

THE SHAPE OF A WORLD
WITH MANY CENTERS:
THE WORLD VIEW OF SOME
PUERTO RICAN ADOLESCENTS,
1969-1970

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It is commonplace that home lies at the center of our world. It is equally commonplace to identify this home with a *homeplace*, more or less fixed, and more or less likely also to be a place of births and of celebrations; to be that place—in our collective fantasies—to which to return on the holidays (and perhaps to die); if not that place where we abide, individual drops in that primal fountain of flesh that is the nurtured family renewing itself in successive bodies through the countless generations, *there*, spurting from community, rooted, in place.

Of course this is not the way it is, at least for many. There is no rest for those perpetually displaced by war, there is no rest for agricultural labor snared in the circuit of the seasons. Military brats and children of IBM executives equally mature in a succession of environments, aliens in all. Young professors in search of tenure drift from university town to university town. The fixed space brimming with accumulated meaning spreading out from a fixed center is forsaken, it is lost, it is destroyed—it *did not hold*. It recedes into a dream achieved by none (but those in the Norman Rockwell covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* (and even it is gone)) replaced in each of our lives by successive bivouacs on an unending line of march, a world of many centers, each but for a little while.

But not all polynucleic worlds are identical. Some have an air about them of serial monogamy, till death do us part (*for now*). Others are more frankly polygamous. And these are but two points in a space of many options. In what follows I try to describe the world view of a handful of Puerto Rican adolescent males as it may have existed a couple of decades ago when what Jim Blaut (Blaut, 1987, 167) has recently termed the "air bridge" between the island and the mainland was somewhat less heavily trafficked than it is today, when, in 1969-1970, Ingrid Hansen and I spent the year living across from a housing project inhabited by some 350 kids and their adult relatives in the highlands of central Puerto Rico, in Barranquitas, to be precise, a town of seven or eight thousand in a *municipio* of the same name then inhabited by some 23,000 others, many of whom were farmers.

We were there to see if we liked the place as much over a year as we had during the previous Januaries and Julies we'd spent there; and, by way of structuring our ample time—I was entirely unemployed—we'd decided to attempt a geography of children, of *caserio* children, which is what they called the housing project we lived across from. It was an in-

credible opportunity, all those kids, and us just across the street; and they liked us, and we liked them—they were one of the things we'd liked about Puerto Rico in the first place—and *studying* them was a very non-threatening way to spend a lot of time with them.

We wanted to know everything about them: when they got up and when they went to bed; what they ate and how they ate it; where they went and what they did; how they made money and when they fought; how they got their toys and what they did with them. We wanted to write a full dress regional geography of *caserio* children; we wanted to write a transportation geography about how they got where they went; and a resource geography about the ways they exploited their environment; and a children's land use study; and an exploration and settlement geography of how they went about learning the paths up into the hills and where the best fishing places were and how to get to them; and a political and military geography about where they could and couldn't go and who fought whom over what. But among these, way up there in the beginning, just after "physical description of their universe" we noted that we wanted to define their conceptual universe as well, particularly its outer bounds (how big was it?), but also its interior richness.

So, in the first place, this is part of a much larger study, portions of which I have published during the past few years (Wood, 1982; 1985a; 1985b); but, in the second place, it is only a *small portion* of this small portion, that concerned with *caserio* children's images of their world. I might add just two other things here: first, I am not all that happy with the way we went about trying to learn about this conceptual universe. By this I don't mean to say that our methods were sloppy, but rather that "world view" as Redfield (1952) understood it—even this simplest "Where am I?" part is probably appropriately better grasped by poets and songwriters than social scientists. And second, that in saying the things I will be saying about Puerto Ricans, I do not mean to be saying them as though I could not have said them about others as well. I could have. I have (Wood, 1973). I will. As I hope I have made clear already, this is about Puerto Ricans only because, having fallen in love with them, I found myself in their midst with nothing to do for a year but this...

"Your name?"

"Angel Manuel Ortiz."

"Age?"

"Sixteen."

"School?"

"You know I don't go the school!" But of course I'd known his name and age as well... "Yeah, and I know you're a

I am indebted to Gary Gossen, 1974, for the protocol and its analysis. Compare his results, page 119, for the Tzotzil community of Chamula with these for Barranquitas.



