

# La Racha: Speed and Violence in Tijuana

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## ABSTRACT

Perched at the edge of California, Tijuana occupies a strategic location for capitalist mobilities of all sorts. This essay examines how the violence of drug trafficking and the speed of the transnational assembly plants came into resonance during a period often known locally as the *racha*, or streak, of violence, when Mexico's so-called war on drug trafficking was perceived by many to be at its worst. The semiotic underpinnings of the *racha*, I argue, lie in the qualia of speed and slowness as these are valorized in supply-chain provisioning of the assembly plants and then calqued onto automotive traffic in the city. Speed and slowness here, though, are bound up with a highly equivocal sense of individual agency. By tracking these qualia across spheres of practice and, finally, into narratives of violence, I show how the *racha* took shape as a public crisis in the ability to assign individual agency securely.

In 2008, homicide rates in Tijuana abruptly doubled, inaugurating a spiral of violence that would not abate until 2011.<sup>1</sup> Located across the US-Mexico border from San Diego, California, Tijuana has long been a key territory for smugglers, and it was no surprise that it should be hotly contested in what has been called the “war on drug trafficking” that President Felipe Calderón initiated in 2006. In Tijuana, however, this period was more commonly known as the

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1. Though the homicide rate has again risen, many people concur in the perception of a fairly well demarcated violent stretch that ended a few years ago. According to Baja California's Secretary of Public Security (<http://www.seguridadbc.gob.mx/contenidos/estadisticas2.php>), homicides in Tijuana rose from 310 in 2007 to 577 in 2008, peaking at 688 in 2010, all this for a city of under 2 million.

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*racha de violencia*, the spell or streak of violence. *Racha* refers to a brief period of good or bad luck; literally, however, it means a gust of wind.<sup>2</sup> Like a storm, one can be within a *racha* as something that occupies time and space, even as it can come and go as if of its own mysterious volition. A *racha* does not demand explanation or incite to a search for causes and responsible parties. It chalks events up, rather, to passing chance; it designates an enveloping force and an entire environment in motion. As with weather predicates in general (“it is snowing”; see Eriksen et al. 2015), *racha* flags an issue of agency: the lack of a subject to which to attribute it.

Since the “war” began, public debate in Mexico as a whole has confronted fundamental difficulties in the attribution of agency and allocation of responsibility for what is most often conceived of as a national climate of violence.<sup>3</sup> In Tijuana, however, the issue of agency often presented itself in relation to a peculiar ambit: automotive traffic. Consider these examples from the Internet. In the online edition of a Mexico City magazine, a comment appended to an essay on Tijuana notes, “I no longer have to be checking the radio constantly to find out whether or not, where I’m going to circulate [i.e. pass by in my car], there’s some shootout going on” (Valle-Jones 2010). Without using the word *racha*, the comment repeats and fleshes out its premises. Like the weather, shoot-outs come and go; as one drives through the city, one is subject to them and can at best monitor them through radio reports. Beneath an online news article announcing two corpses hung off an overpass, another reader uses a similar imaginary of the city to ridicule the commonplace, “It doesn’t affect me; they kill each other amongst themselves” (Andrade 2010). The corpses, the reader points out, in fact caused a huge traffic jam, so that “many of us got to work late.” Thanks to the “decision” of an anonymous, autonomous “somebody,” everyone else is frozen into place. In both examples, automotive traffic is the medium through which violence’s capacity to “affect” others spreads. The *racha*, in these remarks, makes itself felt through the same eminently agentless forms as a rush hour or a traffic accident. Even in the second example, which initially inflates the killer’s

2. *Ráfaga*, most commonly used now for a burst of fire from an automatic weapon, is a closely related word, for it too refers originally to a gust of wind.

3. The move to blame the state, and thus attribute a fundamental agency to it, emerged quite late; Javier Sicilia’s “March for Peace” in 2011 marked a turning point in this sense. The public debate coming out of Sicilia’s movement, though, focused more on the state’s responsibility in creating the conditions for criminal violence than on state agents’ direct responsibility for killing. See Escalante (2011) for an early and influential, though cautious, argument in this direction. Of the disappearance of students in Ayotzinapa in 2014, many remarked that it sparked such a massive response because for once the state could be held responsible: one of the main slogans of the marches, after all, was “fue el Estado” (it was the State).

agency, automotive traffic ultimately reduces him to nothing more than another impediment to flow.

In this essay, I argue that the *racha* involved a generalized crisis of agency that depended not just on the rampant violence of the “war” but on longer-standing conditions of capitalist mobility at the border. As sites dedicated in their essence to transnational traffic in commodities of all sorts (including human labor), border cities like Tijuana make flow and stoppage into salient objects of public consciousness.<sup>4</sup> The US-Mexico border in particular, separating as it does two highly contrastive national socioeconomic regimes, can seem to offer near-miraculous potentials for value transformation, thus making flow and stoppage appear especially crucial. In this context, speed can emerge not just as apparently value-producing but as a value in its own right. Speed is widely, if unevenly, available to be experienced in automotive traffic (hence, I will argue, traffic’s importance for public representations of the *racha*),<sup>5</sup> but it acquires its greatest political economic importance in the transnational assembly plants that are still the spine of the local economy. Illicit border commerce (paradigmatically, drug trafficking), in contrast, tends to valorize violence as an avenue of control over flow and stoppage. The more speed and violence emerge as fetishized values in these two types of commodity traffic, however, the more slippery agency turns with respect to them.

During the *racha*, the challenges to agency posed by speed in the assembly plants and violence in drug trafficking converged in frightening ways. This convergence, I will argue, was fundamentally semiotic. It hinged on the analogic calquing, or transposition, of qualia of speed and slowness between realms of practice—including, crucially, automotive traffic as a site where drivers encountered the violence of the *racha* and that, often, gave occasion for framing its effects in collective terms. After explaining the argument’s theoretical underpinnings, I begin by laying out the categories of speed and slowness, and the highly equivocal sense of agency implicated in them, that supply-chain professionals in the assembly plants use in managing flows of goods. Next, I track these same categories to Tijuana’s roadways, first in one supply-chain professional’s acute attention to the details of her commute, and second as a coworker of hers narrates how he handled a violent contingency emblematic of the *racha*. Finally, I present a narrative that, though told by someone not personally con-

4. In his classic article, Schegloff perspicaciously reverses commonsensical assumptions about border economies by pointing out that places perceived as being in-between other places accrue economic value precisely due to this fact (1972, 123).

