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Homeboys and Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space

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Kings is not only like a gang, it's a family. Everybody cares about one another. You can never leave one behind. Everywhere we go we watch each other's back. We never leave nobody running behind . . . 'Cause, see, the same way we watch their back, they're watching our back. When he [gestures toward Shadow, his friend] walks in the street and I'm walking on the other side of the street, I'm watching his back and he's watching mine. That's how we watch our own. That's the way you gotta do it. You gotta watch each other's back. We're all family, we're all Latin Kings. And see right there on the wall [points toward graffiti on nearby wall] you can read over there by that crown over there with the LK—it says "Amor." And "amor" right there means love. Amor stands for a lot of things. It stands for, uh, the A stands for Almighty, the M stands for Masters, the O stands for Of, the R, Revolution—'cause that stands for Almighty Masters Of Revolution. See, amor.

—Latino Boy talking to Dwight Conquergood on a Chicago rooftop (June 1989)¹

¹The fieldwork research for this chapter is part of a larger ethnographic study of Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood, a working-class community that has become a port of entry for refugees and

Gangs give new meaning to group communication. For gangs, *esprit de corps* is an overarching goal and much celebrated achievement of all communication praxis. More than a discursive context, the gang as group is a way of being in the world—both *modus vivendi* and moral vision. Although gangs span a remarkable range of organizational structures that vary in terms of complexity—from a neighborhood adolescent street corner society to a city-wide supergang that controls the urban drug market²—in-group solidarity remains a defining characteristic. For gangs, conventional typologies of communication, such as interpersonal and small group, are inadequate. I coin the term *intra-communal communication* to capture the group-centered cosmology and communitarian ethic of street gangs.

My focus on intra-communal communication practices extends Lannamann's (1991) important critique of the ideological commitment of mainstream communication research. Lannamann noted that academic research on interpersonal communication presupposes the individual as the locus of personhood, leading to a focus on cognitive operations that renders invisible the wider social and historical fields of power within which all human communication is embedded. I would add that this privileging of the individual in communication research both reflects and reifies the "ontological individualism" that Bellah et al. (1985) and Gans (1988) identified as a defining characteristic of middle-class America.³ Indeed, the intensely communal ethos of gangs threatens bourgeois individualism and accounts for the anxiety-ridden demonizing of them in media images of the "pack," the "mob," and "wilding" group—middle-class nightmares of communalism run amok (see Conquergood, 1992a).⁴

new immigrants. The Chicago field study is part of a Ford Foundation national project, "Changing Relations: Newcomers and Established Residents in Six U.S. Communities," that was funded through the Research Foundation of the State University of New York, Grant 240-1117-A (see Lamphere, 1992). I am grateful to the Ford Foundation, Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, and the Illinois Humanities Council for financial support of my work. In December 1987, I moved into the large Big Red tenement in a notorious quarter of this neighborhood called "Little Beirut," and lived in that area until June 1992. (In August 1989, Big Red was evacuated and boarded up due to its severe state of deterioration and disrepair, so I moved into another flat one block north). I am committed to ethnographic research methods that are intensely participative and critically engaged (see Conquergood, 1991a).

²Padilla's (1992) recent research and Thrasher's (1927) classic work are representative studies situated at opposite ends of this continuum of gang structures.

³For an incisive critique of Bellah et al. (1985), see di Leonardo (1991).

⁴Bourdieu (1977), like Lannamann (1991), critiqued the individualist bias of much social research. He argued that "interpersonal" relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships and that the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction" (p. 81). His critique of social psychology for ahistorical and superficial understanding of context is pertinent for much of the research on small group communication:

This is what social psychology and interactionism and ethnomethodology forget when, reducing the objective structure of the relationship between the assembled individuals to the conjunctural structure of their interaction in a particular situation and group, they seek to explain everything that occurs in an experimental or observed interaction in terms of the experimentally controlled characteristics of the situation. (p. 81)

CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF GANGS

Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1982a) argued for a dynamic, communication-centered understanding of social formations that are constituted and sustained by appeals to the greater value of the group, as opposed to those that are premised on the sanctity of individualism:

Every time a member appeals successfully to the paramount need to ensure the survival of the group, its being in existence can be used as a more powerful justification for controlling individuals. . . . Each basic principle, the value of the group, the value of the individual, is the point of reference that justifies action of a potentially generative kind. (p. 198)

Douglas critiqued "passive voice theories" that construe culture as a static entity floating above the everyday communicative interactions, arguments, and rhetorical struggles of living people "who actively make their own environment" (pp. 1, 189). She reconceptualized culture "in the active voice": Culture is both the fecund residue of past communicative interactions and the dynamic resource for ongoing communicative activities; in other words, meanings are both "deeply embedded [in history] and context-bound," and they are dynamically "generated, caught, and transformed" (p. 189).

Communication practices of "real live human beings" become the crucible of culture—the generative site where culture gets made and re-made. As Douglas explained:

For the cognitive activity of the real live individual is largely devoted to building the culture, patching it here and trimming it there, according to the exigencies of the day. In his [or her] very negotiating activity, each is forcing culture down the throats of his [or her] fellow-[wo]men. When individuals transact, their medium of exchange is in units of culture. (p. 189)

The virtue of Douglas' theory of culture is that it restores agency to individual actors as they negotiate their everyday world, while providing a communication-centered framework for understanding how individuals become predisposed to act in culturally patterned ways—what she calls "cultural bias." She is interested in comparative discursive configurations of cultural bias produced by:

moral judgments, excuses, complaints and shifts of interest reckoned as the spoken justifications by individuals of the action they feel required to take. As their subjective perception of the scene and its moral implications emanates from each of them individually, it constitutes a collective moral consciousness about [wo]man and his [or her] place in the universe. The interaction of individual subjects produces a public cosmology capable of being internalized in the consciousness of individuals, if they decide to accept and stay with it. (pp. 199–200)

More
JUSTICE
CULTURE

Wow!

Douglas (1982a, 1982b) set forth a grand typology of four cultural contexts, and compared and contrasted their distinguishing moral visions and cosmological biases: rugged individualists, isolated insulates, hierarchical organization members, and bonded communitarians (commitment to the group is strongest with bonded communitarians).

Clearly, gangs are exemplars of the bonded communitarians. Their communication pulls against the dominant cultural bias of competitive individualism in the larger society. Celebrations of interconnectedness and rituals of "phatic communion" (Burke, 1984) create these strong attachments. The street aphorism, "Look up or pull up" ("pull up" in street argot means "to leave," "depart," "make an exit") stands in contradistinction to the middle-class enjoinder "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." The street saying projects a view of the social world as a web of interconnections, whereas the latter references a vertical hierarchy of upward mobility. During the time of my fieldwork, one of my working-class neighbors from South America noted disapprovingly that "American [middle-class] culture is a do-it-yourself tool-kit." Contrast middle-class self-reliance with Latino Boy's affirmations about the communal, familial caring and nurturance of gang culture as echoed and elaborated by another young Chicago gang member quoted by sociologist Padilla (1992):

We call ourselves a family, but, you know, when you really think about it we're also a team. And if you want to lose, play alone. . . . Myself, I have gotten busted by the police several times because I was alone. I couldn't see them coming. When you're with your boys you have more eyes to check out what's going on—you can see the cops; you can see the opposition. But when you are by yourself sometimes you feel scared. . . . In the Diamonds we teach the young guys; *we practice how to be together all the time* [italics added]. We think that that's our strength. Other people have money. We have each other. (p. 108)

Scarcely could one have a clearer enunciation of the communitarian ethos rooted in a social environment where self-sufficiency, individuation, and independence are dysfunctional and even dangerous. *Nice*

Douglas (1982a) noted that strong-group social formations maintain their solidarity primarily by producing rhetorical visions of a hostile outside world that threatens to violate the integrity of the group. Bonded communitarians are boundary vigilant; border maintenance between in-group and out-group areas and alignments is a constant activity and source of anxiety. "The social experience of the individual," Douglas explained, "is first and foremost constrained by the external boundary maintained by the group against outsiders" (p. 205).

The need to mobilize and heighten group consciousness by creating a strong boundary against the outside world accounts for the densely coded and deliberately opaque nature of gang communication. Gangs rely heavily on nonverbal

channels of communication: hand signs, color of clothing, tilt of a baseball cap, brand of tennis shoes and style of lacing, whistles, visual icons (both in graffiti murals and body tattoos), mode of crossing arms, and earrings. These nonverbal channels of communication are incomprehensible to outsiders who lack the necessary "local knowledge" to decipher their meanings (Geertz, 1983). Gang graffiti is inscrutable to outsiders because it draws on an elaborate system of underground symbols, icons, and logos, the nuanced meanings of which can be keyed according to certain semiotic manipulations: inversions, reversals, and fractures. Middle-class citizens driving through the so-called "inner city" look at a graffiti-covered wall as meaningless gibberish and a sign of social disorder, whereas the local homeboys look at the same graffiti mural and appreciate the complex meanings and messages it artfully conveys. Instead of a mindless mess, gang graffiti, at least in the Chicago neighborhoods where I have conducted research, display an efflorescence of semiosis (see Conquergood, 1992a).⁵

The verbal communication of gangs is likewise coded in a variety of ways so that meanings are camouflaged. Gangs draw richly on street slang, a class-marked discourse that already sets them apart from mainstream "respectability." In addition, they develop a special argot and set of shibboleths peculiar to gangs, with certain terms and phrases that circulate only within specific gangs. Examples include *violation*, shortened typically to *V*, as in *take your V*, a term referring to intragang discipline, the administering of corporal punishment for infractions of the gang's cultural norms, and during rites of initiation into gang membership. In Chicago, the Vice Lords, one of the oldest and largest supergangs, use *All is well* as their password, whereas their archrivals, the Disciples, use *All is one*. The "What you be about?" challenge is the verbal equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet, whereby a gang member when encountering a suspected rival on unfamiliar territory demands that he or she declare gang allegiance. Much more than a simple question, "What you be about?" uttered in a hostile, intimidating tone is often the prelude to a fight, and functions communicatively as what Austin (1962) called a "performative utterance."

