

# On the Subject of Gang Photography

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the figure of the Chicano gangster in “gang photography,” which represents Chicanos affiliated with street gangs in the greater Los Angeles area. Gang photography encompasses documentary photography, self-produced gang photography, as well as police photography. Moving beyond the aesthetic and personal desires by which the practice of photography is typically framed, I insist that we must come to terms with the sociopolitical forces underscoring all representations of Chicano gangs. My title refers to overlapping meanings of the subject. The subject or topic of gang photography requires an understanding of the Chicano gangster as a social subject whose subjectivity is (re)figured within and outside the realm of the photograph. Moreover, my analysis of these particular photographic practices dialogues with ethnographic discourse analysis, media studies, and contemporary cultural studies of race and ethnicity. In conclusion, the paper unsettles any smooth comprehension of photographic representations.*

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues, “The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (1968, 236). Metaphorically bending Benjamin’s claim, the “enlargement” or enhancement of the mere snapshot to an item for (legal) documentation also shifts the subject of gang photography—photography that focuses on Chicanos affiliated with street gangs in greater Los Angeles—from a mere photographic image to a rendering of that subject as a suspect of gang activity by means of “new

structural formations of the subject.” In other words, the subject’s appearance on film necessarily casts his/her image in a completely different light when placed in the hands of others. For what may be believed to stand as a personal, political, or artistic photograph inevitably produces ulterior meanings in other contexts. With this in mind, I will show that although certain photographic practices may be compelling, they cannot be simply understood by way of their author’s personal stakes, political intentions, and aesthetic interests.

I will examine the politics and functions of three approaches to the gang photography phenomenon. The first, exemplified by the intriguing work of British documentary photographer Robert Yager can be characterized as *ethnographic*. Yager’s photographs are best understood as products that stem from recourse to what I will call the “negotiated pose.” This categorization of Yager’s work resonates with contemporary ethnographic notions about dialogic impulses informing ethnographic practices.<sup>1</sup> Such impulses produce competing accounts of a peculiar ambition to represent and be represented. Yager’s photographic ethnography, however, poses a set of problems bearing upon the relation between those participating in the “photographing of culture” and the potential viewers of these photos. How, for example, are the dialogic impulses of photographic texts read strategically by disparate interpretive communities? What are the ideological stakes of the interpretations and uses of the photos?

The second approach identifies particular *autoethnographic* modes of gang photography as they function to produce “gang” self-representation.<sup>2</sup> Similar to the stakes of “family” portraiture, this kind of photography relates individual selves to a communal self by establishing a specific pictorial scene. Autoethnographic photos are not produced on behalf of “professional” interests nor intended for museum display; rather, their purposes are somewhat more intimate. As an example of autoethnographic gang photography, I have chosen one of my relative’s photos to be read alongside the cover of Miguel Durán’s 1992 novel *Don’t Spit On My Corner* and selected photographs in *Teen Angel’s Magazine*, a publication that circulates within Chicano youth subculture communities. These photographs provide the material for a detailed analysis of the ways in which photography has functioned for Chicano youths in the past and present, especially for those associated with “gang” cultures.

Such photographs prevail in circles that receive them as familiar, or “familial,” on the grounds of sustaining a group memory. I ask, how do these photos challenge the dominant media’s images of Chicano youths as “gang members”? In what contexts are these photos to be read, and how are the photos altered to underscore a self-inscriptive impulse?

As the historical use of photography in law enforcement is quite complex and extensive, the third approach I investigate focuses on dominant media and law enforcement agencies. These social entities use both their own photographs and those ethnographic and autoethnographic gang photographs in “official” catalogues to identify and eventually apprehend gang members. Often arranged alongside ethnographic and autoethnographic gang photos, these police photographs are primary documents stored in police archives and compiled in file cabinets and “mug books,” serving as visual documentation to reference (possible) culprits. But routine photographing of gangs is a law enforcement strategy that frequently violates the rights of youth (who are marked by racial and class differences) that the police purport to defend. It should be no surprise, then, that these photos inevitably produce images of gang members stereotyped as prone to violence and delinquency.

The three approaches outlined above also raise three questions. First, how do we read the photographer as ethnographer and interpret photography as ethnography? Second, how do we relate autoethnographic photography to the task of imaging a communal self? Third, how might police photography as a genre be held accountable for pictorially reproducing a specific subculture that serves to criminalize members of that subculture? I argue that textual productions such as photographs offer many interpretive possibilities for how Chicano gangs are represented. Furthermore, the discourses of aesthetic interest, personal retrospection, and law enforcement must be read *vis-à-vis* the social contexts and tensions that frame the subjects of gang photography.

### **Tracking the Natives of East L.A.**

I see Yager as an ethnographer (and not simply as a documentary photographer) and I read his photos as ethnography. In no way do I argue, as John Collier Jr. and Malcolm Collier have, that photographing instead of writing culture

gives even the “novice fieldworker” claims to authority since “photographic orientation” produces the kinds of “control and authenticity” that writing does not (1986, 21-23). Such claims render the photographer an all-seeing participant-observer whose work stands as objective and an authority figure who matches silhouettes with the old-school anthropologist who writes only what is true (Clifford 1998). I recast the idea of participant observation in which the authority to represent, once seemingly delegated to the ethnographer, *demand*s an approach in which those “being studied” necessarily participate in the process of (their) cultural inscription. This approach maps the interrelations between actors whose performances enable the production of cultural texts.

These interrelations, emphasized by what I call negotiated poses, are pivotal in photographic accounts of ethnography. The act of posing helps us understand the angles of (self-) perception Yager’s photos intend to convey. An awareness of the presence and aim of the camera on the part of the photographer as well as the gangsters allows one to recognize poses as performative moments of concession between Yager and his subjects. To argue that Yager commands all authority as photographer of Chicano gangs and that the gangs fall victim to whatever intentions Yager has in mind is to foreclose debate on the interactive procedures at work in a collaborative endeavor. As Pierre Bourdieu writes in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (1990), “Striking a pose means respecting oneself and demanding respect” (80). For those subjects of Yager’s photography, their poses convey this demand for respect; those appearing in his photos stake claims to how he or she is represented given how the negotiated pose hinges on the agency of those configured in the visual realm.

