

Populacho and Callejeros

Stories about street children and other urban poor in Mexico City

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Dit artikel gaat over de formatie en het beheer van de grenzen tussen straatkinderen (callejeros) en een aantal stedelijke armen die niet van de straat zijn (de populacho). Na een korte introductie worden in drie secties gedetailleerde levensverhalen gepresenteerd. De verhalen bestrijken drie specifieke domeinen van het formeren en beheren van grenzen: manipulatie en mimesis, de tragedie van het hebben van een straatkind, en het achter zich laten van de straatkindertijd.

Het centrale argument is dat de grenzen tussen straat- en volkscultuur relevant zijn in de ogen van de betrokkenen. Daar ze het onderwerp zijn van beheer en manipulatie, kunnen deze grenzen verschuiven met de situatie waarin ze geconstrueerd worden. Afhankelijk van de context, kunnen de grenzen permeabel zijn, maar ze kunnen ook de harde facetten van sociale uitsluiting vertonen. De deugdzame of schaamsarmen zijn echter niet altijd in de positie om de grenzen met de straatarmen te surveilleren. Hun kwetsbaarheid maakt de grenzen tussen volks- en straatcultuur onvoorspelbaar en discontinu. Ondanks al deze niet-lineaire kwaliteiten van de grens, zijn zowel de straatarmen als de schaamsarmen bewust van het verschil. Steeds opnieuw construeren en benadrukken zij de distinctie tussen populacho en callejeros. Een beduidend verschil betreft vicio, zo genoemd naar de 'gemene ondeugd' van het snuiven van lijm en oplosmiddel. Deze term attendeert op de paradox van de straatkinderen en hun zelfdestructieve agency.

In de slotparagraaf zet ik de bevindingen af tegen het paradigma van 'constructing and reconstructing childhood', dat geschraagd wordt door al dan niet impliciete noties van vals bewustzijn of hegemonie. Het empirische materiaal over de niet-lineaire grenzen, het bewustzijn van verschil, en vooral het bewustzijn van menselijk lijden vormt hierop een driedubbele aanval. Het is de hoogste tijd dat de hegemonie van simplificerend constructionistisch denken in de studie van straatkinderen wordt doorbroken.

[armoede, straatkinderen, straatcultuur, volkscultuur, grensbewaking, etnografie van de straat, levensverhalen, Mexico]

Very little ... has been heard about street children from the "popular" classes which form the majority of the population in Third World societies. Equally there is very little knowledge about the way the children [themselves] ... think about their situation. (Glauser 1990: 144)

'If you want to study the *callejeros*, the street children of Mexico City, you should definitely go to Plaza Garibaldi!' child care workers advised me when I told them about my plans to do field work among street children. This was in 1990. Plaza Garibaldi remained firmly associated with street children ever since, but in the course of the years other places became their symbol too. From 1993 through 1994, the street children in Marroquí Street, widely known as *La Casa de Todos* or 'The House of All', filled the headlines in the newspapers. In 1995 it was the turn of the group of the Northern Bus Station, and in 1996 it were those from Metro Cuauthémoc. For a while Metro Tasqueña was well known too. The selective attention for street children and all the talk about them were a sign on the wall. Even in a metropolis as Mexico City, perhaps the world's largest city with a number of inhabitants commonly estimated at 20 million, references to street children tend to circle around relatively few groups of people in the inner City.

Plaza Garibaldi is still more than street children. It is also a neighbourhood of permanent residence. The dwellers live in an officially popular neighbourhood, the *colonia popular* of La Lagunilla. But the locality where the inhabitants feel at home is much smaller, involving only the square and some of its nearby streets. This area is what the residents call their *barrio*. Families rarely leave the *barrio*; some do move frequently, but change apartment within the same street. The people of the *barrio* consider themselves and each other as 'from the popular neighbourhood' (*del barrio, la barriada*), or shortly 'from here' (*de aquí*). They also like to call themselves *populacho* (the lower people). Such rhetoric refers to a sense of commonality felt in relation to the real or imaginary people who are not 'from here' or who do not belong to 'the lower people'. The people of the *barrio* are interwoven with each other, often through multistranded relations. Their community should not be understood in any harmonious or monolithic sense, since that would be far from the reality of this square. One should at least distinguish between the *populacho* and the *callejeros* or the straight and the street poor. The former may include the latter – but that is far from always so.

Elsewhere I have described Plaza Garibaldi as a kaleidoscope of more than 20 categories of children and others (Gigengack 1997). Upon closer examination, the container categories of straight and street poor appeared to overlap, resemble and intertwine; in both there were also internal divisions into factions and peer groups. This article further refines the kaleidoscopic complexity of Plaza Garibaldi, shifting the attention from categories to consciousness. In the life stories presented hereunder, the differences between the straight and the street poor are relevant in the eyes of the people involved. This distinction is time and again underscored, and the boundary is almost continuously drawn and redrawn. Street children therefore constitute more than a category or 'phenomenon' to be studied or to be cured. Their definition is also, to speak with Bourdieu (1992: 172), at stake in the object itself.

Two notions are of help to put the life stories in a broader context. First of all, since it hinges on consciousness, the opposition between *populacho* and *callejeros* corresponds to that between what I call popular culture and street culture. Here the idea of popular culture is different from that in most cultural studies, where the same term usually includes all lower-class, non-official cultures. But the distinctions of popular cul-

ture do not only differentiate it from 'above'. Popular culture is also created, to borrow the phrase from Cole (1997), 'when the bottom looks down'. The division between the straight and the street poor is, moreover, not only of an economic nature. Many *callejeros* definitely look more impoverished than many of the *populacho*, but in the perception of the people involved the difference is one of lifestyle as well.

Second, the boundaries between the popular and the street-cultural can best be characterized as non-linear, that is: permeable, flexible and discontinuous. The overlaps, resemblances and intertwinements between the straight and the street poor need to be seen within the context of boundary management as it occurs within the lowest echelon of Mexican society: social exclusion and embedment, manipulation and mimesis, and the crossing of boundaries in both directions. However, these life stories do not only speak of agency. They also tell about powerlessness and impotence: situations in which the boundaries not only shift but may as well become irrelevant and even disappear. Such are the tragedies implied by the discontinuity of these boundaries.

Manipulation and mimesis

The straight and the street poor continuously de- and reconstruct the boundaries of what street children are. Depending on what the circumstances demand and allow, they may deny or affirm to be of the street. The story of 16-year-old David González and his family shows in detail how over the years they constantly explored and redefined the boundaries of street children. Their story explicates the boundary management between the straight and the street poor.

David González and his family

I knew David in 1994 when he and his mother were selling coffee and cookies in the square at night. They worked that late because the mother's husband, David's stepfather, sold in the daytime and the family only possessed one hot water kettle to make coffee. Working in day and night shifts had the additional advantage that the family could efficiently use their three beds. The young lad tried to go to school as much as he could, attending the evening shift from 5 to 9 p.m. He didn't go to school when he was too tired. In one way or the other the boy still managed to finish secondary school.

David had lived all of his life around Plaza Garibaldi. As a small boy he used to associate with the square's street children and, according to David, he also went out with them to steal. In fact, the boy still remembered with nostalgia the days he acted in Trujillo's film *Las Ratas de la Ciudad*. Together with other boys, David, who must have been five at the time, had to rob a lady from her bag. The boy had now 'calmed down', and he did not rob any more. David had also stopped sniffing *activo*, the toluene-containing solvent sniffed in this part of the City, but every now and then he could still appreciate a marihuana cigarette. Having declared himself a former street child, the lad liked to boast about his past. David, who was of a minor physical stature, once told me the following fishing story:

David: 'Nowadays people call me "Coffee-&-Tea" or "The Cookies". But when I was stealing, I was known as *el Brazo de Oro*, "The Golden Arm" ... I always stole with *mi pareja*, my partner Jhony López. You know him, he is still mugging the people along the Eje Central, in front of the cafe where the boys are always robbing. In these days I was very good in applying the Chinese grip. [To support the story, David ostensibly demonstrates how he used to grab his victims from behind.] '*Jajaja*, with my grip I silenced all the people!'

Roy: 'Have you yourself ever been mugged?'

David: 'In the square they once tried to rob me too, but I put up a fight. How are they going to steal from me, *¡si soy de aquí!*, if I am from here!'

Just as many more families in the neighbourhood, the González lived in dire poverty with many of its accompanying problems. The whole family – David, his mother, stepfather, sister and two and sometimes three little kids – lived in a one-room shanty in one of the wastelands with barracks that still lodged the survivors of the earthquake of 1985. Besides the shanty the family disposed of a small and sultry compartment of 1 by 3 metres, which served as kitchen, bathroom and David's bed room. The coffee and tea were prepared here too.

David placed the shanty somewhere between *casa* and *calle*, house and street: 'This room is not ours, but we don't pay rent because this is not a *casa*. It is a *campamento*.' Among the barracks, however, the abode of the González was the best, since it was built with bricks – in contrast to the *casitas de lámina y cartón*, the huts of tin plate and cardboard. An important matter to David and his family was the *asamblea*, the dwellers' self-organization which fought for better lodging accommodations. ('They are going to give us a house, but who knows when.')

Seated on his bed, amidst the vapours of the boiling water and the odours of the Christmas dinner he was preparing, story-teller David told me some of the histories attached to the *campamento*: 'We were the first family to arrive here and we had to clean all the debris and waste. We even found human bones, the remains of the earthquake ... People told us that before the earthquake some Mariachis lived here who drunk a lot and raped children. They raped or tried to rape at least ten of them. Here they took drugs, they killed and buried the dead. A foetus has been found here in a bell jar with formalin; it had a special protection so that it would not break.'

'That's why many of my friends think it is dreadful of us to live here. "Do you live in that corner", they say, "Gee, I wouldn't even dare to enter!" But they wouldn't stand living here anyway because of the apparitions ... One night I suddenly saw an enormous flame and I heard sounds as if a leather bag with coins was emptied. I have been thinking about excavating the corner where you sit now, but I don't do it because the neighbours are scandalmongers and they are going to say nasty things.'