A common rite of greeting and leave-taking among Chicago's Latin Kings gang is to proclaim "Amor!" This, of course, is the Spanish word for *love*, but as Latino Boy explained in the epigraph to this chapter it is also an acronym for Almighty Masters Of Revolution. The complete title for the gang, Almighty Latin Kings Nation, is a complicated acronym that stands for the following:

A Love Measured In Great Harmony Towards Yahve
Latin American Tribe Illuminating Natural

⁵Police refer to gang graffiti in deeply insulting animal imagery, such as "dog and fire hydrant" marking of turf. I quote from the Chicago Police Department (1991) information booklet entitled *Street Gangs*: "Gang graffiti is not a youthful prank. It puts forth a strong message from the gang that they control the area, much like a wild animal marking his boundaries" (p. 1).

Knowledge, Indestructible Nobility and Glowing Strength Natural Allies Together In One Nucleus

The Black Gangster Disciples identify themselves as BOS, standing for Brothers of the Struggle. Secret acronyms as well as special argot are thus developed and designed precisely to circumscribe group boundaries, heighten in-group consciousness, and exclude outsiders.

The most verbally explicit written genre of gang communication—the underground manifestos and charters that spell out the rules, rituals, and symbolism for each gang—are guarded carefully and hidden from the gaze of the uninitiated. It was only after 3 years of intense participant-observation fieldwork that I earned the rapport to be shown one of these secret documents. The first of these typescript manuscripts I saw had a handwritten proscription encircled at the top of the title page: "For real _____ [name of gang] only." One of the "laws" set forth in the manifesto underscores the role of communication in sustaining a tight external boundary: "Nation affairs are to be kept within the Nation and are not [to] be discussed in the presence of anyone outside the Nation." Another "law" also proscribes communication and attests to the fact that members know that "gangs" have become a highly saleable media commodity: "No member shall conduct an interview with any person from the news media concerning Nation affairs without the approval of the _____ [respected leaders]." In the constitution of another large Chicago gang, the first law likewise concerns communication boundaries and sets forth what de Certeau (1986) called the "politics of silence": "All members must respect and participate in maintaining a code of silence within our family" (p. 225).⁶

⁶Conducting and publishing research on an underground, somewhat secret social group is riddled with ethical dilemmas, conundrums, and predicaments. I must negotiate continuously the delicate boundary between respect and sensitivity to my field consultants, and the need to write the fullest, most complex ethnographic account of their communication practices that my data support. My struggle about how to handle the secret manifestos foregrounds the ethicopolitical problematics of fieldwork. They are amazing exegetical documents in which gangs spell out their credo, moral vision, and symbolism, thus providing emic explanations, indigenous interpretations, and metacultural analyses from the people themselves. Any ethnographer aspiring to Geertz's (1973) ideal of rendering "thick descriptions" of another way of life would be foolish to ignore these documents. Further, because I want to contest and counter the mainstream media demonology about gangs (i.e., that they are all drug-crazed, sociopathic, subhuman, vicious killers) with a more complicated picture of gang life, these manifestos are key texts for highlighting the thoughtful, creative, and humane aspects of gang culture—the very characteristics that are erased in the prevailing media representations of gangs so that only the violent and sensationalist (and I would add, highly marketable) images dominate. However, my ethnographic predicament is that these documents are secret. I wish I could say to beginning ethnographers that there is always an easy, clear-cut answer that resolves every fieldwork dilemma. I can share only my ethical struggles and uneasy decision to quote from these underground documents. I do so in support of telling a more complex and ethnographically valid story that will deepen understanding of gang culture and, I hope, contribute in some small way to the advancement of more enlightened public policies and humane intervention programs for street

*Disciples
ethics*

The need for silence, secrecy, and circumspection is intensified because the line between insiders and outsiders is slippery and shifting. Once one looks closely at gangs, it becomes evident that borders are constructed on multiple and mobile fronts. Actually, borders absolutely criss-cross the entire domain of gang culture because gangs set themselves apart from mainstream society, as well as from one another. Intergang conflict and border disputes over turf heighten and intensify the boundary anxiety and vigilance between and among gangs, and all this takes place within the larger context of outside surveillance and hostility from police and other agents of civil society. Bakhtin's (1990) radical rethinking and resituating of culture along boundaries and borders instead of organic centers is a remarkably apt spatial image for understanding the dynamics of gang cultural processes.⁷

A cultural domain has no inner territory. It is located entirely along boundaries, boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features. The systematic unity of culture passes into the atoms of cultural life—like the sun, it is reflected in every drop of this life. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Separated by abstraction from these boundaries, it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant; it degenerates and dies. (p. 274)

In the following section, I map some of the principal boundaries and intersections that constitute gang cultures.

ORGANIZATIONAL LINKAGES AND GANG SYSTEMS

One of the benefits of studying natural groups at ground level is an ability to capture structural complexities, transformations, and processual dynamics that would not be manifest in zero-history, "ad hoc groups manufactured from classroom students" for academic research (Fisher, 1978, p. 230). Gangs have been studied both as organizations (e.g., Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992) and groups (e.g., Miller, 1980; Morash, 1983; Short & Strodbeck, 1974; Vigil, 1988a). Indeed, struggles over definitions of what constitutes a gang are still engaged in the scholarly literature (Horowitz, 1990). Instead of *either* an organization or a group process, I argue that gangs are *both*. Gangs are complex border

youth. When faced with the ethicopolitical problematics of field research, I find it helpful to read how other ethnographers struggle with similar contradictions and ambivalences that arise inevitably in many fieldwork projects. I particularly recommend the monographs of Feldman (1991) and Lavie (1990), two ethnographers who have conducted difficult fieldwork in politically charged research sites.

⁷Boundaries and borderlands, and conjunctions and commotions are now the staples of post-positivist and poststructuralist ethnography (see Anzaldúa, 1987; Clifford, 1988; Rosaldo, 1989).

cultures that at any given moment in time slide between the categories of *organization* and *small group*. It is that slide along this continuum that distinguishes gang experience. I believe the definitional arguments say more about a given researcher's theoretical and methodological focus than the realities of gang life. For example, Jankowski (1991) studied 37 gangs in three cities, so it makes sense that he focused on macrostructures of gangs as hierarchical organizations with entrepreneurial goals. On the other hand, Vigil (1988a, 1988b) drew on his own personal experience of growing up in a Los Angeles barrio to deepen his participant-observation research of barrio gangs, which explains why he picked up on the microdynamics and group processes of gang experience. Interestingly, both Jankowski and Vigil researched gangs in Los Angeles during approximately the same time period. I attribute their contrasting definitions of gangs to their different perspectives, which predisposes them to pick up qualities of gang life at different points between the organization-group continuum.

Although here I emphasize the small group dimension of gangs, I hope to make clear that the face-to-face familiarities of the street-corner homeboys are embedded within, enabled, and energized by the organizational resources of the supergang confederations—the “gang nations” to which they are linked or “hooked up.” In Chicago, there are two major confederations of gangs: People and Folks. These supragang alliances developed in the Illinois prison system during the early 1980s in an attempt to minimize factionalism and intergang warfare. Instead of scores of street gangs all fighting one another for turf and honor, two major coalitions were consolidated to absorb all the internecine hostilities and rearticulate them along one fundamental Us/Them divide: the symbolically constructed border between People and Folks. The Folks Nation is composed of (a) the Black Gangster Disciple Nation, the largest Chicago street gang; (b) the Simon City Royals, one of the oldest White gangs; (c) the Maniac Latin Disciples; and (d) several other street gangs. The People Nation is composed of (a) Vice Lords, the oldest and one of the largest gangs in Chicago; (b) the Latin Kings, the oldest and largest Latino gang; (c) the Gaylords, a White gang; and (d) several others (see Table 2.1).

This organization of all Chicago street gangs into two grand gang nations in the early 1980s was anticipated a decade earlier: Jeff Fort, leader of the Blackstone Rangers street gang, organized several African-American gangs on Chicago's South Side into the Black Peace Stone Nation, referred to commonly as the Black P Stone Nation. Here again, the goal was to reduce conflict by forging solidarity among several gang factions. In response to the greatly expanded and consolidated power of the Black P Stone Nation, the Black Disciples likewise forged a coalition with several other gangs to create the Black Gangster Disciple Nation under the leadership of David Barksdale. The emergence of these two major coalitions during the late 1960s and early 1970s signaled a shift in self-identification from street gang to “nation,” and reflected the revolutionary rhetoric of the times.