Figure 1. The *Caserio* in Barranquitas in 1969.

male, too..."

"How long have you lived in the *caserio*?"

"Six years."

"And what is the furthest place you've ever visited in the world?"

"I don't know, maybe Boston. Is Worcester farther? Or is Falmouth?"

At this point I asked him to look at a large-scale photo-mosaic of the town I had spread out on a table. As I read each of 45 names he was asked to locate it on the photo. Had he had trouble with the photo, I would have asked him just to describe how to get there. I was looking for place-recognition, not name-recognition or airphoto reading abili-

ty. Most of the names had been generated independently by a bunch of (mostly) young adults, but I'd added a couple of names prominent on maps or in local government publications, and the whole thing had been field-tested by asking directions of strangers in town. Popolo, which is what we usually called Angel Manuel Ortiz, had no trouble pointing out all 45 places on the airphoto. In fact, he had fun and was patently proud of his local knowledge.

I then gave him a deck of 60 cards which had been put together in an analogous fashion, but the names on these cards stretched from the *caserio* to China. There were a cluster of names from right around the *caserio*, some from the rest of the island, a handful of Caribbean places, a pile of well-known mainland cities, and a cadenza of places like Spain,

Africa, China and Japan. These Popolo was to arrange in sequence, nearest first, farthest last. This was not so pleasant. He didn't recognize nine of the names at all, including Luquillo Beach, the nearby town of Morovis, and the peak and national park of El Yunque. Among those that he did recognize were many that were little more than names. Indicatively, his final nine cards ran, nearest first: Boston, Chicago, Mexico, Spain, China, Japan, Africa, California, and finally Cuba, most distant of all.

I then asked him to draw me maps of his world and the whole universe. These he genially refused to attempt, no matter the inducement. I, however, refused to accept his reason—that he couldn't draw—, since when he had nothing else to do he could often be found doing just that in my study, not to any end perhaps, and perhaps not well, but definitely drawing. But in this, as in most else, Popolo was, for his age and sex, quite typical. Although a few of the youngest kids from ages 6 through 18 that participated in the protocol *did* draw us maps of the whole world, none of any age ventured a map of the town or any part of it.

For half of my kids, that was it. But for those who had lived elsewhere, I proceeded to repeat the protocol, though in abbreviated form, for the other place or places in which they had lived. Most of these had lived on the mainland, and in very few parts of it—eastern Massachusetts, southern Connecticut, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia—for an average of four years. I say eastern Massachusetts or southern Connecticut advisedly, for in most cases these kids moved around form relative to relative, even as they did in Barranquitas. Popolo, for example, lived with Jim Blaut as a matter of fact for three days and with me and Ingrid for three weeks in Worcester, Massachusetts; with distant family in New Haven for a week; and with closer family in Falmouth for slightly better than a year; before returning to Barranquitas. Subsequently—and subsequent to his participation in our study—he returned to Falmouth for another year, before returning to Barranquitas again where, not at all typically, he continues to live today. I also say “he” advisedly, for he did not travel *with* his family but *among* it, leaving on his first journey to the mainland in company with a 14 year old friend bound on a similar peregrination among *his* family, his first journey, I might add, to the mainland, but not to the airport in San Juan, among the best known places to *caserio* residents outside the environs of the *caserio* itself, for one was always going to the airport to pick someone up or drop someone off, or just for the ride, if only for the *lechon* in route.

While I do not wish to embroil myself in unnecessary complications, it is imperative to observe that when I say *among* his family I do not mean to imply that the family was *broken* in the sense usually understood by middleclass Americans. Rather, what I saw at the time at any rate, were very intact but *spatially extended families*: a husband, wife and kids in the *caserio*; the husband's mother living with his brother in Philadelphia; the husband's father still living on the farm with yet another brother and his family; the wife's parents equally dispersed; to say nothing of uncles, aunts, other sibling and the net of *compadres* and *comadres*, the whole in a kind of incessant flux as son went off to visit mother, grandson moved to live with grandfather,