5. Car ownership in northern Mexico is fairly widespread. By the 1970s, 75 percent of households in Tijuana owned cars, as opposed to 10 percent nationally (Price 1973, 80).

nected to the assembly plants, similarly twines together speed and violence and their respective challenges to agency. In contrast to the supply-chain professionals, whose narratives make agency equivocal but ultimately resurrect it, this last story paints a panorama in which agency remains irrecuperable for everyone. Tracing the semiotic connections between three types of traffic at the border (transnational industry, drug trafficking, and automotive traffic), the essay thus unpacks how specific forms of capitalist mobility together shape a shared urban spacetime: an imaginary of the city, inhabitable on a daily basis, of how one can move, whom one might encounter, and what might happen.

### **The Semiotics of Capitalist Mobility as Public Ambiance**

At the broadest level, capitalist mobilities inflect inhabited imaginaries of Tijuana in a series of widely held stereotypes of the city. While many of these are stigmatic and are rejected to different degrees of intensity by different residents (see Berumen 2003; Yépez 2006; Maher and Carruthers 2014), others circulate as characterizations of “us.” Through such linguistic projections of collective subjectivity (Yeh 2012), people take up and come to inhabit these narrative images of their city.

In Mexico, Tijuana has widely been understood as exceptionally modern, and its modernity has been seen as rooted in the transnational flows that have historically been the city’s *raison d’être*: from tourists and booze in Prohibition days (Vanderwood 2010), to labor migrants to the United States (Chavez 1992), to the commodities of the assembly plants, to drugs and arms, sex traffic, and other illegal truck and trade. The modernity these flows are believed to entail can be spun toward an arms-wide-open frontier myth of opportunity and egalitarian meritocracy or toward the doomsday tones of Tijuana’s “Black Legend,” that accents vice and corruption of every ilk. The city’s reputation for violence is part and parcel of the latter stereotype. While violence as a characterization of the urban whole is sometimes bemoaned and sometimes denied (as in the idea that criminals “kill each other amongst themselves”), Tijuana’s stepped-up pace of life is, in contrast, an absolutely intuitive and frequently voiced element in comparisons residents draw between their city and “the south”—that is, the rest of Mexico. Speed is understood as an all-pervading quality of urban life in Tijuana and an essential condition of possibility for the city’s economic viability. At the same time, exceptional speed becomes even more desirable, for it promises to get one ahead of the rest.

Ciudad Juárez is the other major city along Mexico’s northern border; it is somewhat smaller than Tijuana and even more dependent on the transnational

assembly plant industry.<sup>6</sup> Alejandro Lugo notes that time is of the essence in all ambits of life in Juárez and suggests that the particular techniques by which the assembly plants extract labor from line workers—both economizing their micromovements and keeping the workday as long as possible, with minimal breaks—push similar habits of haste into the public sphere at large (Lugo 2008, 153, 180). In Tijuana, the general valorization of speed is exacerbated by the ready-to-hand example of southern California. Whereas Juárez—half the distance to Mexico City—was a center in its own right since colonial times (Martínez 1975), Tijuana developed as an outlier of southern California, growing with it over the course of the twentieth century (Proffitt 1994). As the United State's paradigmatic car culture, the urban agglomerations across the border present a maze of freeways shooting every which way as the most public and palpable evidence of the region's accelerated economy. Moreover, though people complain about it, chronic rush hour traffic within Tijuana (crossing the border is another matter) hardly represents the burden it does in, for instance, Mexico City. If jams provide an image of "mobility exhausted by its own excess" (Morris 2000, 243), in Tijuana sustained speed still seems within reach, if clearly not democratically available. The accelerated pace of life is just one aspect people draw on to color the contrast between an urban present and a rural past, but it is a prominent one.

Whether positive or negative, all the characterizing discourses I have been flagging are rooted in chronotopic images that distribute past and future geographically (Dick 2010) and draw the forward arrow of time, overwhelmingly, as a vector of acceleration headed north. *Chronotope*, of course, is M. M. Bakhtin's (1981) term for the fusion of time and space both in unfolding events and in linguistic narratives. For Bakhtin, the two were dialogically entangled, narrative chronotopes appearing within and from real-life chronotopes but also bearing the potential to remake them radically. The relation between the two is varied and complex; the use of "we" that I noted above to place speaker and listener within a represented world is but one way to link them. Studies of how narratives are mobilized in context (Basso 1984; Briggs 1988; Silverstein 1996) have long attended to the relationship between what Jakobson (1984) called the narrated event and the speech event, or event of narration. But the convergence between speed and violence in the *racha* depended on a relatively subtle level at which narrative and real-life space-times can be knit

6. In 2009, the population of the metropolitan zone of Tijuana was 1,751,430, and 43.8 percent of jobs were in manufacturing (INEGI 2012, 5). Juárez's population was 1,332,131, and 58.5 percent of jobs were in manufacturing (23).

together: the *qualia*—above all, speed and slowness—that saturate and shape what appear in linguistic rendition as the spatiotemporal actions of agentive individuals. Qualia, I argue, are a crucial element whereby chronotopic imaginaries become flesh, ontologically felt as the very substance of daily life.

Qualia are by no means new to anthropology, but Lily Chumley and Nicholas Harkness (2013) have recently refocused the spotlight on the category to ask after the semiotic processes through which qualities in the world are culturally classified, thus becoming social realities. Besides drawing on C. S. Peirce's division of signs, they rely in particular on Nancy Munn's (1986) magisterial approach to the semiotics of qualities. Munn, of course, develops her argument specifically in relation to speed and space-time, examining, for instance, how the speed of a canoe can link to the lightness of an act like giving food in ways that build social relations spanning space and projecting into the future. It was through just such semiotic calquing, across realms of practice and experience, of the relative values emblemized and physically anchored in the world by qualia that the instabilities of agency pertaining to factory work could, during the *racha*, be projected out onto Tijuana's streets, where they came into resonance with doubts about agency in relation to acts of violence.

