ONE

PISSED OFF IN L.A.

> Behind a Los Angeles preschool, a three-year-old boy is using his feet to propel a bottomless plastic car around a crowded playground. As he maneuvers he shouts, "move, fucking asshole" and "go away, fucking asshole." Occasionally he turns his car sharply to a child who had not been interacting with him and yells, "I don't know, fucking asshole." Soon a scatological epidemic has entered the classrooms and is raging throughout the school. The parents of the original cursing child are called to the director's office and they appear sincerely surprised, insisting that "he could not have picked up the phrase in our house." Just before addressing a remedial talk to the child, the director thinks to ask the child if he knows what the phrase means. "Yes," he says brightly, "bad driver."

Becoming "pissed off" when driving may be an unfortunately inescapable fact of public life in many places, but in Los Angeles it is a naturally occurring cornucopia for social psychology. Because this form of anger is known in memorably dramatic instances by virtually everyone who drives in L.A., because it is a brief and infinitely recurring experience, and because angry responses to other motorists are typically felt to be so deeply justified that they can be recounted readily to strangers without concern for loss of face, the experience of becoming "pissed off" while driving provides extraordinarily useful data for exploring fundamental issues about the nature and contingencies of anger as it emerges and declines in social interaction. The near universality of the experience means that we can examine its workings across a wide range of ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, age, and personality divides, in a diverse set of driving circumstances, and at very different moments in drivers' quotidian routines and life histories.

My materials come primarily from about 150 detailed reports in

which people, mostly thirty years of age or older, were asked by an equal number of college student interviewers to recount one or more experiences of becoming pissed off while driving around Los Angeles.

When emotions are studied in their naturally occurring contexts, it is useful to kick off the search for relevant ideas by highlighting what initially seem to be absurdities in the phenomena. The search for explanation can then be guided by patterns that, in the light of existing knowledge and upon self-reflection by the people studied, remain as haunting enigmas.

What, for example, is going on when solo drivers gesticulate emphatically and curse vociferously in cars with windows that are completely closed up? It is not as if they believe that their expressions are so powerful that they will pass through the glass, cut through the traffic noise, and penetrate the awareness of an offender who may have provoked their indignation.

> Mike, a thirty-one-year-old paralegal, recalls that he "usually yells at the other drivers from inside his car. At this point he laughed to himself and remarked that he knows that they can't hear him."

While the appearance of this madness may be striking, it is equally intriguing that, despite its absurdity, the practice seems to work to resolve emotional tension.

> Lori, who is originally from Georgia but has lived in L.A. for many years, prefers public transportation but must drive here routinely. When "a big new brown truck . . . decided to cut her off, Lori turns to the truck, 'What do you think you are doing? You know better than that!' She talks to herself and uses hand motions. She looks toward the driver in a sideways glance and then talks facing straight ahead. . . .' She does not want to lose her life over a driving dispute.' " But after she goes through scolding motions "she [can] drop it."

Also intriguing are incidents in which the participants make extraordinary commitments to secure what can only be articulated as the most minor aspects of personal advantage. One example is a battle between two mothers who compete for priority at a McDonald's restaurant while driving station wagons that are packed with kids. The drivers repeatedly tap bumpers and the battle ends only when the police arrive in response to a call from the "losing" mother, who managed to call 911 on her car phone while struggling for advantage in the queue. In another example, a fellow "came to his senses" after racing to "return the favor" to a driver who had cut him off, when he found his car straddling a cement lane divider.

To characterize such scenes as absurd is to take an outsider's perspective, and that would violate a primary rule for developing empirically grounded explanations. But what do we do about the fact that such a characterization is often made by the participants themselves a few moments beyond the heat of the struggle? Thus:

> Mrs. Minh, a Vietnamese immigrant who came to Los Angeles after living in Nebraska, is astonished at the rudeness of drivers in L.A. She is even more astonished, and deeply embarrassed as well, when, after a fellow cuts her off and she shakes her head at his rudeness, he gives her "the finger" and she finds herself saying "shit" in front of her children.

> Jan, who lives with her husband and two children in Orange County and works as an athletic coach at a major university, is late to a practice as she drives her red Corvette convertible with a stick shift along a curvy road in Palos Verdes. At a stop sign, a fellow in front of her who is slow to depart irritates her. As she drives behind him, she finds that he slows up. She waits for an opportunity to pass and as they approach a long curve she downshifts forcefully to second, accelerates, and pulls out into the lane of oncoming traffic, only to find that he speeds up, preventing her from passing until they have driven in parallel around a long curve. A few moments later, she stops her car, "dead in the road," forcing him to stop behind her. She walks briskly to his car, puts her head through his window and yells, " 'You ASSHOLE! You could have killed me!!!' " He responds with " 'Shut up, you stupid CUNT!' " Jan immediately "smacked him across the face." After speeding off, she "could not believe she hit the guy." " 'Thar guy could have chased me and pulled a gun on me and shot me.' "

Even when the theme of personal danger does not apply, there is something enigmatic in the effort of pissed-off drivers to "teach a lesson" to the offending other, for instance by tailgating a tailgater. Self-interest cannot make such responsive actions sensible; even if the lesson is well learned, the teacher is unlikely personally to reap the benefit of the student's progress. If the motivation is explicated as altruistic it is no less mysterious. Moving into the role of the teacher, the angry driver defines other drivers as students against their will. Perhaps there is a wisdom here that angry drivers share with university teachers who know that a class can be taught perfectly well even though no student learns anything of lasting value from it. But an aura of mystery trails after this wisdom.

That there is something tricky to explain about becoming pissed off on the road is indicated also by its frequently sudden dissipation. A driver who, in being cut off, had just rushed to the brink of madness, often will be pulled back by nothing more than a retrospective nod of acknowledgment. What requires explanation is a mysterious metamorphosis. Powerful forces develop against the drivers' wills, "taking" them against their better judgment. Just as suddenly, the disturbing forces may vanish.

A final paradox that helps orient the search for explanation is the routine production of a sense of incredulity. Accounts of experiences of anger while driving are full of such phrases as "I can't *believe* that asshole!" and "Would you look at that jerk? How can people *do* that?" What is astonishing is that these phrases pop incessantly into the same driving heads day after day. For many, no amount of experience with road "assholes" is sufficient to overcome this learning disability. It may be commendable that so many drivers avoid a hard-headed cynicism; a posture of incredulity, after all, professes faith in the possibility of collective improvement. But given that nothing has been done to reform the driving public since one confronted the last unpleasant incident, why be amazed when one confronts yet another asshole?

In addition to noting seemingly contradictory and absurd patterns in the phenomena, another strategy for orienting inquiry is to consider the inadequacies of prevailing explanations. One explanation that is very commonly invoked is that something awful happened to the angry driver before and independent of starting the drive in question, perhaps a fight with a spouse or child; maybe a conflict with clients, colleagues, superiors, or everyone at work; perhaps just the recognition at some time before getting on the road of a "bad hair day." This explanation fits some of the originating contexts of motorists' anger, but certainly not all. Thus the current sample of some 150 reports describes anger arising while:

- a psychoanalyst, who is returning to her Laguna Hills home, is enjoying nostalgic recollections of her son's recent bar mitzvah;
- a young man, driving home from his girlfriend's house, is enjoying a sustained reverie after "having finished sex";
- many drivers, listening to music on radio, tape, or CD, sing accompaniments in gay, earnest, or seductive voices.

Another very common explanation is that becoming pissed off while driving arises in reaction to fear. Again the facts sometimes but not always fit this hypothesis. People often become pissed off when there is little if any danger to them. At times their cars are not moving at all, as when another driver slips into a space while one is waiting to

park. Often the response of the pissed-off driver creates far more danger than the precipitating event. And in any case it is not clear why anger should be a natural, sensible, or likely upshot of fear. If one looks closely at accounts that cite fear, the irritating elements are not necessarily connected closely to the fearful aspects. Thus Dana, a woman of thirty-four who was returning to Westwood from an overnight party in Fountain Valley, cited fear and the need to slam on her brakes as the provocation for her angry response to a driver who cut her off on the 405, but she also noted that what "great[ly] upset her was that the driver of the Infiniti drove off as if nothing had ever happened." Not simply fear but the other's driving off, in and to "infinity," left her stuck in anger.

Drivers often use a version of frustration-aggression theory to explain their anger. The accounts of pissed-off drivers may be divided into two numerically unequal but morally balanced moieties, those who emphasize prudence and a pragmatic attitude (a favorite expression of their philosophy: "driving is only a way of getting from point A to point B") and those who celebrate their tactics for cutting through and around obstacles. The frustration-aggression hypothesis roughly fits many of the former accounts but it does not handle well the following shark, a not uncommon type who appears to be delightedly aggressive in searching for driving challenges.

> Marc, who sells plastics and chemicals to petroleum and chemical companies over a sales territory stretching from his home in Orange County up to Santa Barbara, speaks of his driving anger almost as a kind of therapy. . . . He is self-conscious about his construction of his anger: " 'I'm always in a rush even if I don't have to be.' " Marc "repeatedly said 'I don't know why I get so mad. I just do,' at the same time clenching his fists and his teeth followed by a squeal of laughter."

Brad, a thirty-one-year-old loan officer, intended no humor when he confessed that "running lights and speeding are probably the only two major rules that he breaks." With such driving habits, it is likely that aggression will often produce frustration, rather than the other way around. Lena, a hotel manager, was driving while she was being interviewed. At one point in the ride,

> a driver began to run a stop sign in front of us. Lena did not have a stop sign and decided that since she had the right of way, she did not have to stop or even slow down. "It's his problem," was all she had to say. . . . The other driver slammed on his brakes and swerved to the right ro avoid hitting us as we went around. Lena said, "What an idiot" and "Hah! I bet he thought I would stop!" And Lena even honked for a lengthy period of time. The other driver looked completely shocked and clueless as well as amazed at what had just transpired.

In addition to psychological theories of frustration and fear, drivers invoke sociological explanations, pointing to various background factors in standard demographic as well as in culturally distinctive forms. "Machismo" or "testosterone" is blamed, but so also are "women drivers." Bad driving is sometimes attributed to the diminished capacities of the elderly, bnt carefree youth are also damned. Racial and ethnic identities are blamed, but at one time or another virtually all variations of such identities are cited. As we will see, *some* form of pejorative generalization is inherent in the causal process of becoming pissed off while driving; but that is quite a different matter from taking such background factors at face value as determining forces.

Finally, it is possible that a few aberrant drivers cause all the problematic situations, that the 150 or so subjects in this sample are indeed the impeccable drivers they claim to be, and that they have all had the extraordinarily coincidental bad luck of running across a small core of incorrigibly incompetent motorists. Fortunately the data before us include observational accounts by researchers who conducted their interviews while sitting next to drivers like Lena.

We are left with something of a mystery, not only about how and why people so often get so angry while driving, but also about the kind of causal understanding that could explain these emotional phenomena. It seems that pre-anger background factors, such as frustration at work or gendered driving styles, do not lodge causal forces in the driver, where they wait ready to spring out when the provocation is right. It seems also that no particular configurations of the driving situation create fear, frustration, or other dynamics that always shape the process of becoming pissed off. If we can't look *inside* the actor for reliable explanatory factors, and if we can't look *outside* the actor to identify objective features of the driver's environment that would consistently provoke anger, where *can* we look? We can look closely at the phenomena themselves, and in ways that do not require that we divide "inside" from "outside," "subjective" from "objective" factors, psychology from sociology.

Three lines of inquiry will prove fruitful in this chapter, and they will reappear each time an emotion is examined in this book. First, we will look at the distinctive features of the social interaction of driving, by which I mean the special problems that drivers have in managing their identities as they are perceived by other drivers. Second, we

can examine the embodied qualities of the experience of anger, which requires that we take seriously the idea of metamorphosis, a sensual transformation in which the body of the person becomes a new vehicle for experience. Third, we must understand how becoming "pissed off" is not simply a "release of tension" or some other negatively defined phenomenon but is a positive effort to construct a new meaning for the situation. In the next three sections, I argue that a distinctive process of interactive interpretation, a specific experience of metamorphosis, and a focused narrative project are the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for becoming pissed off when driving.

A final section of this chapter asks how drivers' anger may be different in L.A. Almost every reader, having already recollected similar events in other places, will be prepared to contest a claim that drivers get more angry, more often get angry, or get angry in some unique way in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, I will suggest that these phenomena deserve special attention in understanding social life in Los Angeles.

1. Driving as Dumb Behavior: The Emotional Provocations of Asymmetrical Interaction

With the exception of some narrow lanes that run through woods, small towns, and countryside, the space that is covered by public roads usually is defined as heading in one of two diametrically opposed directions. The signaling of the direction of travel may be achieved by lines painted on the ground, by arrows displayed on signage at on-ramps, by greenery that divides the land on which pavement is laid, by vacant space that separates pavement held up or hung in the air, or by physical barriers that impede passage from one to the other side of a road. In each case road culture requires drivers to sort themselves into two sets, one they travel "with," the other they travel "against." Once sorted out, drivers relate very peacefully to each other across these opposed moieties. It is a technico-sociological marvel of our civilization that people routinely whiz by each other in massive numbers and at fantastic rates of speed, only very rarely suffering accidents or even insults from those whose lives are headed in precisely opposite directions. Anger at other drivers is very systematically limited to only certain patterns of spatial interrelationship.

If accidents occur most often at intersections, the routine aggravations in driving occur within directional worlds that are more perfectly segregated. On the highway, and on local streets outside of intersections, what is happening among vehicles traveling in the opposite direction usually need not be of immediate concern. Drivers comfortably limit their horizons of perception to lanes traveling in the same rather than the opposite direction. The result is that drivers are most commonly gazing at the rear ends of others' vehicles, a perspective that is not incidentally related to the fact that the most common invective that emerges spontaneously in moments of anger, on L.A. roads at least, is "asshole."

The motorists' pattern of face-to-tail interaction makes for a major distinction with pedestrian passings, which are rich in face-to-face interactions. Exceptional moments of borderline embarrassment, in which people halt and hop around each other, indicate that as a rule, pedestrian passings are negotiated unproblematically. Pedestrians have relatively less reason or opportunity to perceive each other's rear ends, even though, as tortuous tactics indicate, they may have substantial motivations to observe along those lines.[1] In contrast, drivers have relatively little reason or opportunity to gaze for long at the "faces" of oncoming cars. Even when they look into rearview mirrors to perceive the faces in cars traveling "with" but behind them, drivers readily focus on whether and how much pressure is being placed on their own "tails."

This roughly inverse structure of pedestrian and driving interaction creates roughly inverse forms of personal incompetence. Just because other pedestrians can so readily monitor one's visual perception, one walks in public more or less in the manner of a horse fitted with blinders. In pedestrian passings, the line between a glance and a gaze is morally significant; aware of the social accountability of their vision, pedestrians routinely encumber it.[2] In contrast, drivers are relatively free to look wherever and however they practically can just because their vision is itself relatively invisible to other drivers.

When a person moves from being a pedestrian to being a driver, he or she trades in one dialectical complex of interaction competencies and incompetencies for another. For the same reason that the vision of drivers is relatively unencumbered, the driver's ability to speak and, more generally, to express his or her understanding and intentions to other drivers is severely impaired. The figurative uses of dumbness as a common line of insnlt among drivers ("idiot," "jerk," "*pendejo*") is an upshot of the exceptional and more literal inarticulateness of motorists in social interaction. In effect, drivers project onto each other, in accusations of idiosyncratic personal incompetence, the systematic incapacity that driving, as a method of going about in public, constructs for all. If the pedestrian is, relative to the driver, made blind, the driver relative to the pedestrian is rendered dumb.[3]

That the social interaction of driving makes drivers dumb is not a

matter of an outsider's moral judgment[4] but something that motorists themselves take into account in the elaborate and inventive strategies with which they seek to compensate for the insult that the automobile imposes on their expressive capacities. Through personal inventiveness, the mute character of the automobile is confronted and partially transcended. One driver interviewed for this study keeps a stack of cardboard signs next to her so that she can flash messages of reprimand ("You cut me off, you &*@#%!") and of appreciation ("xxxGod bless!xxx").

For some, the effort to overcome the relatively inexpressive nature of cars begins with a restructuring of the vehicle. Jill, an executive assistant to the vice-president of a construction firm, recalls vividly the original horn in her prior car, a Toyota: "Wimpy. I mean, 'peep, peep.' You couldn't even hear it." Jill's husband delighted her by putting an "air horn" in her Toyota. Now she drives a Mercedes, which "has a *greaat* horn." At a more extravagant level, people may buy a Jeep-like vehicle that will never be driven off of smoothly paved streets but that in any case gives its driver a currently fashionable way of looming large in the sights of others. Drivers of such vehicles, praising the sense of "control" they obtain, often self-consciously enjoy their exceptional resources to project themselves into others' experience.

The aggravating dumbness of driving is exacerbated by the asymmetry of communicative interaction among drivers. Whether stuck in traffic or watching cars freely speed by, each driver has reason to sense that his or her own vivid awareness of other cars is not reciprocated. Shouting at other drivers with one's windows rolled up is a common phenomenon, but not because angry drivers fear violent responses from the object of their aggression. The pattern is common in Sweden as well as in the United States. More fundamentally, people shout in closed cars because the practice re-presents the animating problem, which is the challenge of being effectively appreciated by other drivers about whom one has become all too aware.