TABLE 2.1
Chicago Street Gangs Aligned with Nation

| People Nation | Folks Nation |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Latin Kings | Black Gangster Disciples |
| Vice Lords | Simon City Royals |
| Bishops | Ambrose |
| Gaylords | Ashland Vikings |
| Insane Unknowns | Braziers |
| Latin Counts | Imperial Gangsters |
| Latin Saints | Insane Popes |
| Cobrastones | La Raza |
| Pachucos | Latin Eagles |
| Future Puerto Rican Stones | Latin Lovers |
| Spanish Lords | Maniac Latin Disciples |
| | Orchestra Albany |
| | Party People |
| | Spanish Cobras |
| | Two Sixers |

Note. This list is selective, not comprehensive. The four largest street gangs in Chicago are Black Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, Latin Kings, and Simon City Royals.

I want to emphasize that the boundary between People and Folks Nations is constructed symbolically. It is not based on race, ethnicity, or major geographic area (i.e., Chicago was not divided into South Side for Folks Nation and North Side for People Nation). Although branches of gangs certainly are territorially based, my point is that both People Nation and Folks Nation gang branches are distributed throughout the city, thus making Chicago a patchwork quilt of continuously alternating Nation turf. Most remarkably, the organization of all street gangs into one of two Nations cuts across and subsumes race and ethnicity. Both Nations are multiracial and multiethnic ensembles. A look at the histories of some of these gangs underscores the extraordinary integrative achievement of the Nation confederations. As noted earlier, one of the oldest and largest White gangs, the Simon City Royals, forged solidarity with the Black Gangster Disciple Nation in the formation of the Folks Nation. However, another long-standing White gang, the Gaylords, did not join the Simon City Royals in lining up under the Folks Nation. Instead, the Gaylords aligned with the People Nation, and thus became major allies of the Latin Kings. This alignment is all the more remarkable given the racist history of the Gaylords: Their gang name is an acronym standing for Great American Youth Love Our Race Destroy Spics. Now the Gaylords join their People Nation confederates the Latin Kings and the Future Puerto Rican Stones to fight the Folks-aligned Popes, another historically White gang whose name, like the Gaylords, is a racist acronym: Protect Our People Eliminate Spics. In these international fights, the Popes are backed up by their Folks compatriots: the Spanish Cobras and the Latin Eagles.

The next level of organization, after the Nation confederations and special multigang alliances, is that of the gangs themselves.⁸ Individual gangs can range in size from 6 to more than 1,000 members. Many gangs now affix Nation to their title. In some cases this acknowledges the size and scale of organizational complexity of a gang (e.g., the Almighty Latin King Nation), whereas in other cases it is simply self-aggrandizing (e.g., Pee Wee Future Puerto Rican Stones Nation). Whereas the People versus Folks alignment determines coalition partners and fighting allies, the particular gang is the primary source of social symbolism, identification, and meaningfulness for gang members. The larger gangs have the organizational savvy to know that people are mobilized best in units small enough to encompass co-residence, which provides frequent face-to-face interactions. Therefore, the large gangs subdivide into multiple branches, also called *sections* or *chapters*. The primary unit in Chicago's gang organization is the turf-based branch, named after the street corner where the local homeboys hang out. As soon as a branch grows too large to accommodate the face-to-face intimacies that are the highly prized and defining quality of gang life, it subdivides into more manageable units, typically no more than 50 "heads" (members).⁹ For example, the Almighty Latin King Nation embraces more than a dozen branches, each one named after the intersection that serves as the focal

⁸An example of a special multigang alliance is the Young Latino Organization (YLO), or United Latino Organization (ULO), a coalition of several Folks Nation street gangs that includes the Spanish Cobras, Latin Disciples, Latin Eagles, and Imperial Gangsters. The YLO/ULO alliance is pitted against the Latin Kings, one of the largest People Nation street gangs.

⁹One of the most significant findings of my fieldwork is that turf (territory) overrides race and ethnicity as the primary determinant of gang identification. Both researchers and laypersons have taken unproblematically the title of a street gang as a reliable indicator of racial and ethnic composition, and have generalized that gangs are organized along racial lines. This is true only when a local neighborhood is racially segregated, such as when the Latin Kings emerged in the 1960s in a section of Chicago that was predominantly Latino, hence the title Latin Kings. However, in the multicultural new immigrant and refugee neighborhood where I lived and conducted fieldwork, the Lawrence and Kedzie branch of the Latin Kings embraced a rainbow coalition of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Panamanian, as well as African American, White, Assyrian, Filipino, Lebanese, Palestinian, Korean, Vietnamese, Lao, and others. The vice prez of this branch of the Latin Kings is an Assyrian refugee born in Iraq, and another high-ranking member is a displaced Appalachian youth born in West Virginia, whose street tag is Blanco, which, of course, is Spanish for White. Newly formed branches of the Latin Kings in some of southwest Chicago's predominantly White working-class neighborhoods have a membership that is predominantly White. The local street gang will be ethnically homogeneous only if the neighborhood is residentially segregated. The names of street gangs often point more to a stark history of residential segregation in Chicago than they do the current realities of gang membership (see Massey & Denton, 1993). If the neighborhood is ethnically mixed, then the local gang will mirror this same diversity, regardless of whether it is named Latin Kings or Future Puerto Rican Stones. I could give many examples of how gang identity subsumes and rearticulates racial and ethnic boundaries, but the following example must suffice: in April 1991, a Future Puerto Rican Stone, who actually was a Romanian refugee youth, was killed in my neighborhood allegedly by a Spanish Cobra, who actually was a Vietnamese youth.

point for that turf: Lawrence/Kedzie Kings, Beach/Spaulding Kings, Columbia/Ashland Kings, Montrose/Paulina Kings, Rockwell/Leland Kings, Whipple/Wabansia Kings, Berwyn/Winthrop Kings, Clark/Bryn Mawr Kings, Broadway/Winona Kings, Lawrence/Washtenau Kings, Leavitt/Schiller Kings, and so forth. Each branch uses the colors and iconography of the gang. The Latin Kings branches use black and gold colors and a five-point crown, which follows the overall Nation symbology and numerology. All People use a cross with two dots; inverted pitchforks; the left side of the body in nonverbal communication; and number five in graffiti (either explicitly, e.g., "5," or in icons of five-point stars and five-point crowns), throwing up one hand with five fingers spread, lacing up five eyelets of tennis shoes, and so forth.

Each branch has its own set of officers, and it exercises a great deal of autonomy in the day-to-day activities of the homeboys. The gang manifestos and constitutions referred to previously are designed to share traditions and assure continuity across multiple sections. Some of them contain charts of the organizational structure of the gang, delineating hierarchies of power and various roles. These include, in the case of Latin Kings, the offices of Incas, Coronas, Caciques, and Crown Councils. Other gangs name their officers Chairman, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Ambassador, and so forth. The most common leadership title at the branch level is Prez, short for President. Typically, there is more flexibility in the leadership structure at the level of the branch than at the gang level. Academics might be surprised to know that these underground documents contain sound advice about organizational communication. Here are some examples: "No one person should be required to manage more than six (6) to ten (10) members." Most manifestos encourage adaptive flexibility at the level of branch/section: "There is no ideal organizational structure that fits the needs of every single [branch]. . . . Whatever structure you finally choose, let it be flexible enough to accommodate the growth of your section. . . . Don't be afraid to change your structure when it is necessary."

All these documents also emphasize the centrality of communication. One gang charter actually has a subsection titled "Communication and Meetings"¹⁰:

If you don't communicate effectively, you won't lead effectively. Leadership involves getting things done through people. How well you do this, this will be determined by your ability to communicate. You have to look upon communication as your most valuable asset, other than your own personal communication methods there is one primary way that a section can communicate with its members. The primary way is through: Meetings!

These written documents inscribe what I hear on the streets. Mex, one of my neighbors in the Big Red tenement where I lived for the first 20 months of my

¹⁰For an anthropological study of meetings as key sites of organizational communication, see Schwartzman (1989).

fieldwork, explained: "It's all organization and communication. You gotta have communication" (see Conquergood, 1992b).

The branch or section is the generative center of gang life, and the texture of everyday experience for the homeboys of a local branch is constituted by interactive group processes. A Latin King shows respect to all Latin Kings from every branch, but the real blood-brother bonding is cemented within the shared space of the "hood." Recall the quote of the young gang member cited earlier: "In the Diamonds, we teach the young guys: *we practice how to be together all the time* [italics added]" (Padilla, 1992, p. 108). This quote points to the importance of generational boundaries within branches. Several age cohorts with separate and overlapping responsibilities are nested within a gang branch. They are identified by names such as Seniors (over 20), Juniors (late teens), Pee Wees (14-16), Shorties (12-13), and Wannabes (10-11). Younger cohorts of gangs also are called Futures, and Baby, as in Baby Kings, Baby Cobras, and so forth. An age cohort is often initiated, "V'd in," as a group, given its own set of leaders (e.g., the Prez [president] of the Lawrence and Kedzie Pew Wee Latin Kings), thus appropriating and strengthening the bond that age-mates already share. Differences in age are sometimes the source of tensions within the hood, just as they are in the larger society. A member of an older cohort once complained to me about the immaturity of the Pee Wees: "These young bloods be messin' up the neighborhood. They're crazy, too wild, starting trouble all the time. Then *we* have to take care of it. They be nothing but trouble." However, the age sets within a branch enable intense cross-cohort bonding. Older gang members form powerful mentoring relationships with the Shorties and young bloods. The Latin Kings name this relationship as "making a King," and I heard one Senior announce with pride, "Shadow's my boy—I made him a King." These cross-cohort bonds provide status and respect for the older partner, and attention, guidance, and nurturance for the Shorties.