I interrupted David, closed the door and asked whether it was true that in the barracks *activo* was sold. 'Of course!' exclaimed David, 'everybody knows that! It's an older woman who sells it. We, the people of the *asamblea*, try to get her out of here for with that woman around we make a bad impression. People speak ill of us, they say that we all sell *esa madre*, that junk, and that we live in a cave of thieves ... Once that

woman was called before the *asamblea*, and she presented herself under the influence of alcohol yelling that she didn't need a house, that she had her *rancho* [= 'farm', pejorative for abode]. "Great", we said. "Then we don't need to associate with you!" It is now up to the police to get her out of here.'

David: 'Of course do the police know that *activo* is being sold here, but they don't do anything. You see, in this country everything is handled with money. Here you can be sure that if you hand over a bank note, nobody knows anything. The police haven't even seen something... *Jajaja*, the police! There is a new Police Unit nowadays, the famous "Police 2000". They wear green uniforms and that's why we call them *aguacates* [= avocados]. They drive brand new cars and they replace all the other units, including the blue *pitufos* [= smurfs]. They seem to have taken command of the City Centre; they put all the men in jail. That's why they have imprisoned my tutor. And do the green ones steal! They're even worse than the others. We don't know any longer for whom to watch out more: ¡*Son más rateros que los mismos ratas!* They steal more than the rats themselves!'

David's tutor, his stepfather, was known as a boxer. He had been doing time before and in 1995 he was jailed again for a term of two years for repeated street brawling. Sometimes the mother complained about her husband's heavy drinking and drug use, and she attributed the stepfather's toilsome demands and reprimands towards David and his sister to his Tarasco ethnic identity. David, however, did not badmouth his stepfather and he consequently called him 'my tutor' or 'that gentleman'.

David's little brother, Sem of 8, was actually the child of David's oldest sister whose boyfriend had left her when she was pregnant. The girl was now married to another man and had left the household. Her husband, a schooled middle-class professional, did not want his wife to have regular contact with the family. 'Now she says that we live in a cave of bandits,' commented David once. 'She says I am a scamp and she wants my mother to be locked up in a nuthouse.'

Sem suffered from a sexual abuse trauma. An adolescent neighbour had once raped the boy when he was playing in the *campamento* while the parents were working in the square. In fact, sexual harassment was considered a serious problem in the *campamento*. There were rumours about at least six other children who had been abused or who had suffered an intent of it; the rumours were based upon the masturbating of the 3 or 4-year-old victims. Spying through a peeping hole in the cardboard of his barrack, a neighbour of the abusing adolescent had allegedly once seen the abuse taking place. But the *asamblea* lacked the power to turn the abuser in to the police.

The two other little kids in the family were children of Pamela, David's slightly older sister. The oldest, a 2-year-old toddler, alternated between the González and the family of the father of the child; recently, however, problems had arisen about the arrangement, and David and Pamela's ex-boyfriend had already been fighting about it. Pamela feared similar reactions of her family towards the father of her second child, and therefore she did not reveal his identity. As she had done with Sem, the mother accepted the unwanted toddlers as her own. She thought that the three little kids were products of her daughters' 'youth sins,' and she felt ashamed that she had not been able

to avoid the pregnancies. 'It happened with the first, and it happened again with my second daughter,' she sighed.

In spite of all the problems, the González succeeded not to disintegrate for quite some time. It was especially the cooperation between the child worker David and his mother that gave the family some stability. They worked together in the night and alternated when the stepfather was jailed; by turns they visited the man in the prison and they did the same to take care of the little babies when they were sick of chicken pox.

In May 1994 the mother succeeded once again in keeping the family together. This time David was arrested for a theft he consistently denied to have committed. When he had been brought to the juvenile detention centre, the mother asked the street children of the square what to do. The *banda* advised her to contact the social workers of Casa Ecuador, and these referred her to Caracol, a non-governmental institute for street youths which maintained contact with the Detention Centre. The Caracol street educator managed to have David being released, provided that he would 'rehabilitate' and attend a workshop in the Caracol shelter. David indeed went there a couple of times.

The manipulation, the mimesis and the discontinuity of boundaries

With his sixteen years, David had been a child 'of' the street, a working child 'on' the street, as well as a school child on a part-time basis. He had even been a working child acting as a street child. David González and his family constantly tried to connect themselves with street educators or foreign anthropologists who might represent a resource to them. In doing so, they were able to reconstruct and transgress the boundaries of what child care workers and street ethnographers defined as their target group, the *street child* category. If necessary, child labourer David posed as a street child – not to expose everyone's worst fears about dangerous children but because he had a political-economic interest in doing so.

There is a lot of truth in Glauser's statement that 'being left undefined might mean being invisible' (1990: 144), and also in Ennew's contemplation that NGOs working on behalf of street children tend to 'obscure the situation of the vast majority of impoverished children living with their families in slums and shanty towns, directing welfare resources instead at the modern thoroughfares' (1994a: 413). Yet, the unlabelled poor in the slums and shanty towns are not always as passive as these phrases presuppose. They try to get their share, even if that implies to be a bit 'like them.' Depending on the situation, the institutions of child care may agree in the altering of the definition of street children. A main motive to do this is, of course, to help people in desperate need.

The economy of child care is another incentive to intervene under the guise of helping street children while both the helper and the helped tacitly agree that this is not the case. It is much easier to get a boy like David out of jail and 'rehabilitate' him, than to do the same with an experienced street boy who perhaps has a criminal record and who might have passed the rehabilitation ritual countless times. To the funding agencies kids like David González may be presented as their successful cases in child saving. They thus become instances of 'the reintegrated street child' or 'the child at risk' prevented of becoming worse.

To David and his family, however, visiting Caracol was more than a rehabilitation matter. Some months after David's adventure in the shelter, I and my colleague street ethnographer Raquel Alonso encountered the family working in the square at 1:00 a.m. While I talked with David and Pamela, the mother began to tell Raquel about the difficult job to keep the family together.

'David and Pamela are getting tired of my husband and therefore they want to get out. The first thing David does is going to Caracol. It's his place of refuge. And now my daughter wants to go there too ... One of these days, I would like to go to Caracol as well. Maybe they can get me a psychiatrist, for my little Sem. He often masturbates because of what has happened to him. I can only try to keep him occupied with games such as domino ... At this moment my husband takes care of him. He is playing [domino] with him now ... Semito knows that I am not his mother, I told him that my daughter is his mother. But when he asks me why, I tell him that I will explain it later, when he will understand.'

She continued after a short breathing space: 'The baby is a daughter of Pamela, my second daughter, but I take care of her too. Pamela wanted to give the baby to her sister but that bitch is a *licenciada* [= she has studied law]. She would only take care of her sister's daughter if Pamela signed papers in which she gave her daughter legally in adoption. And so I got mad and I told her that this is not the way it should be. The daughter of her sister has the right to know who her mother is. That's the reason why I take care of this baby as well ... At this moment I have her in a *casa cuna*, a babies' day care centre. There she is taken care of when I am unable to do so because of my work. Besides, my husband is a drug addict, and so it is better to have the girl safe, isn't it?'

In the eyes of the González, child care institutions as Caracol represented a resource. David, Pamela and their mother: they all had their own reasons to go to the shelter and seek professional help. Child care arrangements also helped to settle family disputes and to have the little kids away from the omnipresent greedy and dangerous people. Getting help was the mother's most tried tactic to keep the family together in the long run – even if it implied that they had to break up temporarily.

One year later, David did not visit Caracol any more. Some association with the social work for street children, however, still retained a meaning. David: 'Once I was detained by two policemen. I was eating *tacos* in the street, and when I wiped off my mouth with a napkin they thought that I was sniffing. "No way", I said, "this napkin is not moistened with anything but fat." But they got me in the car and took me to the Detainment Centre where the officers did not want to receive me, and so they brought me to the Delegation Centre where they did not receive me either. They [= the two policemen] had me *paseando*, driving around all the time. In the end they were going to hit me. I said, "Fine, you hit me. But for every blow you give, you will receive the double. I am in shelter Caracol and I know the Director, Pedro Moreno! Moreover, I enjoy the protection of the Human Rights! So if you hit me, you know what will happen. What's more, I want my ring and my chains back." And effectively, the police brought me back to the *campamento* and they even returned me my jewellery.'

Very probably David embellished his tales to increase his self-grandeur. Even so, the stories of this young man indicate that selective identification with the street youth

and their institutional resources belonged to his repertoire of coping – both in a practical way to escape from his stepfather, and in a symbolical sense with the fantasies about his golden arm and his putting corrupt policemen in their place. David's was a game of mimesis, in which it became unclear 'who is the imitator and who the imitated, which is copy and which is original' (Taussig 1993: 78; Van de Port 1998: 178). However, it must be retained that the confusion created in David's 'mimetic play' around the question 'Who is a street child?' was *play* indeed.

David and his mother knew well when not to associate with the children of the street, particularly in reference to Pamela. They encouraged the young mother to take up responsibilities and they tried to insulate her from *los viciosos*, the 'vicious' or drug-using people, not in the last place because they feared a third pregnancy. A clear example of this happened the night that David's mother talked to Raquel about the family and their problems. Outside the mother's reach I chatted with David and Pamela, when out of the blue Soledad and Megaira appeared, two young women from the *banda* of nearby Marroquí Street. They scrounged a cup of coffee, and David, knowing they were friends of mine, effectively invited them. He then asked his mother's permission to stop working. She agreed that her son had worked enough and blessed him on the forehead before he went off to play billiards. She continued talking to Raquel but observed with some worry Pamela and me chatting with the Marroquí girls.

