

Street Baptism, Machismo and Inner-City Street Culture:
Purity and Danger among Contemporary Chicano Gangs in Los Angeles

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In the parking lot of a derelict drug store, a group of eight teenaged men—all wearing gold chains and loose shirts of striking red—encircle the lone adolescent. The leader of the horde shouts to the boy in Spanish. For the next two minutes, all that can be heard is the jolt of flailing limbs and the curt slap of hand to skin. The distinct pattern of dress and speech, as well as the rehearsed manner of violence, mean only one thing to members of this community: young Jose is being initiated into the gang. To a passerby unfamiliar with this ritual, however, the situation can be described as the personification of danger. We can see that these individuals' actions identify them as members of a certain social group, and this group clearly fulfills their role in society: the passerby reasons that gang members are dangerous and thus, prone to immorality. All societies seek social order through such classification; these systems of organization are enforced and illuminated through myths, symbols, and rituals. Chicano youth gangs in Los Angeles—which have flourished in the era of deindustrialization and crack cocaine—draw upon a variety of rituals to reinforce these systems of classification, making the actions of everyday life more meaningful.

The history and context of youth gangs

Youth gang movements in America can be traced to the late 18th century and are increasingly prevalent today. Gangs—in this case defined as a territorially affiliated

group of youths dedicated at least in part to fighting other, similar groups— are comprised of specific structures that emerge from certain social contexts (Vigil 1996: 227). Gangs are distinguished from other youth groups by their use of extreme measures of violence. According to a study of students' perceptions of gangs, cliques are groups of friends with similar interests; crews are groups of friends with similar interests who sometimes engage in self-destructive, destructive, and violent activities; gangs are groups of friends with similar interests who sometimes engage in self-destructive, destructive, violent, and extremely violent (i.e. killing) activities (Lopez 309). According to James Howell's overview of youth gangs at the millennium, Los Angeles was home to an estimated 58,000 gang members in 1997. This makes it the American city with the most gang members (319). The average age of a gang member is 17 years old, but a gang member's age span ranges from 12 to 24 (Ibid.316). The ethnic composition of a gang usually mirrors the territory that it represents. Nationally, 47% of all gang members are Hispanic, 31% are African-American, 13% are Caucasian, and 7% are Asian (Thomas 18). About 50% of gang members belong to the economic "underclass," while 35% are part of the working class, and 12% are upper class (18). Gangs can be comprised of as few as 20 members and as many as 1000, although many gangs have about 200 members. Larger gangs often employ systems of hierarchy and split into sub-groups to ensure that each gang member participates fully in rituals and business. The notorious South Los Angeles rival gangs, the Bloods and the Crips, are each comprised of about 145 sub-cliques (Bourgois 2003: 24). Although an expansive variety of gangs exist throughout the country, I will focus on contemporary Chicano gangs in Los Angeles in this paper.

A legacy of capitalist society, gangs often spring up in the “shadows of industry” when unemployment is high and opportunities are low (Phillips 67). These gangs arise in the “interstices” of society, often in derelict areas of urban centers (Vigil 2004: 219). Socioeconomic conditions contribute greatly to the development of gangs. Some scholars believe that unemployment is the single most important factor in determining gang membership, as the job market mirrors the economic and social opportunities in a society (Phillips 68).

The deindustrialization that took place throughout the country in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s led to a boom of youth gangs in many urban areas. In Los Angeles, more than 70,000 industrial manufacturing jobs were eliminated from 1978 to 1982 (Sides 593). One study found that by 1987, there were 78,000 unemployed youth in the Watts-Willowbrook area alone (Bourgois 2003: 24). Coinciding with the decline in legitimate employment opportunities was the “explosive rise” in street gangs throughout Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s (Sides 592). Accompanying a loss of blue-collar work was the out-migration of much of the city’s middle class population to the suburbs. This resulted in a significant reduction in the area’s tax base and thus, degradation of resources such as schools, public transportation, and law enforcement.