To be sure, posing should not be regarded a passive stance; rather, it is an instance in which a conversation (even debate and dispute) is taking place, a dialogic “contact zone” as Mary Louise Pratt would put it (1992, 6-7). But more than that, the conventionally understood notion of the pose as a passive stance is transfigured into an act of establishing the subject’s claim to self-perception. As Jimmie Durham writes regarding a photograph of Apache Indian Geronimo:

Geronimo, as an Indian “photographic subject,”  
blew out the windows. On his own, he reinvented  
the concept of photographs of American Indians.

At least he did so far as he could, concerning pictures of himself, which are so ubiquitous that he must have sought “photo opportunities” as eagerly as the photographers. Yet, even when he was “posed” by the man behind the camera, he looks through the camera at the viewer, seriously, intently, with a specific message. Geronimo uses the photograph to “get at” those people who imagine themselves as the “audience” of his struggles. He seems to be trying to see us. He is demanding to be seen, on his own terms. (1992, 56)

Thus, the ethnographic photo is an instance where parties on both sides of the camera are partaking in the production of visual imaging. Take, for example, the photo “Playboy ‘Muerto’ Puts a Gun in His Mouth” (fig. 1). In side profile, we see a young man with a bent arm and wrist aiming a handgun in his mouth. His lips appear secure in covering the tip of the gun’s barrel while his forehead, eyebrows, and the area around his nose and mouth go sour. His face is wrought with tension. An index finger with a tattooed “Y” wraps around the trigger. Behind Muerto there is a portion of a mural-like, spray-painted gun aimed over and past his head. By juxtaposing an “artistic” reverie with the very “real,” Yager and Muerto undoubtedly wish to provide the viewer with a commentary on the persistence of violence in urban Los Angeles. However, the photograph most forcefully addresses the psychic life of gang subcultures, which makes meaning of Muerto’s name. For he need not worry about death when he is literally and figuratively already “dead.”

How does this image of a young Chicano gripping a gun aimed in his mouth exemplify Yager’s photographic ambition which—paraphrasing an *LA Weekly* writer—aims to depict gangsters with a “hint of humanity” (“A Troubled Eye: Robert Yager’s Photographs of Life in the Gangs” 1995, 28)? These hints of humanity, I would argue, are constructed by the pose. The “artistic” gun is not aimed at Muerto. Obviously, it cannot kill him. But what about the “real” gun in Muerto’s mouth? Yager and Muerto are suggesting that unlike the gun aimed above Muerto’s head, there are higher stakes involved regarding the gun in his hand given its potential use for murder/suicide. Furthermore, the pose fuels the desire to engender masculinist threads that tie and bind gang formation and existence by challenging the hard and fast power of the gun.



Fig. 1. Playboy 'Muerto' puts a gun in his mouth. Copyright Robert Yager. Used by permission.

After all, “la vida loca” is living life on the edge, a motto some affiliated with gangs adopt as a rule of thumb.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, the photo suggests that gang life is suicidal while it highlights Muerto’s name. These interpretations of Muerto’s reading of himself in the photo suggest that “[h]e is trying to photograph himself, but from within,” if indeed “[h]e is taking a photograph of his thoughts” (Durham 1992, 58).

In spite of the dialogic relationship I have described above, it is imperative to expose the problems of Yager’s project to establish an undercurrent of ambivalence when discussing the personal intentions behind his photographs—as well as when considering the photos’ prospective interpretive communities. Identifiable as representation struggles within relations of power, struggles embedded in most ethnographic endeavors, the production of photographic signification always produces contentious rationale like any courtroom trial involving conflictual testimony and evidence. Yager’s testimony is that his photographs attempt “to document a relatively unexamined subculture that has a major impact on society,” an attempt to humanize the too often vilified gangster. After all, he informs us that these photos were produced “for a grant in humanistic photography for which [he] was a finalist” (Yager 1993, 32). If the evidence is in his photos, what exactly connects his testimony with his visible evidence? Could we call some witnesses to the stand, perhaps those who were photographed? Aside from their appearance on film, precisely how are they positioned in photographic signification? Although the gangsters may be possible witnesses, we cannot say they would necessarily affirm Yager’s efforts to “humanize” them; their participation may in fact hinge on the promise of their photo taken, money given, or favors offered. And who is to say that they care at all about Yager’s justification for taking their picture?

Regardless, Yager and his subjects are allies in the eyes of the law. In this court room drama, which indeed takes place, the LAPD serves as prosecutor and Yager (and his company of gangs not present) as defendant. But before we align Yager and the gangsters, I examine how Yager’s role as photographer lays claim to an uneasy, self-conscious authority.

Printed in column-layout next to a photo of a young man from *The Playboys*, who “‘mad-dogs’ the camera” (fig. 2), the descriptive text written by an unidentified author reads:

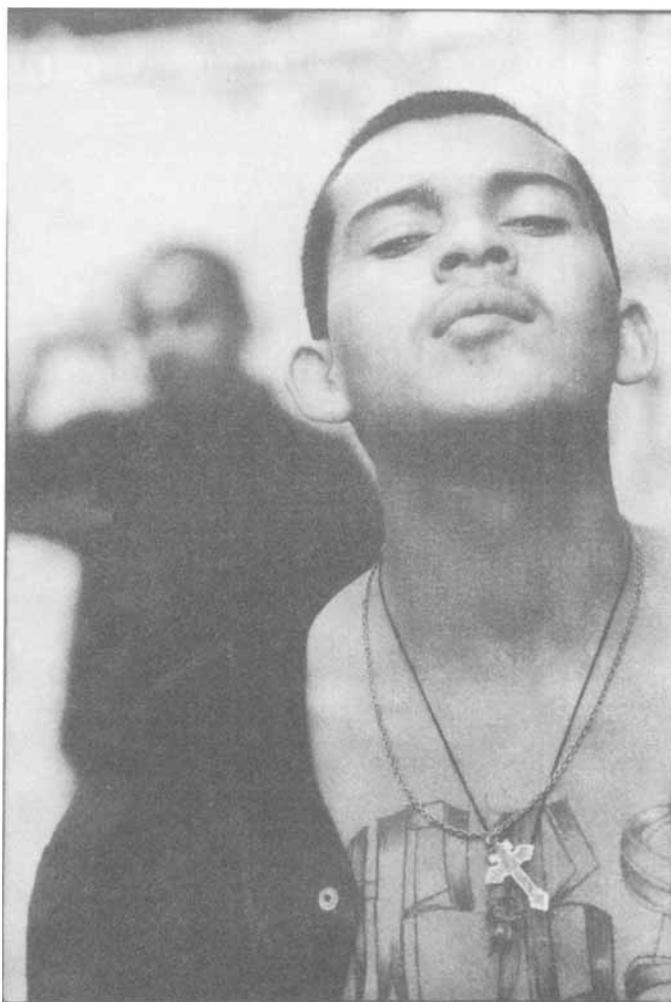


Fig. 2. The playboy “mad-dogs” the camera. Copyright Robert Yager. Used by permission.