Soledad and Megaira were joyful that night and they began to dance in the street. Several men stopped to watch them and two even sat down to admire their moving bodies. The young women stopped dancing to make sexual insinuations about the people who passed by, and then asked aloud my opinion on the backparts of the ballerinas in the nearby discotheque and on Mexican femineity in general. Pamela laughed and out of the corner of her eye she looked at us. Soledad and I started a conversation with her. Pamela didn't waste much words in saying she was unhappy. In short sentences the 16-year-old said she had a baby, that she didn't like her stepfather, and that she sometimes managed to escape. Once again Pamela gazed furtively at dancing Megaira when her mother abruptly said good-bye to me. 'I'm going to bring that girl home,' the woman explained, 'It's late and people need to rest.' She called Pamela's name until the girl obeyed her.

The inarticulate conflict between mother and daughter opened a window on the ambivalent perception of street girls by poor people such as the González. Young Pamela looked with envy at the two uncompromising females who in word and gesture celebrated the sexual independence she did not have. Her mother, in contrast, watched the two Marroquí girls with disgrace. She certainly did not permit Pamela the freedom she had given to her son David. That night Pamela made me think of a passage in Aptekar's book about the 'mixture of envy and disdain' street children may raise within the spectators who view them as 'uncompromising heroes' (Aptekar 1988: 196-201). Aptekar wrote about his own adult, middle-class fantasies of regaining 'memories of being "free" children'. In this case, however, it were the urban poor Pamela and her mother who romanticized, the one in a positive and the other in a negative sense, the lives of street girls as Soledad and Megaira.¹

The inevitable occurred when Pamela ran away for a longer period. On Christmas day 1995, a disconcerted David narrated he had lost weight because of the worries about his sister. 'Pamela disappeared three months ago and we don't know anything. Her daughter is with us again. Shortly before we had agreed that she was going to take care of the toddlers at night while my mum and I would be working. Pamela said it was all right, but the day afterwards she said she was going to look for work as well. She went away and we did not see her back. We're worried because of her daughter and her son. He is with us too now ...'

'Pamela left a note saying she had run off with her boy friend and that the children were too much for them. She wrote that between her and the kids, she'd better choose for herself ... People say that Pamela *agarró el mal camino*, that she set foot on the slippery path. Her fiance seems to be a policeman, and it is said that she helps with stealing. She helps to plan the robberies and she's being paid for that. People also say she uses a lot of cocaine ... She can't be far. They say she is in the square. But we haven't seen her since, because Pamela always hides for us.'

In the light of the family's persistent problems of poverty, it could hardly be surprising that the attempts to keep the family straight and together would once fail. Loosing one's children to the street is a genuine hazard for the poor families living in the centre of Mexico City, besieged as they are by street criminals, drug traffickers, corrupt policemen, child abusers and sometimes also dangerous and ungrateful family members. At the same time, the children of the poor are exposed to the seductions of an underground street economy with its monetary rewards and its sense of freedom. Sons and daughters do not need to be lost literally to the street – as with Pamela, they can also be lost to the slippery path of a police unit. In the eyes of the abandoned family, it may all come down to delinquency and drug use.

Loosing children to the street

These beings have no other points of reference than life – this life which we think we have domesticated by means of morality and social order, but which the social disorder of poverty restores to its original virtuality as a sort of infernal earthly paradise with its exit barred by a fiery sword. (From 'Cruelty and Love in *Los Olvidados*', Bazin 1984: 110).

Street children's mothers and significant others are often depicted as evil. These words are not meant to deny that many street children have suffered from the most terrible child abuse (as a number of non-street children have). There is, however, another side of the picture which has scarcely yielded any attention. This is the tragedy of having a street child.

The relationship between mother and street child is often paradoxical, as Luís Buñuel spelled out so brilliantly in *Los Olvidados* (1950). As the French film critic Bazin commented (1984), the greatness of this film lies in its refusal to refer to moral categories. There is no Manichaeism in the relation between the difficult child Pedro

and his stubborn mother. She neglects her son and the son threatens his mother, but they also display a desperate love towards each other – and that makes their relationship so tragical.² ‘Even more than beyond good and evil,’ to quote Bazin (1984: 110) again, these characters are ‘beyond happiness and pity.’

It is hardly surprising that the voices of street children’s parents are often absent in anthropological accounts of street children. It is after all a small chance that one will meet the parents of runaways in streets and shelters. Most of the parents that I have met in Plaza Garibaldi were either mothers of working children or they were the heads of street families. Meeting the parents of the other street children is not impossible, however, provided that one is prepared to spend lots of time in streets and institutes waiting for the opportunities to occur.³

Doña Blanca and Don Carmelo: ‘She was so lean and so undernourished.’

(Referring to *la banda de Gari*) You see, those boys don’t want to change. Maybe it is because the mother does not love them enough, and ... Yes, there are also cases in which the fathers abandon their children. How can I deny that and put the blame only on us, the women? What I mean is this: when the mothers take care of their children, then it is alright. But when the mothers go as well, and abandon their kids, then the family has been dissolved ...

The above is the opinion of Doña Blanca, together with her husband Don Carmelo the janitors of The Residency, a shelter-like arrangement for the local street children that was established by the police. They are the proteges of the police officer in charge of the square, Colonel Marcos. Their oldest daughter, Dulce, is married to one of the Colonel’s men; the two younger daughters are still living at home, but one of them has a fiance who is also of the police.

Hanging out of the window of the Residency, the caretakers of the square’s street children were used to chat with the police officer’s troops. For some time the building was even daily guarded by the Colonel’s men against possible attacks of other police units. The janitors could also count on the police to settle minor problems. When the boys did not want to have their hair cut, for example, Doña Blanca called for reinforcement to bring the lads to the hairdresser. The good contacts with the police also served the Doña to protect the square’s street children. Don Carmelo recounted the following story, which was corroborated by different people:

Once a Norteño musician was going to hit one of the boys with his belt, and Blanca rebuked him for that because the boy hadn’t done anything wrong. ‘If you hit him, I’ll talk to the police and they will detain you,’ she said. ‘Come on, as if you had that much influence!’, contested the Norteño, ‘who are you to warn the police?’ And Blanca said: ‘Whether you believe it or not, I know someone up there. So if you don’t calm down, I will call the police and they will get you.’

Since that occasion people have spread the story around, and it is now common knowledge that the Doña knows someone who could bring one into troubles.

The Colonel pays everything concerning the building, even the telephone bill that arrives without a telephone being installed. In turn for their taking care of the Residency, he does not charge them rent. 'That's a great help', commented Don Carmelo. 'The rent of a department is around 2.000 pesos (= \$600). I could pay that, but with what money should I eat then?'

The janitors also work in the square. At night they sell rum to the partying visitors; with an average of 200 pesos a night (around \$60), the job is not bad, but Don Carmelo complains that the nights are sometimes very long. Their working hours determine the time schedule of The Residency. Every night at ten o'clock when Don Carmelo goes out to work, the lads need to leave the building too; and when he comes back at 7 or 8 in the morning, all need to go to bed, because Don Carmelo is not going to open the door when he is asleep. This is one of the reasons why after five o'clock in the morning it is not uncommon to see the boys waiting near Doña Blanca until they are allowed to go to the Residency. The waiting furthers a sense of solidarity between the lads and Doña Blanca, also because they recognize each other as people of the night. The *banda* does not leave the Doña alone when she sells her bottles. They also accompany her if she needs to go from the square to the Residency.

Doña Blanca and Don Carmelo have always been used to dealing with street children. They sell rum since 1971 ('and there have always been solvents'). Before the earthquake of 1985 they lived in front Casa Ecuador, a shelter nearby Plaza Garibaldi. 'We've always known the boys well. We've shared life with them, and they have always respected us.' For some of Plaza Garibaldi's street children, Doña Blanca is truly a meaningful other. She has won the esteem of the square's street youth, by providing them with a sleeping place and by giving good advice. She tries to convince the boys to wash themselves, 'because when the boys are ragged the people look down on them. They say "get out of the way dirty bum" and treat them with contempt. People don't say that when the boys have been washed.'

Once Doña Blanca even succeeded to have Smiley take a bath: 'I've been talking to Smiley and I said to him "Ay, my son, take care of yourself or you'll be sick. You've got too thin, you don't eat any more, you're going to die soon." He did listen to me and he said, "Yes, *jefa*, I'm going to give up *el vicio*, the vice. You'll see I'll give it up." And indeed, he gave it up. He was fine for one week already, and then he started all over again ... The boys were pestering him, saying things like "Ay, Smiley the Little Saint, he doesn't do the vice any more! Now he is behaving well ..." They teased him so much that he returned to the vice.'

Don Carmelo has also tried to convince the lads to sniff less: 'I tell them that instead of buying *vicio* they should buy things for their money. Effectively, they have already bought a cassette player and a TV-set. And then I say: "Listen, if you have 10 pesos, don't waste it in *activo*. Buy yourself a good lunch. That may cost you 7 pesos, apart from your soft-drink. If you still have money left and you want to grab the vice, do it. At least you're well-fed then.'" Don Carmelo was of the opinion that since they were in charge of The Residency, there had been less sniffing. 'The boys still sniff inside when we don't notice. But I try to take the solvents away when they enter the building. I throw it away in the sink or I set it afire. The boys don't get angry

when I do it, because I do not hit them. These children do understand, if one talks well to them.'

The janitors could also narrate heart-breaking stories about their failures in educating street kids. Doña Blanca: 'I haven't seen Meche since she has been caught by the police for stealing. Meche was the smallest of all. I brought that little girl to the Residency and I said to her, "Look my daughter, you can stay here with my own children, but don't sniff." I gave her a lot of milk to decrease the effects [of sniffing]. She was so lean and so undernourished of so much *vicio*. But the girl didn't listen and in the night her longing for *activo* collapsed into a crisis, and she only cried: "I want *activo*! Gimme my *activo*!" I gave her food but she only wanted *activo*. "If I'm not getting *activo*, I'm gonna kill myself", she said. My husband told me to let the girl go, because if something would happen to her, we would be blamed for it. The Colonel finally said: "Look Meche, there is the door. If you want to have *activo* and you don't want to be cured, go. In that case, know that you cannot come back!" But Meche said "I want *activo*", and the kid went through the door.'