Drivers struggle to make communicative interaction more symmetrical. Horns are often insufficient, whether because their use is restricted by local ordinance, because the direction of their intentions can get clouded in a din of collective overuse, or because the target is so well insulated in his or her car and "sound system" that often the sole predictable effect of blowing one's horn is that it will pollute one's own audible environment. An alternative is to adapt the car's lighting system for expressive purposes, as by flashing high beams, but although the appropriate stick may be readily at hand, the driver often

will have reason to believe that the message of the flash will not be "read" accurately unless he or she highlights the lighting by projecting it from a specific background, for example by tailgating the target.

Like the use of high beams to send signals, hand gestures also acknowledge the inadequacy of sound as a channel of effective expression. It is common to see a driver attempt to deliver a commentary by first maneuvering around other cars in order to get parallel to an offending driver, and then to launch into some idiosyncratic sign language. For example Carolina, a twenty-four-year-old college student, reports that if another driver has offended her and does not appear to be too intimidating, she will drive alongside and "give a dirty look and wave my hands all over the place with 'what the hell are you doing?' gestures." And Marc, a thirty-one-year-old salesman, employs the device of "shakiug his hand in the air when driving by a driver which has made him mad to simulate the motion of masturbation." Marc and his female university student interviewer laughed heartily at this display, which they took as a message to "go fuck yourself."[5]

When used as a means of expression among motorists, headlights tend to be used in a relatively gentle manner. Drivers direct bright headlights at a car ahead in their own side of the road or to an oncoming car on the other side of the road in order to say "Move aside" or "Drop your beams." But when *brake lights* are used to send planned messages, they usually become instruments of perverse intention. Usually employed as devices that unwittingly signal a car is slowing down, brake lights can be strategic devices for, in effect, putting one's rear in another's face. By getting in front of an offending driver and then hitting the brakes unnecessarily, an offended driver literally and figuratively gets back at a driver who blocked an effort to pass. This is a common way of registering a complaint along the lines: you didn't pay attention to me before, but now you certainly will! Used in this manner, brake lights reflect backward in temporal as well as spatial senses, calling attention to an offense that has already been suffered.

At times frantically, offended drivers search the environment in order to find a way of forcing another driver to acknowledge their existence. One small window of opportunity is afforded by the necessity, felt by most if not all drivers, to glance periodically at their rearview mirrors. Tara, a forty-year-old woman, recalled an incident from some years before when she had to brake with all her strength to avoid hitting a car that had suddenly cut her off. When she caught the miscreant glancing at his rearview mirror, she glared at him in order to express her indignation:

> My eyebrows came down and how I wish I could blink him into a tiny little frog, small and ugly. Yeah, I was really frustrated. Then I made sure I pronounced each cursed, angry word clearly so the guy could read them through the rearview mirror.

I have reviewed a few ways that drivers, when becoming angry on the road, acknowledge the expressive limitations of their vehicles in the actions they take to overcome them. It remains to demonstrate, however, that the relationship between pissed-off driving and the dumbing asymmetry of communication among motorists is causally significant. Is an awareness of this interaction dilemma a necessary condition for the experience of anger? In fact drivers precisely and elaborately appreciate the causal relevance to their anger of asymmetry in their communicative interactions with other drivers. What drivers get mad about is their own dumbness, experienced as a sensed inability to get other drivers to take them into account. An emphatic instance was provided by Philip, a twenty-five-year-old rock band musician. He reported that when he is behind someone who is driving slowly and who does not pull over so that he can pass, he will at times "get in front of the person and slow down, to say 'you fucking see me now, bitch!' "

Los Angelenos often disparage other drivers as "unconscious" even though those others are obviously sufficiently conscious to avoid driving off the road. The narcissistic demand in this labeling of others is left implicit; what is essentially disturbing is that the other driver appears to be deaf to one's own concerns. For the angry driver, the disturbance provoked by the apparently impenetrable insulation of other drivers sometimes takes on existential dimensions. Jim, a forty-three-year-old realtor who was suffering from a heart condition and a weak real estate market, had just lost a deal because a home buyer had failed to qualify for a loan. A Mercedes approached from his rear and irritated him by speedily changing lanes to pass other cars and then cutting in front of him. Jim remarks: "I get really mad when other drivers weave in and out and cnt you off. They think they own the road and that you don't exist."

"Idiot," "unconscious," and similar insults overtly label others as incompetent, but they are the upshot of an energetic sensitivity to one's own incompetence. For all practical purposes, the other's deafness makes oneself dumb. Indeed, there is an irony here that is experienced as a bitter truth. The better you are as a driver, in the sense of being dutifully attentive to the movements of other cars, the more you are aware how circumscribed are the attentions of others. Your courtly efforts to accommodate the less competent run up against their failure to see, much less appreciate, what you are trying to do. Conscientiously monitoring others' awareness, superior drivers come to appreciate how, on the road, ignorance is power. Their appreciation of the incompetence of other drivers is at once evidence of their own superior driving competence and an explanation of the frustrating futility of their superiority.

I am arguing that a perception of asymmetrical awareness is a condition of becoming pissed off while driving. Acting as folk sociologists, drivers tacitly analyze the structure of their interaction with other drivers as part of the process of becoming angry with them. When undertaking this quick and dirty social research, drivers cannot easily ask other drivers about their orientations on the road. Instead they commonly use what sociologists call "unobtrusive measures" to infer subjective realities, in particnlar to characterize others as self-absorbed. Currently, two such measures are car phones and "Diet Coke." Philip, the young rock musician quoted above, bemoans drivers who are

> oblivious when they're in their car. They're always looking for a tape or doing something else rather than driving . . . [holding] their can of Diet Coke, they are in their own little world.

Other respondents referred disgustedly to drivers who continue past exits with their turn signals flashing on and on.

Some drivers create a characteristic emotional tone by employing a more advanced folk-sociological analysis of interaction asymmetry on the road. Just as sunglasses can be used to build a cool, "tough" image, so the windows of a car can be outfitted to put virtually the whole vehicle in "shades." The result in both cases is to create an aura of mystery rooted in a practical problem for interpretation: the reading of whether and where attentions may be directed becomes a unique problem for the person not sporting shades. Not uncommonly, a party in shades will be perceived as relatively indifferent to others, perhaps even disposed to at least small cruelties.

Because the person in shades does not as readily give off indications of his or her disposition but is presumably unimpaired in detecting the direction of others' gazes, an emotionally provocative potential for an asymmetrical uncertainty is built into street transactions. This became a serious problem for Rudi, a minister's son from Woodland Hills, as he traveled home one midnight on the Hollywood Freeway. After angrily cutting off a car that had cut him off, Rudi found himself surrounded by two cars working together to box in, chase, and fire gunshots at his car. Until almost too late, the tinted windows of the two

cars impaired his ability to appreciate that the attentions of both were directed at him, and that their attentions to him were being organized through their attentions to each other.

Notably, the emotional course of this interaction ran close in relationship to its interpretive dynamics. At first believing that another driver was not considering his existence, Rudi was angry about being cut off. Then Rudi became fearful as he realized that he was confronting just the opposite problem, excessive attention to his existence. Drivers in Los Angeles today frequently struggle with defining the line between an oblivious and an overly concerned other, a line that runs on the slippery slope between anger and fear.

The close relationship of interaction asymmetry and anger in driving is revealed in particularly instructive ways when we follow out the emotional ramifications in those instances where the interpretive relationship reverses. It is not uncommon, for example, that a driver who has been angrily honking at a slowly moving, unresponsive car ahead, realizes that the target of his anger has not been ignoring him but has been frustrated by another obstacle further on. Denise, a computer analyst who works in Century City, had been honking at a Land Cruiser, urging the driver to speed up so that she could make a light, when she realized that there was a car in front of him. At this point "she silently fell back into her seat, rolled up the window, wished she could disappear, and mentally cursed herself for being so stupid." What had been humiliation became transformed into shame as Denise realized that she had not in fact been "dumb" in the sense of being unable to get the other driver to take her perspective, but "stupid" in being blind to what the other driver could see.

Embarrassment is the common upshot when one realizes that there is an interpretive asymmetry in the current interaction but that the failure to take the other's perspective is one's own fault alone. Brad, the owner of an export-import business, recalled his growing anger as he was being tailgated on his way to a choir performance:

> I could see the headlights glaring in my mirror, so I motioned him to pass by me but he doesn't. . . . Every single turn I make he's following. I start to think, "Where does this guy live? I mean why does this guy keep following me? Can't he see I'm lost?" . . . I told my wife, "Why does this stupid ass keep tailgating me?" . . . Later the guy who drove the car comes up to me and thanks me for leading him to the presentation. I was kind of embarrassed, so I just said, "No problem."

In effect, the limited expressive possibility in drivers' social interaction creates an infinite series of ambiguous moments. As a social practice, driving is a kind of endless Rorschach test in which, unless the driver finds interpretive dilemmas fascinating as a subject for study, he or she must impute a taken-for-granted descriptive sense of other drivers' social awareness. It is only by appreciating how driving is a "dumb" way of moving through public space that we can appreciate why the emotional results of motorists' interaction are so routinely appalling.

2. Getting Cut Off: The Metamorphosis of the Angered Body

Within some traditions in sociology, the sole focus of analysis would be on the *interactions* through which anger arises in driving. But getting pissed off while driving is also very much a matter of feeling. Accordingly we must now appreciate a part of social action that is consistently missed by social science: the *sensual* and *aesthetic* dimensions of the experience.

Note first that passengers typically do not have the same emotional experience as drivers. Sitting next to the driver, a passenger may observe the same rudeness, feel frustrated by the same traffic, be startled by the same aggressive conduct on the part of other drivers, but watch with amusement or fear as the driver of his or her own car gets mad. Sprinkled through the interviews in our data set are recollections by interviewer-observers of occasions in which they struggled to calm down their research subjects as the latter responded with frightful ferocity to the "idiots" and "assholes" of the road.

> Barry, a fifty-four-year-old attorney practicing in Orange County, is cruising down Rosecrans Avenue at fifty-five mph in his black Lexus, listening to soft music, with his wife and two others in the car. As he slows to merge into the left-turn lane, he spots a car behind him, "a white Integra with five Asians," that is crossing over the double yellow line in an attempt to enter the left-turn lane before Barry gets there. Angry that "this little shit wouldn't let me in," Barry maneuvers toward the left lane as if he is intent on hitting the other car. The Integra screeches to a stop, and as its driver bolts from his car, Barry stops and rushes out to "confront the confrontation." The passengers are "stunned and startled," not by the Integra but by Barry's rage.

Drivers themselves often realize the contrast between their rage and a passenger's fear. There is a significant clue to the causal contingencies of anger in the fact that drivers' realization of this contrast does not necessarily stem their anger. Ralph, an employee of a Beverly Hills architectural firm, is driving his girlfriend and his brother to

Las Vegas. Going seventy on a steep mountain incline, he finds a van pressing from behind with its high beams. When the road gets too narrow for the van to pass, he slows down to piss off its driver. As the van driver succeeds in passing him, he throws Ralph a finger and then cuts in close. Next Ralph uses his high beams on the van, then passes the van and again purposively slows dramatically. Ralph recalls how his girlfriend and brother urged him to calm down, to let it go.

> I didn't respond to their comments. I looked at my girlfriend to the right and noticed that she was holding on to the handle on the passenger door. I didn't care though. I didn't care if I was scaring her and my brother. I felt my face really flushed as I kept trying to catch up to the van. As I was driving, I was cussing the guy out at the top of my lungs. I said things like, "You fucking asshole! Who do you think you are? You don't own the fucking road! I'll show you who owns the fucking road!" Immediately after the incident, I looked at my girlfriend. She was shaking her head in disapproval and told me that my temper is exactly like my father's temper.

There is a crucial difference between the situation of the passenger and that of the driver. Even though both are in the same car, it is only the driver who is cut off. For the driver, being "cut off" is not only a figure of speech. In contrast to the passenger, the driver, in order to drive, must embody and be embodied by the car. The sensual vehicle of the driver's action is fundamentally different from that of the passenger's, because the driver, as part of the praxis of driving, dwells in the car, feeling the bumps on the road as contacts with his or her body not as assaults on the tires, swaying around curves as if the shifting of his or her weight will make a difference in the car's trajectory, loosening and tightening the grip on the steering wheel as a way of interacting with other cars.

Being a passenger is more a matter of being taken around, of hanging on rather than guiding the car through turns, and of orienting oneself to other cars through the driver in the next seat rather than through manipulating the body of the car. Not only are passengers unlikely to share the driver's emotions, but when passengers do get irritated they are more likely to focus on the faults of their own driver than on the drivers of other cars. Note the reference in the following classic complaint about a backseat driver to the very different physical disposition of the passenger-critic. When Ann's husband is her passenger, he often criticizes her. Her interviewer paraphrases her characterization of his attitude:

> First she is going too fast, then too slow. Why doesn't she go now? Why didn't she go then? She demonstrates his position as he lies back in the passenger seat, like a lounge chair.

The structuring and the contingencies of the emotions of driver and passenger cannot be explained without taking into account the fact that, although they are only inches from each other and are in essentially the same perceptual position to witness interaction with other cars, their manners of embodying understanding and literally incorporating the scene, are radically different.[6]

Language describing the embodiment of action and the incorporation of personal identity brings us close to the philosophies of Michael Polanyi and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[7] If we are to explain more satisfactorily the contingencies of the driver's anger we must appreciate how driving requires and occasions a metaphysical merger, an intertwining of the identities of driver and car that generates a distinctive ontology in the form of a person-thing, a humanized car or alternatively, an automobilized person.[8] If we insist on seeing only human "subjects" on one side of an ontological divide and "objective" conditions or the material circumstances for behavior on the other, we will fail to appreciate fully the difference in the perspectives of driver and passenger, and we will not be able to grasp just what is "cut off" that provokes anger while driving.

With regard to the driver's relationship with other cars, being cut off is a richly varied event. But what all such experiences have in common is a kind of amputation, a loss of a previously engaged, tacit use of the car and a loss of the transcendent body that the driver, in the process of driving, had been taking for granted as naturally available. While nothing happens to his or her physiological body—to that body as a thing described in isolation from its use in context—the driver does not doubt the sensual reality of the fact that *he or she*, i.e., his or her lived or phenomenological body, has been cut off. By attempting to describe the driver's tacit embodiment of the car, we will prepare the way to understand, in the next section, something that otherwise is very elusive: how becoming angry is a practical project in which the driver attempts to regain a taken-for-granted intertwining with the environment.

The Naturally Transcendent Body of the Driver

What is it that the driver senses so vividly and yet senses in ways so well hidden that intimate companions do not share the sensuality? What the driver senses in anger are transcendent meanings of the mo-

ment. From the passenger's side of the car, or when the driver is using discursive reason to talk with an interviewer about the event, only the specific situational meanings of the event are apparent, and they do not justify the anger. Looking narrowly at the socially situated interaction among cars, all that is at stake is:

- as a spatial matter, the necessity for the driver to move one foot a few inches from accelerator to brake;
- on a temporal dimension, the "loss" of a moment's time;
- and from a publicly visible perspective, a change in the relationship of cars, not people's lives.

But emotions are doubly resonant; through his or her emotions a person both attends to the immediate situation and orients to transcendent dimensions of the moment's experience. The feeling, the sensual reality of emotions, *is* this double resonance.

People run into, hit upon, discover or find emotional dynamics in their experience. Like things discovered or found, the significance that an emotion registers is regarded, by the persou experiencing it, as already there but previously beyond the boundaries of awareness. Put colloquially, we find ourselves "taken" by emotions. In emotional experience, a person attends corporeally to temporal, spatial, and private meanings that reflect on and transcend whatever he or she is doing at the moment with others. Emotions are a paradoxical kind of turning on the embodied self, a sensual form of self-consciousness that brings into awareness, in the palpably aesthetic medium of the body, commitmeuts that previously were tacitly engaged.

Given the familiar assertion of an opposition between reflection and emotions, it is perhaps ironic to note that, when they are emotional, people are engaged in bringing previously tacit dimensions into their awareness. *But this self-reflection does not take the form of thought.* Drivers usually do not *perceive* themselves being cut off *and then decide* to construct their anger; rather, it is in seeing themselves cut off that they first find themselves angry. What makes the self-conscious nature of emotions difficult to see is that the turn on the self is doue sensually and aesthetically, through a kind of living poetry, and not in the form of discursive reason that commentaries about "reflection" have traditionally evoked.

How does becoming angry when driving bring previously tacit, transcendent dimensions of action into vivid corporeal awareness? First of all, driving is itself essentially a means of transcending space, of getting from here to there. When traffic or a "rude" driver cuts one off, the experience is of falling out of a flow and being stuck or held

back. In the sense of confinement that anger brings to them, cut-off drivers sense the firmness of the boundary between the overall trajectory of their current trip and the local situation in which they interact with other cars. As cars in traffic start and stop, one responds by inching ahead, starting and stopping, in the process drawing an increasingly thick line describing the bounded nature of one's action. When traffic flows smoothly, if a rude driver cuts in close, one must fall out of the flow by hitting the brake or at least lifting off of the accelerator, in the process physically pulling oneself out of a previously tacit intertwining of body and machine.

Each driver usually will have no way of appreciating where other drivers are going and why, unless traffic stops completely and drivers exit their cars to converse with each other.[9] Each knows that he or she alone knows how the interaction "here" carries implications for the activities and relationships he or she maintains in some other setting, "there," and that what happens in the interaction with another driver "now" is meaningful with regard to situations "then," that is, with regard to what he or she has lived before and is likely to experience later on. As drivers relate the movements of their cars to each other, each has a necessarily private awareness of the transcendent meanings of his or her actions.