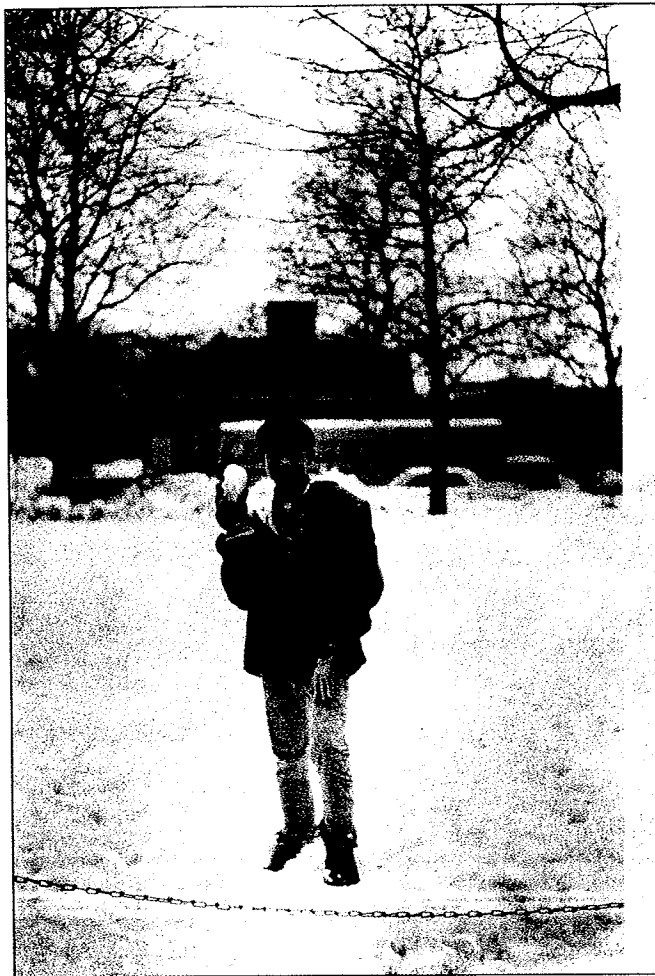


Figure 2. Popolo in Worcester in 1969.

sister (and her children) dropped in on brother (and his wife and kids) and so on, the whole tied together by Eastern and Pan American Airlines and a flood of newsy, gossipy letters.

In his doctoral dissertation, *Family, Community and Place: The Experience of Puerto Rican Emigrants in Worcester, Massachusetts*, Daniel Amaral (1977) used the metaphor of “fluid organism” to describe these patterns of what has been traditionally called emigration, but which is not really anymore emigration in many senses than “across the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go,” where the “horse and sleigh” have become Boeing 747s and the “rivers and woods” become “oceans and islands,” and the length of stay somewhat longer than a day. Which is not to deny the economic marginality that above all else prompts this movement, but to emphasize its force in most of our lives.

But as the *family* is stretched, as it were, like some kind of single-celled organism oozing itself across the socio-economic landscape of a colonial appendage of a great imperialist power, so the world view is stretched, like well-chewed bubble gum, with a densely figured blob here—in eastern Massachusetts—and another there—in Barranquitas—connected by the thinnest strand of *chicle*: a night flight over the Atlantic on an aisle in an aircraft seating



Figure 3. Waiting for a flight to Puerto Rico at Kennedy's Pan American terminal.

eight across. Your father waves goodbye at the terminal in San Juan—you sleep a little—and you are hugging your grandmother at Kennedy. What it's most like is a trip on an elevator—there's *one* world, the doors close, you stand there, the doors open and there's another world: *What image do you have of the space you've passed through? Or even the distance you've travelled?*

This is, of course, well reflected in the ways in which the *caserio* kids responded to my queries. In the first place, local knowledge was very great. Popolo was not alone, for his age group, in locating all 45 local places. Equally assuredly, this sort of test barely scratches the depth and richness of this local knowledge. By way of illustrating this I'd like to quote from my field notes on a series of walks I was taken on by *caserio* kids in response to a request for an introduction to the local landscape. After each walk (or set of walks) I worked with each kid to collect as much of what I'd learned as possible on acetate laid over my large-scale photo-mosaic of the Barranquitas. Here are a few of my notes from this overlay about the walks I was taken on by a kid we all called Monkey (each number marks a different site):