Qualia build narrative chronotopes and real-life space-times into each other not on their own but as narratives order them and attach them to deictics like "I," "you," or "we"; "here" or "there"; "then" or "now." In this process, narrative practice indexically anchors qualia in different subjects and objects. By attending to this detailed level of the "pragmatics of qualia" (Harkness 2015), we can see how they shape "I's" margin of action under given chronotopic circumstances—circumstances that, during Tijuana's *racha de violencia*, could all too easily and suddenly become a matter of life and death. As cultural categories rather than objective qualities in the world, qualia help pinpoint how the forms of mobility that the border attracts and potentiates turned the *racha's* burst of public violence into an entire ambiance in which agency could not be properly allocated.

In automotive traffic as in factory work, general characterizations of Tijuana as a fast-paced city can be grounded in much more microlevel attributions and modulations of speed. This essay tracks those attributions as they become relevant for projecting individual agency (or its lack) in specific situations. Practices of locating agency in concrete individuals are routine and vital for human action and interaction, but they depend on cultural ideologies of personal autonomy and control that gain or lose traction on an everyday level thanks in great part to the casual linguistic cues by which agency can be distributed to

“I” or “you.”<sup>7</sup> It is at this level, as we will see, that agency and speed become intuitively linked: as qualia of speed or slowness come to be effected—or not—in quotidian acts of rush or lag or simply “letting go.” The attributions of speed and agency I will focus on are highly embedded in their immediate context, and their interest might seem limited to the practical matters in which they are directly involved: moving goods toward a factory; moving bodies in traffic. But, I will argue, they also feed into and support broad public sensibilities about urban life at the border and concrete characterizations of the city as a whole—such as the word *racha*.

As we will see, the attributions of agency involved in flexibilized industrial supply-chain work can be intensely equivocal, by turns exaggerating and undermining locally dominant notions of autonomous individual agency. To unpack the categories of qualia that underpin these reversals is, as Chumley (in a personal communication) observed, to “Whorfianize E.P. Thompson” (Whorf 1956; Thompson 1967): to show how the seemingly inexorable development of capitalism rides on the spread of cultural categories for carving up, shaping, and giving life to time and space. As they move, these cultural categories shift and transform, not least as they intersect with other local, national, or transnational historical developments, in this case, the social forms of the drug trade. This essay’s ethnographic tracking of qualia of speed and slowness thus contributes to a broader critique of the work of theorists like David Harvey (1989) or Paul Virilio (1986, 2007), where speed tends to appear as a simple physical and politico-economic reality rather than as a culturally salient category semiotically modulated and distributed in all sorts of complex and highly differentiated ways.

At the same time, however, Tijuana’s crisis of agency speaks to a deeper and more universal problem of human subjectivity and action. As indicated above, agency takes shape inescapably as a projection, since what appear to us as

7. It should be clear by this point that I am not interested here in the objective agentive capacities of individuals, but in what Duranti calls the “ethno-pragmatic level” of agency: how words “contribute toward the constitution of culture-specific acts and activities” (2004, 454). Where Duranti cites control over one’s behavior, the capacity to affect other entities, and one’s actions’ availability for evaluation as three universal components of agency, I am most interested in how local theories of agency, implicit in practice, bring these three aspects together in Tijuana. As Kockelman notes, in objective terms, “it is not usually a concrete entity—qua participant in an interaction—that determines participants’ control, composition, or commitment but rather the temporally unfolding interaction itself. In other words, the locus of agency may often rest not in the individuals but rather in their ongoing interactions and the institutions that enable these” (Kockelman 2007, 382). Duranti (2004) and Ahearn (2010) explain the basic resources languages offer—the most classic example is perhaps passive versus active verbs—that can be brought to bear on what Kockelman calls “the construal of agency” and its “distribution [. . .] in and across real-time social, semiotic, and material processes” (2007, 387).

agents are always entangled with unfathomable complexity in the physical and social worlds around them. For this reason, and as Jacques Derrida (2005) has movingly argued, attributions of agency are always haunted by a fundamental instability, a lingering or sometimes overpowering vulnerability to subtle slippage, radical reversal, and everything in between. Specific events of violence and speed situated within the border's particular history of capitalist mobility, as narrative speech acts weave them into public sensibilities of what "our" city is and what happens "here," give concrete form to this general paradox of agency. To unpack this paradox as it played out in the *racha*, let us begin with the assembly plant industry.

### In the Factory

*Just-in-time* is one of the watchwords of the Toyota Production System developed by Taiichi Ohno in Japan's postwar decades; the term "JIT" is even used to refer to the system as a whole. As Ohno explains, "Just-in-time means that, in a flow process, the right parts needed in assembly reach the assembly line at the time they are needed and only in the amount needed" (1988, 4).

In Tijuana, JIT is nothing new.<sup>8</sup> Perched at the edge of California, Tijuana is an ideal site for nearshore production, and the legal framework for the city's transnational assembly plant industry was laid since 1965 (McCrosen 2009, 55–56); by the 1980s, Tijuana was known as the "TV capital of the world." A working knowledge of JIT is required for many positions within the plant hierarchy, but in what follows, I focus on expeditors. Responsible for keeping parts flowing into the factory from around the world, expeditors are those who incorporate JIT most thoroughly as daily practice at the same time that they bear the burden of realizing it on the largest spatiotemporal scale. Expeditors are uniquely positioned to grasp the global economy in which they are enmeshed as a single enormous system of synchronized flows, and the ones I have spoken with valorize that privileged view, which permits a maximal extension of their selves in space and time. They idealize, for instance, the expeditor who will (supposedly) watch weather forecasts off the coast of Japan or keep their eye out for news of strikes in the mines that supply the steel mills that supply the factory whence comes a small part specifically made for the special model of television to be run just on Wednesday. In this, they are not un-

8. The ethnographic literature on assembly plants in Mexico's northern border cities is ample. It focuses overwhelmingly on line work, and most studies are located in Ciudad Juárez. Peña (1997) and Lugo (2008) in particular examine issues of time and timing on the factory floor.



like Munn's Gawans, for whom the extension of self and control in what she calls *intersubjective spacetime* is a basic criterion of value (1986, 11).<sup>9</sup>