Robert Yager began photographing gangs three years ago because he felt they were not being adequately explored by most media. Coverage focused more on the effect of gangs—graffiti, carjackings, murders—than on gang members themselves. Almost never were they allowed any hint of humanity. As an immigrant himself (from England) and having lived in Mexico, Yager was interested in exploring the culture of Latino gangs and in documenting the daily lives of their members. The photographs that follow were culled from among nearly 6,000 frames he has shot so far. (“A Troubled Eye” 1995, 28)<sup>4</sup>

A license for ethnographic authority is issued to Yager in this text.<sup>5</sup> Although Yager is an “immigrant,” there is no telling whether his ethnographic subjects are, too. Also, the fact that Yager lived in Mexico would seem to grant him sweeping cultural authority for photographing Chicano gangs in Los Angeles. Yager’s immigrant status and his living in Mexico do not excuse his possible generalizations or errors. Most of all, in no way can these supposedly shared factors insert Yager in the photographic and sociocultural realm his work envisions. If ethnographic practices shifted, how might the young Playboy envision himself? Would his photos look anything like Yager’s?

In his essay “Camera Man: A Photographer Reflects on How His Work with Gangs Got Him Arrested,” Yager tells of how an invitation to take pictures at a West Side Playboys party led up to his arrest:

Soon after the party got going, a police helicopter began circling above, its spotlight illuminating the courtyard like a disco. I was well into my second roll of film when roughly a dozen police in full riot gear burst through the gate. I took a quick shot from midcourtyard. The party guests rushed to leave as the police ordered them to disperse.

In the chaos, I noticed at least two officers whacking at kids with their batons. “Take pictures, Camera Man! They’re beating us up,” one of the gang members shouted.

I took two more photographs, possibly capturing a baton being swung. (Yager 1993, 32)

It is not known for sure if a swung baton was captured on film since the police soon destroyed the roll in his camera. What followed was some harsh police treatment toward Yager despite his attempt to certify his attendance with an LAPD press pass. Grabbed by the throat by an officer, he was shoved up against a gate; his camera equipment lambasted. “‘Get his film!’ another officer shouted. Police in riot helmets closed in. Hands snatched my equipment. The flash snapped off and fell to the ground. In a wrenching yank to my neck, my camera was taken.” Of course, he was arrested. “They threw me to the ground, handcuffing my hands tightly behind my back. I put up no resistance and they placed me in the back of a squad car.” In the midst of the turmoil, Yager meets up with “Martinez,” an officer from the Rampart Division’s CRASH Unit (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums), who revokes Yager’s press pass and commands his arrest. It turns out this is not Yager’s and Martinez’s first confrontation:

I had encountered Martinez before. In August, while taking photographs for a grant in humanistic photography for which I was a finalist, I’d been hanging out with some gang members on a street near Pico and Vermont. No one was doing anything illegal. The police came and began searching the kids and asking them questions. Martinez ordered me not to take pictures, threatening to arrest me if I did.

I have always tried to show respect for the officers who police the often violent streets of Los Angeles. I realize they have a difficult job. In August, I tried to explain to Martinez why I take pictures of gang members, how I am attempting to document a relatively unexamined subculture that has a major impact on society.

He insisted that I was glorifying gangs with my photographs. He even suggested that gang members wrote graffiti and broke bottles in the street *just because of my presence*. I took no more pictures that day, as Martinez requested. (32, emphasis mine)

Martinez’s observations—whether or not correct—offer compelling information about the photographic subject’s

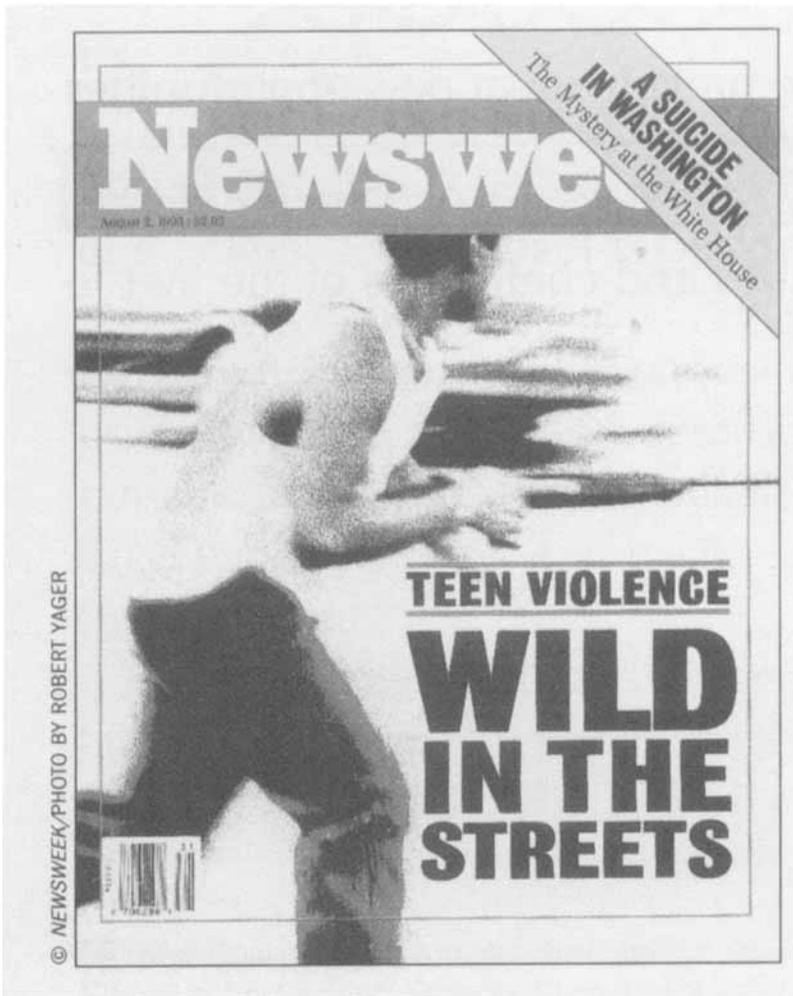


Fig. 3. Cover of the 2 August 1993 *Newsweek*. Copyright Robert Yager. Used by permission.

negotiated “gangster” poses and actions which are part of Yager’s work. For Martinez, these poses also create threats to law enforcement codes of proper conduct.