1. Here you collect *chinas mandarin*s, bitter [*chinas* are a range of oranges]. These would be regarded as stolen, since this is Jose Armando's property, Lolin's husband, who works in construction in Bayamon. 2. Here, *chinas*,

also sticks for kites. Since this is university property, these too would be regarded as stolen. 3. *Toronjas* [grapefruit] here. This is the tree in the back of our house. Monkey says there used to be many more. 4. More *toronjas* here. These would be stolen too, since this is also university property. As is the tree behind our house. 5. From the back of Hilda's house, *chinas*, *acerolas*, *pomarrosas Americanas* [rose apple]. This can be very dangerous, because Hilda has been known to shoot. One time she set her dogs on them and they escaped down the path behind the Internado. 6. By Casa Blanca you can get *chinas* and *toronjas*. 7. *Palchas* [?]. 8. You get *palchas* here too. This is not robbing because this belongs to the government. 9. In back of the *caserio* there are raspberries. 10. You can get sweet oranges by Ramon's shop, and *chinas*, and it's not stealing. You just ask Ramon and he'll give you one or two oranges, and he gives Monkey a sack full. 11. *Toronjas* here at Casa Billo, same deal as at Ramon's. 12. *Pomarrosa Americana*, same deal as Ramon's. *Et cetera...*

Monkey really knew these things—most people did—all these subtle distinctions of land ownership and all the consequent statuses of things, of wood, of fruit, of vegetables, of medicinal plants, to be taken, to be stolen, to be left alone. There wasn't a square inch, you came to feel, of ground, of

earth, that these kids didn't know, and I am not talking about walking along the street and reciting the names of the owners or the residents of the houses on it (though how many of us can do that for the blocks we live on or the apartment building we inhabit?), I'm talking about walking across country, through fields and woods, along paths at best, but often just "across country."

In my attempt to understand their images of Brooklyn and Bridgeport I never came across this degree of intimacy—though of course we weren't *there*, couldn't prompt the memories with the landscape—but this is not so much to say that they knew Fall River less well than Hoya Honda, as it is to suggest that the environments offered themselves to these kids in very different ways. None of them in Barranquitas owned a car; few of their parents did. But in Falmouth Popolo showed us around in one. It wasn't his, and he didn't drive it, but his cousin did and this was how they got around. The thing was this: driving around in this car you never got the feeling that Popolo had *left* Barranquitas. Not that he wasn't fully in Falmouth, but that any goodbyes he might have said had been no more than temporary, those of a kid leaving for school in the morning, not home for life. And the thing was...he *was* home, in both places.

The jetting around that made this possible was never translated into a similar kind of knowledge about the world surrounding these homes. Though this is a difficult point, suffice it here to say that the degree of local knowledge revealed for Barranquitas and selected mainland locations was not matched at supra-regional scales or for any places in between. While there can be no doubt about the legitimacy of construing this as "ignorance," it is probably not useless to think about the importance of its role in maintaining the "transparency" of the movement from place to place, a "transparency" needed to keep "the world" intact. Only as long as the cost of flying between the mainland and the island is vanishingly low (in time, dollars and cents, and geographic knowledge), can the distance separating the nuclei of the family remain invisible. When it is, Falmouth and Barranquitas become—in important senses—contiguous, as in the space-time of Popolo's life they actually are.

In this respect the results of the rank-ordering-of-places are quite instructive. In the accompanying figure are the results of this test for eleven males between 15 and 18 years of age (See Figure 4). I show the results for the males, not because the females performed significantly differently (though there were significantly fewer of them at these ages, 27 males compared with 17 females), but because this provides more than enough detail. Had these boys all ordered the deck "correctly," the dots in the figure would have fallen on a smooth, straight line running from the upper left to the lower right.¹ Places found to the *right* of this line have been pushed farther back in the deck than they should have been; places found to the *left* had been pulled closer to the front. The points themselves are *mean* responses, while the dashed lines enclose the envelope of ranges. Generally, it's clear that these guys have some "picture" of the relative distances among the places named, but what is instructive is the relative location of whole *groups* of places.

New York, Brooklyn and the Bronx, for example, are deemed closer to Barranquitas than Mexico and Florida, to say nothing of Cuba. In fact, so are Massachusetts, Boston, Chicago and New Mexico; while California and Cuba are located at the *same* distance from Barranquitas.