The expediter's job is to manipulate the lead times of purchases, not just by timing the placement of orders but, more paradigmatically, by tracking the shipment and applying pressure along the way. Chatting one evening, Edith described the color-coded calculus of pressure her boss demands. On her spreadsheet of purchase orders, orders less than a week old must be marked with purple, and a note reading "no es necesario gritarle al proveedor" (no need to scream at the supplier); older purchase orders are classified "gritarle al proveedor" (scream at the supplier). Time here is, unsurprisingly, spatialized: the two categories are literally "de hoy a siete días par'atrás" (from today to seven days back) versus "todas las de atrás" (all the ones in the back), and Edith explains the difference in terms of *retrazo*, being behind. Conversely, "si la PO no la ocupas ahorita, pues empúuujala" (if you don't need the purchase order right now, well, puuush it back). If screaming hurries purchases in toward the plant, to push is to slow them down, iconically (in the Peircean sense of similarity) embodied in the elongation and lowered pitch of *empúuujala*. The categorization of slowing is, again, according to whether *el empujón* (the shove) is of more or less than a week, and is thus neatly symmetrical to the categories of rush. The need to push back as well as pull purchases in, of course, responds to JIT's golden goal of approaching zero inventory: parts should come in *just* as they are needed. Note, however, how Edith's explanation tends to valorize rush—the effecting of speed—as an agentive action above the effecting of slowness. She begins with objects that lag and that must be sped up by the human incitement of "screaming." It is in lesser detail that she covers objects that require slowing because the plant does not require them yet. Indeed, it is not clear that she does anything at all to "push" a purchase order back; slowing appears simply as the absence of the positive activity of "screaming."

Edith deals, fundamentally, in position, velocity, and acceleration. Speed and slowness are basic qualia she must effect, at a distance, in her materials. To do so, she does not merely "scream" or "push"; she enacts a sympathetic transference between her own body and the objects she must move. Screaming

9. Most of what I know about expediting comes from my friend Edith and people I have met through her. They are all (like most expeditors, they tell me) in their twenties and thirties; all own cars; the majority are single and live with their parents. Besides interviews, I have mainly spent time with them on evenings out; sports bar franchises like Chili's or T.G.I. Friday's are their favorites. Though the ethnographic material I draw on is from a time when Edith worked at a smaller and more specialized electronics plant, her first and longest-held position was at a major television factory, where she handled orders from Asia. Manuel, who will appear later, was her coworker there.

applies *presión* (pressure) to someone else along the supply chain, but it also means *estrés* (stress) for Edith, for it becomes necessary in a situation in which materials may not arrive in time: “so I started filling in [the form] real fast, chhchhchhch. [. . .] I was so stressed, so stressed? cuz, cuz seriously, I’m stopping the [production] line, I’m stopping the plant.”<sup>10</sup> *Estrés* here is stress as we all know it, but it is also a term embedded in the value schema of Edith’s spreadsheet and JIT’s spatiotemporal imaginary of “flow process.” Stopping production, Edith becomes herself the obstacle that impedes flow, and so pressure builds up on her: as a kind of valve in the “flow process” she is quite literally stressed. Just as her agency expands beyond the plant in a positive sense to pull materials in, so it is through a deficit of agency, as Edith frames it, that she single-handedly stops production. This is of course a negative value transformation, in Munn’s terms, and as expeditors’ bosses often point out to them (or so they claim): today you lost us \$100,000 USD.

Almost as in a mechanistic model of fluid dynamics, stress pushes Edith into the frantic velocity with which she types up the form on her computer, onomatopoeically represented by *chhchhchh*. She typed the form, she says, *de volada*, right away or real fast, literally, “by flight.” *Chhchhchh*, I would suggest, epitomizes rush as an agentive action, pressure pushing past obstacles into untrammelled speed, and it conveys the opposite of *empúuuujala*. Typing, Edith conveys the pressure and stress concentrated in her body out through the Internet to another person and, ultimately, to the materials themselves, freeing them from where they were stuck (in customs perhaps or in a container in Long Beach) to let them flow forward again.<sup>11</sup>

To “bring” materials is the paradigmatic verb of action expeditors use to describe their activity: “yo traigo los materiales” (I bring the materials), they say. Subject and object are not just clearly stated here; expeditors’ sense of pride and pleasure in what they do rests on this agentivity.<sup>12</sup> However, as we have already

10. “Y ya me puse a llenar de volada, chhchhchhch. [. . .] estaba yo tan estresada, tan estresada? porque, porque en serio estoy parando la línea, estoy parando la planta.” Single question marks in the Spanish indicate a rising tone.

11. The chain of causality runs through telephone and Internet cables—it is with satisfaction that expeditors underline to me that they never leave their desks but rely on the latest communications technology. But, as “scream at the supplier” reveals, causality also runs through human relations of pressure and shame. “Me siento horrible” (I feel horrible), Edith says, describing what happens when her boxes do not arrive: “todo mundo me pregunta, ei, ¿la caja tal? ei, ¿la caja tal?” (everybody’s asking me, “hey, what about that box? hey, what about that box?”). This fusion is not unlike the “pressure” of Anand’s (2011) “hydraulic citizenship,” which takes shape in the interface between political pressuring and the physics of water pressure.

12. As per Ahearn (2010) and Duranti’s (2004) insistence that the grammatical encoding of agency does not determine cultural categories of agency, note how the phrase emphasizes the agentive “I” by stating *yo*. (In Spanish, *yo* is not obligatory, since person is indicated by the verb.)

seen, “bringing” materials requires a certain blurring of the boundaries between subject, medium, and object, a certain diffusion of agency. When Edith’s most trusted local supplier told her to come across town while he located the box she so desperately needed, he told her, “tú déjate venir” (you let yourself come along), for he would take the burden of rush, of pressure and stress, upon himself. She was to release herself into traffic, to be carried along by its flow. A moment later, though, as Edith told me the story, she repeated his words slightly differently: “tú déjate lo venir” (you let yourself let *him* come along), for it would in fact be a driver and not Edith herself coming over. The moment highlights the casual slippage to which expeditors are prone: a sympathetic confusion between subjects and objects of action as expeditors productively project their agency out from themselves through the “flow process.”

The urgency and effort of *chchchchch* versus the deliberate, controlled slowing of *empúujala* describe opposite states in the body of the expeditor that, through a highly mediated chain of causality, must be conveyed to the materials in motion. As the spreadsheet shows, JIT requires rush and lag in equal measure, but expeditors tend to value rush as what they do, and speed as the effect of their agentive activities. Failure to effect speed, after all, results in the extreme negative value in this scenario, the total stasis of plant stoppage, while failure to effect slowness is of relatively little consequence. To grasp the epitomy of untrammelled flow toward which Edith’s *chchchch* strives, however, we must move beyond the factory.