Today, institutional racism and exclusion pervades American society. Those who possess little education and few skills to work in high-paying jobs often find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty. Many ethnic groups, including the majority Hispanic population, have been systematically excluded from the American economic system due to an ideology, whether conscious or subconscious, that justifies inequality (Phillips 67).

Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois, who spent five years studying crack dealers in New York's Spanish Harlem, found that "Manhattan sports a de facto apartheid labor hierarchy whereby differences in job category and prestige correlate with ethnicity" (2003: 26). "Band-aid" solutions, such as temporary minimum-wage employment at a racist establishment, will neither produce sufficient living wages nor correct the institutional patterns that contribute to a lifetime of poverty (68). This results in a cycle of low quality education, joblessness, poverty, and poor living conditions.

Well-established gangs serve as an alternative economic system for those immersed in the spiral of urban poverty. Gangs have emerged as one of "a range of strategies that the urban poor devise to escape or circumvent the structures of segregation and marginalization that entrap them" (Bourgois 1995: 18). Although gang membership limits the chances of gaining legal employment, a lack of opportunity in this field justifies and drives gang membership. Gangs offer lucrative economic prospects through strong networks, the creation of stable systems otherwise missing in these communities, and the sale of illegal drugs like crack cocaine. Crack, a smokeable compound of cocaine and baking soda, began to surface on the streets of Los Angeles in the 1980s. As the market for crack began to rage, many gang members became involved in the sale of this highly addictive drug. Not only did this blossoming underground market offer a superior income to minimum-wage jobs, but it also became a "more dignified workplace" for the largely uneducated and unemployed gang members (Bourgois 2003: 23). In the context of the urban crack trade, Bourgois asserts "the underground economy is the ultimate 'equal opportunity employer' for inner city youth" (2003: 23). Selling crack offered a sense of responsibility, success, and prestige to those who had been unfairly rejected

from mainstream society. For the first time, impoverished minority youth had a realistic and probable chance at achieving the American Dream: self-employment that could lead to significant, rapid upward mobility. It is not the goal of success but the means to it that distinguish these gang members from the rest of American society.

Gangs make up a substantial part of a larger “inner-city street culture,” which Bourgois describes as “a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society” (1995: 8). Although gangs are very much excluded from — and considered dangerous to— everyday American life, they have emerged in direct response to it. We will now examine how gang rituals in this inner street culture contribute to a system of classification, following the ultimate goal of moral order.

Gang rituals

Rituals play a central role in making gang life meaningful. Initiation rituals, for example, have both practical and psychological functions in gang culture. Gangs grant membership through three types of entrance. “Jumping in” refers to being physically attacked by the gang, as described in the introduction. “Walking in” refers to membership without any initiation, perhaps due to years of previous exposure as the child of a gang member. “Putting in work” refers to completing a task assigned by the gang, including shooting a rival gang member (Lopez 308). “Jumping in,” the most common initiation ritual among Chicano gangs in Los Angeles, is also called “street baptism” and “inverse gang-banging.” In this ritual, between two and eight more senior gang members surround and beat up a novitiate (Vigil 2004: 218). The novitiate is usually in junior high school,

aged 12 or 13. The beating may last from 30 seconds to 2 minutes and may or may not be timed. The scene always takes place in a public space within the gang's territory, with plenty of witnesses watching the ritual. As we see in the ethnographic film "Children of Violence," most of the witnesses are small children— younger siblings of the gang members and other neighborhood friends— as well as girlfriends of gang members and more senior members of the community. It is often a spontaneous, unplanned event. The severity of the beating depends on a variety of factors, including the crowd's reaction and how intoxicated the older members are at the time. If the novitiate accepts the beating without a single complaint or whimper, the older members and witnesses shake hands and welcome him (or, less frequently, her) into the gang as a full-fledged "homeboy."