In some of the incidents of becoming angry, drivers are clearly frustrated in their attempts to "get there" and they imagine clear pictures of themselves as they once were or might soon be in other places. Note how anger arises as the following driver situates himself with reference to unpleasant versions of himself that he projects into the future and recalls from the recent past.

> Torrential rains in Malibu have slowed traffic to a crawl as Clarence, a tax accountant with a public accounting firm in Santa Monica, bangs his fists on the steering wheel, lights a cigarette, then repeatedly bangs his head against the side window. Aware that he is already late for work and aware that his job performance has recently come under question, Clarence observes a stream of cars moving freely on the shonlder and recalls the ticket he received a week ago for the same maneuver. Observing a police car up in the shonlder np ahead, he moves to block the attempt of a minivan to come off the shonlder into his lane: "Shaking his fists angrily at the minivan, he yelled, 'I am not going to let this fucking bitch in front of me.' "

In other experiences of drivers' becoming angry, a spatial rather than a temporal dimension of transcendence is most emphatic. For Dita, talking on a cellular phone as she drives "is a form of therapy"

in that it allows her to be in two social places at the same time, interacting with other drivers and with her phone correspondent. If another driver acts rudely, what may be cut off is her ability to remain attentive to her phone call. A set of observational field notes on Francine, a forty-five-year-old travel agent and mother of two, show how she once became angry in close relationship to her discussion with her daughter-passenger about a dress that she, Francine, had tried on at the mall and was considering buying. Her conversation continued as a white car from the left put on his blinker and moved into her lane. Francine "was not angry, she just slowed down and contiuued talking about the dress." But as the white car progressively slowed down to well below the speed limit, Francine repeatedly had to hit her brakes.

> Her anger heated up as she glanced at the speedometer and noticed that we were only going forty miles per hour. She stopped talking about that dress she was going to buy and looked over her shoulder to go around the white Camry.

Rude and inconsiderate drivers do not injure only in a symbolic manner, for example by showing disrespect; they strip dimensions from one's social existence, in these cases undermining the drivers' ability to be iu two places at once.

As forms of sensuality, emotions render the body a prism, lighting up otherwise invisible, transcendent meanings that in each interaction always pass through the participants. Even for drivers who are not headed toward a pressing engagement and who are focused exclusively on the road, driving may have a series of other temporal and spatial implications that reach beyond and lend emotional significance to particular encounters with other drivers. Driving is a prime field for the study of what Michel de Certeau referred to as the "tactics" of contemporary everyday life.[10] Many people develop what they regard as particularly shrewd ways of moving around society.[11] These include carefully choosing streets that one knows carry little traffic, sneakily cutting across corner gas stations to beat traffic lights, discreetly using another car as a "screen" in order to merge onto a highway, passing through an intersection and brazenly doubling back to avoid the queue in a left-turn lane, and such triumphs of motoring chutzpah as following in the smooth-flowing wake of an ambulance as it cuts through bottled-up traffic. Variations in motoring cunning are endless.

> Eddie keeps his speed between certain levels because to go too slow would put him in an inefficient gear and if he goes too fast "his gas mileage would decrease by 20 percent, due to excess wind resistance."

> Bob, thirty-seven years old, a drug store employee who drives a recent-model Toyota truck, has his eight-mile round-trip between home and work all worked out. He knows the way the lights normally go, and which lanes to avoid because he could be blocked by "unprotected left turns."

For such shrewd drivers, what is at stake in any given interaction with another car is a trans-situational strategy of which other drivers on the road must be completely unaware. What can be cut off here is an overall game plan and a more or less grand conception of self.

All encounters in social life build their emotional meanings from the juxtaposition between a local situation, one to which the participants collaboratively respond as they construct its sense and boundaries in the "here and now," and the privately known destinations for which the local situation is for each but a way station. Chance meetings on the street, an episode of sexual iuteraction, an afteruoon spent on a crew doing a roofing job, or a meeting of middle managers and lawyers to discuss security concerns at a shopping mall . . . for each participant what is collectively treated as locally transpiring will have unshared, transcendent implications in the form of sensed relevancies for other encounters in some other time and place. The emotional meanings of everyday life are naturally and necessarily hidden because selves, although they are always presented in forms that are tailored to a social time and place, are always produced by bodies, and what having a body most fundamentally means for a person is that he or she lives an ongoing coutinuity beyond the social situations passed through in everyday life. Bodies make us mortal in the long run, but until they do they are vehicles of situational immortality, constantly conferring the gift, unwauted or not, of signifying life beyond the deaths of the localized interactions that constitute our mundane social lives.

When a driver gets cut off, what occurs is an instantaneous and exceptionally pristine confrontation, not simply with other drivers but with the existential challenge of interminably working out the relationship between isolated social situations and a transcendent life course. Driving produces conflicts that are at once an unwanted therapeutic challenge, an undesired introduction to the social-psychological structure of everyday life, and a tiresome obligation to try to make sense of one's life.

Who needs this aggravation? Perhaps only drivers who happen to be social psychologists. Most people have other hobbies and occupational concerns. So, as is generally the case with anger, pissed-off drivers are

angry that they are angry, that they must give so much importance to working out the relationship between their petty interactions with other drivers and the inescapably compelling themes of their lives.

Because cars are so naturally literal/figurative vehicles for transcendence in spatial and temporal senses, they are ready vehicles for a third dimension of transcendence. Cars as objects, and driving as an activity, are given private meanings that transcend what others—other drivers and the driver's own passengers—can observe. Thus each driver not only does not know where any other driver is going and how long it may be before he or she gets there, but each is unaware of the symbolic meaning that the others may have built into their relationships to their cars. Cars are treated like private living rooms that are driven about in public; secure in their privacy, drivers take for granted that others won't be successful Peeping Toms. Thus Ernie, a used-car salesman at Galpin Ford who lives in the Valley, does not need to change out of his pajamas when he leaves his home at 10:30 P.M. to drive a friend home. As he explains to his wife, "no one's going to see me. I don't have to impress anybody."

Usually, however, what privacy covers is not so much the driver's physical body as the folk philosophy that he or she has developed for his or her car and for driving. What makes driving so richly provocative of emotions is not simply or even primarily that situated interactions with other drivers impede one's progress to a given destination; it is that the sociophenomenological structure of driving interaction crystallizes a challenge common to all of social life. Because the meanings of driving build up from the naturally metaphoric character of the activity, they are especially subtle in their seductive power and doubly hidden, not only from other drivers but from oneself as well. If railroad trips figured prominently in Freud's dreams, narratives of driving play a richly hermeneutic role as contemporary adults dream nightmares of being eternally stalled in traffic, careening around sharp downhill curves while driving family members in a stuffy little car with faulty brakes, or being hauled around by some reckless driver in the company of utter strangers.[12]

When drivers are cut off, their anger may respond to one or both of two possible forms of embodied loss. First, the driver may have to pull out of a previously taken-for-granted corporeal involvement that is specific to the current trip. A given interaction with another driver may interrupt the phone conversation that one is sustaining with a friend, break the flow of strategic maneuvers that had been making the trip a testament to one's extraordinary urban cunning, or require that one remove a hand from lightly stroking a girlfriend's thigh in order to grip a steering wheel tightly.

Second, independent of the driver's machinations as they may be specific to any particular trip, driving a car may symbolize one's overall way of passing through society.[13] The postures and airs in the following examples demonstrate how some drivers habitually intertwine their identities and the bodies of their cars. The crucible that produces the extraordinary emotional power of the driving experience is the routine juxtaposition of immediately situated interaction with other drivers and situationally transcendent meanings of driving. This juxtaposition is a constant in episodes of road rage, even as situational dilemmas and transcendent meanings vary widely from one incident to the next.

Rick, a college student, keeps his 1994 Ford Probe gleaming. It is

> more than just a means to get from point A to point B; I take pride in keeping it looking good, it is a place I go to escape from the pressures of school and work.

Getting stuck in traffic as he is driving from Glendale to the Malibu Sea Lion to celebrate his fiancée's birthday "make it painfully clear that I am not the master of my destiny that I thought I was."

> When it became apparent that the traffic was not going to clear up and that no matter what I did, we were going to be late, I got pissed—I mean REALLY PISSED. I . . . basically just lost it in terms of self-control.

Because his car represents a shiny version of his future, traffic turns him to shameful memories of his past. Rick recalled that "my mother drilled it into me as a child that it is bad to be late; it makes you look irresponsible."

If for Rick his car is a pristine body that other drivers threaten to soil, Mark owns the car of Rick's nightmares, but its symbolic meaning is no less capable of generating enraging implications for its owner. Mark's car has 170,000 miles, its wheels are badly out of alignment, and driving it hurts his back. Far from symbolizing that at this stage of his life he is on a rapid trip to a bright future, Mark's car serves him less reliably when it is in motion than when it is functioning as his bedroom. A frequently unemployed roofer who states that he is often underbid on jobs by Mexican illegals, Mark finds that even when he works a forty-hour week he can't pay all of his bills. "My life is more fragile than it's ever been." When other cars cut him off, what they are cutting off often seems to be his last tie to respectable member-

ship in the community. Ugly encounters with other drivers stimulate deep resentments that often take social-class directions. "Sometimes I'll fantasize about running a tailgater off the road or destroying a rich person's car."

The way that a person lives philosophical orientations to his or her car shapes his or her corporeal disposition when driving. Thus when Jill got her Mercedes, it meant "growing up" and being "an adult," which for her means driving cautiously. The "gutless" Toyota she had before was like driving "the ashtray of the Mercedes, very tinny." The heaviness of the car conveys to her an aspect of stability, which she enhances by braking far in advance of the spot at which she will come to rest and by taking corners slowly enough that the car avoids any tilt. If some "asshole" cuts in front of her, what is cut off is likely to be the faith that she is now secure and immune from the surprises and foolishness that threaten to bring uncertainty into a life.

Cars obviously can be outfitted to reflect the desired personal identities of their drivers with bumper stickers and accessories. But, what is more interesting, some drivers more discreetly *reshape themselves* to fit with the image that they expect the car to project. Brandy, "an attractive thirty-three-year-old Latina from East Los Angeles," is a middle-school teacher's aide who works with children with learning disorders and behavioral problems, work that "requires lots of patience." Interviewed by a female friend, Brandy reports that a "'95 jet-black Jeep Wrangler" is "her pride and joy." She labors elaborately to shape the car, passengers, and herself into a seamless version of self, which the interviewer characterizes as "the Jeep image of fun, adventure, wild youth, and excitement." The car has no radio, because Brandy does not want it to be broken into. On a trip to Tijuana, she parks on the California side of the border and she and her boyfriend walk across because the people there drive "like bats out of hell." The car and her body are mutually altered to create an ongoing, complementary whole. Brandy "would find something to do with herself each time we stopped at a light or slowed down in traffic," such as "smoothing down her hair and turning the mirror to inspect her face." The car elevates its driver, putting her on display, but she refrains from looking into other cars because it would be rude. She "always says that only a certain type of person can own a Jeep, like herself," and for that reason she "does not want to be seen in it with thick glasses on," even though, as the condition imposed on her driver's license indicates, she cannot see well without her glasses when she is driving at night.

On returning from a trip to Mexico one evening, the various elements that Brandy had built into her car-body identity came into conflict. When stopped by a CHP officer for speeding, she was given the choice to take a four hundred–dollar ticket, or put on her glasses, or turn the wheel over to her boyfriend-passenger. Not wanting to admit that she fails to wear glasses for the sake of appearance, she allowed him to drive, a choice that subjected her to endless humiliation as the story was told and retold in family and friendship circles.

Seductive Metaphori and Being Cut Off

Perhaps the most commonly visible indications that anger in driving emerges from an experience of being cut off from a tacit embodiment of and by one's car is the rise of tension in the driver's body. Interviews and participant observation field notes indicate changes in the rigidity and inclination of posture, in the grip on the wheel, and in the direction and intensity of the driver's visual focus. But to limit our appreciation of what is entailed in the loss of the tacit body to such surface aspects is to maintain a subject-object contrast of person and world, and this is precisely what is transcended in the natural course of driving. Driving is not a series of discrete touches on a machine and discrete sightings within a perceptual field, but an ongoing process in which one inevitably becomes sensually intertwined with mechanical tool and perceptual field.

The necessity of dwelling in objects in order to use them with an air of natural competence is not unique to driving. As Michael Polanyi noted in a memorable illustration of the point, when one writes by hand it is not possible to maintain a course of thought if one is attending to the shaping of each mark on the page; one must write strings of letters and words. Put another way, in order to write one must lose self-conscious attention to oneself by engaging in a kind of drawing (or, when typing, in a kind of keyboard playing).[14] Polanyi noted that if in moving over a glossy patch of the paper, the pen skips, the slippage is experienced *at the tip of the pen*. The writer dwells in the pen.

Similarly, in order to speak with an unbroken sense of natural coherence, one must engage unselfconsciously in a kind of singing that maintains a heard but unnoticed continuity of sound as the vehicle for enunciating individual words. Speech uttered in a way that its transcription usually appears on paper, with noticeable space between each word, much less with a clear silence between each letter, not only will sound weird, it will undermine the speaker's ability to speak to anything other than the enunciation project itself.

If there is a touch of the surreal in the image of the writer dwelling

at the tip of the pen, or of speech creating the body that sustains thought, then we must acknowledge the practical necessity of the surreal. The surreal dimensions of the driving experience are not interview artifacts or analytical hyperbole but the foundations of any real driving conduct. Cartoonists who animate cars, and people who give names and recognize personality traits in their cars, are recognizing that people must in a sense "confuse" their identities with their cars in order to drive them. It is a fair question whether the person who gives a name to his or her car is sillier than someone who thinks that because cars are just lifeless, fungible tools, cartoon-animated cars are just silly conceits.

Cars are naturally seductive instruments. At the age of twenty-five, Alexander says that "his car gives him 'big balls' " and makes "his dick automatically grow three inches." When I reported this passage in class, one male student was moved to ask, with no apparent touch of irony, "What kind of car was he driving?" How drivers merge with their cars, and what is at stake for them when they are cut off, will not usually be so clear. But in ways so diverse they defy exhaustive listing, cars seduce by providing a new form that one must inhabit as if it were one's natural skin, if one is to drive with routine competence.

It is notable that in contemporary Athens, as Michel de Certeau liked to point out, public buses are *metaphori.* In L.A.'s culture, cars seduce drivers into a metamorphosis that is in many respects a literal process of transforming the practically useful vehicle of the self. Consider the perspectives of the following two retirees. They drive in contrasting styles but for both, other drivers are maddening when they compromise their treasured freedom.

Steve, fifty-eight years old, is a retired college professor. Recalling a recent experience of being cut off, he frames it against his recollections of taking public transportation when he was living in New York thirty-five years ago. A young man, apparently impatient with the rate at which Steve was exiting the freeway, shot in front and cut in to exit first. In contrast to public transportation, one's car offers the freedom of "not relying on somebody else or something else to get you where you need to go." What such events cut off is the pleasure of liberation Steve often feels when driving, a pleasure in which the car is so intimately part of the driver that it is not even, as he put it, "something else" that one relies on "to get you where you need to go." Unfortunately it sometimes turns out that driving means that what you do have to rely on are the narcissistic dispositions of other drivers.

Paco, who lived most of his life in the relatively tiny agricultural

town of Salinas, is now seventy and a recent resident of L.A. When other drivers anger him,

> Los maltrato [I curse at them]. . . . If a young man cuts me off I yell at him, "Orale vato! Que no ves!" ["Hey punk! Can't you see!"]. . . . I might call someone "menzo" or "menza" [brainless]. . . . But the old folks are the worst. . . . I just say, look at this "viejito," he's too old to be driving.

Paco frames the displeasure of driving in L.A. against his small-city background. "Where I used to live people drove slower and there wasn't such a rush. . . . Here people drive too fast." In effect Paco insists on treating L.A. as if it were Salinas. He avoids the freeways, and as noted by the participant interviewer, Paco drives local streets at five miles below the speed limit. His interviewer paraphrases Paco's comments: "I feel too congested and as a result I may go slower just to go slower."

In these two cases, what is seductive about cars is their moment-by-moment evocation of a perspective that gives integrated meaning to huge stretches of personal biography. Steve and Paco indicate that at times they drive around in life metaphors that they defend against people who are rudely insensitive to what is at stake.

For other drivers, cars offer metamorphoses to states of moral perfection that they find difficult to manage elsewhere in their lives. Reina, a longtime L.A. resident who grew up in Guadalajara, now does morning volunteer work at the gift shop of a local hospital before going to work. For her the car offers a relatively restful passage between social situations that are routinely troublesome to get out of and into. One Wednesday morning, Reina got into her car in a flurry of small attentions, bouncing back to the house to pick up letters that had to be mailed that day, grabbing an Evian water bottle from the box that sits in the garage beside her car, figuring that although the tank was low she should have enough gas, and finally heading off on her twelve-mile trip to Pasadena. The concerns that flared up on entering the car were put into the background as the driving trip imposed its own integrity, up until she arrived at the hospital and found an "imbecile" moving to exit the parking lot in her lane, a lane marked for ingress. It may or may not be relevant to the shaping of Reina's emotions that the car serves as a vehicle for her altruistic work as a hospital volunteer. But even if her car does not promise to give moral purpose to her life on any grand scale, it does promise a kind of temporary perfection of orderliness for a short stretch of everyday life. Apart from the risk

that the Evian bottle will spill as it rolls freely in the passenger well, the threats to coherence are displaced outside of the vehicle of her action and for a while she has a smooth and unambiguously focused drive.