### **On the Road**

Driving to work one morning, Edith narrated her commute as an idiosyncratic synchronization of her own trajectory with that of others. For instance, she made me watch for a boy in a funny cap, because if he’s not walking to the bus stop when she passes, she knows she’s late. She also calculates relative flow by picking referents moving with her: “ese trailer amarillo, vamos a ver si pasa [. . .] antes de nosotros” (that yellow semi, let’s see if it goes through before us), she says as we approach a point where the road splits and then merges again. Edith’s calculative practices allow her to move through the categories of her spreadsheet not from the vantage point of the factory but as herself relative to others in motion who may be lagging in an obstruction or, with a little agentive pressure and finagling, may free themselves to flow ahead.

As we neared a major bottleneck, Edith explained her lane choices: had we left just ten minutes earlier, we could have taken the fast lane, but since she

and everyone else must sleep in, now it is better to hug to the right.<sup>13</sup> The fast lane, “con tanto carro acumulado, pues ya es muuy leento” (with so many cars piled up, well, now it’s reeally slow). On the right, she can slip into a residential area and bypass the jam: “ahí me meto, hago chapuza, y ya me voy deresssh” (I go in there, I cheat, and that’s it, I go ssstraight). Edith here repeats the acoustic icon of lag, of obstructed movement, now applying the lowering and lengthening of *empúuuujala* to an explicit qualitative descriptor: *reeally slow*. A moment later, she performs this icon’s polar opposite, not now the *chchch* of stress and pressure pushing into speed, but untrammelled flow itself. *Derecho* means “straight,” but to convey the qualia of this movement, its speed and smoothness and unobstructedness, Edith softens and lengthens the *ch*, and shortens the final vowel: *deresssh*. Note how *chchch* cuts the sound of *shh* into tiny fragments, making it nicely iconic (again in the Peircean sense) of the impediments to speed which Edith’s typing is meant to surmount. Thus though *chchch* and *sh* are onomatopoeic of two completely different things (typing and fast driving), the sounds themselves as well as JIT’s imaginary of “flow process” connect the apparently unrelated activities they describe.<sup>14</sup>

Edith’s focus on flow and its manipulation certainly speaks to things we all do in traffic, but her expertise as an expediter lends a crispness to her categories and heightens her own sense of what she can do in a flow process like this—indeed, we did very well that day.<sup>15</sup> Let us turn, now, back to the *racha* to track further this calque between expediting and driving, sustained by sonic icons of motion qualia as well as associated descriptive terms and words of action. For this I need to introduce a category in between *chchch* and *empúuuujala*. The phrase, “you let yourself come along,” which we already heard from Edith’s supplier, implies neither acceleration nor deceleration, neither rush nor lag. To *let* come or go is an agentive action of release, but the object released passively goes with the flow, whether swift or slow, without pressure being applied either way. Unsurprisingly, the term connotes a relinquishing of agency. In this case, Edith was to release her driver into traffic, to be carried along toward a point of coin-

13. Tijuana’s morning rush hour tends to be quite compact, since most of the assembly plants open or change shifts at the same time.

14. Compare Bialasiewicz (2015) on how the desired “smoothness” of flow dictated the selection of Tangiers for a new transnational port, for it was thought workers there would not paralyze materials’ movement with strikes. Expeditors find this valued qualia at a whole other level of detail, which is what lets JIT begin to shape their sense of space-time ontologically.

15. Of course, the transference of skills here depends not on any natural similarity between automotive traffic and industrial JIT, but on an implicit comparison between them brought out by Edith’s practice itself. That is, she treats traffic in some basic ways as if it were a JIT “flow process.”

vidence with another trajectory (that of the box within the factory), which in the time of traversal would be rushed to meet the other exactly.

This “letting” go reappears in the following account from Manuel, an expediter in his late twenties and a former coworker of Edith’s. We were sitting in a park in 2012, having met for a formal interview about his work, when I asked his feelings as to “public security” in Tijuana over the last few years. After telling me that he himself never experienced anything “fuerte” (strong), he offered a story. While driving one day, he glanced over at the car next to him and saw this:

iba manejando un tipo y en el asiento del copiloto, ps era un gatillero, ¿no? venía acomodándose al revés. se venía recargando acá en la guantera, con el asiento aventado, y venía cargando un rifle. ps dije, “oh, que se va a poner grueso esto”, ¿no? ‘tonces yo me frené? y los dejé pasar, y me fui despacito. a la hora que, te digo, donde miré la balacera, pues ahí estaban ellos, ¿no? ya muertos y todo.

[one guy was driving and in the copilot’s seat, well, [there] was a gunman, right? he was settling in backwards. he was leaning back here against the glove compartment, with the seat thrown down, and he was loading a rifle. well I said [to myself], “oh, this is gonna get heavy,” right? so then I braked? and I let them pass, and I went real slow. at the time when, I mean, where I saw the shoot-out, well there they were, right? all dead and everything.]

Holding himself back the way Edith “puuushes” back her purchase orders, Manuel restrains himself into slowness: *me fui despacito*, I went real slow, Manuel says, not enacting the sonic icon of lowering and lengthening, but using a related descriptor. At the same time, he *let* the gunmen pass, *los dejó pasar*, the way Edith’s supplier told her to *let* herself into traffic. By differentially applying pressure and letting go (just as Edith juggles her different purchase orders), Manuel desynchronized himself from the gunmen in the flow process. Significantly, this drama played out on a straight stretch of some two miles, with only one stoplight along the way:

ya ves donde sales de la aduana y agarras para el aeropuerto, fsht. más o menos en esa curvita los vi. cuando me los volví a topar ya era ya cuando vas a empezar a, a bajar por la . . . Postal. en esa curva.

[you know where you come out of Customs and you head toward the airport, fsht. more or less around that curve, I saw them. when I ran into them again was when you start to go down through the Postal [neighborhood]. at that curve.]