Mainland sites, then, fall into a range of places regarded as closer to Puerto Rico than all other places off the island, no matter how close these other places may be (Cuba for instance), or how distant the mainland sites (for instance, Chicago). Furthermore, those about which these kids have some local knowledge (for example, Brooklyn) are brought closer than those about which they don't (Florida, for instance), despite the Spanish language quality of, say "Florida" vis-a-vis that of, say, "Massachusetts." And of course these places *are* closer, certainly in the conventional sense that they can be reached more easily—New York is an elevator trip from Barranquitas, but Cuba can't be reached from there at all—but also in the sense that places like Brooklyn and the Bronx and Boston are part of the Barranquitas culture in a way that Cuba and Spain and Mexico simply are not. It's not as exaggerated an effect as in Venezuela, where I was, in Maracaibo, say, frequently give street directions—turn right here, turn left there—for a location in Miami, but without this fact being specified except insofar as I was expected instantly to recognize the Miami street names (Collins Avenue, for instance); but it does begin to approach this level of *biplaceness*, *here* and *there* sort of all at once, and without much in between but an inflight movie or the dark outside the window. And in any case, this inbetweenness is *taken for granted*, like an elevator ride in a tall building...

It is easy to construe this as ignorance, and indeed it is. There is a whole realm of knowledge entirely absent from the minds of Cano and Marron, Guillo and Popolo. Here's an anecdote—one but of hundreds I could have read from the journal I kept in Barranquitas:

I just returned from the store to buy milk and napkins [a jaunt of some thirty seconds] and I was about to tell Angel what it was I wanted when Popolo accosted me, in English, with, "You go this Saturday to Worcester?" I'd spoken to his mother earlier in the day and she'd garbled the information. "No, Popolo, I'm going to Cleveland on Wednesday." "Where's Cleveland?" "In Ohio," I told Popolo after telling Angel I wanted milk and napkins. "Ohio? where's that? By Africa?" Angel burst into laughter. "Ohio?" asked Angel, "Ohio's over by Taco's house in La Vega, right, Denny?" "Quit fooling around. Ohio's in the South, right?" "No," I said, "it's in the north. Cleveland's a big city in a state called Ohio in the north of the United States." "But what city is it by?" "Popolo, it is a city, a big city, bigger than San Juan and Worcester combined." "But by what city?" "Ay! It's between New York and Chicago." "Ah," said Popolo, with an effect of great light dawning, though I'm sure he has no more idea of where Chicago is than Africa, "Ah, now I understand."

A colleague of mine to whom I recently read this chuckled at Popolo's expense and proceeded to wax tedious about the horrifying extent of geographic ignorance. When I tried to remind him that in giving him directions but the week be-

