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Rescuing Critique
On the Ghetto Photography of Camilo Vergara

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Abstract
This article explores the work of the contemporary sociologist and urban photographer, Camilo Vergara. The piece draws on early work in critical theory to characterize Vergara's work as 'rescuing critique'. Specifically, the article maintains that it is only in the theoretical vocabulary of Walter Benjamin that the methodological uniqueness, historical sensitivity and critical thrust of Vergara's project can be adequately understood. Indeed, it is argued that what is truly distinct about Vergara's work is the decidedly Benjaminian way in which, in the ruinous present of neoliberal 'progress', it fuses the aesthetic power of images with an anamnestic obligation to the urban past. In such a fusion, Vergara's photo-ethnographies of America's new ghettos raise critical questions about what has – and might yet – become of such places, and those who inhabit them.

Key words
ghettos ■ history ■ neo-liberalism ■ rescuing critique ■ urbanism

I
N AN essay on the work of Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas productively contrasts the 'consciousness-raising critique' of Herbert Marcuse with Benjamin's 'rescuing critique'. Moving within the familiar horizon of ideology critique, Marcuse's consciousness-raising criticism follows the impulse of unmasking. Most generally, it aims to unveil those contradictions between the ideal and the real that distort human existence in ways that trigger the practical transformation of consciousness and life. Indeed, 'by analytically disintegrating an objective illusion', as Habermas writes, consciousness-raising critique seeks 'to prepare the way for a transformation

of the thus unmasked material relationships of life and to initiate an over-coming of culture within which these relationships of life are stabilized' (1983: 136). In contradistinction, Benjamin's rescuing critique, as Habermas emphasizes, does something different and genuinely innovative in the history of critical theory. For it does not seek to overcome distorted life-worlds through a normative unmasking of contradictions. Instead, following an impulse toward historical retrieval, it 'proceeds descriptively' (Habermas, 1983: 134) as an archaeology of human life-worlds in their empirical processes of dissolution. Where consciousness-raising criticism disintegrates objective illusions in order to get beyond them, rescuing critique minds the historical ruins of such illusions in order to retrieve them from the storm of 'progress'.

I

In this article I want to extend this characterization of rescuing critique to the realm of contemporary urban photography. More specifically, I shall claim that the innovative work of the sociologist and urban photographer Camilo Vergara is best understood as rescuing criticism. Indeed, it is the central objective of the present inquiry to demonstrate that rescuing critique, and the Benjaminian conception of history that informs it, provide a rich theoretical vocabulary for explaining core features of Vergara's studies of post-industrial American ghettos and, moreover, the *critical* potential of his urban photography. My argument, in brief, is that only in elaborating Vergara's ghetto photography as rescuing critique can we adequately illuminate the innovative methodological and critical character of his work.

Of course it should be acknowledged at the outset that, important methodological affinities aside, Benjamin and Vergara inhabit profoundly different geographic, cultural, historical and political moments, as well as different disciplinary locations. Most relevant for our purposes here, it is obvious that the post-industrialist American ghettos Vergara has painstakingly photographed for the past 30 or so years are separated in numerous ways from the bourgeois industrialist and fascist cities of Europe inhabited and described by Benjamin in the 20th century. Any characterization of Vergara's ghetto photography as rescuing critique that merely assimilated it to Benjamin's theorizing would elide the diverse concrete conditions under which each emerged and to which each responds.

And yet, there is one decisive point of convergence that must be foregrounded. For all their differences, one of the defining features of 20th-century European Fascism and 21st-century global neo-liberalism is the predominant image of history as one of 'progress'. In both, 'progress' amounts to a kind of rage against the particular, the unassimilated and the contingent of social life. To be sure, the political storm of fascism that Benjamin confronted sought violently to eradicate alterity, whereas the economic storm of neo-liberalism that Vergara documents structurally marginalizes all that its globalizing forces cannot absorb. But in both contexts it is the 'non-identical' (Adorno, 1973) that is threatened, and it is

rescuing critique that is deployed to retrieve it imagistically. In Benjamin and Vergara, rescuing criticism directs its energies towards the material ruins of modern urban social life precisely because it is there, most acutely, that the 'refuse of history' (Benjamin, 1999: 461) demands critical re-collection. Or, to make the point in the elusive terms of Benjamin's philosophy of history: practitioners of image-based rescuing critique make good on the 'secret agreement between past generations and the present' by actualizing a 'weak Messianic power' (Benjamin, 1968: 254). In the face of 'progress', that is to say, Benjamin's and Vergara's rescuing criticism share an attenuated sense of *anamnestic obligation*. What fascist and neo-liberal 'progress' destroys, rescuing critique tries to retrieve.