The marketing of cars has long offered the potential of publicly displaying oneself to others in an enviable form[15] but also the promise of a private daily metamorphosis affording hands-on, real-world, sensual verification that one fits naturally into a peaceful, immortal, or transcendent form. Cars are increasingly designed in elaboration of this message. The button that will automatically lower the window happens to be just where the driver's hand naturally falls. His key is a bit different than hers, and when he begins to work it into the ignition, the driver's chair "knows" to adjust itself to a position that is tailored to his dimensions and sense of comfort. Cars have replaced watches (self-winding! shockproof! waterproof!) as the microengineered personal possession that, like a miniature world's fair exhibit, displays the latest technological achievements to the masses. Also like watches, cars can be readily consulted as a reassuring touchstone for the assessment of messier segments of one's life.[16]

That emotions flow most directly from an initially sensual being in the social world and not from personality traits appears in relief in Morgan's experience. For him the metaphoric dimensions of vehicles have an exceptionally high profile. Morgan drives a fourteen-wheeler to deliver beer in Culver City and Santa Monica. In his truck, cars

> look puny; kinda like ants, in a funny sort of way. Whenever I'm driving, I don't worry about how reckless I drive because I know that I won't get hurt. My truck is way too strong to sustain any damage. I've run into a few telephone poles, a fire hydrant or two, and even the side of a building. Other than a dent or two, nothing happened to my truck, Not only that, but the company takes care of it all. . . . So, yeah, I do feel a little more powerful than everyone else on the road.

The form of the vehicle gives rise to a fitting personality. When Morgan drives his BMW, "I'm not as invincible then, and I try to drive a little more carefully, since I know we really can't afford another car if I smash this one up."

Does a truck bring out a different style of driving than does a BMW? It will not do to substitute mysticism about the nature of different vehicles for mysticism about values and character. If the driver's emotions do not spring from his or her personality, neither does the form he or she embodies for action determine them. Both views are inadequate because both are static. When driving, a person takes a vehicular

form to interact with others, and his or her emotions are the upshot of this corporeal process.

Max is a six-foot-six-inch, 250-pound resident of "mellow" Rancho Cucamonga who works out of a truck yard in Ontario. As he drives his diesel in Beverly Hills to pick up hazardous waste at the Hilton his truck becomes a monstrosity that threatens him more than other drivers. When he had to make a U-turn on Wilshire because he had gone too far, the other drivers wouldn't give him the space; they would speed up and cut him off.

> He said that it got so bad and was taking such a long time that . . . he started yelling and honking not only at the drivers around him, but also at some of the pedestrians who would not wait to let him complete his U-turn, before crossing the street.

The truckers, Max and Morgan, make it relatively easy to see something that is usually obscured, that the driver's emotions follow from sensing how his or her vehicle-form fits into the social environment. At one moment a truck-body makes the driver immune from concerns about fitting into community. At another it makes him emotionally vulnerable by isolating him from the surrounding community.

Drivers monitor the interaction contours of the vehicular form that they inhabit, managing their thing-selves from within and without. What the angry driver seeks to defend, when he or she is cut off, is not the trajectory of the car, but the intertwining of the body and the car. Anger's energy is in the first instance an effort to hold onto an inhabited form. When one is cut off, the offense lies precisely in the understanding that other drivers would treat one's car as an impersonal thing, without honoring the fact, of which the driver is intimately aware, that what is cut off is the driver. Drivers don't imagine that the "idiots" who piss them off are insulting them as individuals; that's one of the reasons they are idiots. The problem is that they *don't* "make it personal." The offense as commonly stated is that the other is acting "as if I'm not even there." The outraged driver addresses him- or herself with the impersonal perspective that the offending driver has manifested, and from that vantage point slips effortlessly into the indifferent and disrespectful perspectives of others encountered earlier in the day.

It is not possible to come up with a formula specifying the distance, speed, and timing of lane changes that will predict being cut off. The problem is not that there are too many factors to put into the formula but that the driver's body is not located where one might suspect it to be, either in the driver's seat, at the vehicle's metal skin, or indeed at

any stable location. The driver operates from a moving point in a terrain for interaction, and that terrain is defined in part by the driver's current style of driving.

An enraging experience of being thrown out of one's car-body by others' insensitivities can occur even before the car starts moving. Parents of adolescent drivers are familiar with the assault that occurs when they turn the key in the ignition and find the seat position straining their backs, their feet stumbling on empty drink containers, music blasting in their ears, and the fuel gauge pointing to empty. It is relatively easy to see how anger arises in such circumstances from sensual beginnings, but the same sort of analysis is necessary to understand how drivers become angry when relating to each other through the interacting trajectories of their cars.

There is a common dimension in experiences of being cut off, whether the assault is on a moving or a stationary body. It is a matter of being reduced to a raw state of being. This is a kind of fall, an awakening to a self-conscious awareness of nakedness. The car-body, as a form of active social clothing, is stripped away and one is left exposed, vulnerable, without any persona with which one can relate respectably to others. Along with the sacrifice of these cartoonlike dimensions of ordinarily competent action, what ordinarily passes for civility and mundane rationality instantly, if only momentarily, disappears as well.

3. Flipping Off and Other Narrative Practices of Anger: On Righteous Indignation, Prejudicial Stereotyping, and the Socioemotional Logic of Revenge Scenarios

Mehdi, driving his black Porsche to represent his father's luxury car dealership at a car auction, did not get pissed when he was cut off by "an incredibly bright 911" Porsche driven by "one of the hottest females" he had ever seen. Instead he took the surprise encounter as an opportunity for a flirtatious "cat and mouse" game and for fantasizing about what winning might mean.

In order that anger may develop when one is cut off by others who seem to be indifferent to one's existence, some further work of sense making is necessary. The two aspects of social action that we have reviewed are never sufficient to explain conduct. People do not "perceive" their relations to others while standing outside the world of practical action; perception and response are joined in a seamless whole. Nor do people undergo sensual transformations without trying somehow to make sense of the experience. We will not have a complete

explanation of becoming pissed off driving until we have determined how the experience is a practical project of making sense of a dynamic situation.

We already have one clue as to where to look for additional factors. If the driver's anger arises as he experiences being cut off from a tacit use of his automobilized body, perhaps the implicit practical and self-serving logic in anger is as an attempt to recover a taken-for-granted intertwining with the world. Surely there is something along these lines yet to explain, because drivers in L.A. do not just "get" angry, they "do" their anger, in all of the surprising and seemingly absurd ways we have already reviewed: yelling at other drivers over great distances, in the midst of deafening traffic noise, and with one's windows rolled up; getting back at the offender through risky maneuvers that don't seem worth it a few moments later; and perhaps the most common response of all, "giving the finger" or "flipping the other off."

We have come all this way in the analysis of a familiar phenomenon of everyday anger only to arrive at what may be its greatest enigma. The angry driver seeks to enact a drama that tells a story about the animating interaction, and if the story is told in an aesthetically satisfying fashion, anger fades quickly. Why is this an enigma? Because the way anger emerges in social interaction, it virtually guarantees that no matter how well the story is told, it will not be understood by anyone else as the narrator wishes. The enigma is that, on the one hand, anger arises to fuel and indeed seeks its apotheosis in *a practical story-telling project,* but on the other, *anger doesn't seek audience approval.* In some sense it is obvious that the effort to "teach a lesson" is a pretense, but it is obviously not obvious to the narrator, at least not just then. A moment after anger fades, yes. But at the moment, the narrative performer effectively suspends disbelief and is routinely taken in by his teaching/story-telling performance.

How could the amputation, the cutoff, be repaired and the tacit body restored to its natural, taken-for-granted state through enacting a story of revenge? What kind of emotionally compelling, natural sense does this seemingly silly process of sense making make? And if the moral of the story is likely to be convincing only to the narrator, why isn't it sufficient, in order to serve and dispel anger, just to *think* a scenario of revenge?

The secret of the magical force of the enactment is in its sensual dimensions. In contrast to just thinking up a story, telling it requires that the driver enact it bodily, and the process of embodying the story in a dramatization produces a sensual resonance for the narrator. By conjuring up a script of action that attributes great significance to the

events, the angry driver becomes a magician taken in by his or her own magic.

The driver's fury hides the secret of emotional magic even from him- or herself. The trouble with thinking revenge, as a strategy for the resolution of anger, is that it is only thinking. One still has to act, and if the revenge scenario is not enacted, it competes with the actions one does take, increasing tension and compounding the problem. When revenge is just a thought that is not acted upon, it is evidence of impotence, and that shows the angry person yet another way that he has been cut off from him- or herself. Thoughts of revenge lack the charm of enacting revenge because in acting the narrator reshapes the perceived world to fit the contours of his or her anger, reshaping him- or herself in the process.

There appears to be some kind of "subconscious" or "psychic" mechanism at work here. But such phrases just flag the issue; at best they put on hold the business of providing an explanation. The route to the hidden objective of the driver's anger is through taking seriously the actor's "manifest" meaning, which we do by analyzing its constituent elements.

Looking for the essential elements of the angry driver's narrative project, we find three distinguishable phases. First, moral meaning is given to the social situation as the driver takes the posture of a victim. This step is already sly. Defining him- or herself as victimized, the driver sneaks moral meaning into the situation before projecting a moralistic response.

Second, the meaning of the immediate social situation is generalized. The interaction is given transcendent significance by various devices, most notably by the invocation of prejudicial stereotypes. This is a key step in gaining a new grounding for the self, because the meaning of the situation now transcends what is in front of the driver, and by going beyond what is in front of him or her, the driver breaks open a path to recover what was behind, a body tacitly deployed as an unseen resource for shaping conduct.

By generalizing the meaning of the moment, the angry driver sets the stage for an attempt to reverse the moral and sensual process he or she has witnessed. Now the driver can perform as a ritual actor before the general audience whose presence he or she has invoked. If, once on this communal stage, the driver enters a battle that cannot be won, he or she may stay out of sorts for some time. But if he or she can enact a role of ritualized revenge that is successful at least in the aesthetics of the performance, the driver will briefly celebrate his or her heroic communal status and then, from the heights of that pleasant self-regard, come down to reengage the world unselfconsciously.

To summarize the angry driver's situation: The animating problem is a loss of the taken-for-granted basis of action, experienced bodily as a tacit way of being in the world. The dilemma is how to get back something that cannot been seen, a touchstone for conduct that by definition one cannot grab onto directly. Some sleight of hand is required. The trick is to call up moral energy to construct a drama of communal importance in the immediate situation, and then to clothe oneself in the role of avenging hero. Once the situation has been given morally transcendent meaning, it does not matter that no one else is watching, since the relevant audience is universal and could never physically be in attendance anyway. Nor does it matter that the offender may remain intransigent. The process of invoking the communal role itself inducts one back into a sense of competent involvement in a transcendent realm, and that is the animating objective in any case.

But it will not do just to think this logic through; it must be enacted in some form. Anger calls for a practical, embodied project, if only a curse that reverberates within a closed vehicle, because a curse, unlike a thought, achieves sensual resonance on which a double meaning may be registered. The curse has one meaning as a response to this other in this locally situated interaction drama, and more importantly, it is meaningful as a stirring of universal moral spirits that can embrace the self as a competent community member.

Assuming a Victim's Posture

Assuming the posture of a victim is a condition for becoming pissed off, but it is hard to predict the moral infractions that drivers will discover as proof of insensitive treatment. Driving in Santa Monica, Dita is pulled over by a police officer "because a pedestrian who was jaywalking had placed one foot in the street" and Dita "continued to drive by without stopping." Reinforcing her sense of being victimized by laws that humiliate because of their oppressive stupidity, Dita gave

> the example of children in car seats. If you have a child under four years old in the car they must be strapped in a child car seat. On the other hand, if you are driving your neighbor's child who is seven months old, they can just be laying on the seat, not even strapped in.

Idiosyncratic sensitivities to oppression on the road are not peculiar to Dita. George is on hard times, out of work and prohibited by court

order from visiting his children. He feels especially vulnerable in many facets of his life, not the least when he is on the road. Because he lost his license he is not free to retaliate against bad drivers, who not only routinely break the rules of courtesy in driving but also can insult him with impunity. Virtually every time he drives now he vividly suffers this patent injustice!

Passengers are often unable to anticipate what will victimize a driver. Bang, a sixty-year-old Vietnamese immigrant businessman, is doing well economically. He drives "a new black Toyota 4-Runner," but to him it also feels that " 'other people target me and only cut me off, not anyone else.' " When the interviewer drove with him, she was surprised to find that "he even considered drivers who got in front of him from a distance [as] cutting him off." Craig, identified by his girlfriend as a Japanese-American "doctor of Chinese medicine" who practices as an acupuncturist and herbalist, is cut off by an "old man in a pickup truck." Despite the fact that Craig, complaining, "He didn't even look before he changed lanes!" acknowledges that the offender didn't see him, he cuts the fellow off in retaliation, remarking as he does, "Thought you got me, didn't you?"

One aspect of the self-definitional work entailed in becoming pissed off when driving is to feel personally victimized, and this may be accomplished even though one knows that the offending driver meant nothing personal, even when one is stuck with a mass of other drivers in a traffic jam. When there is no single other driver to blame, one may blame "those who are responsible." Cindy, for example, is having trouble pulling out of a "stack" parking lot because other cars are too close. A line of cars builds, waiting for her to exit, and the attendant looks on, laughing.

> I started to get angry then. I started thinking—why do they have this stupid stack parking anyway? . . . why did the people running UCLA have to give a thousand spaces in the students' garage to new medical personnel?

A second aspect of self-definition as victim is seeing one's suffering as the result of a violation of community standards. The victim does not demand any special privileges; by protesting he or she stands up for everyone's rights. Ellen, an "independent businesswoman," refers to the pattern of alternating ramp and highway cars in merger situations as " 'It's just the etiquette, you let one in, and then you go.' " When her turn came up and a woman on the highway kept inching up to block her entry, Ellen understood the offense, not just personally but as an attack on the community as a whole: " 'When she [cut me off], she let down the whole team.' " Many interviewees reflected the same spirit when, after describing a personal experience of victimization, they would add, "Now wouldn't that piss you off?"

A psychoanalyst driver showed the way to reconcile the apparent conflict between, on the one hand, feeling personally put upon by bad drivers and, on the other, perceiving drivers as bad when they appear to be unaware of the cars around them. Her phrase was that such drivers are "intentionally unconscious." It would follow that anyone standing up to such drivers would be directing the offender's attention to a failing that oppresses the entire driving public.

Just because the offense consists of an impersonal indifference to me, the offense is to everyone. With this understanding of self and other in place, an altruistic response starts to make sense. La Verne is mad at drivers who may be driving "fast" but do not get out of the "passing" lane when she presses from behind: " 'They're not following the rules, you know? so I start making a scene and yelling and honking.' " Bruce, a respiratory therapist, makes a point of cutting off people who cut him off, whether or not they did it on purpose, because "they should pay attention." His revenge isn't simply for personal satisfaction: "You wouldn't believe how many accidents are a result of people just not paying attention."

Bob, who is thirty-seven years old and works for a drug store, has an unusually worked-out moral philosophy to justify retaliation against miscreant drivers. He casts his responses as serving the interests that used to be served by social laws honoring natural selection, before society lost its disciplinary nerve.

> Civilization came about because we are beings who have evolved a social way of working together to keep our species going. As we evolved and changed through time, we worked out rules of living together . . . and the people who were incompetent and didn't follow those rules in the old days centuries ago got killed or kicked out of their society. That doesn't happen as much now, and it shouldn't, but California and Los Angeles drivers make me want to rethink that train of thought. I mean, we have rules now in our society, both formal and written, and others that are just as strong but unwritten, in all aspects of life in America. One of those areas is driving. . . . If you don't or can't follow those rules, you don't deserve to drive.

The interviewer, his girlfriend, caught the altruism in his aggressive views: "Bob is standing up for everyone when he yells at people, and cuts them off, and tailgates them, he is performing a public service. And he knows it." An optimist in the end, Bob goes out of his way

to teach bad drivers lessons, even though he suspects all along that they are " 'fucking brain-dead.' "

Typifying and Signifying: The Moral Attractions of Prejudice

In the first moment of self-definition in the process of becoming angry, the driver casts him- or herself as a victim. In a second moment, the person-becoming-pissed must turn more directly toward characterizing the other in a way that can sustain angry spirits. The key challenge here is to give the other a doubly resonant identity, one that, while appreciating a specific person in fine detail, also describes the other as the representative of a type of moral incompetence that one might confront virtually anywhere in society.

As a matter of the logistics of social interaction among drivers, the act of self-definition is much easier to bring off than a description of the other. One always carries rich familiarity with the object of self-definition. But the other is available to a driver only for some fleeting moments, and then often only as a person glimpsed at oblique angles within a largely opaque metal box. His or her perceptive competence severely constrained, the pissed-off driver's gaze must scramble to pick up features that can trigger a generalizing characterization.