The microunit of gang structure is the clique—the tight bond between two or three members of a cohort that is inseparable. One can be a member of more than one clique, and these cliques, like all close friendships, can change and reconfigure over time. Although these dyads and triads are not formal units of gang structure, their existence nonetheless is marked by informal talk and joking. People on the streets acknowledge this special relationship: "You looking for Richie? Find Little Man, he'll be with Little Man." Sometimes the clique partners are teased good-naturedly and referred to jokingly as "girlfriends." Partners make metareferential references, such as "Ghetto Boy—he's my homey, my homz, he's my main man—I'm down for that brother."

Gangs need to be understood as large systems of multiple embedded and mutually implicated units, each one impinging and shaping the contours of experience for all the others (see Fig. 2.1). With permeable boundaries and interdependence with immediate context, gangs are exemplars of what Putnam and Stohl (1990) called "bona fide groups." The fundamental external boundary

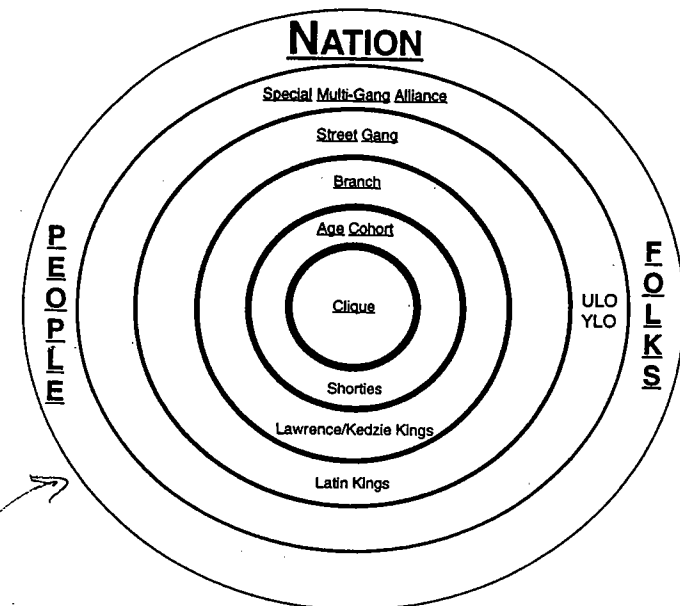


FIG. 2.1. The gang system.

is the hostility-charged border between People and Folks Nations. However, my point in mapping the larger gang system is to reveal all the intricate intersections and boundaries of difference *inside* Nations that constitute and crisscross identities. Latin Kings and Vice Lords are both lead gangs in the People Nation: They "ride" together, but at the same time they are different. It is important for both to signal solidarity with one another while simultaneously negotiating their own ramified boundaries. It is not unusual for tensions to erupt sometimes between gangs of the same nation. During 1988-1989, fighting broke out between the La Raza and Ambrose gangs, both members of the Folks Nation. The dispute escalated into a war that drew in the Two Sixers and the Party People gangs on the side of La Raza, and the Satan Disciples on the side of Ambrose. I want to emphasize that all five Chicago gangs embroiled in this conflict were members of the Folks Nation.

There are also internal tensions and occasional rivalries among the various branches within the same gang. Some street gangs originated as breakaway sections from established gangs. For example, the Spanish Cobras broke away from the Maniac Latin Disciples, and the Future Puerto Rican Stones broke away from the Latin Kings. Each branch contests for pride of place within the overall reputation of the gang. Because the branch is the heart of gang life and the site of primary loyalty and affection, gang members often code graffiti

displays to designate their specific branch affiliation, in addition to their gang identification. In the hood of the Lawrence and Kedzie branch of the Latin Kings where I lived during most of my fieldwork, I frequently saw graffiti from other Latin King branches. That is not the same kind of insult as when a rival Folks gang entered the hood and "splashed" the walls, but it is a bit of a boundary transgression.

It is not uncommon for gang members to switch allegiance from one branch to another within the same gang. This border-crossing practice is called "turning sections." From time to time gang members also change gangs. This is relatively unproblematic as long as the new gang is, of course, a member of the same Nation. These transfers between gangs come about typically as a result of a gang member's family moving to another neighborhood. I also know individual gang members who have changed from Folks to People Nation gangs, and vice versa. This practice, unlike turning sections, is an unspeakable transgression of the fundamental binary opposition on which gang identity pivots, and therefore cannot be countenanced. Such major threshold crossings are deep, closely guarded, dangerous secrets. I am sure that my confidantes felt safe to unburden themselves with me only because of my liminal relationship to gang culture. Because I know a great deal about gangs, I can serve as an appreciative audience able to absorb the full impact of these dramatic self-disclosures. At the same time, I am not a part of the culture: As participant-observer ethnographer I am both insider and outsider. An even more radical border crossing takes place when entire gangs switch affiliation between Nations. At one time the Latin Saints were a Folks gang (originally a breakaway gang from the Spanish Cobras) that changed to People. During the summer of 1991, the Insane Deuces switched from People to Folks as a result of their intranation fighting with the Latin Kings. Unlike individual crossovers, when an entire gang switches Nation allegiance it is a public act that is discussed widely, with repercussions for the entire gang system.

To convey the dynamism and volatility within the overall gang system, I summarize the life cycle of one particular group with which I have been involved throughout the course of my fieldwork. I moved into the Big Red tenement in December 1987. The exterior walls and the interior stairwells were inscribed with graffiti proclaiming that Big Red was in the heart of Latin King turf, specifically the Lawrence/Kedzie branch of the Almighty Latin King Nation. There were other affiliate People gangs, such as the Assyrian Eagles and the Future Puerto Rican Stones, whose turf overlapped with that of the Lawrence and Kedzie Kings. After a few months, new graffiti, LNN, which stood for the Latin Knights Nation, a new gang (they substituted N for the K of Knights to differentiate their logo from the Latin Kings), started appearing on neighborhood walls. The Latin Knights were an emergent gang, a loose collection of more than a dozen local 14-year-old Mexican, Puerto Rican, Assyrian, African American, and White youths all constellated around a charismatic 17-year-old

leader. The Latin Knights were associated closely with the Latin Kings. They adopted the Latin King handshake and crown symbolism, but sustained their own LNN graffiti. By the summer of 1988, they had ordered their own custom-made Latin Knights baseball caps.

In October 1988, the Latin Kings were hanging out in the park with several Latin Knights when they were attacked allegedly by the Simon City Royals, whose hood is just to the north. Two Kings were wounded, and a third youth, who was not a King and just socializing with them, was killed during the attack. This killing sent shock waves through the community that resulted in the incorporation of the Latin Knights into the Lawrence and Kedzie Kings. On December 9, 1988, 13 of the Latin Knights were "V'd in" as Pee Wee Kings. Their charismatic leader became the prez of the Pee Wee cohort. In effect, the Latin Knights were a "wannabe" gang, an imitation of formal street gangs without the ensuing responsibilities of a full-fledged gang. It had provided a liminal space for neighborhood youths to experiment and play with gang symbolism and traditions without a full commitment to the larger system. The Latin Kings in the area were not very pleased about the prospect of sharing the neighborhood with another gang, even a friendly one that emulated them. However, the killing in the park created a crisis that clarified and consolidated boundaries. The Latin Knights saw the advantage of relinquishing their autonomy and joining a larger established group, while the Lawrence/Kedzie Kings seized this opportunity to deal with the mildly annoying presence of the Knights by incorporating them in toto as a Pee Wee cohort.

This Pee Wee cohort became very active and assertive within the branch, and soon began to chafe under what they perceived as the stodginess of older gang members. By the summer of 1990, there was increasing generational tension within the Lawrence/Kedzie branch. As early as the summer of 1989, I began noticing graffiti announcing a new Whipple/Ainslie branch of the Latin Kings (see Fig. 2.2). Whipple and Ainslie is a street corner in back of the Big Red tenement where I lived. Thus, it looked like the Lawrence/Kedzie branch was splitting in half, with Big Red situated on the fault line. However, this fission was prevented by skillful mediation within the branch across cohorts. The cohorts united in common struggle against the Insane Popes, the enemy Folks gang on their eastern boundary. They invaded and conquered a portion of the Popes' territory, thereby extending the Latin Kings' turf two blocks east. Most importantly, the border war against the Popes gang absorbed internal tensions and consolidated the Lawrence/Kedzie branch of the Latin Kings.