Differences and similarities between Benjamin and Vergara aside, this initial formulation of critical theory and contemporary ghetto photography as 'rescuing' might also anticipate certain internal methodological objections, especially with regard to the theologically inflected conception of history upon which it depends. In Benjamin's day, it was his acquaintance Max Horkheimer who most pointedly raised this issue. 'Past injustice', Horkheimer wrote in a barbed letter to Benjamin, 'has occurred and is completed . . . [t]he slaughtered are truly slaughtered.' To which Benjamin responded:

> The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of mindfulness as well. What science has 'established' mindfulness can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in mindfulness we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological. (Benjamin, 1999: 471)

Thus for the rescuing critic, as Benjamin admits, past wrongs are in one sense objectively unreachable and irredeemable. From the standpoint of the present, nothing – and certainly no constellation of images – is going to bring back the 'slaughtered'. But the mindfulness of rescuing critique allows it to modify the existing matters of fact upon which the past and present rest. Rescuing criticism, as we shall see in examining Vergara's work, collects the kinds of material that history, social science and ideology critique cannot precisely because it is mindful of the evidentiary potential of the detritus of 'progress'.

Indeed, a contemporary practitioner of rescuing critique such as Vergara does not merely gather up dead history for the sake of observation, cultural preservation or overcoming – even less so for theological salvation. Instead, the critical objective of such rescuing is to construct constellations of images that, when presented in existing life-world contexts, have the power to transform contemporary dialogs and traditions and the contexts in which both exist. In fact, at the methodological level, three Benjaminian aspects of Vergara's rescuing critique of America's ghettos will be

elaborated in what follows. First, Vergara's work is acutely material and historical in its orientation. One might best think of it as an affectively engaged, image-based historiography. Second, the central methodological principle of Vergara's photography is historical relationism. His rescuing critique makes extensive use of sequencing, juxtaposing, cross-referencing and cascading images in its construction of temporal montages. Third, Vergara's work depends upon *both* the aesthetic power *and* the historical force of such montage constructions. Vergara's rescuing critique, as we shall see, makes explicit and graphic seemingly irrelevant 'dead' matters of fact, and it aims to make such matters of fact *count* in specific socio-historical and cultural contexts.

II

> By recording the voices and looks of the ghettos, I hope to rescue from oblivion a part of this nation's history and to capture the world that survivors themselves are shaping. (Vergara, 1995: 11)

As part of the built urban environment, ghettos have typically functioned as sites of ethnoracial division and enclosure, especially in socioculturally complex urban milieus such as one finds in America's cities. Yet the mid-20th-century ghettos of America's industrial cities were decidedly unlike those one finds in America today. Such 'old' ghettos, as William Julius Wilson (1996) has argued, were 'institutionalized ghettos'. That is, they were places where people were more or less forced to live because of their ethnoracial identity, but also for the most part able to 'maintain effective social control and realize their common goals' (Wilson, 1996: 20) within the institutionally stable confines of their assigned urban context. In other words, while America's 'old' ghettos were racialized sites of segregation and degradation, they were also functional communities. Widely employed in robust manufacturing sectors, the thoroughly working-class residents of such communities enjoyed relatively high levels of 'neighborhood social organization' (Wilson, 1996: 20), and had access to an extensive array of formal institutions, voluntary associations, informal networks, commercial goods and public services.