Thus just after being cut off, drivers often turn immediately to focus sharply on the other, picking up whatever information is available: the make and model of the other's car, its state of maintenance, the driver's face and dress. At times drivers who have been cut off will make tricky maneuvers around traffic to get parallel to the other so that additional information can be acquired.[17]

At the same time, the victimized driver sets in motion a frenetic generalizing process as he or she seeks to tag the offending party with a seemingly fitting label, one that need stick just long enough for anger to emerge and run through a quick metamorphosis. In order to accomplish their dualistic descriptive task, drivers make dizzying jumps between specifics and generalizations, between noting details about makes of cars and reflecting on the nature of people "out there," between describing what happened at a particnlar intersection at a particular time of day and offering sociologically formulated explanations of general pathologies in society. Common examples of the latter are that the instant incident shows: why people get shot on the freeways, how civility is rapidly vanishing from life in L.A., and the shortcomings of various ascriptively defined subgroups of the population.

By exploring the different types of generalizations that drivers make, we can see how the process of characterizing the other provides the vehicle in which anger can run its course. There is no one substantive set of dimensions that drivers invoke to define the incompetence of those who offend them. The only universal element is an analytic jump from a given moment or move in driving behavior to the person's character as a whole. For the members of the current sample, this is achieved perhaps most often through applying "idiot" to an otherwise heterogeneous set of putative driving insensitivities and errors.

> That idiot driver [recalled Tara about an incident in which she was cut off close] was just obnoxious and annoying. He was like someone who wanted to take up every inch he could get on the road. It's OK with me, but he's got to watch out for other drivers on the road. He should make sure what he's doing is safe for everyone. Not to scare other drivers, like me. From that incident, I learned to be more aware on the road and watch out for stupid drivers.

Generalizing from a given driving act to the overall character of the offender, Tara reads the immediate situation for a meaning that she will take beyond it as she shifts her orientation to stupid drivers in general.

Irate drivers perceive various subclasses of faulty driving characters. "Space hoppers" who try to get ahead of the pack by making strategic little jumps into empty spaces irritate Francine. Using her perception of one or more space hops to characterize the driver, Francine tracks their fate when she can, and her irritation is sometimes resolved when "she actually enjoys seeing these space hoppers fail and end up a mile farther back that when they started." Similarly the tailgater type irritates George; he dreams of giving them their comeuppance. "Sometimes I'll fantasize about running a tailgater off the road."

In lieu of particular driving acts, angry drivers may fix on features of the offending driver's vehicle to give an encounter generalized meaning. Truck drivers are often seen along the following lines. As Pablo, age sixty-one, whose commute involves a drive to Burbank and a shuttle to Palmdale, puts it, "These truck drivers think everyone is just going to stop in their tracks or risk getting crushed; just because they don't value themselves doesn't mean they have to go fucking with me."

Sometimes angry drivers create novel character types by mixing features of the other's physique and car. Patrick, at thirty-three a successful title insurance salesman who lives in the "upper-middle class neighborhood of Studio City," imputed a "Napoleon's complex" to a driver of small stature who, in his Mercedes Benz and "cool little sunglasses on his balding head . . . [was] a little man driving an expensive car in hopes of impressing people." When Patrick "encounters these people he tries to 'bring them back down to earth and show them that their shit stinks like everyone else's.' "

The interviewer wisely asked Patrick if it would have made a difference if the driver who had cut him off was a tall woman in a Toyota Tercel. "He thought for second and with some hesitation he claimed it would not have made a difference. He said that he would have reacted just the same." His anger may have been the same, but it is a good bet that his characterization would have been different. The other driver must be defined as having caused the problem because of his indifference to or inability to appreciate the details of the situation around him. A patently inaccurate characterization will not work. But it does not matter much which type of prejudice the angry driver uses. Pressed by the need to act quickly in a situation of limited investigative possibilities, the driver works with what he or she finds readily available.

This is important to keep in mind when we turn to the next set of stereotypes, those related to race, because their politically sensational character invites the misleading view that they are simple revelations of causally significant racist motives. These data show that angry drivers use race interchangeably with stereotypes about politically insignificant characteristics. For some angry drivers there probably is an order of priority in the preference of race criteria over others, along the lines of: when working up anger toward another driver, look first to the other's apparent race, and if that will not work, go to sex, then age, then to type of driving malfeasance, then to type of car, etc. The data at hand do not permit the verification of such priorities. But they do show that the Los Angeles area provides rich possibilities for using racial and ethnic stereotypes to generalize about offending drivers, and the data also show that, even if racial prejudices are not essential to the stereotyping work that sustains anger, many drivers take their racial stereotypes very seriously.

One way of taking prejndices seriously is to offer them in the eminently respectable form of a well-researched sociological theory. Thns Rod, a Latino ex-marine, described a "tacky oriental lady who must have been over a hundred years old" as the person who made an illegal turn and hit him. No indifferent scholar he, Rod provided a documenting footnote for this view: " 'I have been to Korea and Japan and they drive all crazy and in different sorts of ways over there.' " Philip, a young musician we have met before, became outraged when, driving eastbound on Melrose and listening to a Melvin's tape, he became stuck behind two cars that stopped in traffic to have a conversation.

> Philip honked and yelled and was "belligerent at the fucking Iranians. Furious, he reached into his ashtray and grabbed a handful of pennies . . ." which he "flung" at the cars in front of him.

If offensive drivers are sometimes characterized as selfish, cliquish Iranians, the most consistently abused ethnicity in this sample is "Asian," in which I include "Japanese," "Korean," "Chinese," and "Asian." Barry, a middle-aged Jewish lawyer interviewed by a Korean student, explained that "most Asians pass their driver's test because they are given answers to the written test from the Asian driving schools," and "they need more driving experience before [they] are put on the road by themselves." Barry's explanation appears to be popular. When Ursula, a Latina, is cut off and blurts out the question, "That stupid Chinese, why do they get licenses?" her daughter says, "They buy their licenses, don't you know?"

Asian drivers are not unaware of these prejudices, and in order to fight back, some share them. The following narrative was told to a Japanese-American student by Hugh, a third-generation Japanese-American who works as an accountant in downtown L.A. Hugh introduces the problematic situation with: "Can you believe those people that drive forty-five miles an hour on the freeway?"

> I got stuck behind a Honda. The rest of the cars were going at least seventy. I looked at my speedometer and I was going forty-five! I tried to pass . . . but . . . the other cars were going too fast. So I started to tailgate the car in front of me. You'd think they would get the hint! But the car just kept going at forty-five. So I decided to be rude and honk. The car did not speed up. Boy was I mad. I finally saw a break. . . . As I passed the Honda I saw an Asian driver. I was pretty upset so I flipped the guy off as I passed him. Man!

The interviewer asked him "why he was so upset." " 'Well, people are always making cracks about us Asian drivers. It's those kind of drivers that give us a bad name.' "

Whatever the stereotypes that prevail in other areas of social life in Los Angeles, on the road Asians apparently are not "the model minority." African-Americans were insulted only once in this sample (by a Latino yelling "chango"), while Mexicans (as such or as "beaners") received a few insults. As the reader will see below, several stereotypes commonly associated with, and perhaps code phrases for, whites, such as "yuppie," "suburban Volvo mother," "a Betty," and "rich punk kid," were damned far more often than blacks. Mars, one of the student interviewers and herself white, offered this example of a popular prejudice against a subtype of Caucasian:

> Immediately, when I saw the woman cut me off I made all kinds of generalizations about what kind of woman she was because she was a

> "blond in a convertible in L.A." At that point every blond, bimbo stereotype came to my mind.

If "racism" is at work here, it is not by simple extension from patterns extrinsic to the driving situation. We may get a clearer view of how racial stereotyping works in sustaining the driver's anger after we review how other ascriptive criteria are used. Age is commonly taken as a revealing indicator of driving incompetence. Hugh, in describing being held up by a car that blocked two lanes, recalled,

> I tried to swerve around it but when I did, the car swerved the same direction as I did. I saw this old man behind the wheel, you know, they shouldn't be allowed to drive. . . . Those old people put everyone on the road in danger.

Even when elderly drivers go fast, their age may be cited to give generalized significance to an irritating incident. Mario, forty-two years old and an export-import businessman, recalled being cut off close by a woman who was driving a white Volvo aggressively: "you think older people would be a little more subdued."

But if age is commonly cited, it is not any particular age category that receives abuse. Young drivers are frequently singled out as reckless. "Businessmen" and "mothers," categories with age connotations somewhere between "fucking geriatrics" and "wild punks," are also damned, sometimes for being so self-contented or preoccupied with their own presumably conservative concerns that they will not let working people get quickly to their more oppressive responsibilities. Tony, who works at a multitude of jobs (in his father's antique store, installing car alarms, managing a children's swimming school), recalled getting angry driving on Coldwater Canyon, a one-lane (in each direction) road that he drives daily. Referring to "dickheads" who drive too slowly because of excessive caution, he described a "Volvo, a woman toting around her kids" who, because she was driving slowly, "shouldn't have taken Coldwater." The interviewer suggests: "Is it like they shouldn't be there when you are late for work?" "Yeah." In another interview, Marnie, an art teacher at a high school in the Valley who lives in Malibu, had to brake sharply to avoid an accident with a car that pulled out unexpectedly on a canyon road. Marnie spontaneously yelled, "You stupid fucking bitch," and described the offender as a "housewife in her ugly minivan" who had been "thinking she owned the road."

Like age, sex is also frequently used to give generalized meaning to angering encounters, but as with age, sexual stereotyping is neither unidirectional in target nor simply cross-sex in the relation of source and target of insult. As the last example indicates, women often see the offender as a woman, and men often find that the enemy is male. Mark, the roofer noted earlier, voiced anger at many types of drivers, including a fellow driving "one of those macho bullshit, bigger-than-necessary trucks." Of course men in the sample voiced the classic "typical woman driver!," for example about a car that failed to exit although its directional light was blinking that message. In complementary fashion, some women saw "an excess of testosterone" behind bad driving manners.

The categories invoked by drivers to mobilize their anger read like an old-fashioned sociology textbook. In addition to ethnicity, race, sex, and age, social class is used to give folk-theoretical meaning to experiences of being cut off, where the proxy used to identify social class is the brand, year, and condition of the car. Drivers presumed to be wealthy because they drive expensive cars are very commonly abused with phrases ringing with a revolutionary passion of class resentment that would thrill the most despondent Marxist radical. Here are but a few of the many examples:

- Hilaria: "You have to go with the flow. I go with the flow. There are no exclusive rights. And it's always some asshole in a BMW. BMWs think that they own the road. But they can't just cut people off. Mercedes owners, the same."
- Darlene, who tried to cut off a driver who had cut her off, only to be cut off again: "She wanted to avenge herself and all of her fellow drivers against the BMW, and she felt that she had failed in her mission. She . . . recognized some jealousy—rich people always seem to come out ahead, on top, whatever. . . . [This incident] made her realize that she had been waiting for a chance to put a rich yuppie in his or her place."
- Catherine, a middle-aged housing inspector for the city, after just avoiding an accident with a sports car that ran a light, damns "little, rich, hotshot L.A. people."
- Drew, a CPA, focuses his anger on a range of privileged types, noting, "One can tell a lot about another individual by the automobile that they drive." Struggling to rank the offenders, he declares that he is most angry at "yuppies" in BMWs talking on car phones, or perhaps at "middle-aged women in Jaguars talking on the car phone with their poodles panting in the backseat"; but then he recalls "the worst . . . those little teenagers who go around driving their daddys' cars and sports cars with their cute little girlfriends and driving as if they owned the whole damn road."

Lest this rhetoric of class resentment be taken as a sign of a generalized revolutionary outlook, it should be noted that substantial indignation is also directed against those presumed, on the basis of the vehicles that they drive, to be poor. In recalling a time when she stopped off at Trader Joe's to pick up something quick for dinner, Dana notes: "I was waiting to pull into the parking lot when some woman in a beat-up old car pulled in front of me when it was clearly my turn." The shabby condition of the offender's car is invoked, I suggest, not as a feature compounding the offense but as an indication of the moral incompetence that lies behind it. Ellen, trying to merge onto the 405 after working out at a Sports Connection club, is frustrated by " 'this one chick in a Volkswagen or some other stupid-ass car [who] kept inching forward even though I was ahead of her.' "

Angry drivers invoke the same variables to describe the objects of their attentions as are commonly used by sociologists working with statistical data. Demographic characteristics are especially useful for explaining people's behavior when you must come up with an explanation based only on a quick glance at others' lives. Pissed-off drivers take for granted that, with a look at another car, they can quickly and accurately perceive such personal identifiers as race, ethnicity, age, sex, and social-class status. In focusing on demographic factors, angry drivers rely on a common folk culture that assumes that such factors are major ubiquitous determinants of people's behavior.

When labeling offenders, drivers are seriously concerned about the empirical grounding of their descriptions. While they must work quickly, they do not take that constraint as an excuse to be sloppy in their data gathering. Yolanda, a Latina, focuses intently as her RX7 is almost hit by a car speeding out of a parking lot: "As I looked through my rearview mirror, I could tell the driver was a young male, possibly of Filipino or Spanish descent, in his early twenties." If it appears that their initial descriptions are in error, they work quickly to make corrections. May, who is "half Asian," "takes great pride in not falling into the category of stereotypically absentminded Asian drivers." One recent night, as she is returning from her workout to "the ever-popular Juice Club in Brentwood," she finds herself behind "an old beat-up compact car of an unidentifiable make. The car, and therefore its driver, are failing to drive even close to the speed limit." First she says, " 'fucking geriatrics,' " then she sees that the driver is a young man. After tailgating him, she passes him on the right and "remembers recognizing the driver to be a Persian man in his early to midtwenties, with what she referred to as a 'giant unibrow.' " First using relatively superficial indicators like the status of the car and its failure to be an identifiable brand, May moves more closely in, trying an age characterization. Then she shows the discipline to drop that variable and switch to an ethnic dimension when the evidence rules out earlier hypotheses. May adds a kind of methodological footnote with the "unibrow" observation, as this in effect displays her coding procedures for attributing ethnic identity.

Considered as lay sociologists, drivers are often refreshingly humble about the grounds of their knowledge. Some respondents volunteered confessions of biases that would undermine the credibility of their favorite social portraits of bad drivers. Mark, the unemployed roofer, for example, told his interviewer:

> Once more he lost a position with a solid roofing company to a Mexican crew who will work for less. And he told me when he is driving and sees somebody driving poorly he tends to want that person to be Mexican so he can go off on them.

And Bob, the motorized Darwinian we met earlier, invokes sex and ethnicity whenever he can, but he acknowledges that he is

> an equal opportunity insulter. No one type of driver is safe from his derogatory remarks. He says "I match the insult to the person pissing me off."

Many of the respondents voiced a self-deprecating humor about the slim rational bases for their anger, discounting any extrasituational validity for what are delivered in situ as strongly held views.

What we have here most clearly is broad evidence of situational practices of characterizing others in demographic terms in order to achieve a generalizing sense within the specific moments of anger. It is just not enough for the angry driver to structure his or her experience within the limits of the view that "someone cut me off, damn it!" Nor is it enough to imagine the other in a way that would suit one's fantasies unrestrained by obdurate reality. A *dualistic* descriptive job is required. A perspective must be constructed that fits both the *specifics* at hand and casts the other as *representative* of some class of people.

By constructing a transcendent meaning that is tailored to the local situation, the enraged driver has a practical objective, that of discovering a way out of the oppressive moment itself. Now we can follow pissed-off drivers as they rush to seize the possibilities along that escape route.

Flippings Off, Domino Games, and Other Narrative Strategies to Recover the Tacitly Grounded Body

Will is a sixty-six-year-old college professor and a father of six. He lives in the Valley and teaches educational psychology at a Cal State campus. Representing the prevailing opinion in academic psychological and sociological circles, Will would explain the dynamics of anger in rational terms. Will admits to anger when he is cut off but states that his response is only to "give a look." He explicates this look as conveying a cool reasoning.

> I am mad and you have diminished me somewhat. I resent the manner in which you drove and I'm giving you some negative feedback about your style as it affects other people. Please change.

This message neatly points out Will's sense of victimization and explicitly generalizes the meaning of the encounter, which he treats as an opportunity to teach the offender a lesson that will benefit the community as a whole, not himself in particular.

But when called on to relate a specific incident of anger, Will describes a more metaphorically dramatized and emotionally animated response. A young man who thought that he, Will, had cut him off, would

> roar up along side me, yell, would cut in front of me and jam on his brakes. If I went slow, he would go slow right on my rear bumper. [When they were both stopped at a red light] . . . he pulled up next to me and I called out to him a rather unflattering name. [Which was?] I believe, if memory serves me correct, I called him an anal orifice, an asshole! . . . very quickly the anger diminished and I got back into my fear because my wife was with me at the time and it had frightened her a great deal and I realized my responsibility in it.

Will's insulting shout is an effort to humiliate the offender publicly. He wants to "teach a lesson" to the offender in the moralistic rather than the educational sense of the phrase. If anger in driving is virtually a universal experience, very few drivers are routinely acting as road knights sworn to defend the rules of the road against those who would flout them, coldly running personal risks to defend the community's honor as defined by the DMV (California's Department of Motor Vehicles). Instead, the angry driver wants to dramatize his or her relationship to the offender in a way that emphasizes the offender's extraordinarily inferior moral status and by inference, his or her own superiority. What Will's confession means for our inquiry is that we still must explain why drivers naturally, without self-reflective thinking, try to transcend their anger by *constructing moral dramas* about the provocative incident.