Martinez’s response to the photographer unfolds a more complex situation when Martinez reveals that he collects Yager’s photos because they help police identify suspects of gang activity:

At the police station, Martinez brought out a copy of *Camera and Darkroom* that featured a 12-page spread of my photos and an interview with me. He asked me which kid was in a photograph of mine that had run as a *Newsweek* cover. I was surprised he was so up on my work. (32)

For law enforcement units such as CRASH, photographs are necessary to identify criminals, which is no surprise once Yager’s photos are published. Yager’s investments in his photos—his attempts to humanize his subjects and his humanities grant—cannot stop the competing interpretations that are bound to surface. For instance, the cover of the 2 August 1993 issue of *Newsweek* shows a sketchy, suggestively violent photograph manipulated with the stipple effect of a young man’s side profile (fig. 3). William J. Mitchell identifies the stipple effect as “posterization” and states that through the act of digital posterization, “A digital artist . . . must adjust the dynamic range and distribution appropriately to the content and occasion” (1992, 99). One reader interprets this image as “a young Latino running through the streets with a rifle” (Senft 1995, 40). Yet, the only information *Newsweek* gives about the photograph is that it was taken by Robert Yager, and the caption reads, “Teen Violence in the Streets.” Given the stipple effect of the photo, this is a stock image, and one of those competing interpretations is that a vague image associated with a prominent photographer is going to be read in a very specific way, as the reader’s interpretation and the manipulation of the image suggests. The digital artist’s manipulation of Yager’s photograph, therefore, fits the content of *Newsweek*’s cover story.

The concentration of white tinting contrasted with the purple/black/gray shading in the photo appears to highlight particular features of the *Newsweek* cover. For example, the subject’s clenched hand and, more salient, index finger that lines nearly half the length of the gun’s body offer a

provocative gesture. Illuminated by this “light” and “dark” juxtaposition, his hand and index finger are highlighted and etched in the form of a gun in contrast to the darkness of the gun he is holding. Given the eye-catching white void that contours his hand and index finger, he emphasizes the gun as the object embodying the dangers of “teen violence” announced on the cover. A similar assessment could be made regarding the shading of the figure’s semi-muscular arm accentuated by his white undershirt. The white (under)shirt often signifies gangster attire that also issues “rhetorical challenges to the law” (Hebdige 1988, 18)—particularly for Chicano youths.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the white shirt accentuates the urgency of violence that the *Newsweek* cover circulates. To depict someone or something wild in the streets, there should be some motion that connotes the wildness at work, hence the overall manipulation of the photo.<sup>7</sup>

This cover photo’s “dynamic range and distribution” of tonal refinements are greatly accentuated when we compare the *Newsweek* image with the cover of Malcolm W. Klein’s book, *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control*, that features a replication closer to Yager’s original photo. Although the image is not readily identifiable to Yager, the image on the dust jacket of Klein’s book is much more photographically clear. There is less of an ominous tinge, however; the gray and white (originally black and white) photo no doubt holds similar meanings. It is possible to consider the image of the man as in the process of either fading away or coming into view. The space in between appearing and disappearing is part of the control Klein’s book yearns for—wildness transfixed.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the unidentifiable man aiming a gun at some unknown target supports mass media conceptions of violence and “The American Street Gang.” This photo correlates with images heavily circulated by the media around the time of the upheaval propagated by the Rodney King verdict. Given the racially ambiguous figure of the photo, the pan-ethnic composition of Klein’s gangs of study, and *Newsweek*’s sweeping coverage of what counts as “Teen Violence,” the photographic subject could be anyone or anything identified with the “L.A. riots,” “gangs,” or “violators.” This specific image assists in the visualization of particular ideologies, but it is vague enough to produce manifold meanings for a variety of contexts. Paraphrasing Roland Barthes,

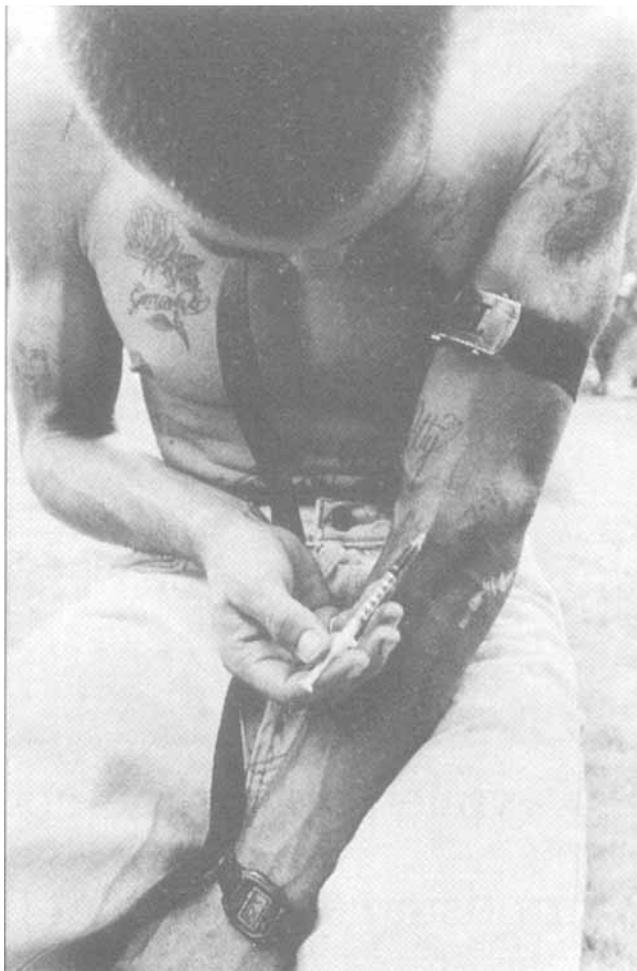


Fig. 4. A gang member shooting heroin. Copyright Robert Yager. Used by permission.