Between curve and curve, the gunmen are sucked into the *fsht* of untrammelled flow, the *sh* of *deresssh*' now standing on its own but likewise conveying straight, swift, unimpeded motion in a flow process. The gunmen go along passively with the straightaway as it pulls them. But this space-time of flow is, as Manuel's narrative subtly frames it, the space-time of his expertise, and he is familiar with its qualia and how to act with and within them: how to hold back, push forward, and let things go.

It is within the *fsht* of the straightaway that Manuel operates: "se me despegaron en la recta del aeropuerto. de curva a curva" (they took off [or unstuck themselves] from me on the straight stretch of the airport. from curve to curve).<sup>16</sup> And though it was "cuestión de un minuto, o dos, tal vez, lo que me tardé en llegar más que ellos" (a matter of one minute, or maybe two, that I took to arrive more than they did), he does not dwell on that abstract minute but instead frames the difference between his life and his possible death directly in terms of flow process: "pues igual si yo me voy con ellos, hasta me toca, ¿no?" (if I'd gone along with them, it could even have happened to me, right?). Conceptualizing the shooting as the endpoint of encounter, where objects in motion coincide, he says: "como que ahí [ . . . ] se iba a dar el encuentro ahí, o como que iban siguiendo a alguien, y ahí se dieron, ¿no?" (as if the encounter were going to be there, or like they were following someone, and they ran into them there, right?). To recall Ohno, "The right parts [ . . . ] reach the assembly line at the time they are needed and *only* in the amount needed"—or in Edith's words, "if you don't need the purchase order right now, well, puuush it back." As Manuel described the end product of JIT on the street, for which he was, thankfully, not needed: "there were like three four cars, and. holes all over the place. bodies lying around. [ . . . ] by the time I arrived at that point where I reached them, well, everything had already happened, right?"<sup>17</sup>

The qualia of speed and slowness, and the actions of rush and lag relative to others in a flow process, imply the whole system of space-time that they are imbricated in. Automotive traffic may occasionally appear directly as part of JIT's "flow process" (as when Edith's driver went over to the supplier's factory to pick up her box), but JIT shapes Edith's and Manuel's spatiotemporal sen-

16. *Despegar* means literally "to unstick," but it also refers to the takeoff of an airplane.

17. "Eran como tres cuatro carros, y. los hoyos por todos lados. cuerpos tirados. [ . . . ] ya cuando yo llegué a ese punto donde los alcancé pues ya había sucedido todo, ¿no?" Note how this image of pileup coincides with what can happen when an expeditor fails to enact JIT. As long-distance expeditors, neither Edith nor Manuel face this problem, a fact that facilitates their fetishization of speed. Jazmín, who handles bulky local materials such as cardboard boxes and packing foam, must be far more exact in timing her shipments' arrival. Her practice is thus closer to JIT than theirs is, but for her this means that the specter of bottlenecks in production is a constant nightmare.

sibilities far more pervasively. At the same time, it shapes their sense of themselves as agentive subjects who can effect movement or not—though expediters often blur their own agency in order to move their materials and are also frequently overwhelmed by the sense that they are mere cogs in a system, they love to emphasize their own agentive capacities in the flow process of transnational capitalism. Expediters are a small and highly particular group, but the following example shows what happens when JIT’s spatiotemporal imaginary of coincidence, as well as its ambivalent distension or diffusion of agency, begins to circulate more broadly. This example too involves death, agency and accidentality in the *racha*, but it speaks to a socioeconomic context quite distinct from that of the expediters and the car-owning, job-holding, law-abiding Tijuana they belong to and that we saw too in the online commentaries.

### **Crisis of Agency**

Don Roberto, retired from thirty years as a stable hand in the United States, lived in one of Tijuana’s many *colonias populares*, or marginalized working-class districts. Here, many people work in the assembly plants—not as successful professionals but as line operators, who depend not on cars or even public transit but on company buses to get to work. The *racha* hit this neighborhood hard, but violent death had long marked life here in a quotidian way it does not for Edith or Manuel. During my fieldwork with don Roberto in 2006 and 2007, I heard about two bodies that turned up one morning around the corner from the house, a man gunned down spectacularly on the main street two blocks away, two young men reportedly killed by a policeman for urinating on his patrol car, and a man shot dead in front of don Roberto in the pool hall he used to frequent. In 2010, however, don Roberto felt the situation merited a warning.

“Go back to San Diego [where I was living then],” he told me, “they kill people here.”<sup>18</sup> To explain his concern, he told the following story. One day his *comadre* (*compadrazgo* is a form of ritual kinship) was chatting out in front of the house next door when a speeding car glancingly hit her. She wasn’t hurt, just knocked down, but the *comadre* was diabetic. With the shock, her blood pressure fell and she had to be taken to the hospital, where she later died. Some time afterward, the young man who hit her was found in his car, also dead. The *comadre*’s son, don Roberto reminded me, is a policeman.

Doubtless, the story narrates a problem of the privatization of the sovereign power to kill. But it also unpacks the issue of agency, and its logic as a warning

18. The words, though close, are in paraphrase.

depends on this. As in Manuel's story of the shootout, killing and accidentality in automotive traffic are tightly woven. Unrelated objects coincide in space, and shooting appears as the endpoint of encounter. But this story does not re-erect agency as Manuel's does, even if only in the devalued form of his slowing. Instead, it leaves agency strangely deflated on all fronts.

The logic of don Roberto's warning rides on the difference between the two deaths he narrates. The first comes of carelessness; there is no implication that it picked out its object (the *comadre*) on purpose. At first, moreover, it is not even properly an accident, but one avoided. As the story progresses, however, we see that the accident is not avoided at all, but simply delayed. It stretches itself out in time to let us contemplate in slow motion the fatality of the unexpected, at no moment predictable, but only in retrospect appreciable in all its inexorability. And then, suddenly, everything becomes opaque: we have nothing but the image of the youth, dead in his car (instrument and now scene of killing), and the allusion, oblique to an extreme, to the son's profession.