Contrary to what an outside observer might believe, this type of initiation ritual functions in a variety of ways to ensure order among the gang. The practical reasons behind "jumping in" are fairly straightforward. The beatings weed out the weak and uncommitted (Vigil 2004: 225). The gang members also take advantage of this opportunity to train for their physical confrontations with other gangs. A variety of psychological and social reasons, however, keep this ritual crucial to the operation of the gang. "Jumping in" can be viewed as a form of rebirth: the pre-initiation individual is ritually murdered and a new gang member is born. "Street baptism" also assigns the novitiate a new name, a concept that we will explore later. Besides rebirth, it also represents a rite of passage into manhood. This ritual usually takes place just after the start of puberty, a time when many cultures celebrate a transition into manhood. The novitiate must use his masculine will and strong physique to fight the older males. Jumping in also offers an opportunity for the novitiate to assert his identity as a mature,

masculine individual. It is common for the gang member to come from a female-headed household, and it is at this moment when the boy can declare sexual differentiation from his matriarchal family life by demonstrating violent and overtly masculine behavior.

The initiation ritual offers other social functions. As the witnesses view the beating, younger members idolize the novitiate and older members remember their own initiation, increasing solidarity. This solidarity among generations of gang members keeps a diverse group unified in a time of conflict. The ritual also acts as a form of “street socialization,” acquainting the new gang member with a formally defined set of norms and values that he or she may have not received from their family, school, or government. The young witnesses may also absorb this type of socialization, preparing them for a life of gang activity before they have a chance to personally negotiate their future. In “Children of Violence,” we see children as young as four or five years old present at such beatings, subconsciously internalizing the practices and values of the gang community at an early age. The ritual also affirms an individual’s ethnic orientation, as a novitiate observes himself and other ethnically similar members of the gang in positions of power. The outright violence of this ritual also allows gang members to satisfy sadomasochistic urges in a socially acceptable fashion. Finally, if an individual completes the ritual in a successful manner—accepting the beating without complaining—“jumping in” becomes a ceremonial celebration of a newly baptized gang member.

Although street baptism seems “irrationally violent and self-destructive” to outside observers, Bourgois explains that it “can be reinterpreted according to the logic of the underground economy as a judicious case of public relations, advertising, rapport

building, and a long-term investment in one's 'human capital development'" (2003: 24).

One must examine the context of the gang to completely understand this ritual.

Exit rituals are much less extravagant than initiation rituals. The individual may choose to endure "jumping out," a practice in which they are again beaten by other members of the gang to signify and formalize their departure from the group (Vigil 1988: 106). He may "chicken out" and abstain from gang activities, in which case the gang members are encouraged to harass the individual at any time. Most gang members, however, "mature out" of the gang lifestyle when they leave school, usually around age 18. Exit rituals, as well as initiation rituals, determine an individual's status in the social group of a youth gang, which is central to ordering the existence of those in the inner-city street culture of Los Angeles.

Symbols and myth in gang life

Symbols illuminate everyday life in the gang. The most visible gang symbols are manner of dress and style. Certain colors, insignias, and brands are associated with different gang groups. The Bloods, for example, adopted red as their symbol because it was the signature color of the founders' Centennial High School (Sides 592). Some styles of dress are so specific in terms of brands, logos, and trends that anthropologists are able to create accurate maps of gang territories based on residents' dress (Phillips 84). Many of these items—especially exclusive brands of clothing—are quite costly. The ability to afford such extravagances in a low-income community signifies that the individual must be financially successful, through legal or illegal means, and this status is broadcast throughout the neighborhood. Such conspicuous consumption symbolizes the social

position one holds in this subculture. “The ultimate expression of success,” Bourgois claims, is a purchase by those who have acquired wealth in these economically depressed neighborhoods (2003:26). Cars are another example of a means through which gang members demonstrate their wealth and prestige, as certain expensive models and brands require affluence.