“the more technology develops the diffusion of information (notably images)—perhaps through posterization—”the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning” (1985, 201). The constructed meaning is the pose and the given meaning is the wildness of Latino youth gangs.

The photograph, “the gang member shooting heroin” (fig. 4), raises several issues regarding the pose of the subject compared to the “young Latino in motion.” The negotiation process between Yager and his photographic subject explicitly and implicitly produce a multilayered relationship that invokes the subject positions of the ethnographer and ethnographed, photographer and photographed. In other words, if indeed the “gang member shooting heroin” is informed of Yager’s status as a professional photographer, he may be aware that the photograph for which he posed may be published in a magazine spread, which in turn may also be documented into a police archive. If Yager enables humanistic representations of such “gang members,” this photo must serve a purpose, but, with the information offered vis-à-vis the photographic realm, that purpose remains obscure at best.

In the “gang member shooting heroin” photo, the man posing for the photo is facing down while tugging with his teeth the strand of a belt tied around his arm while he “shoots up.” This specific pose may have been negotiated; perhaps promises were made during the negotiation. Such examples and countless others stand as possible hypotheses regarding the negotiation process between Yager and his photographic subjects. The traffic of shooting—shooting heroin, shooting gangs—leaves the readers/viewers of these texts with nothing more than questions about the nature of the negotiation between Yager and his subjects. For, while Yager may be attempting to humanize these subjects, there is so much more at stake in the readings of his photos.

Building upon the notion of photography as inherently dialogic, ethnographer and visual arts theorist Eric Michaels also details the multivalent problems of perception. Arguing for a “cooperative photography,” an ethnographic practice similar to the dialogism of the negotiated pose I have discussed above, he too is aware of the meanings conveyed by and to the photograph’s “exterior” communities of readers. As he notes,

There are certain kinds of images, camera positions, cropping and composition, which suggest, perhaps subconsciously, certain attitudes toward the subject in the “grammar” of photography. For example, the direction of the subject’s gaze toward the lens may convey much meaning. But . . . they guarantee little in terms of a viewer’s evaluation, and could hardly serve as a defense in any disputation. (1994, 14)

Michaels pointedly articulates my suspicion of ethnographic photography. Keeping this tension in place, I will now shift to another instance of ethnographic expression in gang photography, which emphasizes the stakes of self-representation. I would like to engage a variety of texts (including auto-ethnographic narrative), to provoke dialogue about promising possibilities, although these possibilities are fraught with tensions emerging from autoethnographic photography.

### **The Autoethnographic Impulse: “...what we were really like”**

Picture, if you will, one hot August day in 1994 in a southern California city. I caught a bus headed downtown to the library but decided to stop off at an aunt’s house on impulse. After some customary warm greetings, we discussed my project on gang photography. She brought from a dresser drawer a photograph her husband, my uncle-in-law, received a few years back from some neighborhood friends. The full-color photo shows around twenty-five Latino men who belong(ed) to the L.A. “neighborhood” with which my uncle once associated. The members of the group assume various poses: some squat with dangling hands between their knees, while others stand at soldier-like attention. A paired-off few engage in a handshake while staring toward the camera; four or five are “throwing their set” (the hand gestures symbolic of their distinct neighborhood). They range in age from thirteen to thirty years old. And there is a mural in the background. Emblazoned with the neighborhood’s name etched in black ink, the back of the photograph accentuates as the title a familiar oldie tune, McKinley Mitchell’s “The Town I Live In.” From left to right, the nicknames of everyone represented correspond with their photographic placement.

Miguel Durán's semi-autobiographical novel, *Don't Spit on My Corner*, a narrative rich with details described from the eye of a young Chicano male in the World War II era of East Los Angeles, comes to mind. The novel comments on the historical accounts of the media and law enforcement propagation of the 1940s Zoot Suit Riots. "Zoot Suiters," or pachucos, are often regarded as the forefathers of contemporary Chicano gang subcultures, and Durán's narrative proves effective for elucidating that family resemblance and its historical relationship with law enforcement and other communities or social institutions. The cover of the book shows a photograph of a group of young men. Juxtaposing this photo with my uncle's enables an amazing comparison. It is not just the photographic family resemblance that is striking, but also the genealogical threads of "poverty, stressed families, unemployment, underemployment, undereducation, racism, and the breakdown of sociocultural institutions" (Hutson et al. 1995, 1031), spanning half a century and connecting these autoethnographic photos. Durán's narrative helps make those ties stronger.

Mary Louise Pratt uses the terms autoethnography and autoethnographic expression "to refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms...in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (1992, 7-9). Echoing Pratt, bell hooks writes, "Unlike photographs constructed so that black images would appear as the embodiment of colonizing fantasies, snapshots gave us a way to see ourselves, a sense of how we looked when we were not 'wearing the mask,' when we were not attempting to perfect the image for the white-supremacist gaze" (1995, 62).<sup>9</sup> Extrapolating from Pratt and hooks, I understand photographic autoethnography as a practice in which colonized subjects turn the gaze inward.

In Durán's book, "Little Mike" describes a scene in which he feels the need to take up the camera:

I had a camera, so I lined them up and took their picture. They were all young and good-looking, just like the song that Jesse Pinetop sang about our barrio. Eddie was in his sailor uniform. Butcher was home on furlough and wearing Levis instead of his sailor suit. The others in the picture were Chapa, Ballena, Joe, Rudy, Pope, Jesse, Pato and Chueco.

They were just a small part of what made up the barrio of Tortilla Flats...We were attracted to one another. There was a bond between us that was very strong. There probably would be several adventures with this group. Some things to laugh about and some to hang our collective heads over. (Durán 1992, 108-109)

Little Mike's description works well as a reading of my uncle's photo precisely because both photographs comprise a particular genealogy of visual autoethnography. On the whole, *Don't Spit on My Corner* broaches the historical predicaments of self-fashioning in the face of legal retribution. In particular, several issues regarding Chicano youth gang representation float to the surface when these two photographic texts are juxtaposed.