Doña Blanca knew the problems of children and drugs from her own experience. This is what she related about her 16-year-old daughter: 'Two years ago Dulce took to the street as well. She was sniffing too. A neighbour warned me: "Doña Blanca, do you know your daughter is at the parking site in the Alley of Bitterness? Lying on the ground, *¡hasta las chanclas!* Blotto! She can't even stand on her feet!" That's how I found out. Her daddy told me to go for Dulce and take her home. Her daddy hit her with an electricity wire and my daughter cried, but it was of little help. Somewhat later the neighbours came again to tell me that they had seen her sniffing. Once more I went for her, and this time Dulce approached me shamelessly. She even showed me her *mona*! [= the rag soaked with solvent] ... I called the police. "But that's your daughter!", they said when I told them to take her away. I said I didn't know her, and that they should do what they had to do. Inside the police car my daughter only laughed and said that they couldn't do her anything. And in fact, since her boyfriend is a cop, I thought they would let her go, but no ...'

'They sent her to the Anonymous Drug Addicts. She had been detained together with a couple of other kids who came to warn me after being released. "*Jefa, jefa*" they told me, "please go to see Dulce. If you don't get your daughter out, she will kill herself! She can't bear it any longer. She doesn't eat." "Let's see whether she has the courage," I answered. "If she says she's going to kill herself, let her kill herself." O, I felt so ugly! Constantly I had to say to myself that it was for her own good. Then I wanted to get my daughter out, but Colonel Marcos convinced me not to do that. He said, "Don't cry, Doña Blanca. It's better to leave her inside for a while. You'll see that she will quit.'"

'Because of all the sorrow, I stopped eating and after three weeks I couldn't stand it any longer. We went to the Anonymous Drug Addicts, where I met my daughter's *madrina*, her godmother. You see, [in the A.D.A.] they appoint godparents to everyone. A very despotic and vulgar woman. She said to me: "And who the hell are you? The mother? You cannot see her! Visits are not allowed. Don't you know why your daughter is here?" "So you think I cannot visit her", I contested that woman. "We'll

see. I do know people!” ... “All right, then” she said. “If you’re the mother... But how are you going to prove that you’re the mother?” “With papers!” I said, “here I have the papers that prove I am my daughter’s mother.”

‘I was finally brought to my daughter, and when I saw Dulce I felt sadness. There sat my little girl, in oversized clothes and with an unhappy face. She ran into me, threw her arms round my neck and didn’t let me go. “Get me out, mummy,” she cried, “get me out of here. I can’t stand it any longer. *Ya me voy a componer*, I will recover myself.” I took her with me and my daughter stayed at home in peace. She did not go out for three months and she did not sniff. That was the only way in which she learnt, by trial and error.’

The story of Dulce had a happy end. Her boyfriend, the cop, came along and asked the parents their permission to take their daughter to the movies. Blanca told them to be back at ten p.m., but the couple did not come back that night. Only two weeks later the boyfriend came along to inform Doña Blanca that he had stolen their daughter.

‘Well, here I am,’ he added, ‘You can do with me whatever you want.’ Blanca said that Dulce knew what she was doing, since she already had a daughter. ‘I only hope that you, knowing that she already knows the way, are not going to blame her for her daughter.’ ‘No, Madam,’ the lad contested, ‘I promise.’ Dulce soon got her second child, who was now 10 months old.

Doña Blanca regularly compared the street children with her own daughters:

‘Smiley’s history is a very sad one. He says his stepfather maltreated him, and his mother didn’t do anything to defend him. His mother didn’t treat him like her other children. One should always treat the children equally because they are sensible to differences. Never did I treat my daughter Dulce different from the others, even though she was the way she was. She would ask me money to buy cigarettes, and even though I would say she should buy juice and not cigarettes, I always gave her the money. Her sister always told me that I should not give money to Dulce because she behaved so badly and only bought cigarettes. But I told her it was her sister, and that I would not treat her less ... My old man said to me “If one day, we do not stand each other any more, I am not going to leave you, because what will happen to my children? It’s better we will stay together until they’ve grown up.”’

When Doña Blanca spoke about family disintegration, quoted at the beginning of this section, she hit the nail on the head. If her stories tell of a more general pattern, it is that street children are treated differently than home children. When first the father and then the mother abandon their children, the family is dissolved – and this is a problem in a society that lacks alternatives. Even the child-saving janitors were not able to treat the children of the street as their own. Don Carmelo tried to talk to the lads who sniff, but he became desperately violent when his own daughter did the same. Doña Blanca took her intoxicated daughter immediately away from the Alley of Bitterness, but she had to let Smiley return to the boys who pestered him. And while the janitors and their patron, the Colonel, forced Dulce into treatment, they placed the responsibility for the recovery of Meche in the hands of the 11-year-old herself.

The Rat and his family: 'Where would he sleep with this cold?'

The Rat, who probably owed his nickname to the form of his face, formed part of the Marroquí *banda*. I had already known this lad for years when I found out that he lived near Plaza Garibaldi. Walking back from the square late at night, Raquel and I suddenly heard a voice from the dark: 'Psst, White Man, what are you doing here?' The Rat invited us to enter his home and meet his family. He added that his real name was Angelo.

It was a small apartment: a living room of 4 by 4 metres with in the height a wooden construction where the kids can sleep, a kitchenette, and a bedroom of exactly the size of a double bed. Here the Rat lived, with his mother, aunt, sister and brother-in-law, three nephews, and two brothers who were already asleep. The family's *compadres*, who were also the Rat's aunt and uncle, were temporarily staying here too. The dire poverty of the family could be read from the little kids' undernourished bodies and the bad state of their teeth. But the adults cared about the little ones, playing with them in the middle of the night, caressing them on their lap and bringing them to bed. Even the Rat, such a hoodlum in Marroquí Street, did not groan to his little nephews that night. The Rat had even brought his own, recently-born son. Compared to the other little kids, his son looked reasonably healthy.

It was about one year after the 1994 peso devaluation, and the family had plenty of topics of conversation. 'Formerly, one could walk safely in the streets of this neighbourhood,' said the *compadre*. 'Even at this time, at one o'clock in the night. But now, at ten o'clock, what do I say, at three in the afternoon it's already almost impossible to walk in the street without being mugged!' The rest of the family agreed. 'It's all because of the crisis', said the Rat's aunt. 'It all went down since Zedillo became [Mexico's] president. ¡Cualquier pendejo ya es de gobierno! Any arsehole gets in the government nowadays! Up there they pass each other the good jobs. The son of Durazo, the former chief of police, is now the boss of NMT. They just sold it to him!' 'That is one of the companies which built the metro', the Rat's mother clarified. She then referred to the metro constructions near Plaza Garibaldi: 'Not long ago, there was an accident with seven workers. Only one could be saved and he is now paralysed. I know because the woman who cleaned the toilets saw it all happening, and she knows exactly what was going on. These men had fallen down in the shafts. Nobody helped them to get out. The other workers said they were still alive, but they had to keep on working. People say that the dead bodies give power to the basements. Just look at the Latin-American Tower, which has resisted so many earthquakes. On how many dead bodies mustn't that building rest?'

Such a political analysis of poverty and crime is an example of what Foucault (1995: 288) called the 'counter-*fait divers*'. It gives a clue to understand why the straight poor, those who suffer most from street delinquency, often still feel some sympathy towards the children of the street. The Rat's family went against the common institutional discourse on the *street child* (poverty-idleness-unwed mothers-alcoholic fathers-immorality-theft and crime). They did not deny the degeneration of their neighbourhood, but rather saw the delinquency in their street as a result from necessity. They identified another delinquency, the one from above, as the cause of the misery. In

the eyes of these *populacho*, the riches committed their crimes because they were protected by the law and, even worse, because they were the law.

Suddenly I noticed three small plastic bottles on the table, which I immediately associated with *activo*. Furtively I opened one and smelt at it: rose water. 'Grandmother died one month ago', explained the Rat's mother, 'her grandchildren were fond of her. You see, my mother brought the little kids always to bed. They couldn't sleep without their granny's good-night kiss. Her death made the kids sick of *susto* (magical freight). That's why I give them *espíritus para tomar*, spirits to drink.' I felt dismayed. For more than five years I had known the Rat as a hard-core sniffer and as a juvenile delinquent who stole whatever had not been nailed down. I was prepared to encounter child abusers and drug takers in his home, but I found a loving family.

The two points were interconnected. The degeneration and immorality from above, and the emotions the family displayed towards each other put into perspective the barrier between the straight and the street poor. For the Rat's family realized that the children of the street, or at least their own son, originated from the popular classes and that somehow a connection remained. This should not be taken as a romanticization but as a paradox. As with the other families I have known in this neighbourhood, the Rat's kin were weighed down by the problems of poverty. They complained about street crime, corruption and exploitation – but a couple of blocks away their own son was deeply involved with juvenile delinquency, corrupt politicians and exploitative policemen.

The family had little knowledge about their son's street life. 'He escapes my notice', complained the mother, 'That boy always comes home late at night and goes early in the morning. He likes it to disappear whenever he feels for it and stays away for days.' Once the Rat had even disappeared for almost a year, keeping his mother uninformed about his sniffing life in nearby Marroquí Street. The mother did not know the wasteland, but she had visited the Rat when he and his *banda* had moved to a shelter-like arrangement supported by the state from which they had by now already been evicted. The Rat had been proud to show his new living place to his relatives. On that occasion the family also met the Rat's girlfriend, Soledad, and the couple's baby. They were not on speaking terms with Soledad, whom they thought of as a bad mother. Rat's mother complained about the baby; Soledad sometimes left him with her family-in-law while she herself disappeared for days. 'It's a nice kid,' the Rat's mother said while she stroked the baby's cheek, 'Look how fat he is! But I can't keep him. There are already too many people in this house. Don't you know some shelter where they can keep him?'