Over a period of several decades, however, profound shifts away from heavy manufacturing to service and information economies – the 'progressive' storm of economic globalization and aggressive adoption of neo-liberal market policies – and the concomitant dismantling of much of what was left of the welfare state in the US, have transformed the 'old' institutional ghettos into 'jobless ghettos' (Wilson, 1996). These 'new' ghettos – severely de-populated places of hyper-unemployment, intergenerational poverty, pervasive crime and 'structural violence' (Farmer, 2003) – are the contemporary ghettos of America's post-industrial cities. They are the places that Camilo Vergara has steadfastly photographed for the past 30 years, and they are the places Vergara's work continues to try to '*rescue from oblivion*'.

Now, the story-line of neo-liberalism's disastrous effects on industrial cities is, to be sure, not a new one. Nor is it specific to the American urban milieu. But Vergara's rescuing approach to describing those effects is unique. In fact, Vergara's ghetto photography is only adequately understood as a rescuing criticism of historical montages of urban social life in the throes of post-industrial ruination. His work documents fragmented evidence of damaged life in the much-altered contemporary American ghetto milieu. Vergara's description of his approach is telling:

> I first record the changes evident from close observation of images – that is, what has been added to or has disappeared from a block; what seems to be ailing and what seems to be thriving; and what is happening to the vacant land. Secondly, I compare aspects of different cities, for example, their commercial streets. I supplement the description through interviews with those who live and work in these neighborhoods. . . . Whenever possible, the collection has been organized into pictorial networks that begin with a panoramic shot covering several blocks. The sequence proceeds toward ever-smaller units photographed from the ground, the roof of a car, or the top of a smaller structure. Thus, we move from the panorama to shots of one of its single blocks or buildings, and then to selected details. Often I have repeated and added on to the sequence over the years, which allows the viewer to follow ongoing transformations. And this work is open ended. By carrying on the documentation themselves, others interested in these urban areas can detect new trends as they emerge. (Vergara, 1995: xiii)

Also telling is the evidence of the material changes in new American ghetto life described in his ethnographic interviews with local residents:

> Among those confined to ghettos are many residents who have been displaced. Former homes, where they spent their youth and raised a family, have become ruins or vacant lots. Cora Moody, the president of the tenants' association at the Hayes Homes in the Central Ward of Newark, lived for ten years in a now-derelict building, part of the Hayes development, that she calls 'a piece of my history'. Contrasting with what remains – the stinking vacant structure, with its broken windows and its entrance full of garbage and excrement – is the vital community that the building once anchored: 'I was pregnant with my fifth child when I moved there. I can see my kids playing hopscotch, I can hear them outside my window, calling for money'. Pointing to a littered, overgrown spot on the grounds, she says: 'There used to be a shower there. My kids would use it at all times during the summer, even at midnight, and I would not be worried. There were public telephones in here; you could use them. You could wait, you did not have to get your own phone right away. We did not have to worry about people hurting us. There was a community of people you could trust and got along with'. Cora explains why she sees the ruined building with so much affection, saying: 'You cannot shift memories to another place. These are my greatest memories. They took all that away from us when they closed the building'. The present is inscribed on a wall nearby: 'Shahonna Tovheedah in the mother-fucking house. If you don't like it kiss my ass.' (Vergara, 1995: 9)

III

The organizing principles of Vergara's photography are explicitly designed to reveal the distinctive historical features of the new American ghettos. Rather than present images of poor people, Vergara maintains that:

> . . . images of the physical communities in which people live often better reveal the choices made by residents and the city officials over the long haul . . . photographs of the built environment constitute the essential element of an urban history told from the ground up. (2005)

Unlike other contemporary American street photographers, then, such as Helen Levitt (2001) or Ovie Carter (featured in Duneier, 1999), Vergara's work aims not simply to photograph ghetto residents but, more fundamentally, to document the changed and changing milieu in which they are embedded. What interests Vergara is how, from the 'ground up', ghetto environment and actions interpenetrate and change over time.

Thus it is not surprising that this study features, among other things, the uses and abuses of ubiquitous empty lots in the contemporary ghetto. In fact, one of the most striking dimensions of the new American ghetto is that its earlier characterization as a 'concrete jungle' has gained an unintended precision. Far from being a built site of human density and diversity, contemporary American ghettos appear as locations where nature has successfully reasserted itself against history. Ghetto artists respond to the emergent natural history of their milieu in ways that make explicit this new 'jungle' (see Figure 1).