In *Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life* (1993), the film about girl gang members in Echo Park directed by Allison Anders, *Teen Angel's* magazine makes a cameo appearance when Sad Girl (Angel Aviles) introduces the magazine to her "school girl" sister La Blue Eyes (Magali Alvarado). While holding it in her hands, La Blue Eyes names the magazine that she swipes from Sad Girl, *Teen Angel's*. The voice-over, which is Sad Girl in the role of narrator, declares "There was this magazine that shows us how we were really like." Her statement is one example of many a teen angel's claims to self-representation and is evidence for autoethnographic imaging. In color and black and white there they were—those youths whose photos paraphrased a line from that classic song "Teen Angel": "Teen angel/Can you hear me?" becomes "Teen angel/Can you see me?"

This scene in *Mi Vida Loca* represents the autoethnographic stakes in *Teen Angel's* for Chicano/a youth in "real" life. (In fact, the film reveals why the magazine is always in demand because obtaining copies is difficult.) One distributor informed me that he was one of two people in San Francisco who stocked the magazine. Another distributor in Los Angeles told me it was risky business carrying *Teen Angel's* because the magazine acts as a mug book for police gang units. It should come as no surprise that recent issues of the magazine print a rider, "*Teen Angel's Magazine* supports the A.C.L.U. and the Bill of Rights." Although the publisher of the magazine is unknown through the information offered

within its covers, the readers, who are often the contributors, make the magazine what it is.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that not all photos featured in *Teen Angel's* are "gang" photos; there are indeed photos which do not bear any noticeable trace of gang/neighborhood affiliation. But those which unabashedly declare allegiances to particular neighborhoods, cities, and/or state locations (i.e., Northern or Southern California) are the photos which—read in specific ways—carry the burden of representation.<sup>11</sup>

Take a look at a family-like photo from South Side Los Angeles or SO.SI.LOS. Closer examination reveals the specific South Side barrio those subjects in the photo claims, "Rooks Towne." "Ruketeros," their barrio moniker, is written above their images with what appears to be a permanent marker. At the bottom of the photo, the written text emblazoned on the pants of those in the picture was probably made possible with the etching of a pin. The etched text in the photo bears the markers X3, XIII, RTX3, and BRTX3R, all references to the number 13, and used as a metonym for Southern California. Sylent, whose name appears on its own in the bottom left-hand corner, probably took the picture, but other names are also marked on the photo totaling eleven. There are also four women visually represented whose names are not present on the photo. Although the women are clearly participating in the production of RT13's image, with some even gesturing with hands and fingers Rooks Towne's "set," it is obvious that they are not fully partaking in the communal imaging of this photo.<sup>12</sup>

Another photograph in the same issue shows a Chicano squatting before the camera, his back facing a mirror with the mirror facing the viewer of the photo. His arms, chest, and back are completely covered with tattoos. White shoes peek out from under the baggy pants he is wearing. There is a chain around his neck and sunglasses, also known as "maddoggers," cover his eyes. He is tightlipped, offering a stern look to the viewer and photographer. Again, writing on the photo informs the visual text, revealing the subject's name, "Mr. Woody," and his allegiance is to SURX3. Above his head looms the "LA" insignia of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team. East Los Angeles, or "ELA" as it is written, is "1#," meaning, of course, number one. (A misreading of the picture itself would presume complete attention to the image of Mr. Woody.) The text, however, offers another example of autoethnographic

gang photography staking claims for the sake of collective memory. Twice in the photograph the writer of the text, most likely Mr. Woody, pays homage to a lost homeboy, "Teaser Valdo," to rest in peace or "R.I.P." Although not visually represented, Teaser interrupts the photographic realm through his friend's remembering him in writing on the photo.

In her discussion of Chicano narrative photography, Jennifer A. González notes, "Many contemporary photographers . . . have made use of the anchoring possibilities of text in their work, some to create political or metaphorical juxtapositions with an image, others to produce a narrative context" (1995, 19).<sup>13</sup> Autoethno-photographers, such as those described above, do employ such narrative strategies. As a means of "anchoring" the personal stakes of the photo, the photo becomes a two-fold inscriptive text either to allow a contextualization of details not visually evident or to elucidate the figures pictorially present. The photo, thus, becomes an illustration of multifold signification in that the visually graphic meets up with another version of graphic communication, writing.

Autoethnographic photos function as writerly texts as opposed to ethnographic photos. Barthes notes that "a writerly text is one I read with difficulty, unless I completely transform my reading regime" (1977, 118). Although I attempt to read them, as exemplified above, I am certain there are details that go unaccounted for in my text. There are undeciphered symbols, names that cannot be connected to faces, acronyms impossible to decode, and moments and lived experiences that I cannot claim to have known. My readings, therefore, are untrustworthy. Following Barthes suggestion, I deem these photos as "receivable" texts. As such, I am held accountable "to the following response: I can neither read nor write what you produce, but I receive it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic disorganization" (118). The importance of autoethnographic photos, nonetheless, should not rely on my readings alone but among the communities which produce and read them, such photos execute the vital, personal stakes always embedded in the process of imaging.<sup>14</sup>

Yet as I have read these photos, others do, too—namely the police who read these photos not for their meaning but for their reference. The police with their familiar interpellative gestures depend upon the potential of photographic signification and are also compelled to take up the camera to produce that essential gangster image.