In May 1991, a minor war broke out between the Lawrence/Kedzie Kings and the Future Puerto Rican Stones with whom they had cohabited for years. Latin Kings and Future Puerto Rican Stones' graffiti would often be displayed side by side on the same walls. A single family might include one brother who belonged to the Kings and another brother who belonged to the Stones. However, in early May 1991, a King disrespected the girlfriend of a Stone,



FIG. 2.2. In addition to the tattoos and graffiti, this Latin King is reppin' to the left—the privileged side of the body for all People Nation gangs—by crossing his right hand over his left wrist. This specific mode of reppin' is called “crossing up,” and can be performed in another way by crossing the right hand over the torso so that it grasps the left upper arm. Folks Nation gangs rep to the right. (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

inciting the Stone to shoot out the windows of the apartment building where the King lived. This incident escalated quickly into a war. Recall that the Future Puerto Rican Stones had originated as a breakaway branch from the Latin Kings more than a decade ago, and no doubt old tensions and imperfectly resolved issues from the past resurfaced during this breach. There was intense fighting within the branch during most of May, with several exchanges of gunfire, but fortunately no one was killed, and only one person received a minor wound in the leg. What is interesting about this crisis once again is the way it clarified and realigned boundaries. Several members of the original Latin Knights who had become Pee Wees impatient with the older Latin Kings had drifted over to the Stones. Before the war, this slippage was not very remarkable because the Stones and the Kings of the Lawrence/Kedzie branch are “tight”—they “ride together.” However, the war forced people to take sides, and everyone remarked particularly about the Kings-turned-Stones who were now shooting at Kings. The charismatic leader of the original Latin Knights was one of these frustrated Kings who, as prez of the Pee Wee cohort, had led the movement to create his own Whipple/Ainslie branch. After that failed, he turned Stone. By the end of May,

a truce was negotiated. Because no one on either side had been killed, it was relatively easy for both sides to resolve the dispute in a face-saving way.

I provide this historical detail about the processual dynamics within one branch of the larger gang system to make the point that borders and boundaries are continuously negotiated, clarified, reconstructed, and contested. Examined at the microlevel of everyday interaction, the gang system is more like a dynamic zone of contest and struggle than a fixed, static, hierarchical structure.

GANGS AND CULTURAL SPACE

The heart of gang life, the branch, is what Turner (1982) called a “star group”—the group “with which a person identifies most deeply and in which he [or she] finds fulfillment of his [or her] major social and personal strivings and desires” (p. 69). Embedded within a larger system, the branch provides an encircling web of support, attachment, and solidarity against a hostile world. The group is galvanized communicatively through the figurative and physical deployment of space (see Lefebvre, 1991). Every branch is rooted in a clearly bounded territory called the hood. For example, the Lawrence/Kedzie branch of the Latin Kings inhabits the neighborhood of Chicago bounded by Foster Street to the north, Montrose Street to the south, the north branch of the Chicago River to the east, and Kimball Street to the west. Within this territory, particularly near the boundaries, graffiti announce self-consciously, “LK Camp,” “This is King’s World” (see Fig. 2.2). The communicative task of the gang group is to transform marginal, somewhat forbidding urban space into a hood—to make a world of meaning, familiarity, adventure, and affective intensity through ritual, symbol, and dramaturgy.

Carey’s (1989) view of communication as ritual is particularly helpful for understanding the intracommunal cultural practices of gangs. For Carey “communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23). Through communication we “produce the world by symbolic work and then *take up residence* [italics added] in the world so produced” (p. 85). I am struck by Carey’s analogy between ritual communication and homemaking, inhabiting, “tak[ing] up residence.” Carey is not alone in using the metaphors of *home* and *habitation* when theorizing about cultural communication. de Certeau (1984) wrote evocatively about the everyday practices of marginal people struggling to cope within forbidding social structures as “dwelling,” making a “dwelling place” within dominant space. Bourdieu (1977) developed his complex cultural theory around the idea of “habitus.” hooks (1990) wrote about the task of “making homeplace” as the construction and maintenance of “spaces of care and nurturance” (p. 42). Bachelard (1969) argued that the image of: “the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the

thoughts, memories and dreams of [wo]mankind. . . . It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. Before he [or she] is 'cast into the world,' . . . [wo]man is laid in the cradle of the house" (pp. 6-7).

Gang youth articulate and experience their hood through imagery of home and family. They name themselves *homeboys*, *homeys*, *homz*, *bloods*, and the preferred term of intracommunal address is *bro*, short for brother. Bro is a term of endearment, *communitas*, an expression of "we feeling," asserting that you are an extension of myself (see Turner, 1977). Powerfully significant, this term marks a move to trust and intimacy, and it is not used idly. I moved into Big Red mid-December 1987, but it was June 14, 1988, before anyone addressed me as "bro." It took 6 months of intensely participative fieldwork to earn the trust signified by this relational marker. However, once one has earned this epithet, it is used liberally to lend emotional warmth as well as stylistic rhythm to verbal exchanges: "Hey bro, anybody steal your bicycle, bro, you tell us, bro, we'll get it back for you, bro. Hey bro, we'll even get you a better one."

Most outsiders, whose image of gangs is shaped by media demonology, would be surprised to hear the preponderance of gang terms rooted in nurturance and domestic tenderness. The entire hood is symbolized as a homeplace filled with bros and bloods, with specific apartments and domiciles referred to as "cribs" and "cradles." The nicknames that gang members give themselves and one another alternate between menacing and affectionate epithets. For every Hit Man and Pit Bull nickname there is a long line of Spanky, Teddy Bear, Baby Face, Hush Puppie, Kool Aid, Little Man, Pee Wee, Pollo, and other diminutives. The hood is imagined as a space of warmth and well-being.

The key term in *gang communication* is *reppin'*, short for *representing*. It refers to a repertoire of communication practices whereby gang members enact, and thereby constitute, their gang identity. *Reppin'* encompasses everything from wearing the signifying gang colors, throwing up hand signs, and calling out code words to inscribing elaborate graffiti murals (see Figs. 2-10). However, there is a deeper meaning undergirding all of these representations. As one neighbor explained to me, "It is throwing up your love—it is all about love." I quote from one of the underground manifestos: "Our struggle is to show love to each other. . . . We all understand the love and meaning behind representing. We all know who we are, and what we stand for. If in any place or situation you cannot represent, well, we know one doesn't have to hit his chest to be 100% loyal to this almighty family."

The Latin Kings frequently write on walls and call out "amor," and "King Love." They say that the five points of their crown stand for Love, Honor, Obedience, Sacrifice, and Righteousness. Their manifesto enjoins members to honor and respect "the Sacred Colors" of black and gold "for they represent the people we love and live for." *Reppin'* truly is an example par excellence of what Burke (1984) called "secular prayer . . . the coaching of an attitude by the use of mimetic and verbal language" (p. 322). The attitude that is danced continuously



FIG. 2.3. Street gangs inscribe the urban landscape with elaborate, complex, and deeply meaningful symbolism. The bodies of gang members, in addition to urban walls, are important sites for these signifying practices. Here, Ghetto Boy reps his identity by hand signing (throwing down the Folks Nation with a digital icon of an upside-down pitchfork) and by wearing his baseball cap with the bill raked to the left. The cap can be worn with the titled bill in front or back, but the back position intensifies the rep. Also, the strength of a rep is calibrated by the degree of the angle (e.g., a slight tilt to the left is interpreted as not as strong [audacious] as a wide angle rake to the left). (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

throughout the representational practices within the hood is that of loving commitment, bonding.

The elaborate and stylized rites of handshaking—much more developed than the perfunctory middle-class two and one-half pumps—enact performatively this blood-brother bonding. Most gangs in Chicago have their own specific and elaborately choreographed rites of handshaking. For example, the Latin Kings "shake on the crown"; the crown, of course, is the centerpiece of their iconography (see Fig. 2.4). "Shaking on the crown" entails a graceful series of coperformed hand gestures that represent digitally the Latin King crown. These choreographed handshakes, performed both as rites of greeting and leave-taking, often include a kiss of the coparticipants fingertips joined to form the crown (see Fig. 2.6). These rites culminate in both partners throwing their right fist on their "heart" (chest), kissing their fingertips, and then tapping their heart with tips of fingers extended in the shape of a crown. Called the "national salute," this performance can be repeated a dozen times in the course of traversing a single block if many brothers happen to be out on the streets. The



FIG. 2.4. Two versions of the “throwing up the crown” rep. The youth on the upper ledge combines a digital three-point crown with a “crossing up” to the left side of his body. The youth on the lower level performs a two-hand variant of “throwing up the crown.” Note also his baseball cap tilted to the left, his left foot “turned out” to the left, and his Converse high-top tennis shoes. The Converse brand is popular with People Nation gangs because of the five-point star logo on the heel. (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

manifesto has a section entitled “National Salute”: “A fist upon our heart, it means, “I DIE FOR YOU” for you are flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, son of my mother who is the Universal Nature and follower of Yahve who is the Almighty King of Kings; it also means Love—Strength—Sacrifice.”

