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2

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 graffito 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]

[1]The 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 market[2]—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 *intracommunal communication* to capture the group-centered cosmology and communitarian ethic of street gangs.

My focus on intracommunal 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]

Nice Justif. critic

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).

Wow!

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

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

[4]Bourdieu (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)

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, "Hook 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.

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

[5]Police 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]

[6]Conducting 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

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 & Strodtbeck, 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.

[7]Boundaries and borderlands, and conjunctions and commotions are now the staples of postpositivist and poststructuralist ethnography (see Anzaldua, 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 internation fights, the Popes are backed up by their Folks compatriots: the Spanish Cobras and the Latin Eagles.