'Some kids just like it to live like that in the street,' Rat's aunt interrupted pensively. '*Les gusta la calle*. They like the street. This boy, for example,' she added while she pointed to the Rat, 'I have told Angelo various times that I'll pay for his school, but he doesn't want to. He feels attracted to the street.' The Rat's mother nodded.

Speaking about the black sheep of the family, the Rat's mother and aunt invoked *la calle* as a metaphor to describe the drama that had befallen in their midst. It helped them to come to terms with their despair. Once more it turned out that reifying 'the street' is not only the privilege of intellectuals or child care bureaucrats. 'Reification exists' and 'is more practically significant', Berger and Luckmann (1966: 90) wrote long ago, 'in the consciousness of the man in the street'. Through speaking about *the*

street and its mysterious fatal attractions, the social world appeared to merge with the world of nature. 'Loosing children to the street' became a fate, and as such the Rat's family lived it through.⁴

Two months later, again at around midnight, Raquel and I encountered the Rat's mother in front of her apartment. The woman made herself comfortable on the stoop, and spoke freely with us about her son. The Rat and Soledad now lived at the family's. Since the Christmas street commerce had begun, they were selling toys in the nearby square of Alameda. Especially now, around Epiphany, the selling was good. 'But I don't know how much they earn. They will never tell me that.'

The mother invited us in, and once again she presented us to her eldest son and her smallest daughter, a thin and undernourished girl. The living room was now crowded with the Rat's elder sister, his sister-in-law, and the aunt who lived nearby but who always stayed at her sister's in the day. In the bed upstairs an older and sick man lay. This time there were seven children, since Soledad had also brought her other son Carlitos.

The brother sold in the Alameda too, which was why he had been able to secure the Rat and his girlfriend a place in the street commerce. 'Yesterday I saw Soledad greeting someone who seemed to be one of her friends. I first thought the lad wanted to attack her because *andaba con su vicio*, because he had his vice with him. I already whistled to the other vendors but nothing happened. He only embraced her for New Year, *y andó en su vicio*, and he walked away in his vice.'

In his description of Soledad's acquaintance, the Rat's brother differentiated between walking with and walking in the vice of solvent sniffing. The former expressed a sense of insecurity, in which the solvent indicated an outward-directed danger or nuisance. The latter hinted at the sniffer's alleged mental absence, and expressed a feeling of pity. The Rat's brother thus recognized that the danger of solvent sniffing was inward directed as well, against the sniffer's self. Such fine distinctions testify to street-wise, implicit knowledge. The language of the straight poor is so evocative, precisely because these people have seen the street poor.

I saw an opportunity to ask after Angelo and his sniffing. The mother: '*Todavía anda*. He's still around [with or in the vice]. The other day he was here at home, and I told him "not here", because his little sister is still living at home, and there are the other little kids, his nephews. And I said he should stop as well for the sake of his own kid ... I told him to *andar* outside. The vice is very bad for the little kids. They follow him ... [Pointing at Carlitos, Soledad's other son] Look at him. He is 4 years old and look how small he is. And now look at this kid [pointing at the Rat's nephew]. He is of the same age but he is much bigger and looks healthier.'

The Rat's mother had a point when she said that the vice is bad for little kids, especially if she had referred to the child neglect that often accompanies parental drug use. But in attributing Carlitos' malnutrition to drug abuse she made a classical mistake. For Carlitos had mostly been raised in the home of Soledad's father, who as far as I know was not a drug user. The cynical fact was that Soledad's other child, the baby who was being raised within the *banda* and whose name I have never known, looked healthier than the others. This baby could after all count with charity, free milk and napkins.

‘We told Angelo not to sniff any more, if not for himself, at least for his son. But he says “It’s just one (= just one *mona* or solvent-soaked rag). It is only to take away the temptation.” “To take away the temptation?” I replied. “You only go on (with sniffing) ... Why don’t you get drunk. It’s better to be drunk than to be vicious!” ... Soledad says she doesn’t do it any more. *Lo dejó*. She says she left it some time ago for the sake of her son.’ Sighs as these made clear that in the eyes of this family the *street* ran parallel to the *vice*. Both were metaphors for drug use, especially sniffing. Part of the drama of having a street child, then, was the constant struggle against their kid’s self-destruction.

I informed about the possibility that Soledad and the Rat would obtain an apartment. Some authorities had promised to distribute apartments among the *banda* if they would leave the terrain in Marroquí Street. The mother: ‘Who knows... Soledad says the apartment is going to be for her, her son and his father ... They were also going to give [an apartment] to Angelo but he didn’t get one *por vicioso*, for being a drug addict.’

The mother narrated how she had helped her son with the eternal problems with bureaucracy. She herself had helped to create these problems since she had failed to register her son. Consequently, the Rat did not have a birth certificate and the mother now helped him to obtain the *certificado de no-existencia*, an official proof of non-existence. ‘Neither did I register my daughter, nor my eldest son. In that time my mother took care of the kids because I couldn’t be here. (Pointing to the Rat’s youngest brother) In his case, I could not prove that his father had died and so I couldn’t give him the name of his father. He has the names of my mother.’

Maybe the mother used to work as a prostitute, which was not uncommon in this neighbourhood. In any case all children were from different absent fathers. It had been the women, in particular the deceased granny, who had given this family some degree of stability. The mother also narrated how this pattern was ‘inherited’ from one generation to the next: not only had the families of the grandmother and the mother been female-headed, the Rat was an absent father too:

Angelo has already got two kids with another girl, Chaya, who also hangs out here in the neighbourhood. She’s only got one son left who is four now. The other child was taken away by the DIF [the state institute for family and child welfare]. We don’t know anything of that kid. Perhaps they have given him into adoption. He is six now. We wanted to see him but that was impossible, they said, because we were family of the father and they only give children to the family of the mother. Perhaps the child is now in a *casa cuna*, a shelter for foundlings. They also took away Chaya’s other child but she could reclaim him and he was given back.

The story of Chaya’s toddlers underscored that the poor, especially the young mothers, may lose their children not only to the streets but to the institutes as well. A welfare institute as the DIF may punish them for being unable to take care of their children while it will discipline the children that have been taken away as if they were foundlings. But Chaya’s story also showed resistance; claiming children back from the institutes is not at all unusual in Mexico City. By giving one child back to Chaya and by refusing to give the other child to the family of the father, the state obviously affirmed the structure of the female-headed household.

When I asked at what age Angelo left home, the mother and the sister began to speak simultaneously. The sister: 'Angelo left home when he was very young, 9 years. We lived here with his younger and his older brother, and me. There has never been a strong hand, a man in the home ... We didn't hear anything of Angelo until the summons arrived that he stayed in a *casa hogar*, a shelter... It was not the Reformatory, and neither was it the Milpa [= custody centre for youths below 12]. O yes, it was the *casa hogar* in Tlalpan, the *Consejo Tutelar* (= general youth detention centre). Angelo was 11 at that time.'

Such stories further underscored the resemblances between the straight and the street poor. Whereas the DIF revealed their vulnerability for the agents of intervention, the story of Rat the runaway spoke of the dependency of the institutes. Here it is telling that the Rat's family apparently knew all the youth prisons, which they described as *casa hogares* or shelters. The institutes thus did not only take the children of the poor away, they also helped them to survive and to reunite, however briefly, with their family.

The mother: 'When Angelo had run away I didn't see him until he ended up in that shelter. And after that I only saw him when he was at home ... That's to say I did see him, for he was in the square. The people saw him strolling there and they told us "We saw your son, he's in the neighbourhood, don't worry." I looked for him but whenever he came in my sight he ran away and hid himself. In that time I never talked to him. Only once did I manage to catch Angelo when he ran away and I told him to come home and he said, "All right, in a moment I come." So, I went back home to wait for him, but the kid never came. After we had visited him in the *casa hogar*, he came back more regularly, stayed for a while and went away. He only came to visit us and never spent the night here. To be with us with Christmas was the last thing he would do. Especially my mother, his granny who rest in peace, went looking for him. My mother would then say to herself: "Where would Angelo be, where would he sleep with this cold..."'

'Angelo is the only one who got derailed,' the mother finally excused herself. 'My other son, Angelo's older brother, was as well taking *el mal camino*, the wrong track, because he was seeing friends, some queers, but I taught him a good lesson which he fortunately understood, and now he is even married'. 'They rather married me', the Rat's brother grumbled.

Remembering street childhood

'It is not difficult to find someone in Mexico City who formerly lived in the street, but who succeeded to return to the societal corset' wrote journalist Versteeg in a newspaper article in 1990. He cited a Plaza Garibaldi Mariachi, *El Pelón* (The Bold One), who as a child had lived on the street. At the age of ten this man migrated from the city of San Luis Potosí to Mexico in 1935. In Mexico City he mainly lived from carrying fruits and vegetables at the markets. At night he liked most to sleep under cars, although later he was able to rent a room. 'It wasn't such a bad experience' narrated the Mariachi, '[street life] gives you a sense of responsibility. Although as a lonely little boy you do suffer a lot in such a big city.' This former street child thought that in the

eighties more children had ended up in the street, and that now they sniffed more glue, thinner and gasoline. 'Nowadays the children of the street destruct themselves. Not only the boys, but the girls too. There are too many of them.'

It is indeed relatively easy to find people who have grown out of street childhood, although this observation only relates to specific poor neighbourhoods. But the glimpse from the past sheds doubt upon Versteeg's formulation about the former street children that were cut off from the mainstream of society. The comments about el Pelón's working on the market, renting a room and feeling lonely while obtaining a sense of responsibility rather suggest the contrary. Actually, Pelón's youth seems to have been that of a working, homeless hotel sleeper, and not that of a street child. His comment upon street children's present-day tendency to self-destruction confirms this impression. For the inhalation of glues and solvents is not a recent phenomenon, it dates back to at least the fifties.

Whereas El Pelón grew up in the thirties, the following two stories reflect upon street life in the fifties and the seventies. In these memories of street childhood two themes recurrently pop up. The first concerns the mixed feelings with which the past experiences are recalled. Former street children often underline that living in the street implies human suffering, but at the same time they may feel joy and even pride at recalling the mischief. Secondly, there is a tendency to think that society has become harsher since the economic crises of the early eighties, and particularly so for the children of the street. El Pelón's impressions about the rising number of street children, the appearance of street girls, the increase of sniffing, and the differentiation of the market of inhalants fit this pattern.