In fact, in large swaths of the new American ghettos, nature has severely corroded the built environment. From the perspective of ghetto

Figure 1   West Side, Detroit, 1991 © Camilo Vergara

residents, the reification of their environment often runs so deep that history appears not to be made but to happen to them. Buildings tumble into ruin, their stubborn foundations becoming makeshift playgrounds and basketball courts; grass grows high, and litter piles up everywhere. Sections of Detroit that were the scene of that city's 1967 uprising are now de facto urban prairies (see Figure 2).

As Vergara points out, this reification of the built environment profoundly affects not only the physical space of the ghetto, but also the perceptive schemes of its residents. Vergara writes:

> Residents of poor communities intensely fear and dislike empty lots, seeing them as public garbage dumps, breeding grounds for rats, places to 'get high' – wasted spaces that are dark and dangerous at night . . . empty land serving no useful social purpose conveys the message that people and their community are unwanted and forgotten. (Vergara, 1995: 28)

Processes of the suburbanization of today's ghetto milieu also figure prominently in Vergara's rescuing critique. The built environment of the new ghetto is an odd mix of ruined desolation and new construction. Vergara's work is especially useful in demonstrating the problematic connection between the ruination of the old ghetto and the townhousiza-tion of the new one. Whereas most of the old ghetto residential dwellings were durable structures made of brick, stone and steel – and were often notable for architectural and historical reasons – the new suburbanized housing of today's ghetto is mass produced and pre-fabricated of wood and plastic.

Figure 2   Rosa Parks Boulevard, Detroit, 1987 © Camilo Vergara

In a striking cascade of photos of a South Bronx housing complex, where sturdy brick edifices decay and new suburban-style townhouses replace them, Vergara documents the image of 'two Bronxes' (see Figures 3 to 10).

Figure 3   178th Street and Vyse Avenue, 1980 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 4   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1982 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 5   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1983 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 6   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1986 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 7   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1988 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 8   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1991 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 9   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1993 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 10   178th and Vyse Avenue, 1996 © Camilo Vergara

About the site Vergara writes:

> When I first saw it in 1980, the building on 178th Street and Vyse Avenue seemed like a castle of brick and iron, filled with Puerto Rican and African American children. The late seventies and early eighties were times of pervasive destruction. Walking along the streets I had a sense of impending doom. Yet this particular building was so large, so useful, and seemed so solid that its abandonment and destruction were unthinkable.
>
> Fires began in the fall of 1980, in top-floor apartments. (This is a telltale sign of arson, because when a fire is started on the top floor it is understood that the residents will flee, so that charges of murder will not be raised.) Then scavengers moved in to remove the pipes, radiators, and appliances, leaving the water running to flood the apartments below and force the tenants to move out. The building was completely abandoned in January 1983.
>
> Continuity has been lost. In an extraordinary transformation taking place over thirteen years, a big, solid building with sixty-four apartments was replaced by three townhouses, built to accommodate six families. Brick, iron, and stone were replaced by wood and plastic: dark brown gave way to light blue; and where a courtyard with two staircases and a balustrade ringed the entrance, there are small lawns and some pavement for the owner to park a car. Two Bronxes are visible in these photographs: one that died too soon and one too flimsy to last. (Vergara, 1995: 69)

Images of de-capitalization evident in the history of the built environment of the new ghetto are richly detailed as well. When the storm of neoliberalism runs its course – when the industrial and manufacturing cities of the US de-industrialize their cores and outsource their labor force – market-based societies often survive in pre-modern ways. Indeed, many of today's ghettos have returned to a quasi-medieval peddling local economy, where street vendors barter and sell everything from homegrown vegetables, books and magazines, to hair products and homemade baked goods.

Meanwhile, in the built landscapes of such an economy, bank buildings loom like pyramids – institutional remnants of a ghetto life-world long gone. These buildings persist only in a profoundly altered form, as archaic relics that line the empty streets of what were once major commercial thoroughfares (see Figures 11 to 13).