With his act of vengeance, the policeman-son reintroduces agency into a chain of events that lacked it. In this sense, the difference between the two deaths is, apparently, absolute. Juxtaposed, they contrast accidentality and decision, the lack of agency with its firm exercise.<sup>19</sup> The policeman's act of killing appears at first to re-anchor all the accidentality, all the host of coincidences that led to the death of his mother, in the logic or law of vengeance. Like the "decision" of the anonymous "somebody" who hangs two corpses off an overpass, the policeman's decision to kill is sovereign, and it leaves everyone else (don Roberto and myself included) sunk in a swamp of accidentality, of an arbitrary, uncontrollable, and ever more extreme eventfulness. In contrast to us, who cannot even refer directly to what he did, the policeman seizes the course of events by the horns and makes it turn back upon its path to reveal an origin that, amidst the complications of unfolding events, was until that point by no means clear. The policeman pins down responsibilities; recounting the story, we cannot even pin down reference. However, his decision cannot disentangle itself from the accidentality that gives rise to it.

The policeman charges his victim death for death, murder for accident, as if that exchange were equivalent. He makes them equivalent. The law distin-

19. This opposition is captured in Spanish by the lexical pair *diestro/siniestro*. While *diestra* and *siniestra* mean right and left, *diestro* means, according to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española (<http://dle.rae.es/?id=DiPpTTa>), a person who is "skillful, expert in an art or craft," that is, someone with a high degree of motor control, who does not admit accidentality into their movements. A *siniestro*, in contrast, is an accident in the common but imprecise sense, as a calamity. It is "an incident that produces damage," or the "concretion of the risk" covered in an insurance policy (<http://dle.rae.es/?id=XyrEzmC>).



guishes between degrees of homicide, omission and intention, the lack of exercise of the will versus its excessive and illicit application. The policeman, in contrast, erases that distinction. He erases the question of intentionality and leaves only death. In this way, the first death becomes like the second. But the second is also like the first. It comes out of it; it is born of the same contingency, and without the first would have no reason for being. If in don Roberto's story the policeman diverts the path of causality, he does it by repeating, or transmitting, an accidental death.

From the perspective of the youth, the policeman himself would appear as an accident, as an effect of the first automotive accident returned to kill him.<sup>20</sup> In the street, the youth runs into something he does not recognize, but that connects him, unexpectedly, with a lethal force. He is not so different from the drivers happening upon the body hung from the bridge—as one person explained to me, how are you going to call the police, if you don't know those people aren't right around the corner watching you? That is, upon seeing the *colgado*, this person at least felt himself in the path of death, exposed to the danger of becoming the next victim. That lethal force, the force of the *racha* or gust of violence, runs through the young man. When he hits the *comadre* it turns him momentarily into its medium, only to turn subsequently upon him as its object. This is the danger of which don Roberto warned me, and it is the danger of the *racha* as such: "death" as the force of accidentality itself, that falls upon its victim by surprise, that can be momentarily appropriated, but that does not come to rest in anyone and cannot be possessed securely or stably.

In a discussion on reason and that which perturbs it, Derrida contrasts the running aground of a ship with the act of its anchoring or grounding (in French, *l'échouement* and *l'échouage*). The first is an accident that occurs "without foreseeing it and without calculation" (Derrida 2005, 122). The second happens thanks to the decision of the captain, and it takes places "intentionally, freely, deliberately, in a calculable and calculated, autonomous manner." The online comment about the corpses hung from the overpass makes a similar contrast. The drivers are literally *varados*, not just stranded but run aground as a ship might be. Their impotence highlights the agency of the killer, with his "decision" to hang the body from the bridge. As the French makes especially clear, though, the two moments—subjection and decision—are intimately related and, finally, not completely distinguishable. In Rosalind Morris's explana-

20. If, that is, he associates his death with the accident. If not, it itself is a full accident. To complete the cycle of exchange, vengeful murder thus stereotypically requires that the victim recognize the reason for their death.

tion, the decision “cannot guarantee its own effectivity [. . .] and remains suspended in relation to its own failure (running aground)” (2008, 252). Just as Derrida notes of the text by Heidegger in relation to which he proposes this fragile distinction, so too in don Roberto’s narrative “everything [. . .] gets played out at the limit between the calculable and the incalculable [. . .] where giving reasons [*rendre-raison*] and giving an account [*rendre-compte*] [. . .] are threatened by or drawn into the abyss” (Derrida 2005, 122).

Running back over chains of inference, marking a path heavy with silences, don Roberto’s narrative circles around such an abyss. In his social context, the *racha* as lived in Tijuana’s *colonias populares*, death is the form in which this abyss makes itself felt. It concentrates itself in the policeman but does not dwell in him. It is an abyss in the Derridean sense because it represents the unthinkable point where intentionality, exercised to a maximum, breaks down and becomes its opposite, utter accidentality. In the *racha*, I believe, this breakdown propitiated a vicious inflationary cycle, as killers kept killing in the attempt to stabilize it.

### Conclusion

Though don Roberto’s warning makes clear that he felt a qualitative difference between the *racha* and earlier times, I did not find the term *racha* in use in Tijuana’s *colonias populares*. Instead, it was common among the better off, the middle classes, people like Manuel or Edith. In light of this fact, the term itself appears as a kind of defense, positing this period as an exception and contrasting it with more normal times. Normally, for middle-class sectors, violence can be put out of mind by minimizing it as a marginal phenomenon. Normally, for them, speed produces value as it should, and attributions of agency work glitch-free. In contrast, I have more often heard people in the *colonias* argue against this periodization, that would cordon off the crisis always implicit in capitalism’s valorization of speed and violence at the border. Without necessarily denying the steep rise in homicides in 2008, they insist that violent death—with all it implies for value and agency—was a problem from long before and continues to plague the city. These people are literally left out from speed: the *colonias* have cars, but they are both fewer and more likely to be beaten-down jalopies, and people’s participation in the assembly plant economy is restricted to the stationary and poorly remunerated monotony of line work. If speed and violence are fetish values sustaining Tijuana’s border economy, the *colonias populares* clearly get by on their dregs.