As a participant-observer, I have firsthand experience with how these rituals of phatic communion texture street life into a tightly knit fabric of familiarity. It sometimes has taken me an hour just to walk a few blocks to the bus stop, particularly on weekend evenings when all the brothers, sisters, and local characters are out on the streets, seeing and being seen, acknowledging one another's presence, and self-consciously commenting on and thereby cementing relationships. Even if you have seen someone the day before, or earlier in the same day, you perform these rites of affiliation all over again. Not to do so is to commit one of the cardinal sins of life in the hood: disrespect. In a mainstream world where residents of the inner city have been marginalized socioeconomi-

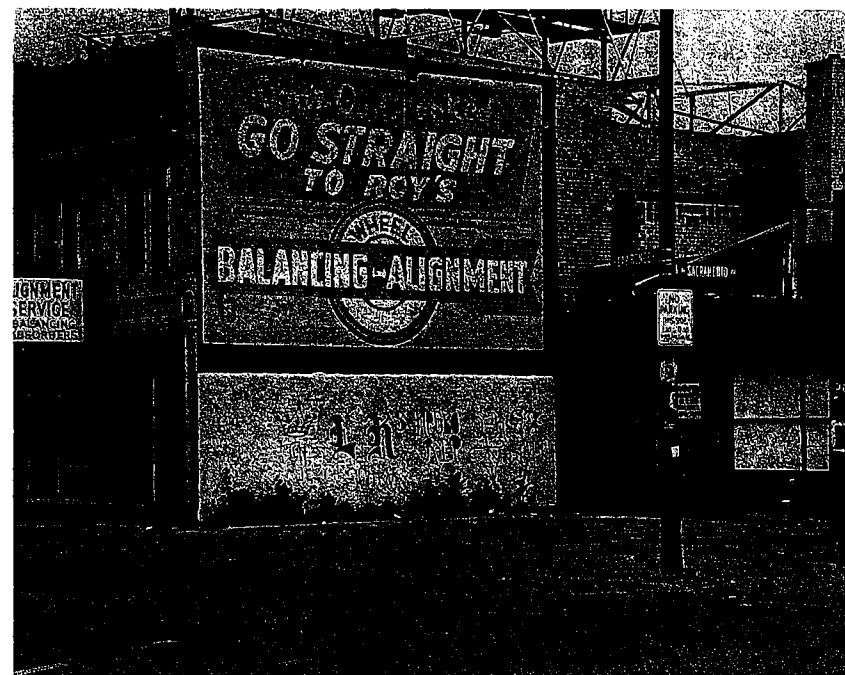


FIG. 2.5. An elaborate death mural displayed to commemorate the killing of a 16-year-old Guatemalan youth who was beaten to death in an alley not far from this site. (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

cally and stripped of human dignity, the reciprocal courtesies of street politesse help restore respect, repair the loss of face, and redress the daily humiliations of poverty and prejudice.

The social indignities and status deprivations that the homeboys and other low-income people endure when they venture into mainstream society as bus boys, dishwashers, janitors, and common laborers are more fearsome than physical suffering or death. The *Latin King Manifesto* includes a section entitled “Fearlessness,” which speaks to the need of “freedom from such fears as hunger, *humiliation* [italics added], wrath and criticism of others.” The fear of hunger points to the real material needs of this community, but I find it most interesting that hunger is followed immediately by humiliation, which points to social indignities and denigrating communication processes. “Physical death” is actually last on this list of fears. My reading of the manifesto corroborates my field observations, where fear of losing face or the social death of erasure equals and sometimes overrides the real physical dangers of the streets. Within this context



FIG. 2.6. No biological brothers could be closer than these two Latin Kings who are "shaking on the crown." This particular clique demonstrates the cross-ethnic bonding. The youth on the left is White, his bro on the right is Mexican. (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

of stigmatizing poverty and prejudice, *disrespect*, a term loaded with intensely charged meanings, is a breach of the cherished norms of restorative warmth and reciprocal affirmations of self-worth. The manifesto of another Chicago gang spells out this principle: "Disrespect is a very serious violation of the principals [sic] of law of our amalgamated Order, and will be judged according[ly]. Therefore, it will not be tolerated." I once observed one of my Latin King neighbors approach another homeboy, put his arm around his neck, and apologize: "Was I disrespecting you last night, bro? I'm sorry, man. I was wasted [drunk]. I'm sorry, bro."

A particular form of disrespect is to "leave me hanging." To leave someone hanging refers specifically to the failure to return a handshake (because one has not seen the extended hand) and copperform these manual choreographies, and, more evocatively, to fail to weave someone into the intracommunal webs of talk and sociability that keep people "hooked up." Just as homeboys "watch each other's back" and "never leave nobody running behind" when physically running on the streets, they likewise "look out" for one another communicatively, always taking care that everyone is included in the loop. When I thanked my friend Roadrunner for follow-up information, he responded metaphatically: "Sure, Dwight, I wouldn't leave you hanging." One keeps hooked up through communication that provides "not [just] information but confirmation" of ongoing interaction and togetherness, "the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (Carey, 1989, pp. 19, 43).

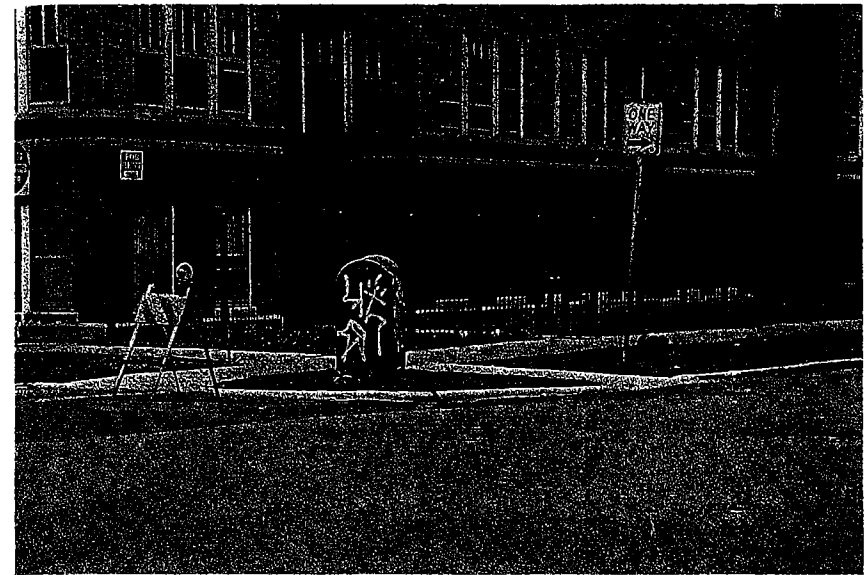


FIG. 2.7. The cross with three points astride an inverted LK (Latin Kings) and crown announce that this street corner is Folks turf. (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

Gang communication is all about "keeping in touch" through the tactile talk of handshakes and the metaphatic rites of "hanging out" on the corner, "hanging together," and "being together," "being tight" (as in tightly connected, not tight with your money). As an ethnographer, particularly during the first 3 years of fieldwork, it was important for me to be out on the streets in order to get enmeshed in the daily dramas of the neighborhood. Periodically I had to withdraw from the streets to write papers and attend conferences. The homeboys took note of my absence and chided me thus: "Where have you been? Be around, Dwight, be around the hood, so we can see you, so we can be with you." They wanted me to be out and about, not necessarily because they had something to tell me, but, quite simply, so that they could "see me, be with me," so that we could co-experience the hood—our shared and overlapping cultural space. Intracommunal communication is rooted in co-presence.

In contrast to intracommunal communication, interpersonal communication conjures a map where discrete persons are linked together via terminals that enable and control communication flow that does not infringe on personal space. On the other hand, gang communication is all about blending and merging identities into the group: "The Brotherhood of man, blending like the waves of one ocean, shining as the sun, one soul in many bodies . . . all our powers and all our desires thrown into the mission of human service and united

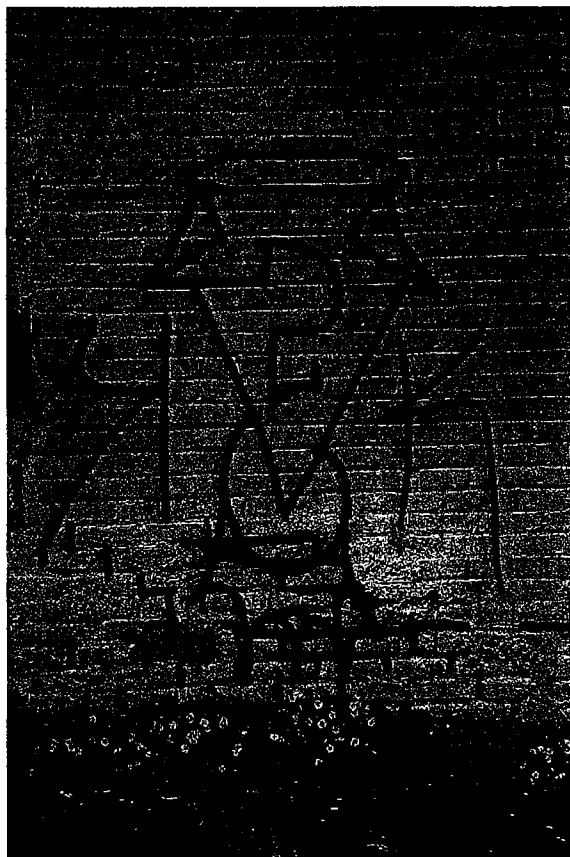


FIG. 2.8. This graffito fuses and simultaneously invertst the iconography of both the Latin Kings and Future Puerto Rican Stones gangs. Framed by two Ks, the left one reversed (standing for King Killers), this wall stakes out Folks turf. (photograph by Dwight Conquer-good)

into one Single Gold Sun" (*Latin King Manifesto*). The homeboys are keenly aware of class difference in communication style, and are critical of what they take to be the tepid, distant, interpersonal mode of the middle class. Using "White people" as an index for "middle class," a Guatemalan youth facing deportation proceedings because he was an "undocumented, illegal alien" complained to me during trial recess about the yuppie lawyers, middle-class social workers, and courtroom personnel involved with his case: "I don't understand white people, Dwight. How they look, how they talk, how they dress, how they carry themselves. If they gonna put me away, lock me up, I'd rather be locked in a cage with wild animals, than with white people, Dwight. I can't breathe around



FIG. 2.9. The cross with three dots and I-P-N on the roof proclaim that this park clubhouse is the turf of the insane Popes Nation. In addition to the dramaturgical breaking of the upside-down crown every time the door is opened, the Latin Kings are debunked further by the inverted 5 underneath the window. The inverted LC underneath the left window is a put-down of the Latin Counts, another People nation gang aligned with the Latin Kings. (photograph by Dwight Conquer-good)

white people, Dwight."¹¹ Against a dominant world that displaces, stifles, and erases identity, the homeboys create, through their communication practices, a hood: a subterranean space of life-sustaining warmth, intimacy, and protection.