In fact, it is banks – sturdy, fortress-like, and expensive to demolish – that are some of the first fortifications in the ghetto to be reoccupied by commercial and religious investors. For in reality there are no *banks* in the new American ghetto, only bank buildings containing pizza joints, sex shops and isolated churches. As Vergara writes:

> There is no better illustration of the flight of capital from ghettos than the scarcity of operating banks and the large number of former bank buildings. . . . Between 1978 and 1990, according to a 1992 study by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, in the poorest fifth of the neighborhoods of Brooklyn 30 percent of all the bank branches were closed. This situation was even worse in similar areas of the South Bronx, where during the same period half of the bank branches were closed. (Vergara, 1995: 90)

Figure 11   East Side, Detroit, 1991 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 12   Central Ward, Newark, 1993 © Camilo Vergara

The visual language of the art of the new American ghetto is also extensively presented in constellations that retrieve a history of tradition and revolt and make apparent an ongoing public conversation among ghetto residents. Photographing the appearance and decay of large-scale iconic

Figure 13   Highland Park, Michigan, 1993 © Camilo Vergara

mural imagery, Vergara documents how today's ghettos are a complex jumble of icons from the African-American experience in the 1960s – especially Martin Luther King and Malcom X – and newer, flashy murals invoking a Marcus Garvey-like sense of 'Africa'. Here the new ghetto looks, seemingly in vain, for its historical footing and critical heritage. On the one hand, the physical erosion of a Black Panther mural stands as a concrete allegorical expression of the rich legacy of a degraded people (see Figure 14). On the other hand, the more numerous and well-preserved images of a mythic Africa, complete with Egyptian hieroglyphs and native African flora and fauna, express a mythologization of history (see Figure 15).

It is no accident that images of 'Africa', as Vergara notes, are widely reproduced on T-shirts and bumper stickers and sold on ghetto street

Figure 14   West Side, Chicago, 1986 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 15   Harlem, New York, 1992 © Camilo Vergara

corners – as if the dream of a tradition outside of *all* history could somehow be purchased for a few dollars. Vergara's analyses of the complex historical dialog at work in the visual language of the new ghettos are penetrating:

Exposed to time and the elements, the existence of murals is precarious from the start. Typically they are painted on the exposed side of abandoned buildings, and destroyed with the demolition of their host structures. Those rarer ones that survive become eroded – their paint fading, their bright colors muted, the plaster behind the paint showing, the composition breaking down into fragments, softening the stern faces and whitening Afros.

Contemporary signs are nostalgic, constructing a remote utopian past, chronicles of lost battles, martyrs, victims, and dreams. Depicted as a lost paradise under a red-hot sun is a primordial Africa with giraffes, lions, and panthers running wild in a vast open landscape. In a world that was pure, maidens pour antelope milk from pitchers. And in a place where black men ruled, Zulu warriors, spears in hand, sit adorned in traditional attire. . . . The contrast could not be stronger between the degraded urban settings where these images are displayed and the lofty beginnings the residents claim. (Vergara, 1995: 135–7)

IV

I dreamed in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks
of the whole of the rest of the earth,
I dreamed that was the new City of Friends,
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love – it led the rest,
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
And in all their looks and words.
(Whitman, 1998: 109)

It is unlikely that the city of Camden would inspire Whitman, one of its more famous former residents, to such heights today. On the contrary, perhaps nowhere has the storm of neo-liberalism so vanquished a city as it has Camden. Thus it is with no small irony that Vergara has recently brought his work on America's new ghettos to the worldwide web with *Invincible Cities* (2005), an interactive website that documents the changed and changing built environment of Camden, along with Harlem (New York) and Richmond (California). The presentation of images in this format enables Vergara's work to, quite literally, come to life: in a capillary-like way, sensory 'image trees' are arranged and embedded in complex networks of their relations to urban space and time, as well as US census data and ongoing commentary. Users of the website click on images and are immediately connected to their place and time in urban space, site descriptions and relevant quantitative data, as well as clusters of other related images. In this way the interactive website makes it possible for viewers 'to visually experience the cumulative effects of decades of persistent disinvestment' (Vergara, 2005) from afar, and yet, as it were, from the ground up.