The extent to which angry drivers try to enact coherent multiact narratives in which they regain the higher moral ground vis-à-vis their driving enemies is striking. Sometimes frustrated drivers simply sigh or utter a single-syllable "shit," but there is a great variety of much more elaborated responses that angry drivers favor as ways of publicly making sense of the situation. They give the finger to the offender, swerve around intervening cars to reciprocate a cut off, tailgate tailgaters, etc.

How does expressing a moralistic understanding of the interaction serve the project of quelling anger? It is not enough to explain why angry drivers construct moralistic *understandings* about the others who provoke them. More specifically, we must explain why angry drivers spontaneously and *dramatically express* (e.g., by shouting in their enclosed cars) or *go public* with the stories that they create about the scene. Why isn't it enough that Will just *think* his moralistic interpretation of what has transpired? Just thinking insulting thoughts about the offender does not work, indeed, "just thinking" frustrates more than it resolves, because it heightens rather than transcends the very self-consciousness that spurs anger on.

The scenes that we are about to review are colorful and their color suggests that there is a motivating interest in sensationalism at work. Indeed there is, and for two reasons. First, angry people do sensational things because they are trying to create a sensuality through which they can overcome their anger. Second, people in rage want to express their understandings in the form of dramatic stories. The link between the sensual and moral dynamics of anger is at the heart of the causal career of this emotion.

The proof that moral and sensual dynamics are critical contingencies in the empirical careers of rage lies in the details of what people do when they get pissed off. Angry people may experience wild feelings but they do not act randomly or go berserk in their behavior. The patterned conduct of anger provides systematic resources for explanation. In these patterns we can glimpse the hidden dependence of the naturally enacted self on its silent embrace by a sacred community.

Notes on the Well-Flipped Finger

A finger well flipped at an offending driver routinely works to transform the emotions of the pissed-off party. There is no apparent social group limitation to the attractions of, much less to the ability to understand, the folk meaning of "flipping" (sometimes "flicking") someone

"off." The drivers who recalled performing spontaneous acts of this sort include a truck driver from the Inland Empire, a Vietnamese refugee who came to L.A. after first living in Montana, middle-aged attorneys and accountants, a retired college professor, and, among several middle-aged mothers, a nurse, a psychoanalyst, and multiple homemakers. These data contain no instances in which the respondents doubt whether or not they have given or received "the finger," although it is not inconceivable that such an event would occur.[18] That a particular gesture is so widely and routinely understood as unambiguous suggests that it exploits mechanical properties that are reserved with some care from alternative uses.

Giving the finger requires the use of a particular finger held up from an otherwise closed hand: not the pinky, which hangs at an oblique angle off of a lazy wrist to suggest a fey character; nor the thumb, which when stuck up from a fist often conveys a hearty, friendly meaning; nor the index finger, which has vast experience in the precise work of focusing attentions away from the person behind the referencing hand; but the middle finger. As the longest finger of the hand, the middle finger reaches the farthest out into the world even while it retains a powerful tie to its base in the hand, which it roughly divides into two sections. Easily capable of a rapid, stiff erection that intersects and is juxtaposed against a balled hand, the middle finger is aesthetically unparalleled for suggesting an aggressive phallic penetration of another's world. When thrust upward rapidly and then stopped abruptly, the middle finger creates a stiffness that runs back through the arm to disappear at some ambiguous point in the body, at once manifesting an outward thrust and demonstrating that this projection is powerfully controlled from the center of its owner's being. It is in just this regard that the ring finger, which for most people can only weakly be extended in radical juxtaposition to a closed fist, fails in the intra-hand competition for selection as the finger's finger.[19]

In obscene gestures suggesting erotic sex, the middle finger may be moved languidly through or may trace the internal perimeter of a circle made with an opposing hand, a motion that depicts a cooperatively worked out intersection of bodies. But the finger in giving the finger, while it may be accompanied by a sadistic smile, demonstrates no desire to please. The thrust of the message is a thrust, a movement that is passionate in its meaning but does not suggest eros so much as an unfeeling, even indifferent desire to force the other into unwanted feelings. The surreal intention is to get the finger into the other without subjecting the feelings of the finger's owner to the personal world he or she enters. So, the finger doesn't get one or the other "off" in the erotic sense of merged and mutually ambiguated identities. Instead, with a connotation of casual cruelty, the finger flips or flicks the other off. The suggestion is that the owner of the finger preserves his or her integrity even as he or she violates the integrity of the other.

The aesthetic features of giving the finger make a neat fit with the narrative tasks and communicative challenges faced by the gesturer. Consider direction. "Down yours" could be given an offensive meaning, but it does not signal as well. Pointed upward, the middle finger makes the highest profile that one finger can achieve, maximizing the possibilities that the message will be received effectively at a great distance. Note also that the finger does not achieve the intended meaning when it is pointed horizontally forward toward the target, much less back toward the gesturing party. The finger must be pointed upward anywhere from about a thirty-degree to somewhat more than a ninety-degree angle in order that its message reliably be thrust outward. Gestured in this manner, the finger shares a central feature with the shouted curse, which in another manner reaches deep into the body to pull out something ugly to be thrown at the offender.

"Up yours" is a phrase commonly used to capture the meaning of the gesture. That there is often an anal metaphoric target is suggested by the aggressiveness of the motion, which indicates that the penetration will have to overcome substantial resistance, and by the irrelevance of either the gesturer's or the target's sexual identity. With this gesture, an offended driver takes the offense out of his or her experience, where it was implanted by an inconsiderate intervention, captures it in a finger, and "sticks it to" the culpable party. By symbolizing a brutal assault on an anal target, it implies: "I'm messing you up by attacking your most primordial source of self-control to show how you've messed with me."

Relying on a deeply institutionalized community of understanding, the gesturer takes for granted that the targeted party will, in a moment's observation, appreciate an entire narrative that is indexed at the tip of a finger. Seeing the finger pointed up, the recipient is supposed to understand that it is nevertheless pointed at him or her, and that it makes reference to prior actions on his or her part that intervened in the world of the finger flipper. The finger is an effort to sum up an emotionally elaborate history, and the recipient is presumed capable of instantly recognizing that the finger is insisting on a conclusive commentary.

These various hermeneutic dimensions of the finger are not post hoc academic inventions; they are themselves appreciated by pissed-off drivers. Consider the experience of Mars when she found a woman

shaking her head at her. Mars understood that the woman was accusing her of having changed lanes improperly. Mars then flipped the other party off and screamed at her within her own car's sealed interior. The finger was useful in focusing anger.

> I believe that I interpreted her shaking her head at me as her trying to instill some feeling of shame in me. . . . I guess I turned whatever shame I may have felt into anger so as to avoid placing blame on myself. I also focused my anger on her by yelling and giving her the finger.

For the finger-throwing party, the pointed nature of the gesture is central. As a practical matter the victim often has a very small "window of opportunity" for sending a message to the offender. Traffic may soon create insurmountable perceptual obstacles between the two. For example, the other soon may not be facing in a direction that makes reception of the message possible. Or if the offended party waits too long, the target might exit the road before receiving the finger. The communicative power of the finger as an instantly recognizable, narratively rich folk gesture tempts the angry driver to try to isolate, package, and send off to the other the disturbance that he or she has him- or herself felt.

Drivers do not invent the culture of the finger; they find it well adapted to their interaction setting. The device of the finger, although it long predates the invention of the automobile, appears to have been shaped culturally in order to exploit the distinctive possibilities of just such interactions as are found in the passing relations of motorists. Where the possibilities for sustained and intimate interaction are much greater, for example when mutually hostile parties are seated face-to-face, many fond users of the finger find themselves severely constrained. The angry driver does not want to start a conversation with the finger; he or she wants to flip it "off," using the finger as a final comment about an intersection of lives from which he or she is speedily departing.

Eloquent in its silence, the finger communicates simply by being seen. If picked up by its target, the victim-gesturer can take satisfaction in the aesthetics of his or her storytelling. With the simple, quiet flip of a single finger, the gesturer can metamorphose from a state in which he or she had been molested by someone who rudely invaded his or her space to a state of relaxation, once again sealed in quiet comfort and moving through public space in a mobile private living room. The finger in this way has attractions superior to yelling out obscenities, an act that ruffles the avenger's composure and interferes with the ability to listen to the radio or talk on the car phone.

The finger points backward and forward at once, not spatially but in the temporal dimension of its narrative reach. It stands for an offense received and it depicts what would be a just fate for the offender. Even if no one but the avenging victim and the offender-recipient is aware of the gesture, the offender invokes the presence of "the community" as a third party to their interaction when he or she sticks up a middle finger. The community is made present by the compact hermeneutic character of the gesture. That is, the gesturer presumes, usually correctly, that the recipient will unproblematically draw on what both take to be a shared, preexisting, universal culture as he or she instantly grasps a rich narrative meaning. With the community present, the avenging victim can put the recipient to shame. As the recipient takes in the humiliating gesture, the avenger is cleansed of the anger that was born of his or her own humiliation during the earlier asymmetrical interaction.

The magical efficacy of this slight gesture in transforming the avenger's emotions is no less curious than the effect that the gesture has on the recipient. Finger flickers are no fools. They know that people to whom they give the finger are typically not gracious recipients of the gift. Indeed it seems that most people find it impossible to see someone giving them the finger and not get mad themselves. In such cases, what the gesturer essentially accomplishes is a mutual acknowledgment that the emotional lives of the two are intertwined. The gesturer might not get away with it; the offender-recipient might get in a responsive finger that sticks in the victim as the offender exits the highway laughing. But they are now joined, emotional gut to emotional gut.

This joining, this intertwining of spirited emotions is essential to the transforming power of the gesture. In heavy traffic, Bill, who sells computer equipment through mail order, grinds gears on purpose as he shifts from second to first. Making the car bear audible witness to his suffering helps a bit, but, like shouting into a closed car, Bill's way of representing anger has clear limitations. The angry finger flipper, by contrast, works more strategically to get out of his or her insulated world in order to get back into it peacefully.

The magical efficacy of the finger is that when the recipient sees it he or she will feel it, and that when the sender sees the recipient seeing the gesture, this will excise the irritation that caused the gesturing party's anger. Angry drivers attest to their belief in this magic in various ways. An angry driver who has been cut off by a car that is now in front of him or her may hold up a middle finger in the confidence that it can shoot its magical energy successfully if the offender will just look up to the rearview mirror for a brief moment. The offender's glance to the rearview mirror is taken to mean that he or she is acknowledging

guilt. Joyous that an offender has received their gesture, angry drivers sometimes proudly prolong the erection of their middle fingers, confident that so long as the offender sees it he or she will continue to feel it, and understanding that if the offender stops looking it is because he or she cannot take it. Finger flippers also know that they can geometrically increase the power of their message if they can arrange suitable eye contact. If the victim-gesturer not only sees the recipient seeing the finger but also perceives the victim seeing that he or she, the gesturing party, is watching as the target takes in the gesture, that will be much more forceful. One recipient in such a scenario complained that the other party was "mind fucking" him. After the finger transforms the visual into the tactile, the eye contact drives it in, not just as a figure of speech but as a figure that works actively to restructure the recipient's experience.

The gesturer assumes that even the recipient, though unwilling to receive the message, cannot resist its emotional impact. In effect, a form of consent that is mutual has opened a bidirectional communicative channel even though on one side it is grudging. Now the intertwining that the victim lost when he or she was cut off is reestablished in a new direction with the offender-recipient. The surreal dimensions of both extensions of self into the world—that of the lost dwelling-in-the-car and that of the new projection of a finger into another person's experience—are equally real.

The victim's objective is to drain off the electric reality of anger by grounding his or her moralistic understanding of their interaction in the offender's corporeal experience.[20] This is why Will, the college psychology professor, could not resolve his anger at a rude young driver simply by calmly articulating a rationale for his irritation and delivering a lesson that would improve his adversary's driving manners. The angry driver wants to stir up the enemy sensually, not really to change the other's mind but to change the other's bodily experience so that he or she can change his or her own corporeal experience. If the avenging driver wants to be a teacher, it is the pedagogic style of the desk-pounding or bible-thumping moralist that he or she exhibits, not the enlightened patience of a driving school instructor.

On Automobilized Mimicry and Domino Games

As disturbing as the event may be, the target of a finger also receives an implicit offer to end the interaction. Because the angered party's purpose is to flip one's anger off, the target can usually end the interaction by taking it in the sense of not visibly returning the officious present or otherwise resisting its accusation. Yet the compliant recipient, in not protesting the characterization of "punished offender," does not have to see nonresponse as making him or her a loser in the transaction. Shaking one's head slightly, one can assume a posture of martyred indulgence toward such pathetic and coarse people as are these finger flippers who make so much of the inevitable petty disturbances of life.

Beyond the finger, there is a variety of ways to transform anger by dramatizing the interaction. Anger-transforming devices share two characteristics: (1) implicating the community as an audience, and (2) a practical activity that physically dramatizes one's superior moral understanding.

One neat way of accomplishing a satisfying ending is by activating third parties who damn the offender for the victim and on behalf of the community as a whole. Drivers who are pissed off when they are delayed by a car that is waiting to make a prohibited left turn may keep their horns blasting in the hope of attracting the attentions of a fortuitously passing police officer. Even if no cop arrives, the angry horn blower has grounds to feel satisfaction in the awareness that he or she has publicly punished the offender with the fear of apprehension. If he or she sees that other drivers are present, the horn blowing calls them to witness the moral incompetence of the offender. Then, having become just another member of the audience, the aggrieved driver can move discreetly to the background. Thus Paul Ramirez honked his horn loud when a slow driver put Paul in danger by slowing even more in order to allow a truck to merge.

> I tried getting everyone else's attention—just to show them what a pitiful driver is on this freeway. To humiliate him and make him responsible for almost making me crash.

In some cases of invoking communal authority to redress one's identity as a victim, the metamorphosis out of anger does not require that one witness the final act in the drama. Max was driving a diesel back to the truck yard from the Downey area, trying to get onto the 60 north, when a young "Mexican male" in a paint-primed, older American car "would not speed up or slow down to let him in." Max explained why he did not brake but forced the offender either to accept being hit or to move over: it takes his diesel four times as long to stop as it takes a car. The offender then cut in front of Max and slowed down. Thinking of "a news special he had recently heard, which was about how Mexicans were purposely braking in front of cars on the freeway, to get rear-ended and get some money," Max devised his revenge.

> He decided to get on channel 9 on his CB radio, which is the emergency channel, and report this driver as being a drunk driver who was disrupting traffic in many ways. . . . after he had radioed in his information, Max started honking and yelling at the other driver . . . [who] finally took off, speeding away and flipping off Max. Max said that this just made him laugh, because he was thinking about how the driver would feel when the police pulled him over.

The driver's anger is instantly transformed by the perception that the curtain has fallen on the drama just after a public definition of his or her superiority. The following incident is unusually instructive in this regard. Cutting off "a perfectly coiffed woman in a green Jaguar" who had just cut her off, Imelda recalls that she

> pressed hard on my accelerator to make a big cloud of smoke puff out at her. I gave a wicked giggle and smiled to myself as I hurriedly drove on to meet my friend.

A couple of weeks later, however, Imelda's understanding of the drama was transformed, and so were her emotions, when she received notification of a smog inspection that was triggered by a complaint against her car. Revisiting the incident, Imelda realized that the last critical narrative moment in the interaction was not the trail of smoke behind her but the display of her license plate as she sped off.

The angry driver's narrative project is to package his or her anger in a story of moral superiority that, if neatly sent off, demonstrably received, and not rejected and returned by its targeted recipient, will effectively carry his or her anger away. Perhaps the most convincing proof that the angry driver's story of righteous indignation has been well told is evidence that its target has become angry. Bruce, a respiratory therapist, is cut off by a black Jeep ("he came an inch away") as he drives with his girlfriend on the 101. Bruce then works hard to end up with the proverbial last laugh.

> Because it "really pissed" him off, Bruce maneuvered for several minutes until he could "cut that asshole off." The Jeep driver then "flipped" Bruce off and again cut him off. Ignoring his girlfriend's request to "knock it off," Bruce, who at this point was "on fire," cut the Jeep off and smiled as he was passing, "just to tick him off." As Bruce moved to exit to the 134, the Jeep driver, at this point unable to equal the score, "pulled up next to" Bruce "on the shoulder of the freeway [and] was screaming something" and "flipping" Bruce off. Now ignoring the fellow, Bruce "suddenly found the whole thing funny." Exiting at Victory, Bruce thought "the guy was an idiot for risking a ticket or his life to catch up."

Like Bruce, Catherine, a housing inspector, takes cathartic satisfaction from seeing her own anger reappear in the experience of an offender.

> Driving home depressed after having given a "Mexican family of ten or twelve" a notice to vacate their home within five days because of their failure to remedy longstanding health violations, Catherine finds that it's stop-and-go on the freeway. She notices a car weaving around traffic behind her ("so stupid . . . they're not going to get anywhere that much quicker than everybody else"), "there was no way I was going to let him get in front of me. So I drove for awhile keeping him boxed in by speeding up or slowing down when I had to. I felt an almost sick sense of pleasure in watching him get mad!"

Emotions in everyday social interaction live and die in contextually situated metaphors. By changing the metaphor that describes the course of his or her relations with others, a person can transform the very body of his or her experience. The right metaphor, well enacted, will serve effectively as a bridge that allows anger to pass naturally from one driver to another. For a closer understanding of how this metamorphosis works, we need to trace the path of anger over this symbolic interpersonal bridge. Simply to say that the victim's anger is "displaced" is to leave confused the temporal and causal ordering of emotional change, and to obscure the practical story-creating work through which the victim endeavors so earnestly to undermine the offender's emotions.

