it is the “fieldsite.”