Don Nestor: 'I stole well.'

On the corner of my street I once bumped into my neighbour, Don Nestor. I had just done my shopping at the grocery, and the man warned me for a very dirtily dressed *teporocho*, or tramp, approaching me. 'Let me see, let me see whom I'm going to kill this night!', exclaimed the vagrant, '*soy matón*, I'm a murderer ...' 'All right, all right, you're a murderer', spoke Don Nestor. 'And now clear off to your friends. Down there you'll be the hero!' The *teporocho* went away but not after having proudly shown his bottle. Immediately he came back to harass me, pointing to my shopping bag and asking for money and beer. When I refused, he reacted by saying nasty things about foreigners living in Mexico and dating local girls. Don Nestor chased him away again. It was a good opportunity to ask what he thought about vagrants, drugs and the children of the street.

'My children don't take drugs', Don Nestor said without hesitating. He made himself comfortable and leaned on the wall. 'Kids use *activo* when they have no one to take care of them, when there is nobody to correct them. I have been a drug addict too, for 22 years. I'm 48 years old now, and if God wants it, I'll live through my fifties ... Since 16 years I don't take drugs any more. Nothing since 1980. And when I say nothing I mean nothing! I took everything: *cemento* [= the glue Resistol 5000], *chochos* [pills with psychiatric medicines], marijuana, tobacco – and I drunk too.'

‘I started sniffing glue in the fifties. O yes, we already had *cemento* in these days, but it was of a different kind than the kids sniff now. It was the glue used for bicycles, and it was sold in small tubes. They cost 1 peso each, but a peso of that time of course. I sometimes bought glue for a hundred pesos, imagine one hundred little tubes... I hallucinated pretty nice on them... Later it became Resistol, the type called 5000. I also hallucinated on mushrooms, but only with the hallucinogenic ones. You can have hallucinations with both mushrooms and *cemento*, but the difference is that with mushrooms you can only trip twice a year. Mushrooms are the best. I tripped on them and I have really been far away. I saw the Devil, Lady Death, the angels, the seraphims and the archangels. I played with the Devil. In that time I didn’t know whom they were. Only much later, when I started to read the Bible, I discovered that, *caray*, I had seen them all before!’

‘I began to walk away from home and to use *cemento* when I was 8 years old. I was a *niño de la calle*, a child of the street, and I will explain you why. I did not have a father and a mother, or at least I have never known them. I had a sister who was a prostitute and an older brother who was a soldier. All the money my sister gained was for her *galán*, her beau, and my brother wasn’t at home. So practically I had to earn the money for myself and my younger sister. Someone bewitched my sister and all the others have died too. Of the family only me and one brother have remained. So what happened was that I had no one who corrected me, *que me llamaba la atención*, who rebuked me when I did something wrong.’

‘I took to the street and remained there the whole day. Since I didn’t like school, I played truancy. I would rather go swimming or playing *frontón* [a Mexican ball game]. I also worked as *periodiquero*, newspaper boy.’ Don Nestor smiled. ‘That was a fine time, going out to the streets and yelling “Excelsior!” or “Universal!” I’ve also been working as a shoeshine boy, I sung in the bus and I sold lollipops and chewing gum. It went like this: I was in the street and the bigger guys came to me and said “Come on, let’s work, let’s sing!” That’s how I learned the ropes.’

‘After that I began to steal. *Yo robaba bien*, I stole well. I was a *carterista*, a pick-pocket [from *cartera*, wallet]. Nowadays people call them *conejos*, rabbits, also because there are so many of them now, especially in the Metro. Now they even assault in the metro; with 5 or 6 of them they raid an entire carriage. I never liked that. A good *carterista* acts in such a way that the people don’t notice. He wears a tie and has a chic set of clothes, what we call *bien acá*. Take a look at me, I am quite grubby now, but in former times I wasn’t like that. I was dressed in a suit and I put on my lotions. Then I approached the people, especially foreigners, *gringos*, a lot of *gringos*, and without their noticing it, *los cirujeaba*, I practised surgery on them.’

‘The last time I stole was around 17 years ago. I stole on the highway from Cuernavaca to Toluca. I assaulted the coaches, not the passengers but the *cobrador*. He collects the tickets and he always carries a lot of money on his body, especially on Sundays. Imagine, sometimes they carry all the money of the last three days, and on Sundays there are always many travellers. The *cobrador* always puts his money in various pockets, so you need to search him over his whole body. Think of it! With that money I could easily live for one, two, and sometimes even for three months ... And I was

lucky, I never went to the Reformatory. Only once I stayed in prison, in *Lecumberri*, the Black Palace [a well-known prison from former times]. That was in 1973.'

'Thanks to the love of God I gave up the drugs ... Right now, I can't even imagine all what I have done. Sometimes I think about how it has been possible that I did all these vicious things ... Getting out of the vice is not easy, but it is worth the effort. Me and my family, we are not Catholics, we're Christians ... No, no, we are not Jehovah Witnesses! Come on, that's a satanic sect! ... Have you read the Bible? You really should. The Lord does not want us to do Evil and the Devil does. The Devil wants us to be vicious, he wants us to drink and to go out with a lot of women. That's because the Devil wants to destruct humanity. The Devil has power, a lot of power, but his power is limited by God. What happens is that many people say "No, I'm fine with my grass, my *mona*, and my girls". One does the things one does because of one's own volition.'

'Tell me, what do I need to go to Holland, to work there? ... I don't have a passport, neither can I get one. My papers have been lost a long time ago, I don't even have a birth certificate. Therefore, when I go to the United States I always go illegally or *de mojado*, in the wet way. I learned to cross the border by doing it many times: always *de mojado*, then being caught by the Migra [= migration police] and sent back to Mexico, from where I returned to Tijuana to go *de mojado* again. I have done that circle many times, and that is logical. In Tijuana there are so many people waiting the whole day to pass the bridge without knowing how. They hope they'll get at the other side but if they don't know somebody ...'

'You must do it with people you know. You need a *pollero*, a guide. The last time it went well. I was going to meet the *pollero*, and so we did, right there on the bridge. He brought me to a department where a *gringo* visited us. A very tall blond man who must have been an important person because he spoke five languages. I'm sure he had been paid a good amount of money, because at the other side there is corruption too. We had to sit a long time on the floor of his car without making a single movement ... The *pollero*, or *coyote* as they call him, charged me 1.500 USD. That was for two persons and I had to pay for both. He brought me to New York, all the way from Los Angeles in greyhound [bus]. The police had caught an aeroplane full of Latinos, I think they were from Colombia, and our *coyote* said it was better to go in coach while the police was inspecting the airport. I then worked in various cities, but I always had to go back to New York to pay my *coyote*. It was a lot of money, and I paid him little by little. No way not to pay him, since he was from here. He had relatives all over Mexico, in this neighbourhood too ...'

'Now you see the lads here *moneando*, sniffing from their rags soaked with solvent. But at the other side it is more awful. There are many mad people in the United States. If the drug addicts there become crazy, nobody, not even the doctors, can help them. They simply seem to explode.'

Don Nestor's story seems to support the idea that 'strolling constitutes only a phase in the lives of [street] children' (Schärf et al. 1986: 282, Ennew 1994a: 421). Having opted for a religious lifestyle, there can be no doubt that this man condemned his earlier wrongdoing. Nonetheless, Don Nestor still spoke with fascination about his former experiences with drugs and delinquency. He did not find it necessary to excuse himself

by attributing his former lifestyle to external causes. Of course, Don Nestor mentioned the neglect he suffered from, but he saw this more as the condition for than as the cause of street childhood. Roaming the streets, selling news papers, sniffing *cemento*, stealing well, and frisking ticket collectors were rather self-evident matters to Don Nestor, which belonged to a certain, rather prolonged phase in his life.

Having closed street life and with the responsibility of maintaining a family, Don Nestor chose to go to work illegally 'at the other side'. The later adventures indicated how this former street boy applied the practical knowledge gained before. Struggling against the North-American *migra* Don Nestor used the only resource he had in abundance: time. Again he strolled across the Mexican Republic. Not deterred by the continuous cycle of detention and release, he had faith that once, through the workings of corruption and the right contacts, the golden opportunity would occur.

Just like the Mariachi El Pelón, Don Nestor noticed a shift in the market of inhalants: from bicycle glue to Resistol 5000 to solvents. An even more substantial shift over the years concerned Don Nestor's perceived increase and hardening of delinquency. There are, however, always worse places; and Don Nestor is not alone in his conviction that in the United States the people of the street are worse off than in Mexico.

Incidentally, Don Nestor mentioned a possible reason why street youths may prefer the violence of stick-ups in the street above the tranquillity and rewards of 'stealing well': they simply look too dirty and frightful to approach *gringos* and other people without being noticed. Here we touch upon the main distortion of representing street life through the eyes of a former participant in street culture. Don Nestor had had both the opportunity and the capacity to leave the street behind. By selecting informants such as the sweet-scented entrepreneur Don Nestor, one picks out the success stories. But not all ex-street children are as lucky as he.

Adolfo: 'I'm still alive, thanks to God.'

The following story is what Adolfo, a Tacuba man, wanted to tell me about his life. I have met this man only once. He was playing *frontón*, the Mexican ball game, with the *banda* of Tacuba. Adolfo preferred to play with Madman, a young male adult, but he also accepted to play against some of the older adolescents, on the condition that they would throw away their plastic bags with glue. Four smaller kids watched the game while they kept sniffing from their bags or glue tins. They actually showed more interest in each other's glue than in the game from which they had been excluded. One took some glue out of another's tin and the four spectators were soon fighting and throwing glue tins and other drug paraphernalia at each other. They only stopped when Adolfo chased them away and kicked the tins of glue out of the park. After the game Adolfo joined his girlfriend Alma, who had been watching too. He told me he had heard from the boys that I was an anthropologist and insisted in 'being interviewed'.