It would indeed be magic if the "victim's" anger left his or her body before showing up in that of its target. Instead, anger stops controlling the driver's experience only after he or she sees it shaping the experience of his or her opposite number. If the victim can re-create the process through which he or she became angry in the offender's experience, the victim gains a spectacle to stand off from and admire. And if the angry driver's dramatization of revenge is sufficiently artful, he or she may take the appreciative perspective of a spectator on his or her own performance even without witnessing the transformation of the other's emotions.

As spectacle and as practical narrative project, the angered driver's dramatization of a revenge scenario provides a publicly recognizable place in cultural space from which to savor the transformation of a rudely fractured experience. If fingers are used, what they will often raise is an oblique awareness of sexual and violent themes. These bring

a resonance and provide additional fascinations in which the avenging actor can delight. No longer an impotent victim, the once-pissed-off driver becomes a titillated observer of the autonomous life force that his or her symbolic creation has taken on.

Meanwhile, however, the other party is likely also to feel like a victim and to experience vengeful actions as cutting off his or her own ongoing involvement in driving. Adopting the same strategy of representing the sources of his or her anger in order to transcend it, the target of revenge often produces a specifically complementary response. Here is an everyday example. Carolina is cut off by a BMW as it exits a gas station. She then "laid on my horn and threw my hands up." At this point Carolina employs a new modality, the obnoxious sound of the horn, to cut objectively into the offender's experience, and with her hands she dramatizes how he had interrupted her hands-on involvement with driving. That performance would have been a satisfying one for Carolina, except that the BMW driver then blew *his* horn and threw *his* hands up, mocking the moralized story that she had been conveying. In effect, he undercut her story line by cunningly exploiting it as a narrative resource, effectively dramatizing his superiority, not only as a driver but also as a warrior in righteous road battles. At this point, Carolina attempted a coup de grâce by maneuvering successfully to cut him off with her car.

If Carolina is successful and meets with no reciprocating response, she will have restored herself to the relaxed embrace of a moralized social form, and the BMW driver will be left cut off both from his pre-Carolina involvement in driving *and* from the brief dramatic career that he had launched. Drivers who have been cut off love to get revenge but even more they love to leave the offender hanging on to an aborted effort to reciprocate their vengeful response. The spectacle of a rude driver writhing in frustration, unable to relax back into an unselfconscious engagement in driving, is one they can enjoy almost indefinitely.

As drivers insult each other, they use complementarity as a tactic, not as an end in itself. Pairs of drivers can create virtual sagas as each seeks to give a finishing touch to the public story of what has been going on. I will describe here two of the forms these sagas commonly take.[21]

The first is an extraordinary incident in this data set, although it illustrates the dynamics of a kind of news story for which L.A. became famous in the 1980s. B.G., a lab technician, was trying to move into the right lane on Rossmore in order to make a right turn where it ends at Wilshire, and he found that

> an old Arabian man driving a Nissan [in the right lane] wasn't advancing and wasn't slowing down, he was maintaining his speed . . . so that B.G. couldn't pull into the right-hand lane.

B.G. felt forced to cut the Nissan off in order to make his turn. The Nissan's driver then moved to the left lane and flicked off B.G. while passing him. B.G. responded in kind. His

> finger forcefully jabbed up into the air and halted suddenly, then was lowered a bit and quickly jabbed up to the same level again for emphasis. The man in the Nissan, however, kept his finger calmly up the whole time B.G. was giving him the finger and then turned.

Two minutes later B.G. saw the same driver speeding by, while shaping his hand into the form of a gun pointed at him. Explaining that he "felt violated and invaded," B.G. sped to catch up with the Nissan, then reached under his seat to pull out and point a gun. B.G. "now felt powerful." Proud of his "counterattack," he said to himself, "This isn't a finger, is it buddy?" The Nissan driver slammed on his brakes, and so did B.G., who then watched his opponent leave the scene on a side street. As B.G. saw that his opponent "had become submissive," he commented to himself with sarcasm and relish, "I guess he doesn't want to play anymore."

B.G.'s use of the play metaphor suggests that a kind of game theory is necessary to understand the social-psychological dynamics of anger in evolving interactions. Pairs of angry drivers often produce sets of moves along the lines of a game of dominos. Dominos are played with rectangular tiles, each of which is divided in half, each half either showing a blank face or displaying a set of one to six dots. In placing a tile, a player matches an as-yet-unmatched half of an opponent's tile and leaves a new challenge for the opponent to match. The winner is the player who adds his or her last tile to the growing chain, leaving his opponent stuck with unplaced tiles. The basic procedure of such a game, which is at once to match and provide a new challenge, is what often binds together the gestures of two angry drivers.

Unlike dominos players, however, drivers are not bound by common norms or a shared affiliation to rules that frame the domain of play within bounds of civility. Each may be quite willing to violate norms of safety and criminal laws while seeking to meet and go beyond the opponent. The dominos motif is produced through a shared understanding that one may transcend anger by re-presenting its provocation. Frequently the re-presentation is not quite identical to the pre-

ceding move but captures it in a new modality or adds the flourish of awareness that the re-creation is a re-creation. In the last incident, for example, B.G. provides a hard touch of reality as he mocks a mock gun with a real one.

As in dominos, a player-driver cannot just repeat his prior moves if he or she is to transcend anger by re-presenting it. What each gesticulating driver strives for is a narrative ending that will recast the meaning of the entire interaction as leading up to this, the moment of a last laugh. In search of a story line that will leave him or her one up just as the last scene ends, the angry driver changes genres, tropes, modalities.

The following example of automobile dominos reveals just such a desperate and inventive search. Cesar, fifty-one and "middle class," has taken the day off to help his daughter handle the problems with bank and credit card accounts that followed the theft of her purse. As he approaches a stretch of road where a right-side lane ends and merges into another, he sees a woman in a Jeep coming up the right lane rapidly from the rear. He sees her as trying to get ahead substantially in traffic by exploiting the empty space that had been created by cars that, like Cesar's, had already moved left.

There now develop four complementary moves in at least four stages. The first phase of a given stage is designated A and its complement "B."

> 1A and 1B: Cesar accelerates so that the Jeep would not be able to cut into his lane, and then he watches the Jeep run up onto the curb, pass on the right, and cut in ahead of him anyway.
>
> 2A and 2B: Cesar honks, tailgates, and flips her off. She returns the hand gesture.
>
> 3A and 3B, and 4A: She turns right and he follows, racing up to her, lowering his window and shouting obscenities including "you goddamn bitch!" She responds with "you motherfucking cocksucker!" and [4A] she swerves her car to the right, toward his.
>
> 4B: As both throw insults and fingers toward each other, Cesar takes a turn that follows his route but takes him out of the interaction, but not before instructing his daughter to write down the license plate of the Jeep.

In 1A and B, Cesar meets his opponent's speedy effort to better her position against everyone in traffic by mimicking her strategy and adding a personal note, which he does by speeding up specifically in response to her. She speeds and adds a new element, the innovative

use of the curb as a passing lane, an egregiously illegal move that attests to the power of her will.

In 2A and B, Cesar introduces nonverbal, audible and visual means of cutting into her experience; she responds in kind, holding on to the advantage of being ahead of him.

In 3A and B, Cesar adds insulting language, bringing the sexual theme, previously suggested by finger flipping, into the manifest focus of interaction; she responds in kind.

In 4A, she adds an element of physical assault. In 4B, Cesar appears to abandon the conflict, leaving her as the victor. But he has her license number and through his work in the insuring of cars, he tells his daughter, he will use her license number to access personal information, implying that he can affect her license or insurance costs. Cesar leaves, his anger transformed into a private, as yet unspecified scenario of sweet revenge. The scene ends as a win-win situation, each driver imagining that he or she has been left in the lead.

Doing battle on the public streets of Los Angeles, driver-storytellers do not need advice of the sort that is common in the area's sales-driven culture: "Close, close, close, always be closing." Anger rises in search of its transformation, and the drivers' chase evolves as each proposes to the other a finishing touch of this, that, or another sort. In the way that each attacks the other, he or she invokes an idiom of discourse, illustrates a form of vulnerability, and becomes a receptive audience for a sarcasm-tinged return of the complement. Each driver's fate is locked to the other's in perversely created stages of reciprocated assaults.

In the Wake of Angry Encounters: Some Common Negative Cases

Earlier I reviewed some examples of the celebratory spirits that can emerge when road warriors triumph in their battles. Obviously such happy outcomes are not always the case. What happens then is especially instructive about the causal contingencies of anger in everyday life. Cut off from a tacit engagement of their bodies in driving, losers of auto conflicts sometimes find that the experience leaves persistent bodily traces. It is remarkable that when people are interviewed on their experiences of becoming pissed off while driving, they commonly reach back months, even years to produce highly detailed versions of the events, and in the process of recounting them, they sometimes begin to relive the anger, becoming visibly animated, uptight, and voluble in front of the interviewer. The asymmetry of the recounting ("Here

I am, stuck with this unpleasant memory, while the real villain, indifferent to my pain, has escaped!") begins to re-create the emotion itself.

In the immediate aftermath of frustrated efforts to make in situ sense of road conflicts, interviewees provide the following sorts of reports.

> Flordelina, a twenty-two-year-old bank employee, recalls being cut off by a car pulling out of a parking lot. She also recalls noting that "the driver was a young male, possibly of Filipino or Spanish descent, in his early twenties." After she honked at him, he tailgated her and she found she could not lose him until she drove to a police station. "When I saw that he was completely out of sight, I could no longer hold in my emotions. I began to cry hysterically. I could not control myself. The tears raced down my face and my hands started shaking." Calling the bank, she excused herself from the day's work by telling them that a "family member was in a car accident. I could not tell them the truth. How could I? They would have probably thought that was the stupidest reason to miss work. I felt ashamed making up such a terrible story and I felt that they knew I was lying. What a weak person I am that I can not admit the truth. I felt so little. I went straight home to bed. My head was throbbing."

More commonly, angry drivers who fail to obtain in situ narrative victories soon manage to segue out of emotional distress. Often after a marked interval they gravitate to more modest forms of pleasure as they reassume their tacit corporeal involvements. Craig shows how a sigh facilitates the change.

> A doctor of Chinese medicine, Craig, thirty-six, father of three, divorced, is driving to dinner with his hand on the thigh of Maria [the interviewer], his girlfriend of four years. When a truck cuts in front of him, Craig yells, " 'He didn't even look before he changed lanes!' " After cutting off the truck in return, the truck cuts Craig off again, and Craig "whines, 'Geeez! Why don't ya just run me over and get it over with? You asshole!' " Then Craig sighs, marking a closure, and after the truck exits the highway, "Craig returned his right hand to my thigh, glanced at me with a smile, and asked what I planned to order at the restaurant."

For systematic reasons, there is relatively weak evidence on precisely how people move beyond anger when the emotion trails on and only diminishes gradually. When anger ends with a neat narrative flourish, the driver usually relishes the opportunity to recount the triumph. When the failure to construct a transcending drama leads to a rash or to hives, that too is easily recalled. But when the self-conscious awareness of anger fades more subtly into a renewed involvement in the practices of everyday life, almost by definition it will be more difficult for interviewees to recall just how the vanishing operation was brought off. It appears that what most commonly happens to such drivers is that anger fades as they get back "in the flow" of projects other than driving. A conversation is picked up with a passenger or with a correspondent on the car phone. The radio is turned on or the station is changed, providing a new focus of attention. Thoughts turn away from the here and now to projects in scenes remembered and anticipated.

The social logic of emotional transformation that such examples suggest is that anger fades as one contemplates enacting a socially recognizable role in some other time or place in which his or her competent performance can be taken for granted. Just as the experience of being cut off or thrown out of tacit engagement in social interaction is the catalyst to anger, so envisioning oneself being embraced by some version of community appears to be the typical process for anger's mundane transcendence.

Sometimes, however, angry drivers want a quick fix. Unable to win a battle and impatient to transform their spirits in service of more fruitful ends, they often adopt proverbial formulations.

> Clarence, an accountant, screams impotently at traffic, " 'Fuck!!! We have barely moved in over half an hour!' " as he "pounded his fists against the steering wheel." Seeing a car attempting to bypass the blockage by driving on the right shoulder, he yells: " 'I am not going to let this fucking bitch in front of me.' " For a long stretch they play "cat and mouse" as she tries to get onto the road and he blocks her, until finally he gives up and lets her. " 'It's not worth an accident,' he said softly. . . . Oh well, fuck it. Life's a bitch.' "

"Life's a bitch" is not unlike Craig's device for marking the closure of a losing episode, his sigh. Indeed the phrase seems to articulate the subtext of many sighs, and the two work along similar lines to segue oneself out of anger. A sigh releases one's bodily hold on a situation, allowing one to relax or collapse into a new seating for experience. As a means of shifting the sensual base of experience, a sigh is a cultural convention and a neat corporeal trick.[22]

"Life's a bitch" casts Clarence's experience as just another instance of something that many others have come to recognize as part of the unavoidable unpleasantness of everyday life. "Life's a bitch" could be a caricature of a blues song. Like blues music, the phrase as used by Clarence implies not the dubious proposition that misery loves company but a wise strategy of emotional self-help. The phrase reframes

a particular situated problem as a kind of misery that "everyone" is familiar with. Phrased as such, an instant's aggravation can be allowed to fade out of anger and into the communal background of all individual action.

4. Angry Drivers in Southern California's Public Life

It may seem by now that driving the streets of Los Angeles is routinely the stuff of high drama. There are good reasons for that misrepresentation. The most obvious is that this inquiry is not about driving in general but about a certain type of dramatic moment that occurs in the everyday practice of driving. The primary challenge here is to specify the conditions for the rise and decline of anger when driving, not to characterize the experience of driving in general or in any particular place.

A less obvious bias toward colorful interaction in these writings is built in for methodological reasons. The logic used here to relate evidence to explanation is analytic induction. Unlike quantitative social research and its probabilistic findings, data are described here only if they show a novel wrinkle of the explanation being advanced. The reason that I provide information on ethnicity, age, occupation, and other background factors in data passages is the same reason that I present materials that indicate differences in philosophies of life, musical taste, personal tactics, and the like. The objective is to demonstrate that the same social-psychological processes hold true even when we look at cases in which these factors vary. Each qualitatively different case presents a rival hypothesis to the explanation as advanced to that point, for example that the argument holds only within certain ethnic groups or personality types. In qualitative research what one worries about is not how high the pile of confirming evidence can be mounted but that one will have missed a way of life, an interaction strategy, or a kind of event that the reader knows intimately, and that in consequence the reader will come up with a counterexample that demonstrates the inadequacy of the explanation. As a result, qualitative social research that is boring to read because it reports many similar cases is likely to be weak in its evidentiary logic.

A third way that these writings are biased toward the dramatic is their social-psychological focus. The overall objective of this volume is to demonstrate what can be revealed about emotions when they are studied just where the socially situated and the biographically (or psychologically) transcendent dimensions of personal life meet. Whatever the failings of the current exercise, this topic and these materials

are methodologically wonderful because they are so well suited to that demonstration. From a social-situational angle, the reports of angry drivers show the respondents paying close attention to their perception by others and creatively working to alter others' perceptions and responses. As for a perspective on biographically transcendent significance, the interviews allow us to see, within a very compact segment of the respondents' lives, much that is typically unavailable to a driver's accidentally chosen opponents. Through self-reports and close observations by passengers we can see how a situated interaction became meaningful to a driver as a phase he or she segued into from a prior involvement, as an obstacle to reaching an anticipated destination, and as an interruption of other, contemporaneously maintained attentions.

It is exactly at the intersection of the situational and the transcendent that everyday life routinely takes on its emotional force. Playwrights know this well, and the three lines of inquiry I follow in this volume track a familiar structure in dramatic theater. Playwrights often focus on (1) situations of conflictual interaction that (2) carry transcendent significance and (3) are best conveyed when the audience is drawn to focus on how actors represent the conflict in idiosyncratic corporeal ways. Materials structured along these lines are likely to be frequently poignant, often histrionic, sometimes very funny, and a very good way to summarize everyday life at what William James called the joints of experience.

In combination, these methodological considerations mean that a qualitative study of emotions—a topic that ought to be sensually interesting—*should* feature materials that border on the sensational. This is important to appreciate in order to avoid a false impression about life in Los Angeles. Of the approximately 150 people who were contacted for the data in this research, virtually nobody had any difficulty recalling an experience of becoming pissed off while driving. Diversity of background and personal style is itself a good reason for locating the study of everyday emotions in Los Angeles (although on those grounds there are numerous, equally attractive sites in contemporary world cities). But the number who would say that these conflicts represent a constant quality of their driving experience is a good deal smaller.

Yet if these materials do not provide a representative picture of everyday life in Los Angeles, that does not mean they fail to say something significant about Los Angeles. Certainly they do not show that driving is more productive of conflicts in Los Angeles than elsewhere. Angelenos might be surprised to learn that many Europeans consider Southern California drivers to be relatively "good." American academ-

ics often swear that Boston drivers have discovered regions of driving incompetence whose very existence remains beyond suspicion elsewhere in the civilized world. Residents of Mexico City warn, without any touch of humor, that it is out of the question to respond with a finger to someone who you think has cut you off, and not because drivers there are unlikely to appreciate the meaning of the gesture.