Though my interlocutors in the *colonias* tend to reject the temporality of the *racha* as an exceptional period, the force of accidentality emanating from the fetishization of speed and violence produced its most intense effects in those neighborhoods. There too, the *racha* as a crisis of agency can be traced to Tijuana's nature as a border city, though more preponderantly because the violence associated with drug trafficking is disproportionately located in the *colonias*. Nonetheless, speed plays a role here too. The unexpected outcomes of encounter on the street are a central trope of public life in working-class Tijuana, but the speeding car in don Roberto's story takes this trope to another level, at which speed and violence resonate. Don Roberto is not personally connected with the assembly plants except insofar as they provide the major source of employment in his neighborhood. As Lugo (2008) contends, though, the valorization of speed filters out of the factories in many ways. In this essay, I have focused on expeditors because they are privileged with respect to JIT, but Edith's sister-in-law, a working-class housewife, provides an apposite example of how JIT-like practices can spread. "Voy justo" (I go just in time), she says, describing how she's obsessed with calculating, down to the minute, her trips to buy groceries or pick up the kids from school. Echoing both don Roberto and Manuel, she ultimately associates this excess of control with an undesirable loss of self-control to speed. Her train of thought runs straight to violence itself, as she describes scenes of road rage she has been involved in. As fetishes so often do, the city's prime value turns toxic.

As the border exacerbates the occupational conditions of both expediting and drug trafficking, speed and violence pop to the foreground of concern, seeming to generate value of themselves. The *racha* emerged as a time when the negative, value-canceling potentials of this process swung into prominence. Insofar as the *racha* was a public experience, though, insofar as it involved broad characterizations of the city ("here they kill") and the performative evocation of "we" ("it doesn't affect us," from one of the online comments I began with), neither of these two specialized kinds of commodity traffic is sufficient on its own to grasp the generalized deflation of agency the name *racha* suggests. In Manuel's story of the shootout as in don Roberto's warning, speed as well as violence plays a crucial role. The gunmen are sucked into the *fsht* of the straightaway; the young driver who hits the *comadre* likewise kills and dies because of his loss of self-control to speed. The ambivalences of agency involved in speed and violence converge most fully, and acquire their properly public dimension, in the ambit of automotive traffic.

Analytically, the force of accidentality and Tijuana's generalized crisis of agency come into focus thanks to close attention to the qualia of speed and slowness, both as distributed between different subjects and objects, and as associated with particular verbs of action. The questions of agency germane to transnational production and illegal smuggling move into the ambit of automotive traffic as expeditors mobilize categories of speed and slowness—understood as the effect of agentive acts of rush and lag and letting go—both in the factory and on the street. This calque rides as much on the materiality of sound (its own qualia) as on referential language: there is an underlying synesthesia between, for example, *chchch* and *sh* as fricatives and the degrees of friction in a flow process that they represent. These sounds are doubtless stylized; as Eduardo Kohn (2013, 27–29) explains regarding *tsupu*, without the necessary cultural and contextual cues, one could never guess that the word mimics the sound of a wild pig flopping into a body of water. Having grasped the term as conventional and symbolic, though, its iconic nature lends that meaning force—the word suddenly seems to make sense as a foreign language usually cannot. Like gesture, though (see Haviland 2004), the onomatopoeic should not be cordoned off as a unique category of language. Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh long ago noted what Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) have dubbed *iconization*, or the tendency to naturalize signs: “As learned in etymology as the Germans may be, in their perception words like [. . .] *spitz* ‘pointed’ and *rund* ‘round’ nevertheless merge with their imagery in such a natural way that in none of these pairs would an exchange of meanings be conceivable” (Jakobson and Waugh 2002, 182).<sup>21</sup> The qualic potentials of language appear as an excess constantly buoying up from within its symbolic and conventional framework, which, conversely, always tends to downshift semiotically into the apparent naturalness of icons.

Sonic icons, however, do not create synesthetic equivalences on their own, but through the habitual construal of correspondences between series of binary contrasts (Jakobson and Waugh 2002, 191–98). As a qualia, speed only connects realms insofar as it is embedded in a system of categories, sketched in skeleton form by Edith's spreadsheet. Onomatopoeic language thus allies with a qualic system to lend it the ontological heft of intuition. Aided by the synesthesia between sound system and flow process, *fsht* and *chchchch* and *muuy leento* draw diverse moments and actions together as sharing intuitively felt, apparently objective qualities. As Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman note,

21. Gal now prefers the more exact term *rhematization* (2005, 35).

such sonic icons provide “a powerful means of naturalizing intertextual relations” (1992, 158). Spanning diverse sensuous experiences, the qualic categories these icons refer to describe the spacetime of JIT and define what individual agency means within it. As Bakhtin wrote, “The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (1981, 85).

Through their transitive tendencies (Harkness 2013), qualia build links between instances of discourse and thus acquire pragmatic relevance insofar as they are also indexical. In their daily practice, expeditors apportion agency and negotiate flow in great part by their use of deictics. Through their quick directives (“you let yourself come over”), they apply and let off pressure, distributing speed and slowness, pressure and stress, amongst themselves and their materials. On top of this, their narratives build complex figurations of flow process and the “image of man” implicated in it. Manuel’s account of the shoot-out, for instance, anchors the qualia of flow process and their associated kinds of agency in different characters by means of deixis: *I let them pass, I went slow, and there they were*. In this story, Manuel choreographs the categories of JIT into the particular landscape where he crossed paths with the killers and avoided his own death. He also, however, choreographs them into Tijuana as a whole, for it was my question about public security in the city that provided the immediate frame for his narrative’s scope.

The pragmatics of don Roberto’s warning likewise anchor speed and violence in the “here” of Tijuana: “Go back to San Diego; they kill people here.” His warning puts me in parallel with the young man as someone who might unsuspectingly (and all too literally) cross paths with death. Leaving (which I can do and he cannot) is the only agentive act, besides his own warning, that don Roberto projects as possible in face of the *racha*. On a finer level, though, his story unfolds, like Manuel’s, through differential assignments of agency with respect to speed and violence. Speed and violence are indexically anchored in the space of the neighborhood: the *comadre* was hit *next door*; the young man was found dead *down the hill*. It is from these micro-attributions that don Roberto builds his broad characterization of the city as a place where “they kill people.”

Such broad characterizations of the city as a whole provide a final, crucial site where speed and violence converge: in the *racha* reflexively evoked as a spacetime enveloping “us.” To grasp the confluence of different modes of traffic and mobility, to grasp how the border can make their ambivalences of agency general, I have relied on these three sites together: linked categories of qualia, their indexical anchoring through narrative, and the reflexive evocation of col-

lectivity. It is through the interweaving of these elements that the border makes itself felt here, that speed and violence as fetishized values proliferate out to the public at large. It is through them, finally, that something like a *racha* can become the weather of a whole city.

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