In addition to the pleasures of communal fellowship, there is a survival function in this communitarian ethos of tightly laced connections with trusted and intimate others. Precisely because the streets are dangerous and densely coded, survival chances improve when one is immersed in a group, among multiple companions all helping and watching one another's back. The rugged individualism and self-reliance much admired in the suburbs would be suicidal for someone who needed to negotiate the street life of the inner city. I quote at length from one of the underground gang manifestos that enunciates clearly

¹¹See Dyer (1988) and hooks (1992).



FIG. 2.10. A miniature death mural for Negro, a slain brother who was loved greatly within the Lawrence and Kedzie hood. (photograph by Dwight Conquergood)

how the communitarian ethic is anchored in a need for collective vigilance and shared perceptions and responses to situations that arise:

Communication among our brothers is our greatest virtue, for what one brother misses in his sight, another brother can carry the blind to see the light of a situation; as in understanding, teach our brothers understanding until they are capable of being the prophet. . . . Our guard is to be up at all times and we are to strike first if need be, because for our people to be struck at first is a sure sign of being lax.

It is always best to be in the presence of another brother at all times, if not, for best results let another brother know of your whereabouts, in case of any occurrence that may come about. . . . Any revengious act of a brother is not tolerated, especially an act alone—consult other brothers in the surroundings to make the wisest decision as a whole, never leaving any brother in the dark.

My findings are corroborated by Padilla (1992), who also conducted field research with Chicago gang members: "To them individual behavior leads to obliteration" (p. 108).

This privileging of group communication has made gang members very

responsive to certain communication technologies, especially the pager-beeper. In the section of the gang with which I have worked most closely, influential members all carry these paging devices.¹² Indeed, this technology has facilitated new methods of extending my fieldwork research. Particularly now that I am spending more time teaching and writing than earlier in the fieldwork, I am able to keep in close touch with key consultants even on days when I am teaching in Evanston and they are running on the streets of Chicago. I can page them from my Northwestern University office, and they return my calls from public telephones on the street.¹³

Through interlaced networks of intracommunal communication, street youth build a hood, producing a "space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love" (Bachelard, 1969, p. xxxi). They "throw up their love" for and within this communal space by writing on its walls. One Latin King described gang graffiti in this way: "We write our love on the wall." As I discussed earlier, dense coding and secrecy are hallmarks of gang representational practices because the external boundary between in-group and out-group is of paramount importance. I want to emphasize that secrecy, in addition to closing out others, has an enclosing function. Experienced from within, secrecy shelters and intensifies bonding. According to Feldman (1991): "In a colonized culture, secrecy is an assertion of identity and of symbolic capital. Pushed to the margins, subaltern groups construct their own margins as fragile insulations from the 'center.' Secrecy is the creation of centers in peripheries deprived of stable anchorages" (p. 11).

Street youth take pleasure in the symbolic capital, collusions, and interpretive intimacies that radiate from the ornamental and esoteric graffiti inscriptions with which they embellish their hood. Figures 2.2–2.4 visually make the important point that the hood is an embodied space, a living space of sensuous

¹²I certainly am aware that drug dealers also make heavy use of these pager/beepers to coordinate their business, or, "beez neez" as they say on the streets. Although some street gangs are involved heavily in drug trafficking, some are not. Further, within a single branch, some members might deal drugs, some will not, and there will be others who go back and forth. That is to say, during an economic crisis they will fall back on the underground economy of drugs to "make their money," and then will take factory jobs and other legitimate employment when opportunity arises. Because the dominant media demonology conflates gangbangers and drug dealers into one master devil figure (e.g., the NBC Special, "Gangs, Cops, and Drugs"), I must emphasize that I know many committed gang members who neither deal nor consume drugs. The two Latin Kings who communicate with me via pager/beepers are not drug dealers; they invest in this technology to keep "hooked up" with King brothers and friends. The general public might be surprised to know that several manifestos contain "gang laws" that expressly forbid the use of hard drugs. I quote from one: "The use of what is commonly known as angel dust, glue, LSD (acid), heroin, downers and free-basing is unlawful, and cannot be sold in our communities." In the neighborhood where I conducted research, "bow" (marijuana) was used freely and sold by gang members, but hard drugs were frowned upon.

¹³In Latin King numerology 5 is sacred, therefore most identification numbers are some combination that contains the numeral 5. The identification number they gave me, for example, is 005.

communication. The tattooed and signifying bodies of gang members become mirrors and mobile extensions of the graffiti-inscribed walls. Figure 2.3 displays the remarkable dialectic between illumination and shadow, comprehensibility and camouflage, that characterizes gang representations. "Here the Sun Shines" refers to the radiant symbol of the Latin Kings, the "Single Gold Sun." The graffiti proclaims that this is the hood of the Latin Kings: that this cultural space will be enlightened by the ideals and values of the King brothers and sisters. For insiders, it is a center of light, glowing with meaningfulness. All the intricate graffiti decorating this rooftop wall are simultaneously the source and result of the shining strength of King Love that suffuses this hood.

Much of the interpretive glow of this wall depends on the meanings that are hooded—hooded in the sense of masked, and also in the sense of limited to members of the hood, hood-specific. Staying with the "Here the Sun Shines" proclamation, an outsider would not know that the R in Here is inverted to "throw down" the Royals, a rival Folks gang. Likewise, the T in The is figured as an inverted pitchfork to debunk the Disciples, whose major icon is the pitchfork. If you look closely, you can see seven other inverted pitchforks in this photograph. A large one with spiked tines is directly underneath *HERE*, another one is the T in *Chiquito*, with a free-floating one underneath the *i* in *Chiquito*. A large thin one with spiked tines is just to the right of *Ghetto Boy*, standing on the ledge, with a fifth one with dots underneath the three tines to the right of that one. A sixth one is underneath *J.J.* in the upper right, and the seventh one is the hand sign *Ghetto Boy* is throwing down. On the left side of the wall, there is a five-point star for the People Nation astride a reversed *D*. The backward *D* stands for the Disciples, the lead gang of the Folks Nation, and the hyphenated *K* stands for Killers. Through a strategy of affirmation by negation, the Latin Kings clear representational space for their own Nation identity by eliminating alien others, thus reminding one of the *terror* that is part of the consolidation of all *territory*,¹⁴ to say nothing of the violence inherent in representation (see Armstrong & Tennenhouse, 1989; Conquergood, 1991b). In addition to reversals and inversions of acronyms and icons, gangs symbolically pollute the other by breaking a symbol. Just to the right of the five-point star in Figure 2.3 there is a heart with wings, another icon of the Disciples, broken grotesquely in half. On the right half of the fractured line, where the other half of the heart should be, there is instead the broken half of a six-point star, the symbol of the Folks Nation. This reppin' of the self by negating the other inspired the emotionally resonant title for the documentary based on my fieldwork, *The Heart Broken in Half* (Conquergood & Siegel, 1990).

Figure 2.4 is dominated by the resplendent five-point crown of the Latin Kings, which is mirrored in two versions of hand signing the crown—one with two hands, and the other with the extended thumb, index, and fifth fingers of

¹⁴I want to thank my colleague Rick Maxwell for pointing me to this etymological connection.

the right hand thrown over the left side of body. Digital reps configure a three-point crown, also used by the Latin Kings, as can be seen in Figure 2.3. An icon of any crown is insufficient to represent the Latin Kings because a Folks Nation gang, the Imperial Gangsters, also rep with a crown, but a six-point crown. One can see an upside-down six-point crown broken in half just to the left of the youth standing on the ledge in Figure 2.4. In the upper-right corner of the graffiti wall in Figure 2.5, one can see the same polluted Folks Nation crown conjoined across a fracture line, with the broken half of a six-point star directly above the inverted and reversed letters *M-L-D*, thus defiling the Maniac Latin Disciples. The reversed *C* hyphenated with *K* stands for Cobra-Killers. The Spanish Cobras are the alleged slayers of my neighbor Negro, who is eulogized in this graffiti memorial by writing his name above *R-I-P*, Rest in Peace. The full name of the street gang allegedly responsible for slaying Negro, *COBRA*, is spelled out underneath the large *LK* acronym of the Latin Kings. The *C* is reversed, of course, to defame the Cobras, the *B* is reversed to put down the Braziers, the *R* inverted to defile the Royals, and the upside-down *A* inside the *O* is actually a complex inversion of the logo of the Orchestra Albany gang. Orchestra Albany, Royals, and Braziers are all gangs aligned with the Folks Nation.

Figures 2.7, 2.8, and 2.9 demonstrate how the same symbolic scapegoating takes place on the other side of the People/Folks oppositional boundary. I photographed Figs. 2.7 and 2.8 just six blocks west of Big Red, across Kimball street, a major border street between People and Folks gangs. In Fig. 2.7, the hood is marked as Folks turf by displaying a cross with three dots atop an inverted and reversed *LK* over an upside-down crown. The semiotic pollution in Fig. 2.8 is also intricate. Here, a three-point crown, a Latin King icon, has been fused with a pyramid topped with an encircling moon, the symbol of the Future Puerto Rican Stones, a close affiliate of the Latin Kings. This double-fused icon has been inverted with a reversed and upside-down *5* in the middle. Double *Ks*, standing for King Killers, frame this image, with the *K* standing for King reversed.