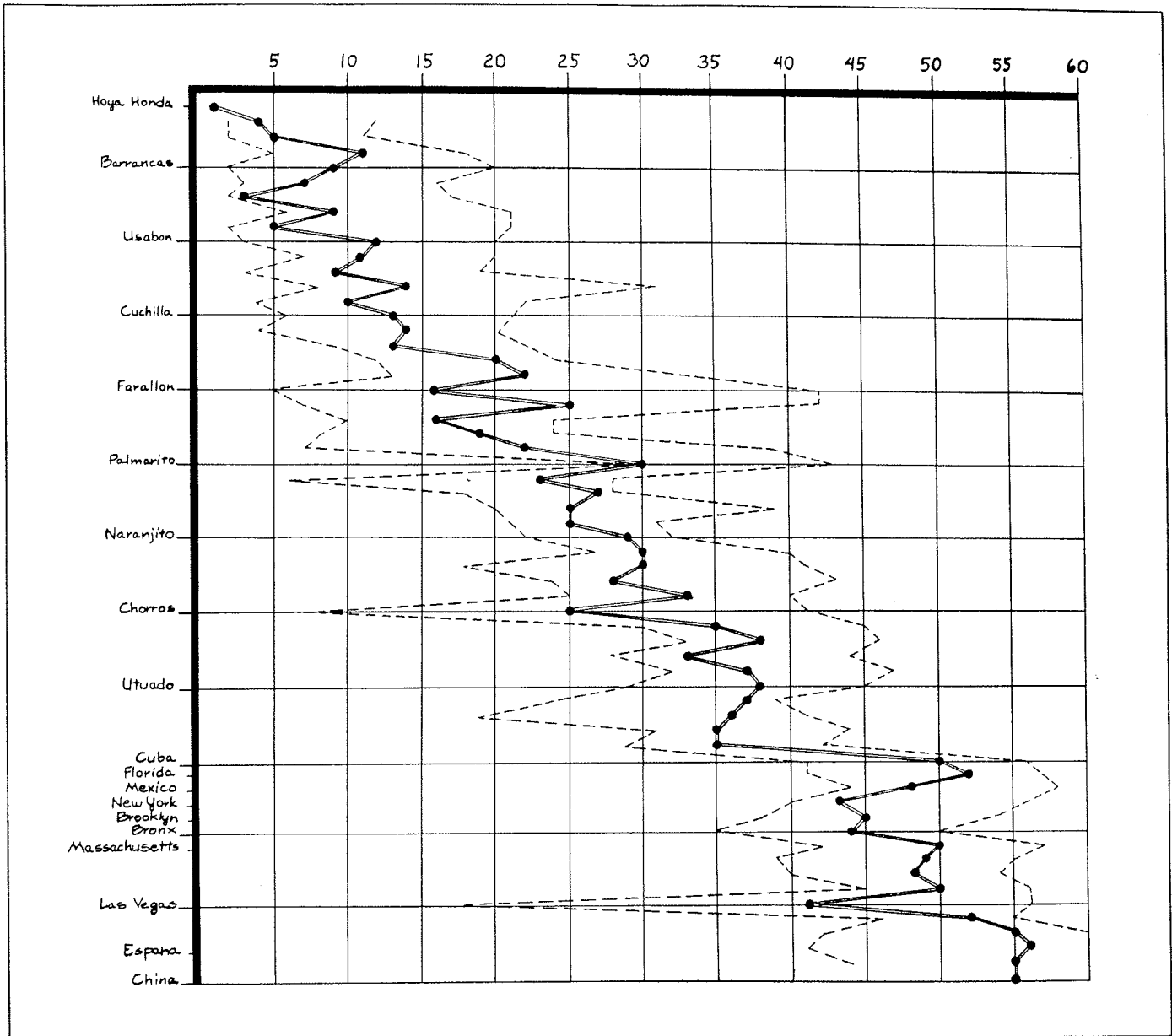


Figure 4. The results of the Barranquitas Q-sort.¹

fore to Clyde Cooper's Barbeque, *he* had revealed *his* ignorance of one of downtown Raleigh's major streets, he pretended not to understand. Or perhaps he didn't understand...

I have no interest in denying that geographic knowledge carries with it the possibility of a genuine empowerment, nor do I mistake Barranquitas for paradise nor ignorance for bliss; but neither do I *know* what knowledge of the world one *ought* to have. If we are to acknowledge that the world has many centers, we are going to have to acknowledge a corresponding *plural* in the shapes it takes. Nor will this be a matter simply of replacing a "traditional" world view—centered in circles of expanding ignorance on the milpa or the finca, on the village or the town, on Chamula or Barranquitas—with a "scientific" world view, of a blue planet, objectified and alien, rushing in terrifying silence around a ga-

seous sun, on which all who dwell have an equal claim to centrality. It will be a matter of letting go of an orthodox world-image held "in common," and of admitting a plurality of worlds, among which yours or mine has no more claim than those of Dey and Victor, Ichin and Tomas. This may be a sphere, or it may be a circle, but if we will let it, it as well may take the shape of well-chewed bubble gum stretched out on the fingers, a blob here, a blob there, the thinnest strands of chicle in between...

NOTE

1. The respondents whose sorting is graphed here were eleven males between fifteen and eighteen years old. A total of sixty places were sorted, only nineteen of which are

named here. The dotted line connects the *mean* position into which the place in question was sorted, the dashed line the *range* of positions. Any deviation from a straight line from the upper left to lower right indicated an error in sorting the cards by distance. Las Vegas, for instance is much closer to the front of the deck than it should be, probably because of its name (La Vega is *barrior* in Barranquitas). The figure repays close study.

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