## The (Raced) Body and the (Police) Archive

Allan Sekula and Sandra S. Phillips note how the necessity of criminals and the photographic figure of the criminal help maintain boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong, and self and Other. In her essay "Identifying the Criminal," Phillips writes:

We need criminals because they are not us. Crimes are transgressive acts, committed not by "normal" people but by those we define as outside the norm. It would appear that the systematic reaffirmation of this distinction is fundamental to our society. Our ability to distinguish right from wrong enables us, as responsible citizens, to identify, prosecute, and punish outlaws—individuals who flaunt social values. Paradoxically, the status of criminals as outsiders has made them heroes in our culture: the guilt, the "otherness," ensures freedom from society's strictures in a way that simultaneously attracts and frightens us. (Phillips 1997, 11)

On the one hand, Phillips accurately points out that "our ability to distinguish right from wrong enables us to identify, prosecute, and punish outlaws." On the other hand, she insightfully highlights how "criminals as outsiders" are rendered "heroes in our culture." Because the criminal functions *as a fetishized object*—a point Phillips implicitly makes when she writes that the criminal "simultaneously attracts and frightens us"—we are able to distinguish right from wrong. For fetishism, Stuart Hall reminds us, "involves disavowal." And since "Disavowal is the strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both indulged at the same time denied" (Hall 1997, 267), the strange allure of the criminal is ultimately denied in order to maintain a "proper" split between self and Other.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Phillips importantly identifies photography as "a nineteenth-century technological invention seen to embody the new authority of empiricism":

Photographs, used as evidence of fact, readily par-took of and circulated within [a] larger scientific atmosphere, where the new study of criminology was emerging as a parallel cultural phenomenon. Many of the important scientific projects of the era exploited the photograph's perceived impartiality—

as well as its speed, accuracy, and fidelity—to record or constitute their findings. Such forensic use continues to the present day. (12)

Indeed, the importance of photography for the police continues to rely precisely on the “perceived impartiality” of the image. This is evident in *Police Photography* when Larry L. Miller writes,

Even though photography may develop into an electronic medium with most pictures recorded and stored on video tape, the basic principles of photography will not change. We still have the basic laws of perspective, correct tone reproduction, and so forth. Photographic processes are but a means to an end, and police are primarily concerned with whether the final photographic exhibit is a fair and accurate representation of a subject, rather than how it was reproduced (1993, 4-5).<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, how police distinguish a “final photographic exhibit” that is “a fair and accurate representation of a subject” from one that is an unfair and inaccurate representation of a subject is not always contingent upon the photograph’s (or visual text’s) assumed objectivity. The Rodney King beating caught on video serves as a good illustration. Despite the video’s visible evidence that Rodney King was severely beaten by four LAPD officers, the “evidence” read by the Simi Valley jurors was that the police were acting in self-defense when they acquitted them of charges. Lynne Kirby rightly notes, “even the camcorder’s claim to objectivity as successor to the photographic camera has been thrown into doubt by the Rodney King verdict, leaving the question of technology as open as ever” (Kirby 1995, 75). With the question of technology as open as ever, the visual text can be (mis)read for alternative interpretations when certain readings conflict with state hegemony. The visual image never only produces objective meaning in and of its own self. But police interpretations of photos (or videos) are always concomitant with the ideological forces of the state that also maintain a tight grip on interpretations of the visual field. For example, as Judith Butler argues, “The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, and episteme, hegemonic and forceful” (Butler 1993, 17).

In his insightful essay, "The Body and the Archive," Allan Sekula details how photographs have been utilized to detail what the criminal body looks like and how it should look in the process of "quite literally . . . facilitat[ing] the arrest of their referent" (1986, 3). Key to Sekula's project is tracing the "biotype," a biologically determined criminal, and his/her impact on "the science of criminology" created in the photography he examines. Moreover, Sekula draws from the interpretive paradigms established in the nineteenth century by Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton. While "the first rigorous system of archival cataloguing and retrieval of photographs was invented by Bertillon," Galton established an "essentialist system of typology to . . . regulate social deviance by means of photography" and to "regulate the semantic traffic in photographs" (55). "Unfortunately," writes Sekula, "Bertillon and Galton are still with us":

"Bertillon" survives in the operations of the national security state, in the condition of intensive and extensive surveillance that characterizes both everyday life and the geopolitical sphere. "Galton" lives in the renewed authority of biological determinism, founded in the increased hegemony of the political Right in the Western democracies. (62)

"Bertillon" and "Galton" have especially impacted minoritized subjects. As captured on the cover of Miguel Durán's book, World War II coincides with the U.S. government's attempts to vilify Chicano youths. By way of what Mauricio Mazón calls "symbolically annihilating" moves, the psychodynamics of general perception collapsed the views of Mexican Americans into a "condensed imagery" of them as "gangs, pachucos, and zoot-suiters" (1984, xi). The media-fueled "zoot suit" craze served as a catalyst to single out Mexican American youths based on a shared stance, "distinctive speech, body movement, and body adornment" (Luckenbill 1990, 1). Although this stance was also adopted by white, black, and Filipino youths, it was the Sleepy Lagoon case of 1942 and the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943 that put Chicano Zoot Suiters on the most wanted lists. While my summary of the "Zoot Suit moment" is admittedly brief and broad, my intention is to focus more specifically on how law enforcement and media of this era produced photographs which were necessary for the invention of racialized deviants,

and for their archival importance in police filing cabinets, mug books, and on corkboards.

The numerous photos appearing on the covers of Los Angeles newspapers during that time were often taken by and provided to the police. For example, in the exhibition catalog *The Pachuco Era*, Dan Luckenbill examines a photograph published in 1942 in the *Los Angeles Daily News* (fig. 5):

A report to a 1942 Los Angeles Grand Jury implied that Mexicans were like “wildcats.” This supported the assumption that if a pachuco were detained, it would be “useless to turn him loose without having served a sentence.” The wildcat “must be caged to be kept in captivity.” This photograph shows one technique of labeling pachucos as “hoodlums.” The bars of jail imply guilt. Actually, the pachucos show a sense of style in their resistant stance. (1990, viii)

The resistant stance detected by Luckenbill works in a similar fashion to the poses in ethnographic gang photography; however, the collaborative efforts between the media and law enforcement are evident in the photos. Also, like Yager’s photo on *Newsweek*’s cover, the racialized bodies of these Mexican “wildcats” ultimately signify the exact opposite of civility and accentuate a presumption of wildness.