The symbols present in initiation rituals make the individuals’ actions more meaningful. For example, a gang member receives a new name at his “street baptism.” The individual becomes “Nickname” de “Gang name”; for example, El Loco de White Fence represents “the crazy one” of the White Fence gang (Vigil 2004: 225). The renaming process represents his surrender of his individual and family identity and his adoption of a new gang self in a very public manner. Renaming becomes even more public as many individuals brand themselves with their new name in the form of tattoo. Another way of expressing their new identity is through gang graffiti, a form entirely different from the more visually complex designs of hip-hop graffiti. The symbols of street baptism echo the importance of baptism, a tradition common in many cultures.

In gang life, myths relate mundane activities to broader social issues. The myth of race, for example, is ubiquitous among many gang groups. Ethnic identities are well defined and widely accepted in these mostly homogenous groups. The myth of race exacerbates conflict between gangs; minor scuffles come to be regarded as racial wars, pitting one group against another. One other myth can be found in the mainstream American notion of a gang: the general public employs a conspiracy theory ideology to explain the phenomenon of gangs. Many institutional authorities, including police and teachers, believe that gangs have emerged against them and that they are in harm’s way

by interacting with any gang members, despite evidence that gangs typically contain their violence within their group (as in initiation and intragroup scuffles) or specific, historical, or territorial rivals. The media's portrayal of gangs as fear-inspiring, explosive social groups that are dangerous to everyone leads to the public misconception that gangs are conspiring against larger society.

The myth of machismo exists in modern gang life as well. Machismo is a powerful system of knowledge that is obtained through initiation into this secretive, dangerous society, much like the concept of witchcraft. Machismo is symbolized by the term *huevos*, which translates to the English slang “balls” or “guts” but literally means “eggs” (Vigil 2004: 222). It is a force that is highly sought after in this culture and that seems to pervade among the older, experienced, extremely masculine gang members. The machismo myth makes violent gang activities—jumping in or attacking a rival gang, for example—relevant in the larger quest for masculinity.

Gangs in the broader world

Although the pursuit of machismo and the ritual of street baptism are distinct features of Chicano gangs in Los Angeles, these actions correspond to broader American society as well as other cultures around the world. As we addressed earlier, gangs are closely related to the failings of the capitalist system. Capitalism, at least in its practice over the past several decades, provides a sense of helplessness and personal failure to the poor. Gang membership and leadership, however, counteracts this notion of personal failure by providing exploited and marginalized individuals with a sense of power over others. Of course, the underground economy of the drug trade also plays into the success

of gangs. Appearing in the “fragmented, ahistoric, placeless urban worlds of the late capitalist consumer culture,” gangs fit into this mentality of capitalist ideology (Phillips 73). According to Turner, socially constructed entities like gangs are always “inextricably linked to the larger society’s politics”—in this case, capitalism—but may be an antithesis of the larger system (72).

A variety of cultures around the world are similar in structure and function to the Chicano gangs of Los Angeles. Segmentary opposition, occurring when generally equal but opposing groups lack central authority, is a characteristic seen among gangs in Los Angeles as well as other groups worldwide (Phillips 81). For example, internalized warfare among kinship groups as well as continuous strife with other, rival groups are common among the Bedouin of the Middle East, Yanomami of Brazil and Venezuela, Maasai of Kenya, and Nuer of Southern Sudan (82). In all of these cases, conflict may be expressed or solved through conspicuous consumption, feuds, and alliances, as well as territory battles in all of these patriarchal societies (83). The problem of incessant infighting can be attributed to the combination of a lack of resources and the absence of institutions for conflict control (government or otherwise), whether in contemporary Los Angeles or historical traditions of other continents. In another vein, gang rituals around crack cocaine are comparable to the millenarian metamorphosis common in religions of “colonized peoples attempting to resist oppression in the context of accelerated social trauma” (Bourgois 2003: 26). We can see that crack causes the transformation of an unemployed, depressed individual into a person with pleasure and purpose, just as the Ghost Dance of the Great Plains Amerindians or the “cargo cults” of Melanesia also dramatically change an individual (26). We cannot examine the case of youth gangs in

Los Angeles without taking into account the context in which they developed—such as contemporary American capitalism—as well as the similarities these gangs share with groups all over the world.