And New Yorkers, whose streets are filled in far higher proportion with commercial traffic, might well regard Angelenos' experiences of becoming pissed off while driving as amateurish rather than amazing. Vince, a former Manhattan delivery driver, recalled for me his coworkers' practice of collecting (metal) slugs in dishes in the company vans so that they would be readily available to be thrown at "assholes." Vince also described professional tactics for exploiting New York's unparalleled traffic jams, including that of leaping over car roofs from the conveniently elevated perch of the van in order to stamp an appropriate message onto the thinly covered heads of offending drivers. Traffic is rarely bad enough to permit those tactics in L.A., despite hyperbolic references in L.A. to "gridlock." The term itself is revealing in its apocalyptic significance, in contrast to the unremarkable, everyday realities of "traffic jams" in New York and "embouteillage" in Paris.

For the most part, there is no reason to suspect that the conditions of the emotional metamorphosis of the pissed-off driver obtain uniquely in L.A.[23] Virtually everywhere driving is likely to be a dumb way of moving around in public. Encased in a relatively mute form for movement, the driver senses an asymmetry in interaction: one suspects that one watches others more than those others are oriented to pick up the meager expressions of one's inexpressive vehicle. This asymmetry of perception is turned on its head occasionally, and then to great effect, when drivers manage to be seen extensively without appearing to care who is watching. Such inversions of driving's routine perversion of complementary perceptions are accomplished when "low riders" cruise Hollywood Boulevard on Saturday nights and when Rolls Royces inch their way through the narrow streets of St. Tropez during high season. But such practices of putting cars on parade are no more typical of everyday life in France than they are in Los Angeles.

The current data set does not permit the testing of themes of national or regional cultural differences in what might be termed mobilized awareness contexts, or how drivers monitor the awareness that other drivers may have of them. But it is not likely that a model of awareness contexts on Southern California's public behavior can be

extended without severe qualification to other settings.[24] Images of cold New Yorkers aside, in many European and Latin American small towns as well as big cities, in uncrowded as well as in crowded circumstances, strangers routinely negotiate physically intimate pedestrian passings without acknowledging one another's existence. The custom in some U.S. settings of offering smiles and greetings to passing strangers, an act that presupposes that one will not only allow but encourage the other to see that one is looking at him or her, may be relatively odd. The intensity of road rage in the United States may well be related. Where people are unusually eager to have strangers acknowledge and respond to them with fleeting positive moral communications, they may be especially vulnerable to feeling offended when they are treated indifferently.[25] Being cut off is perhaps more likely in L.A. than on European streets, but partly because of a marginal difference in the embodiment of the driving experience, not because of differences in driving practices. The U.S. auto market is somewhat exceptional in encouraging drivers to feel that when their cars are cut off, they are cut off personally. The makes and models available in the United States far exceed the diversity available in most other affluent nations, which still maintain severe restrictions on auto imports in order to protect the domestic industries. The result is a kind of vehicular sumptuary code that limits the differentiated display of motorized personality. The diversity of makes and models available in the U.S. market elaborates and individualizes the vehicular expression of social stratification to an extent unparalleled elsewhere. When the symbols one displays are more matters of status than expressions of individual personality, attacks on those symbols may be less intimate matters.[26]

To the contribution made by America's capitalism and its free trade automobile policies Los Angeles adds a justly famous, dispersed economic geography and a limited system of public transportation. These factors flow together to outfit an especially high proportion of its citizens with exceptionally personalized car bodies that they will inhabit for unusually large parts of their everyday lives. Given the range of activities that Angelenos pursue as they drive, it is no exaggeration to say that their driving is a way of sustaining private involvements while moving around public space. The use of stickers to display political views, spiritual philosophies, and peculiar versions of humor on the rear ends of cars indicates that the drivers take for granted that their automobilized doings are intertwined directly with their personal beings.

With respect to the narrative expression of anger, Los Angeles is also at the extreme in the universality with which drivers comfortably

dramatize their aggressive disdain for each other. It is not surprising to see an elegantly styled, middle-aged woman, perfectly coiffed and cosmetically sealed, who, while driving through Beverly Hills in a speck-free, gleaming new Mercedes SL 500, suddenly raises a three-karat-diamond-studded fist to project "the finger" to an unkempt driver of a shabby, ten-year-old Japanese economy car. What is striking about such scenes is that any sense of incongruity is apparent only to the sociological observer. Crude gestures lose no face where face depends exclusively on the display of such hard realities as diamonds and cars. No doubt it is true that in L.A., as in Latin America, in their private lives "los ricos tambien lloran" (the rich also cry), to borrow the title of a popular Mexican soap opera. What is extraordinary in L.A. is the motif in public life that "los ricos tambien se enojan" (the rich also get angry). It is, in a way, a triumph of Southern California's version of democracy that, substantially independent of their social status, people feel free to engage in behavior that elsewhere would be eschewed as shamefully common and rude.[27]

Even if becoming angry while driving is not more common in Los Angeles than in other cities, I would submit that the experience still has special significance within the context of Southern California life. For one thing, public culture here has relatively few resources for managing conflict among citizens. It is paradoxical that in Western European settings with enviable reputations for civility, it is not uncommon to see motorists standing outside their cars, gesticulating broadly and trading round after round of shouted insults at each other, with mere centimeters separating their noses. In a sense, the ability to trade insults in close interaction bespeaks faith in a cultural fabric strong enough to absorb pointed interpersonal thrusts while blocking actual physical contact. Meanwhile, drivers in Los Angeles, citing news stories of highway shootings, report a growing sense of anxiety about how other drivers might respond were they to meet face to face. Where avoiding sustained, intimate interaction with an offending driver is deemed essential, flipping off from a safe and speedy distance should be especially attractive.

Even within the United States, there appears to be a peculiar resistance in California's public culture against accepting the inevitability of conflict. In New York, as Calvin Trillin noted in a piece on residents' reactions when repairs of a subway station finally were completed, the removal of an everyday justification for expressing anger can lead to something like withdrawal symptoms on a massive scale.[28] In California, in contrast, anger in public is more likely to be treated as pathological, and this perspective has given rise to a distinctive remedial response, the effort to inoculate the driving public with Zen teachings.

Zen-inspired writings on driving call for an involvement in the sensual and aesthetic rhythms of the practice. Countering the familiar critique of highway driving as a major failure of modern civilization, Zen writers wax poetic on the possibilities "where the road and the sky collide."[29] This philosophy, by revealing the profundities potential in a total involvement of consciousness in driving, might seem geared to exacerbate anger by building up the value of what other drivers might cut off. But the claim is just the opposite. Unpredictable, even dangerous moves by other drivers are appreciated as just another source of provocation, like the irregular contour of the road, to which one should maintain a lively responsiveness.

Zen driving neatly avoids the rise of anger, or any emotion other than the metaphysical pleasure of remaining in the flow of responsive driving itself, by avoiding the possibility of being cut off from concerns that transcend driving. With regard to the explanation advanced here, this philosophy in effect calls for the negation of the asymmetrical state of social interpretation that sets the stage for the rise of anger. The Zen driver is no more able to make him- or herself heard or seen as a person by other drivers, but there no longer is any asymmetry because other cars are no longer seen as managed by personalized beings. Driving in this manner, one is perhaps even more with others in an objective sense, interacting smoothly as part of a collectively arranged pattern of cars on the highway, but one no longer is with particular others. Once the windshield has been converted into a kind of computer game screen, it makes no sense to get mad at enemy attackers; the point is just to stay alert and respond effectively to them. But if driving takes on novel forms of pleasure when other drivers are transformed into blips on the windshield screen, they no longer appear in one's experience as moral beings. If a driver does not read through the outward appearance of other cars into the personal awareness that other drivers have of him or her, those other drivers cannot be people whose gracious courtesy demands acknowledgment or whose dangerous narcissism requires that they be taught a lesson they will not soon forget.[30]

In effect, Zen teachings call for drivers to abandon their efforts to do folk sociology on the road. Focusing solely on the aesthetics of driving, one abandons the effort to learn through interacting with strangers the kinds of people who are out there and, by juxtaposition, to discover and test one's own nature and to learn whether one is more

or less aggressive, courteous, alert, capable of simultaneous engagement in multiple activities, etc. That can be seen as a kind of loss. In the course of one's routine activities, at no extra monetary cost, conflicts in driving provide regular sessions for a personal working through of a central dilemma of urban life, the challenge to shift rapidly across encounters with indifferent others in diverse and unpredictable social situations while trying to keep aligned with the transcendent values of one's life.

Perhaps a mass conversion to Zen driving would substantially improve the physical, economic, and mental health of California drivers. That is not the issue here. The peculiar appeal of Zen in California culture indicates a discomfort with accepting conflict as part of public life. Other such indications include the lack of the biting political satire that is traditional in older urban centers throughout the Western world. For over twenty-five years, the prevailing image of the mayor of Los Angeles has been as a "nice" man, black or white, a man who neither issues nor receives much public ridicule, who shows no relish for humiliating opponents, makes and receives no nasty charges of personal incompetence, is innocent of ego-celebrating wit . . . in sum, a mayor who fails utterly to produce the cultural stuff that can make urban politics an involving show for the masses. Dramas with just those culturally innovative moral passions are going on every day in Los Angeles, but the site is the road, not the press. Played out not among figures on a communal stage but among individuals who meet as strangers in fleeting contacts on public roads, these moralized passions contribute significantly to a sense of chaos and lack of metropolitan community in Los Angeles.

Oddly enough, car travel puts people in Southern California in a relatively communistic social place.[31] Belying its name and socialist appeal, "public" transportation segregates commuters by social class and ethnicity in Los Angeles, as it does in other American cities. Public transportation groups and separates metropolitan residents, the extreme case being the suburban train commuter who parks in a pastoral bedroom community setting, travels above and under lower- and working-class neighborhoods, and then emerges from a city train station within walking distance of his or her office, where bus and subway commuters bring the night's accumulated faxes and the morning coffee. Adults in L.A. probably interact regularly in their commuting with a more diverse sample of the area's population than is the case in perhaps any other large city. However insulated and unrepresentative these contacts may in fact be, they encourage the construction of a

personal image of the area as a whole. As population density and travel times grow, an image of conflictual diversity is displacing the area's prior image of homogeneity and tranquility.[32]

It would diverge too far from the social interaction data base of this chapter to examine at length the historical developments and the features of political and economic structure that have given Los Angeles its distinctive character. But one final point about the significance of these conflicts for the drivers in them may be brought out. Coming to terms with those everyday tensions is part of the larger struggle of the area to come to terms with being a massive urban center while still wearing suburban cultural clothing.[33] Drivers' conflicts in L.A. may not represent unusual levels of anger so much as an unusual inability to make communal sense of conflict. In turn, this inability makes the experience of conflict in public a challenge that is left to the creative devices of individuals who, in the afterglow of chaotic encounters, regularly look to dinner table conversations to get interpretive revenge against the assholes confronted that day.

Whether or not driving and its emotional upshots are any different in Los Angeles, people in L.A. think it is. The respondents who provided the data for these writings stressed one after the other how driving in L.A. is different from what it was in Nebraska, in Salinas, in New York, in New Jersey. Always there is more chaos in Los Angeles. (One charming myth about New Jersey, for example, is that there the truck drivers, acting like rough but lovable mafiosi, enforce a discipline on the road that ultimately works to everyone's benefit.) And from longtime residents of Los Angeles, one hears again and again, often as a preface to intimations that it is time to leave, how the incivility one now confronts on the road every day was unthinkable just fifteen years ago.

Having lost the ethnic homogeneity that underwrote a broadly publicized image of the area as America's last chance for a pacific (and white) community, experiencing on a personal level the impacts of massive population growth and diversification, served by a public culture that is ill equipped to recognize conflict, L.A. residents innocently enter their cars and drive with everlasting incredulity into daily encounters with impassioned chaos. It may well be that there is nothing about the area that goes far to explain why drivers so often get pissed off in Los Angeles. But residents' experience of getting pissed off when driving is one of the few resources that become routinely and democratically available in residents' everyday participation in public life for understanding what is happening in Los Angeles.

Appendix: Guide for Driving Interview

Your Written Product

Your initial objective is to record, as best you can, just what happens when people get mad driving around L.A. Your *report should not contain any analysis or any of your ideas to explain what happened,* unless you talked about that with your subject. The descriptive report should detail how the person you are studying experienced the events, not what you think they mean. The words, phrases, style should be those of the person you are studying: how did they act, how do they talk about the events, what do they think about the other people involved, what do they think these events mean.

Selecting a Subject

Find someone over thirty years old. Explain that you are in a class that is studying emotions in everyday life, and that there is a class assignment to get descriptions of what people experience when driving around L.A., in particular the scenes that make them mad. If you like, you might ask to take a ride with someone; that might get them to remember lots of events that they found irritating, even if they don't get mad at anything that time. And if the first person you meet tells you they never get mad when driving, find someone else. You should not have to look very far!

You may find that the person can describe one recent event in some detail. That's fine. Often, people asked about getting angry when driving have lots of stories. That's fine too.

How to Record

If you tape-record your discussion with your subject, you will find that you have to spend a lot of time transcribing the tape. That is not necessary. It's fine to have a natural discussion and then, as soon as you can after leaving the scene, write down as much as you can remember. If you want to take notes, just jot down a few phrases that will help you recall what was said. But don't start writing down everything your subject says. Your first commitment is to have a natural conversation with the person. Be yourself; don't let note taking make you artificial.

Anonymity

Don't identify the person by their real name; use just a first name or a pseudonym, even if they are related to you, even if they say you could

use their name. Do identify the person by age, sex, occupation, how you know them, where they live (generally).

What to Look For

It's best to read these suggestions and absorb them, and then have a natural conversation, rather than holding up a list of these guides and following them mechanically.

Your description should include the five *Ws*: Who, what, when, where, and (in the view of the person you're studying) why or what they think the event means (about them, others, driving, life). You can check yourself, after you've written up a description, that those elements are present somewhere in the report.

But your organizing focus is *the big H:* How, as in, how did this happen? What's the process? How did it begin? What happened next? What happened after that? What did you do when he/she did that? What stages did the event go through? The report should describe how your interviewee is doing something with or to someone else, how the other is responding, and so on.

As background, you want to describe: How did your subject come to be at that place then? They were on their way where, for what? How had they been driving? What had been going on for them? What had they been doing? What happened afterward?

If You Get Stuck

If you get stuck in the discussion or interview, and you don't know what else to ask, and it doesn't seem you've got much, there are a few pretty reliable things you can do to get things moving. First, wait. Silence on your part will often lead the other person to think more and find more to relate. A little silence on your part is okay. You don't have to fill every moment with sound. The hardest part of interviewing is being a good listener. The less you say, the more you can be confident that what you record is their perspective and experience, not yours.

Second, after they've told you about something happening, you can ask them to set it in the *Ws* (where did it happen; when . . .), and you can ask them "just how" it happened. After they tell you about one event or action, you can say, "And then what?"

Third, you can play off of their experiences onto your own, with a "that reminds me of. . . ." A good way to interview people is to share your experiences; that shows them the sort of thing you're after, and that you're not judging them from some position of moral superiority. This approach would also tend to make the conversation a dis-

cussion rather than an "interview," and that's preferable. Then you can write up your own experiences with the interview, because your experiences will have been part of the interview.

What Are You Looking For?

If you look too closely for anything, you will turn the report into an analytic exercise, so the guides here have to be general and gentle. One focus is the practice of driving: Just how does this person drive? How do they get from here to there? What strategies, if any, do they use? What do they do when they drive? What do they look at and not look at as they drive? Another is how they "read" others: What do they see as signals from other drivers? What kinds of people do they think other drivers are? How do they understand what other drivers are doing? A third is: What are the especially emotional forms of behavior? If someone got mad, how do you or they know? What showed the anger?

TWO

FAMILIES AND FUNNY MIRRORS

Fun houses are sociologically provocative because they are not necessarily funny. Many visitors walk through halls of distorting mirrors at amusement parks without appearing to notice that their passage is shedding a series of weird reflections. Some treat the mirrors as opportunities for grooming, acting as if it is their appearance in everyday life that is distorted and not the hyper-elongated, fat and squat, or many-headed creature that the mirrors portray (figure 2.1).

Those who become pleasurably engaged with the concave and convex mirrors often develop interests that are other than humorous. Young couples strolling through the fun house arm in arm may silently catch a reflection of their bodies merging, and find the inviting outline of a kiss (figure 2.2). In the 1930s, André Kertész made alluring photographic studies of the nude female form by turning such mirrors on their sides (figure 2.3). In like aesthetic spirits, some visitors become intrigued to move their hands and torsos intently before the mirrors, seemingly indifferent to the fact that in their explorations it is their own identities that are strangely redesigned.

Halls of distorting mirrors are methodologically appealing sites for an inquiry into emotional process. Although the strip of laughing behavior that one finds there may be exceedingly narrow, it is massively recurrent. The contingent nature of laughter invites considerations of two sorts. What does it take to make the mirrors funny? And what meaning do people take from the experience?

On the one hand, the fact that humor, while "natural" to this setting, is far from inevitable in it points to the work that visitors must do in order to construct their emotions. In this vein, we will see that the participants exercise a highly refined attention to the details of interaction to show others that they experience the mirrors as funny and to create a collective warrant for the seemingly casual behavior of laughter. Finding these mirrors laughably funny is systematically

How EMOTIONS Work

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