'I am 29 years old, and I have always been in Tacuba. I came here when I was 7, and that was because my father hit me. I came to Tacuba because I knew the place. I used to come here with my mother and my sister. My mother was one of the street vendors, she had her own market stall here. So I know Tacuba very well. I have always been here, I

may say I've grown up here. For one year I have been in a shelter, the IMSS [the Mexican Institute for Social Security]. That place would later be called Heroés de Celaya [the shelter nearby Metro Tacuba]; nowadays it has already been closed down.'

'Since I escaped from home, *por aquí anduve*, I have been strolling around here. I got to know the taco sellers who fed me. That's one of the differences between the former days and the present time: the people did feed me. They didn't give me any money because [they knew that] I would spend it on the vice. In the early seventies, the vice, *cemento* [= Resistol 5000], already existed. I would buy a little yoghurt bottle to put my vice in. In these days it was strictly forbidden to sell *cemento* to children, so what I did was sending a bigger guy to buy it for me. That was the reason why the taco vendors only gave tacos to me. In that *taquería* overthere, they used to give me *tacos*. People also gave me when I asked for it. The worst that could happen was that they said they didn't have money. People are more offensive today. Now they beat you up if you ask for money. People are villainous nowadays.'

'Formerly, there were more lads in the *banda* and there were more youngsters. But concerning the rest, Tacuba never changes. It is always the same. The lads always hung out with their dogs, just like now ... I really don't know what has happened to the boys of the past. I suppose they have died, or they have gone to an institution. Maybe they have formed their own home.'

'Another reason why I came here was because the metro already existed; the blue line is one of the oldest. There were still no guards so I could travel for free to Tasqueña and back. I also went to the Zócalo and there I knew the vice. At the Zócalo there is a lot of commerce where they produce leather jackets. So when I was 8, I turned to the vice. I used *cemento* for eight years, but after that I stopped and that's the reason I'm still alive, thanks to God.'

'I have never had a job, nor a home. That is, I might have a job if you can give me one or if you know something ... I've always been hanging out and slept wherever the night caught me. But I do have Alma, my wife. She is 18 years old. We have, thanks to God, a baby who is still only 5 months old. I hope I will not hit her the way my father hit me. That's the reason why the lads are here. All the lads who are here at Tacuba have been hit by their fathers.' One of the Tacuba boys, Grimace, had approached us and followed our conversation. He listened carefully and nodded affirmatively with his head. 'Now it has been sufficient,' continued Adolfo, 'I don't want to be interviewed any more.'

Whereas the Mariachi and Don Nestor mentioned the appearance of petrochemical inhalants and the increase of street delinquency as changes over time, Adolfo added the more hostile perceptions of and reactions towards street children and other beggars. His story also throws light upon street culture as existing between and within street youths. Adolfo tells about Tacuba as the place that has always been there, and which has always attracted street children and stray dogs. He joined Tacuba's street culture of sniffing, helped to shape it, for instance by using small yoghurt bottles as sniffing equipment, and left it again after eight years.

Both Don Nestor and Adolfo experienced abuse and neglect in their childhood, both opted for street life and both became ex-street children. Unlike Don Nestor, however,

Adolfo is not (yet) an 'ex-ex-street child' (Ennew 1994b: 136). Whereas Don Nestor was able to distance himself from his own problems and not confuse them with the problems of his offspring, Adolfo is not sure whether he will succeed in doing the same. But the mere fact that Adolfo is worried about the possible reproduction of child abuse is in itself promising. Such reflections were only rarely present among the young adults who got their babies and continued to combine drug use with the care for their children.

Adolfo's story suggests that one should be careful not to leap to such generalizing conclusions as 'the [street] children eventually rejoin mainstream society' (Ennew 1994a: 421; see also 1994b: 20) or 'for the most they will join the traditional work force' (Aptekar 1988: 113). Almost 15 years before, Adolfo practically left street life, in the sense that he stopped sniffing and living in the *banda*. Yet, in all these years he had not been able to find a stable living place and a fixed job. This is not peculiar to ex-street children. But neither do the experiences of a former street life transform a loser into a winner.

Conclusions and discussion

Self-destructive agency as the boundary and essence of street children

The people whose stories I narrated in this article all made distinctions corresponding to that of *populacho* and *callejeros*, or the straight and the street poor. Their consciousness of difference makes that popular as well as street culture express a relational idea, in which the one is opposed to the other. All these protagonists saw drugs, delinquency and homelessness as central to the lifestyles of the street and not of the straight poor. Certainly, as David González mentioned, there are drugs and delinquency outside street culture as well (for instance among the police forces). It is the sort of drug and the kind of deviance that mark the boundaries of street culture: *activo* rather than alcohol, and petty delinquency rather than corruption. Such differences may be small, of degree more than kind. But they are crucial in the eyes of the people involved.

Some of the differences are reinforced through the overall power division within society. One particular aspect in which the straight and the street poor simultaneously coincide and diverge is their double vulnerability towards the institutes of intervention. Both categories are the target of interventions they perceive as undesirable, while the street as well as the straight poor often depend on the interventions they desire. Sometimes the same institutes target both street and straight poor. Even then intervention tends to display differential mechanisms. The stories of David González, Doña Blanca and the Rat illustrate how the institutes shape, restrain and facilitate the lives of street and straight children in different ways.

The differences and distinctions between *populacho* and *callejeros*, the straight and the street poor, raise questions about the relations between them. One possibility is that those in street culture are excluded by those in popular culture. David's mother for example made quite clear that she had nothing to do with street girls as Megaira and Soledad. But often the boundaries are more ambivalent. When David's mother needed

them, she knew where to find the children of the street. She and her family also depended for a while on the intervention for these very same street children. There were also *populacho* who depended on street children and their income-generating activities in a more direct way, such as the janitors of the Residence.

David González was aware of the distinctions between his straight family and the street folks, yet he and his mother were ready to manipulate the boundaries if that was to their advantage. With his mimetic play David still went a step further, making it even more difficult to draw the line sharply. One must keep in mind, however, that the family's boundary management resulted from and affirmed their awareness of difference. Without difference, and the consciousness of it, manipulation and mimesis would be both impossible and senseless. But when Pamela set foot on the slippery path, David and his family experienced the tragedy implied by the discontinuity of boundaries. With a lost daughter there was no boundary any more to manage.

It are not only child savers, anthropologists and coffee vendors who talk and complain about the children of the street. Their mothers and other relatives do so as well, and probably spend more words on them. Mothers who have lost children to the street tend to express strong and ambivalent emotions. They identify and disidentify with their offspring, and they thus further question and affirm the boundaries between *populacho* and *callejeros*. These stories of mother love underscore that street children originate from popular culture. Family ties between the straight and the street poor may remain, as was the case with the Rat and his family. A select number of street people, like Don Nestor and Adolfo, manage to become straight again. Depending on the context the boundaries between popular and street culture may thus become more or less relevant, while some individuals switch from one to the other. This permeability and flexibility further support the idea of non-linear boundaries.

The life stories indicate as well the diversity within aggregates as popular and street culture. Because of the permeability, flexibility and discontinuity of the boundaries, one should be careful in attributing either culture with a reified essence (and for instance see street culture as criminogenic pathogen). Following Fabian (1998: 32), I would say that popular as well as street culture are plural in themselves. This thinking about the straight and the street poor helps to formulate a healthy paradox: if popular and street culture are plural in themselves, it becomes conceivable that aspects or elements of one culture may overlap with the other. Some sort of *vicio*, the hallmark of Mexico City's youthful street culture, may thus also be found in certain sectors of its popular culture. As some young street people like to say, however, 'there are none who sniff as much as the lads.'

The storytellers in this article tend to agree that street children count with one structural feature that is difficult to find elsewhere with similar intensity. This is the paradox of self-destructive agency, with all its implications of human suffering. Popular culture differs in this regard from street culture – for popular culture can at least pass as an instance of straight culture. The symbols, the artifacts and the people within popular culture can relatively easily be clothed with an aureole of dignity. Street culture, in contrast, can only be romanticized through fantasies, lies and other stories that deny the human degradation, pain and suffering.

Questioning the prevailing constructionist paradigm

This brings me to the question how the conclusions formulated above relate to the more influential literature on street children. For the denial of human degradation and self-destruction is exactly what the renowned scholars of street children have done. Their romanticization of street children seems to have been possible through the lack of field work, which enabled these authors to continue hearing very little about street children from the popular classes, and often also from the children themselves. It is telling in this regard that quite some scholars content themselves with analysing printed discourse about street children (such as newspaper articles or policy reports). To say the least, theirs' is not street ethnography.⁵

The romanticization of street children acquired intellectual credibility in the volumes edited by James & Prout (1990a) and Connelly & Ennew (1996a). The constructionist paradigm proclaimed in these volumes was originally intended as a set of 'dissenting voices' and a 'challenge of orthodoxy'. By now, however, it has become the dominant approach in the sociological study of childhood. In the constructionist train of thought, childhood tends to be reified. It is thought of as a model, a construct, an invention, or an export article, and not primarily as what children live through or what happens to them. As a result, the study of 'images' replaced that of street children and this legitimized the intellectual retreat from the fray.

It is worth to contrast briefly the constructionist paradigm with the life stories presented in this article. I identify three flaws, each of them underpinned by assumptions which do not withstand scrutiny. A first assumption, which has led to simplifying representations of an utterly complex reality, is that the objective differences and boundaries between the straight and the street poor are not relevant. Second, the consciousness of difference in the subjects studied tends to be disregarded as well. This flaw is typically justified through an assumption of either false consciousness or hegemony. There is, finally, an implicit assumption of difference between the observing self and the observed other. In the constructionist paradigm intellectuals are seen as 'engag[ing] in and respond[ing] to the process of reconstructing childhood' (James et al. 1990: 9), but the straight poor are typically seen as the passive recipients of ideas that come from above.