Purity and danger in the context of gangs

Another global phenomenon is the concern for social organization. Such order is achieved, largely, through systems of classification. According to Mary Douglas, “the classification of the universe is part and parcel of the social organization” (1999: 196). She believes that humans create and conform to distinct classes in order to bring about a structured social system and thus, to have the ability to reduce the world into an understandable order. According to Douglas, classification, the key to social order, is based on two natural symbols: purity and danger. The result of a well-defined taxonomy is moral and social order, which allows for the understanding of a complex reality. In order to accomplish this, however, societies must rely on myths, symbols, and rituals to implement and elucidate the categories of creation.

Myths, symbols and rituals are decisive factors in the success of systems of social organization. Both purity and danger play a role in these symbols and rituals. Douglas asserts that the doctrine of ritual purity explains, comforts, and helps to “impose God’s order on creation” (1999: 208). In the example of youth gangs, street baptism enforces purity among strictly regulated gang groups; purity is attained through this coming of age ritual in several ways. The novitiate’s abandonment of his childhood identity through ritual beating is the sacrifice he will make to achieve purity. His acquisition of a new “street” name, his formal socialization into gang culture, and his public display of

machismo are all steps to reach purity. As in many coming of age rituals, the blossoming adult must commit to a path seeking purity—in this case, a formal and public devotion to the social group of the gang. This exercise in ritual purity also seeks to purge the contagious power of the boy's former self, thought to be impure and unfit for the tough street life until initiated by the ritual.

The concept of danger is imposed through symbols of gang life. Danger is associated with immorality because, as Douglas explains, ideas of danger guide the moral order of a society. The general public opinion of gangs—that is, the view of those unaware of the sturdy economic and social base that gangs provide to those systematically excluded from mainstream American society—is that gangs are dangerous. Many feel that gangs are synonymous with danger. The crime and violence performed by gangs exemplify their dangerous nature and thus, their presumed immorality. As we have discussed, gang members can be easily identified because many have chosen symbols to signify their group to society: encoded graffiti, color or brand of clothing, patterns of speech, or conspicuous consumption. These symbols define the social categories within and between gang groups as well as to the general American public. To many of those unfamiliar with gang culture, for example, any Chicano youth wearing red and speaking street slang is a symbol of danger.

Conclusion

We can draw from Douglas' work that in times of unequal power distribution, classification can become a basis for discrimination. Those in power may use the social categories defined by symbols and rituals—for example, the classification of gang

members as represented by nicknames and style of dress—to justify or naturalize this inequality. In Douglas' view, anomalies are objects of great religious attention and because of this, come to be regarded as dangerous, impure and unholy. In the case of gangs, the individuals stuck outside the societal norm of legal employment, relatively conservative dress, standard English, and constant observance of the law; in other words, those who typically become gang members have come to be viewed in a similar light. Symbols and rituals associated with these groups reinforce their discrimination. The ritual of beating a young boy in public, for example, is regarded by the general public as purely dangerous—a symbol of the immoral nature of gang members—rather than pure, as in the context of the gang.

The street baptism of Los Angeles youth gang members offers a rich example of the symbols and rituals that Douglas believes instill systems of classification. Douglas argues that keeping social categories distinct, in line with the symbols of purity and danger, is the pathway to achieve holiness. Yet, holiness is not the only aim of categorization; it also enforces social order that in turn allows members of any society to comprehend the complex world that surrounds them. Among these gangs—which have emerged powerfully as a response to American capitalism in the shadow of deindustrialization—purity is sought through rituals like street baptism. The gang members' actions, although motivated by and illuminated through gang myths, are perceived as symbols of the dangerous nature of these individuals—only furthering their exclusion from mainstream society.

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