Figure 2.9 represents a highly imaginative and theatrical innovation on this basic principle of affirmation by negation. Here, a park clubhouse claimed by the Insane Popes, arch enemies of the Latin Kings, features a door that has been incorporated visually into an image of an upside-down Latin King crown. Thus, when people open and walk through the door, they, perforce, break and violate, ostentatiously, the symbol of the Latin Kings.

Figure 2.10 speaks poignantly to the coarticulation of secrecy, sacrifice, and solidarity. It depicts one of the many death murals that appeared throughout the Lawrence/Kedzie Kings hood commemorating young Negro, my neighbor, a 16-year-old Guatemalan youth who was murdered during my second year of fieldwork. His violent death is transmuted rhetorically into heroic sacrifice for the group. Death murals like the one in Fig. 2.10 become mnemonic sites for

storytelling and legend making that function as didactic dramas that sacralize commitment to the hood and all that it embraces. Latino Boy eulogizes Negro while standing in front of a "Negro RIP" mural:

He died being a King. He fought with a lot of Folks and they finally got him. But, see, Negro Rest In Peace means he used to fight for all of this and he believed in the crown and all of this is his [gesturing toward graffiti displays]. This is all his, it belongs to him. All these walls. We will always know that Negro will always live in our hearts. We wrote his name all over this neighborhood and everywhere we go we see something that reminds us of him. And before he died Negro told us that he would like to die in this neighborhood. He died still throwing up the crown, you know, he threw it up until the last minute of his breath.

The death of Negro activates the cultural memory of the group, brings into sharpest focus its most radiant symbols, and becomes a generative source for strengthening cohesion and commitment.

In a profound way, this tiny death mural painted on one of the narrow edges of a bridge can be thought of as an emblematic image for the world-making capacities of the hood. It is a miniature, designed to enclose, concentrate, clarify, control, and intensify meaning. All reppin' practices can be thought of as metonymies and condensation symbols for the hood. They represent it in a heightened, stylized, and focused way. The hood that Negro embodies and, paradoxically, enlivens in death is a miniature world excavated and constructed out of subjugated knowledges and marginal materials. At every level of refraction, the hood represents an enclosed space, a microworld, for the nurturance of agency, intimacy, and meaning. The very forces that threaten to rip it asunder—sudden violence and death—are appropriated and absorbed as value-clarifying and community-building moral dramas of heroic sacrifice and solidarity.

CONCLUSION: GANGS, COMMUNICATION, AND PUBLIC POLICY

Gangs are preeminently a communication phenomenon. I have devoted much of this chapter to a description of how street youth build a sheltering world of mutual support and well-being, a hood, through complex and creative communication practices. However, the intracommunal cultural space of the hood needs to be understood as an adaptive response and bulwark against dominant spaces and structures of exclusion and oppression. No ethnography of gang "group communication in context" would be complete without interrogation of the macrocontexts of communication that have created the "gang problem."

My communication-centered approach to gangs builds on sociologist Becker's (1963) powerful insight that deviance is first and foremost a rhetorical

construction—a label deployed by agents of civil society to control and contain the "dangerous classes." Becker argued that "the central fact about deviance" is that "it is created by society" (p. 8). He explained:

I do not mean this in the way it is ordinarily understood, in which the causes of deviance are located in the social situation of the deviant or in "social factors" which prompt his action. I mean, rather, that social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label. (pp. 8-9; see also Reiman, 1984; Stallybrass & White, 1986)

I am in
change,
I say
what is
Bad + By
whom?

Becker's social construction theory of deviance anticipates the best of post-structuralist theory, which conjoins discourse analysis with political economy (see di Leonardo, 1993). The gang members among whom I lived were labeled, textualized, but these were not postmodern texts of infinite open-endedness and free play. Instead, these were hard-edged texts in the bulging files of police and prosecutors that underscored the authority and power of surveillance, control, and incarceration. My friends and field consultants were incisive deconstructivists of the connections between language and power. One of my neighbors, a 20-year-old Guatemalan, had already been arrested 26 times, mostly for "Disorderly Conduct" and "Mob Action." Facing deportation proceedings as an "undocumented, illegal alien," he showed me the "Criminal History" section of his court file, and explained: "Disorderly Conduct—that means walking down the street if you're a person who looks like me. I just be walking down the streets. Mob Action—that means standing on a street corner with your friends. If you're a gangbanger, they can pick you up just for standing on the corner with your friends."

New Foreword

The grandmother of a slain youth quoted in a *Chicago Tribune* article likewise articulated a subtle understanding of labeling theory, and how it applied, with devastating consequences, to her grandson: "School officials labelled him a gang member. It was hard for him to break that label, she said. So he lived up to it, friends say" (Thomas, 1991, p. 5).

Before they tattoo their bodies with gang insignia, urban youth are always already inscribed and branded by stigmatizing images of poverty, prejudice, and pathology, which are produced by the official discourse of the media, legal system, and public policy institutions—those authorities and experts who have the power to know, name, and label. Gangs are constructed in public discourse as the cause, effect, and aberrant response to social disorder and urban decay. The demized figure of the violent gangbanger is the sensational centerpiece in a self-righteous morality play called "the urban underclass" playing currently in

mainstream media and social-policy institutions (see Reed, 1992; Williams, 1992). Little more than a lurid sideshow, this script locates the problems of the inner city in the so-called pathological behavior of its rogues gallery of residents: gangbangers, muggers, drug dealers, welfare mothers, pregnant teenagers, and other social defectives. This blame-the-victim focus on individual behavior resonates ideologically with bourgeois individualism. Moreover, it diverts attention away from the political and economic macropatterns of exclusion and displacement, which shape the microtextures of everyday struggle for poor and socially marginalized people (see Hagedorn, 1988; Massey & Denton, 1993; Sullivan, 1989; Williams, 1988). The figure of the gangbanger as personification of urban pathology rhetorically deflects scrutiny away from the root causes of poverty and crime: (a) deindustrialization; (b) disinvestment; (c) economic polarization; (d) residential segregation; (e) real estate speculation and gentrification; and (f) the abandonment, neglect, and collapse of civic institutions (i.e., public schools, social services, youth programs), all in the name of retrograde "fiscal responsibility." The urban rites of "hanging out" on street corners and "holding down the hood" cannot be understood apart from the enforced leisure that is a consequence of the staggering unemployment rate for minority youth. The children of entire neighborhoods are viewed as disposable by legislators and policymakers. The so-called "disorder" of the inner city is linked directly to the stability of the affluent suburbs: "mainstream spaces such as suburbs, are also active agents in the destabilization of ghetto communities" (Venkatesh, 1993, p. 8).

"Imagery and symbols—rhetorics," di Leonardo (1990) reminded us, "are themselves material facts" (p. 4). Zatz (1987) provided a stunning case study of the material consequences of the rhetorical imagery surrounding Chicano youth gangs in Phoenix, Arizona. Based on a multimethodological study that included media analysis, interviews, and examination of police and court records, she concluded:

[I]t was the social imagery of Chicano youth gangs, rather than their actual behavior, that lay at the root of the gang problem in Phoenix. The imagery of gangs as violent converged with that of Mexicans as "different." With the convergence of these images, the potential threat of disorder and of contempt for law escalated to the point at which a "moral panic" ensued. This is not to say that there were no Chicano youth gangs and no gang-related crimes. There were and are. But there was also the usual gamut of regular street crime, corporate crime, and so forth, without any specialized "squads" in place to combat them. (pp. 153-154).

These media-fomented "moral panics" help redirect material resources (to say nothing of compassion and good will) away from educational and employment programs that could help these youngsters and toward the much more costly

buildup of a state apparatus of surveillance, control, and punishment—gang squads, jails, and prisons (see Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978).

If communication is part of the creation of the "gang problem," then communication must be part of the solution. My research calls for a radical reorientation of the many gang-intervention programs that deploy fear appeals and shame tactics aimed at scaring street youth out of gangs. One antigang program in Chicago uses a large poster that features a herd of sheep mindlessly congregated in front of a graffiti-inscribed wall (note, again, the animal imagery and the anticomunal bias). Perhaps the most unsavory antigang message is the public service announcement that is part of the city of Evanston, Illinois, antigang campaign, in which members of African-American street gangs are compared to the Ku Klux Klan. The fundamental flaw of these communication strategies (to say nothing of their dubious content) is that by directing messages exclusively to gang members they reinforce the ideology that individual poor and minority youth are the locus of responsibility for the "gang problem." Instead of targeting and further stigmatizing individual gang members, the work of communication needs to be redirected toward rallying and awakening communities and public policymakers to a sense of social justice and responsibility to these youngsters and their families. An initial, concrete step would be to think about jobs, instead of jails, as a preemptive (instead of punitive) response to gangs. Hagedorn (1988) asked the founder of a major Milwaukee gang what would be the most effective way of dealing with gangs; he responded, unhesitatingly, "Give 'em jobs" (p. 166). I agree with Reed (1992): "I do not want to hear another word about drugs or crime [or gangs] without hearing about decent jobs, adequate housing, and egalitarian education in the same breath" (p. 38).

Solution

*
Correct!