In this article I have argued that the differences between the street and the straight poor are relevant in the eyes of the people involved, and that the consciousness of difference between popular and street culture gives rise to very complex processes of boundary formation and management. Such insights have hardly been formulated in the studies of street children. Some difference has been recognized by the widely-used dichotomy of children 'of' versus 'on' the street. Authors within the constructionist paradigm have rightly noted that these policy categories served as conceptual containers with little reality congruence. Instead of creating the conceptual tools to delineate diversity, complexity and other refinements, the constructionists have chosen to minimize and even discursively erase the differences between the straight and the street poor. Connelly & Ennew thus formulated the idea of 'children out of place' (Connelly et al. 1996b) – literally reducing the widely divergent lifestyles of working and street

children to their spatial dimension. Recalling Douglas' definition of dirt as matter out of place, Schepers-Hughes & Hoffman even went as far as stating that, 'Street children are simply poor children in the wrong place' (Schepers-Hughes *et al.* 1998: 358).

The second flaw of the prevailing constructionist paradigm in the study of street children is that the meanings subjects attach to the differences between straight and street life are typically absent or downplayed. Constructionist authors are eager to assume the existence of a 'dominant' model of childhood that from above would generate a monolithic 'popular opinion' on street and working children (e.g. Aptekar *et al.* 1997: 478). A telling fact is that the images of street children are condemned but seldom localized in a context. The representations of street children are rather re-represented as if they freely float around through vague entities; they are never thought by particular persons confronting particular street children.⁶ These reified representations of street children are subsequently reduced to a popular consciousness that is as false as it is uniform. In most cases the assumption of false consciousness remains implicit, but it can be deduced from key words such as 'myths', 'stereotypes' and 'wrong images' (e.g. Ennew 1994a: 409; Ennew 1994b: 13,123,175).

Paulo Freire and Benno Glauser have been more explicit. They resorted to what Scott (1990: 72) would call respectively a 'thick' and a 'thin' theory of hegemony. Freire (1988: 15) holds that working children may behave towards street children 'exactly like certain segments of the bourgeoisie', even though there are 'no substantial differences' between working and street children. It is in other words through their false consciousness that working children 'reproduce bourgeois ideology'. Glauser, the man who reported the gap in knowledge about the popular representations of street children, is more cautious. He only subscribes to a thesis of hegemony, in which the powerful and the dominant define how the 'people' see the social reality.⁷ Such theories, either thick or thin, offer no room to view the popular representations of street children as a contradictory space. For the straight poor whose life stories have been narrated here identified as well as disidentified with street children, sometimes even simultaneously.

The third assumption of the constructionist paradigm underpins positions of intellectual and cultural relativism (which were often the result of a praiseworthy struggle against universalist and reductionist perceptions of childhood). Concerning the position of intellectual relativism, it is clarifying to cite Cohen's felicitous phrase about 'the axiomatic assumption of difference between the anthropological self and the anthropologised other' (Cohen 1994: 5). Glauser's aforementioned article provides a clear illustration here too. This author thinks that 'those with social power ... define the reality of others by shaping and constraining the ways in which it is possible to talk and think [about street children]' (Glauser 1990: 144). Yet, through intellectual operations such as 'deconstruction' it remains possible to obtain 'better knowledge' and possibly also 'a liberation from the influence and reach of unwanted power' (*ibid.*). Glauser's axiomatic assumption, then, is that 'deconstructing a construct' is the privilege of intellectuals and not of the 'people'.

Concerning the position of cultural relativism, some of the constructionist thinkers have gone as far as denying the cultural others those ideas of childhood which they

would very probably value highly for their own offspring. For example, Aptekar (1988: 113; 1997: 488) described the lives of the Colombian junk collector Sergio and his son. This man drives his horse through the well-to-do neighbourhoods of Cali offering to take 'junk' from the people. As a ragpicker, the former street child Sergio sees himself, according to Aptekar, 'as getting by, if not getting rich'. His son sits next to him on the wagon, 'learning to read and to do sums'. Aptekar asks himself: 'How well would the average school attending youth perform while travelling with junk collectors? ... Should all children in all cultures be expected to have ... an ideal western childhood?'

Don Nestor and Adolfo had a clear view on such questions. They envisaged a childhood for their children that would be better than their own. In the eyes of Don Nestor, a good childhood took place at school. He did not allow his four children to opt for the streets, and took care 'to correct them'. Whereas Don Nestor spoke about the necessity of constraining children, Adolfo added nurture as a condition of what he saw as a good childhood. He and the other Tacuba boys had lacked parental love, and that had turned their childhood into an unhappy time. Grimace affirmed it. In sum, these (former) street children saw constraint and nurture as conditions for a childhood better than their own.

The families who had lost children to the street and other slippery paths coincided. Pamela's mother tried to separate her daughter from the street girls, and her son David González lost weight for worrying about his sister. Desperate Don Carmelo battered his daughter when she ran away, but he also thought that street children understand if one speaks well to them. Doña Blanca sent her sniffing daughter to the same institute from which she had to save her later. The Rat's family complained that there was never a strong hand in their household, which was in their eyes the reason why their boy could disregard school and opt for the streets, but they also worried about where the Rat would sleep in this cold, and in their crowded apartment they took even care of his and his girlfriend's offspring.

Underpinned by thick or thinner versions of hegemony, the constructionist scholars have viewed such common sense as exposed by the protagonists of this article as endemically flawed, prejudiced and otherwise erroneous – and not as valid knowledge (cf. Bauman 1997: 86). For example, in her article on the globalization of childhood Boyden characterizes nurturing and constraining as 'the contemporary, essentially sentimental' approach to childhood (Boyden 1990: 186). She sees the images of child victims and young deviants as 'highly selective, stereotyped perceptions of childhood'. Through human rights legislation and social policy, these images would have been 'exported', as if they were bicycles, 'from the industrial world to the South' (ibid.: 191). This sort of constructionism assumes that the poor are the passive recipients of the ideas of social workers and activists. The manipulations and mimesis of the González family, the compassion of Doña Blanca and Don Carmelo, the despair and resignation of the Rat's family, the success stories of Don Nestor and the preoccupations of Adolfo suggest otherwise.

Notes

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- 1 A similar ambivalence in popular perception has been documented for gypsies, that other group of stigmatized and often also poor and itinerant people (see for example Van de Port 1998).
- 2 Pedro, the young protagonist of *Los Olvidados*, wants to be loved by his mother Marta. The latter does not really maltreat the boy. She rather has little time for him, because she needs to work and as a single woman she needs to feed her family. Aggravated by the doings of Jaibo, Pedro's goblin and his mother's lover, the neglect culminates in Pedro threatening his mother with a chair. Marta brings her son to the Juvenile Court where she is reproached by the judge for not giving her son the affection he needs. The mother answers that she spends her days washing other people's floors and that she never even knew Pedro's father. During their last encounter in the detention cell, Marta and Pedro exchange words of reproach and anger. At the end of the film, Pedro gets killed by Jaibo. His mother shuffles over the screen desperately in search of her lost son.
- 3 There are three ways to meet street children's parents (or meaningful others). First, it periodically occurred that family members came to the *banda* in order to bring their child back home. This happened only occasionally, because parents did not always know where their child strolled. Street kids also helped each other to hide from their parents. The opposite could take place as well: one or two mothers successfully managed to convince their child to leave the *banda*, largely because older street boys forced the child to obey his mother ('that boy has a mother and doesn't even listen to her. That's wrong!') In the second place, a few youngsters brought me to their homes. Quite a number of children actually asked me or my colleague to guide them to their home, but the good intentions were seldom realized. The last way in which my colleague and I met street children's parents was through the institutions. (To our surprise, it turned out that the youth prison invested much more resources in contacting parents than most NGOs. At least in a number of cases, the social workers of the Reformatory really went to see the family homes of the inmates, encouraging the parents to visit their sons. Despite all the rhetoric of reintegration, such practical policies were rare for NGOs.)
- 4 The eloquent expression of 'loosing children to the street' is borrowed from other contexts. In Colombia, according to Aptekar (1988: 155), the idiom emerged with *La Violencia*, the violent episode after 1948. Scheper-Hughes documented similar sayings among the poor of Northeast Brazil (1992: 469; 1998: 359). I must point out, however, that I have never heard the expression in Mexico. 'Loosing children to the street' evokes a sense of victimhood, but the families I have spoken with rather emphasized their runaways' agency. David González for example said that his sister set foot on the slippery path of *el mal camino*, while the Rat's family complained about their son's *gusto* or taste for the street.

- 5 To avoid misunderstanding: I only direct my critique at those who write within the limits of the constructionist paradigm. There are ethnographies of street children which do not deny the stark reality of street children's self-destructive agency (for example Schärf et al. 1986; Hecht 1998). Hecht does not review the literature systematically, but he does raise some interesting points of critique of the romanticism and cultural constructionism proclaimed by authors such as Aptekar (1988) and Ennew (1994a).
- 6 Take a phrase as: 'Street children are *often referred to as* "vagrant", a term implying a random, purposeless wandering, attributed to individual failure' (Felsman 1989: 67, italics mine). Or: 'For *many people* the street child is the embodiment of the untamed feral child; an outcast whose very existence threatens social chaos and decline' (Boyden 1990: 191, italics mine). In both cases it is unclear who stereotypes street children and why. In a critique on a leaflet of Agnelli (1986), Ennew asserts that Agnelli's stereotypical idea of street children is 'in general currency among the public, the media and even many service-providing agencies' (1994a : 410). But Susana Agnelli does not form part of any of these social entities. She is a heavyweight Italian bureaucrat of the United Nations and other international bodies. Such a professional of rhetoric is not someone who has to endure daily confrontations with street children of flesh and blood.
- 7 Glauser's theoretical framework makes the quote with which I opened this article all the more remarkable. What is the relevance of hearing about street children from the popular classes, if these only 'apply those [concepts] currently hegemonic in their society' (Glauser 1990: 144)?

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