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Homeboys and Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space

DWIGHT CONQUERGOOD
Northwestern University

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

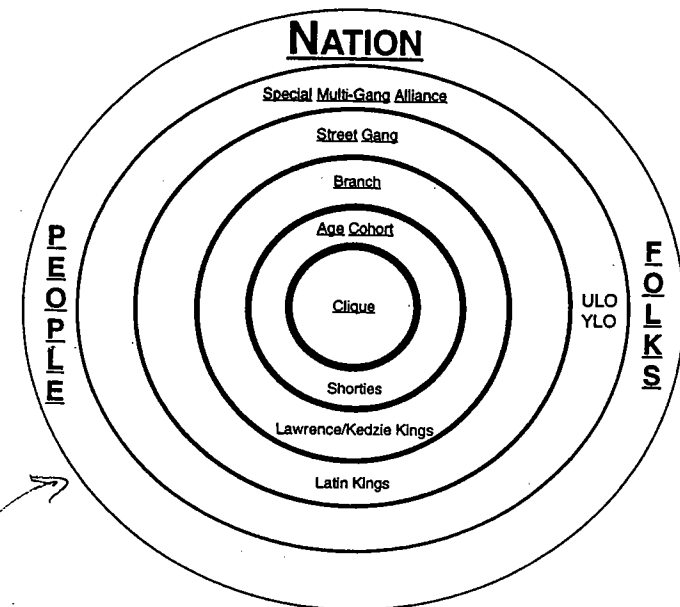


FIG. 2.1. The gang system.

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