Like so many other new American ghettos, industrial Camden was once a stable urban environment. Reaching its peak population of 124,555 residents in 1950, the city began to change drastically in the decades that followed as it became a de-populated and jobless ghetto with 80,000 residents. Vergara recalls that when he first visited the city in 1979 (see Figures 16 and 17):

> Its decay seemed to pour out of the row houses and into the narrow streets, and residents seemed disoriented as if they were not living there, but just were passing through. Drug dealers appeared to control the streets as they manned dozens of corners, operating as if they were conducting legitimate business. (Vergara, 2005)

As one city dies, its innards oozing out into its public spaces, Vergara thematizes the emergence of a defining feature of the new American ghetto – a ghetto habitus deeply informed by an entrepreneurial, if often deadly, street culture. For the post-industrial urban environment is not without its own distinct cultural forms, one of which is a ghetto street culture that transforms abandoned streets and houses into business interiors for the drug trade. In fact, however physically degraded and de-populated, the post-industrial ghetto environment remains, to paraphrase Bourdieu (1977), both an objectively given structured site *and* the locus of structuring human actions that reflexively inhabit or interiorize such sites.

The habitus that constitutes Camden as a new American ghetto is unmistakably informed – both physically and symbolically – by drugs. Drugs are now a pervasive part of the built environment and visual language of the city. Some of what were once commercial developments have become drug clinics, their entrances heavily fortified (see Figures 18 and 19). Meanwhile, dotting the landscape, public service billboards admonish ghetto residents to stay off drugs (see Figure 20), thereby serving as Camden's 'equivalent of Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*' (Vergara, 2005).

Figure 16   West of North 9th Street on Fern Street, 2004 © Camilo Vergara
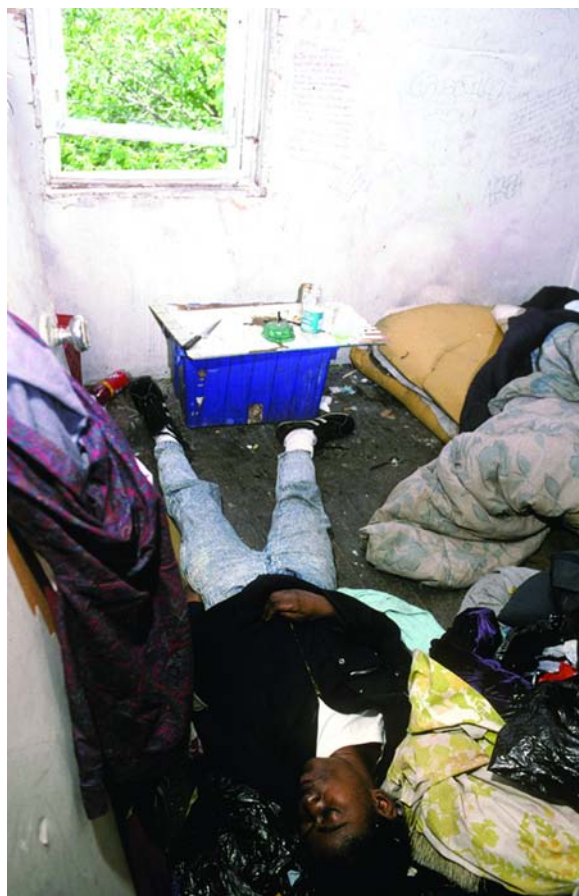
Figure 17   West of North 9th Street on Fern Street, 2004 © Camilo Vergara

One is left to wonder what those residents of Camden who do bother to read such signs might possibly make of them. As an alternative to an afternoon selling or using drugs, angling stands as a profoundly reified pseudo-option for most ghetto residents, whose de-capitalized milieu is unlikely to contain the requisitely stocked sporting goods store, and for whom fishing is in any event wholly uncoupled from the ghetto habitus in which they find themselves.

In fact, the billboard admonition to swap an afternoon of drugs for one of fishing stands in stark contrast to the wall images and murals created by the ghetto residents of Camden. As Vergara's work dramatizes, such images and murals are both shaped by and in turn shape the contemporary history of the ghetto milieu in complex ways. Images and murals of ghetto drug dealers in Camden, for example, are not merely expressions of a harsh urban environment; they are also a humanization of that milieu. For such portrayals, many done as memorials, typically re-present individuals in ways that

Figure 18   4th Street at Market Street, 2006 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 19   4th Street at Market Street, 2006 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 20   Marlton Pike at Baird Boulevard, 2005 © Camilo Vergara

assert their self-esteem and individuality as well as their power and author-
ity in contexts of de-humanization and de-individuation. Indeed, implicit
in such public memorial art is a demand for respect and remembrance
articulated from within an environment of physical and symbolic disrespect
and forgetting.

There is, in other words, an epistemology of 'ghetto cool' to be
discerned in the wall images and murals of Camden's ghetto habitus. In
them, we see how ghetto cool is not only an historical way of being in the
urban world, but also a *social demand* to be seen and known (or 'recog-
nized') by others. Put simply, the wall images and murals of Camden are an
historical record of the social struggle for status and respect in the ghetto
habitus (see Figure 21).

As embedded and embodied displays of self-possession and stored
aggression, menacing wall images and murals of ghetto cool simultaneously
memorialize, threaten and sublimate the violence of local street culture.
Such images and murals directly record the often tragic outcome of the
strategic need for protection (the instillation of fear in others) and moral
struggle for estimation (the demand for recognition by others) in the
contemporary ghetto milieu (see Figures 22 and 23).

Moreover, wall images and murals of local drug dealers function
indirectly as a kind of 'study guide' for young Camden residents, who must
learn to recognize the meanings of the material accoutrement of the ghetto
habitus – phone pagers, pit bulls, jerseys, headscarves, hats, jackets,
jewelry, shoes and expensive firearms, among many other objects – and how

Figure 21   North 5th Street and State Street, 1993 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 22   Chestnut Street and 4th Street, 1997 © Camilo Vergara

Figure 23   Mt Ephraim Avenue and Chase Street, 2005 © Camilo Vergara

to maneuver within the epistemic matrix of that environment. For getting on in a place such as Camden is in no small way dependent upon mastering the curriculum of ghetto cool. Learning to recognize and being able to deploy appropriate objects, codes and symbols – being cool, 'getting cool' with others, and becoming 'streetwise' – are essential elements for navigating the ghettoized streets of Camden. In photographing Camden's highly localized street culture portraits and murals, Vergara's work thematizes the embedded epistemic street codes and moral dilemmas of everyday life in one of America's most desperate new ghettos.

Northeast of Camden, in Newark, an oil drum, painted with the face of a youth, stands chained to a post. The name 'Big Jerry' is faintly legible on the forehead of the boy (see Figure 24). This image is rather unlike those found on wall images and murals in contemporary Camden. Raised eyebrow, wakeful and searching eyes, and an expressionless mouth convey a kind of frozen suspicion, even reproach. Trash protrudes from what is the head of the figure. And a chain dangles like a braided lock of hair, or the chain that it is. Most passers-by, one imagines, simply add to the garbage – and doubtless the drum has long since been removed from its place in space and time. Yet for these very reasons, the image is exemplary of the disclosive power of rescuing critique to pointedly confront the historical present with what it discards.

Figure 24   Central Ward, Newark, 1994 © Camilo Vergara

Conclusion

This article has sought to characterize the ghetto photography of Camilo Vergara as rescuing critique. Elaborating Vergara's work in such a Benjaminian way is – or so I hope to have shown – essential for understanding the methodological uniqueness, historical sensitivity and critical thrust of Vergara's project. For what is truly distinct about Vergara's work is the way in which, in the ruinous present of neo-liberal 'progress', it fuses the aesthetic power of images with an anamnestic obligation to the urban past. Such a fusion is the very hallmark of rescuing criticism. Among the many important effects of Vergara's rescuing critique of America's new ghettos is to make evident how and why, in the global storm of neo-liberalism, no industrial city is invincible. Vergara's current undertaking, the creation of

a 'visual encyclopedia' of the American ghetto, remains devoted to assembling historically mindful images that retrieve the ruins of post-industrial cities. Thus it is precisely *as rescuing critique* that Vergara's work continues to raise normative questions about what has – and might yet – become of such places, and those who inhabit them.

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