Another photo from the *Daily News* shows a mug shot of a well-known individual, Henry Leyvas, the key suspect of the Sleepy Lagoon case who was charged with conspiracy to commit murder (fig. 6). Luckenbill writes, “Harsh photographs of the Sleepy Lagoon defendants taken under jail circumstances contributed to the effect of their being guilty before the trial” (4). This photograph illustrates how Mexican Americans were cast as uncivilized and criminal through the photo, especially the mug shot.<sup>17</sup> Such photographs provide viewers with details, images, and evidence that may have convicted defendants based on biological features and clothing.<sup>18</sup>

In *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945*, Edward J. Escobar discusses how traditional interpretations of the zoot-suit hysteria blame newspapers like the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Los Angeles Herald and Express*, and the *Los Angeles Examiner* (the latter two owned by William Randolph Hearst) “for fomenting fears about



Fig. 5. From the *Los Angeles Daily News* Photographic Archive, Department of Special Collections, UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library.



Fig. 6. Mug shot of a well-known individual, Henry Leyvas, the key suspect of the Sleepy Lagoon case, who was charged with conspiracy to commit murder. From the *Los Angeles Daily News* Photographic Archive, Department of Special Collections, UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library.

Mexican American youths" (Escobar 1999, 198). But the press was not solely to blame for igniting the flames of these fears, Escobar explains:

The press may indeed have incited the public to hysteria, but the newspapers generally did not fabricate the stories they printed. Rather, reporters wrote their stories with the active assistance, support, and encouragement of law-enforcement and political officials. As Nick Williams, the night news editor for the [*Los Angeles Times*] during the hysteria, noted, reporters could not have written their stories without information from police sources. Williams's recollections are supported by the many news stories that specifically acknowledged that the information they contained came from police. Thus, the press could claim, as Williams later did, that while the coverage "may have been inflammatory, . . . at the time, we thought we were objectively covering the news." (198)

This information sheds light on the significance of these newspaper photographs. Because the photos, like the information for articles, came from police sources, the objectivity of the images along with the news accompanying them is questionable. Indeed, the rhetorical force of these photos also "promot[ed] the idea that Mexican Americans, and especially Mexican American youths, presented a serious crime problem or, even worse, that they were biologically inclined toward crime and violence" (Escobar 198).

Daniel C. Tsang writes about instances of branding Asian American youths as gang members in Orange County, California: "...police have detained and photographed Asian youths merely on suspicion that they belong to gangs or are 'gang associates' [all the while aided by the] police department's alleged practice of keeping a 'mug book' on Asian American youths who have never been arrested" (1993, B5). The same story holds true for Chicano youths as it does for other youths of color. As the mug book photos document, they are guilty until proven innocent given their supposed biological inclination toward crime and violence. One scene in Anders' *Mi Vida Loca* depicts the police taking photographs of suspected gang members. Giggles (Marlo Marron), recently released from prison and up on her knowledge of

legal protocol, attempts to prevent the cops from taking snapshots of “gangbangers” with a Polaroid camera. Giggles is well aware that this practice is in violation of their legal rights because some girls being photographed are minors. Yet, photographing minors suspected of gang member affiliation is not uncommon in police circles, and collapsing innocence with guilt is even more common for those who are (mis)read as a threat to society. The recent dismantling of Los Angeles CRASH units over proven allegations of police misconduct serves as a fitting reminder. While Giggles is unsuccessful in her attempt to interrupt the photographic gaze of the police, Robert Yager has shot back by capturing these police photographic practices in his own work (fig. 7).

### **Perception over Representation**

The historical presence of Chicano gangs firmly anchors both baiting and fascination; therefore, the image of the gangster probably will not fade away any time soon. Moreover, the evils of gangs are a topic taken up by a range of influential people, from Los Angeles Board Supervisor Gloria Molina to U.S. President Bill Clinton. At the same time, there is a strong intrigue with or appeal to street gangs within a number of arenas.<sup>19</sup> Also, ethnographic photography is by no means limited to Robert Yager. Photographers José Galvez (fig. 8), Graciela Iturbide (1996), and Joseph Rodríguez (1998) have expanded the field of gang photography and its vision.<sup>20</sup> But what about the material conditions of their existence from which gangs are often abstracted?

The frameworks of conservative and liberal politics, the media, the trafficking of drugs, and guns that lead to violence are continually detached from their interlocking relations to how such political-economic institutions thrive on maintaining antagonistic oppositions between rich/poor, white/of color, and male/female. What conditions—social and otherwise—circumscribe some communities, provoking them to kill with little remorse?<sup>21</sup> This is a question U.S. society and our leaders need to be asking, particularly those who shy away from fully comprehending the notion of “youth in crisis.” Larger questions and discussions need to be engaged by those whose evaluations derive from representations of “hoodlums,” “thugs,” “scum,” and—according to one Los Angeles news anchor—“the vilest of the vile.”

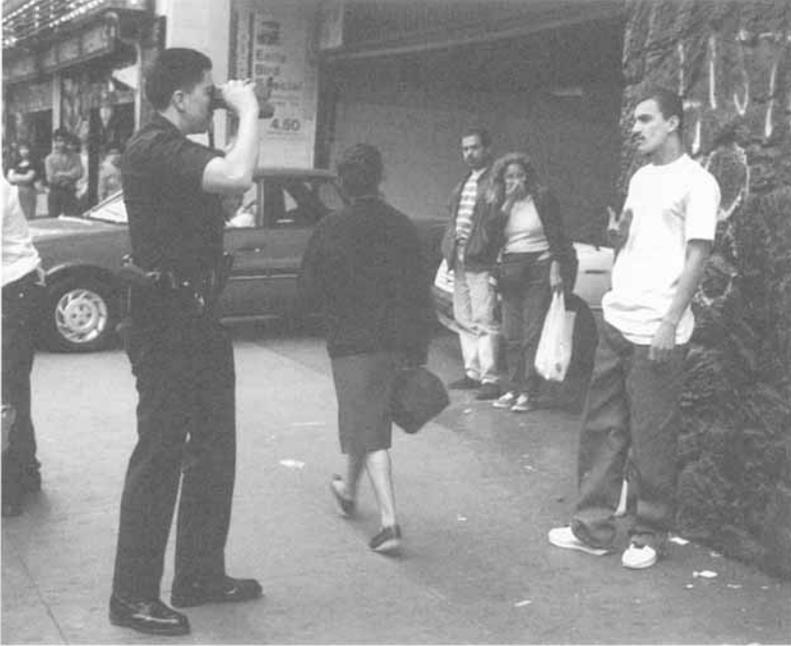


Fig. 7. Police photographic practices at work. Copyright Robert Yager. Used by permission.

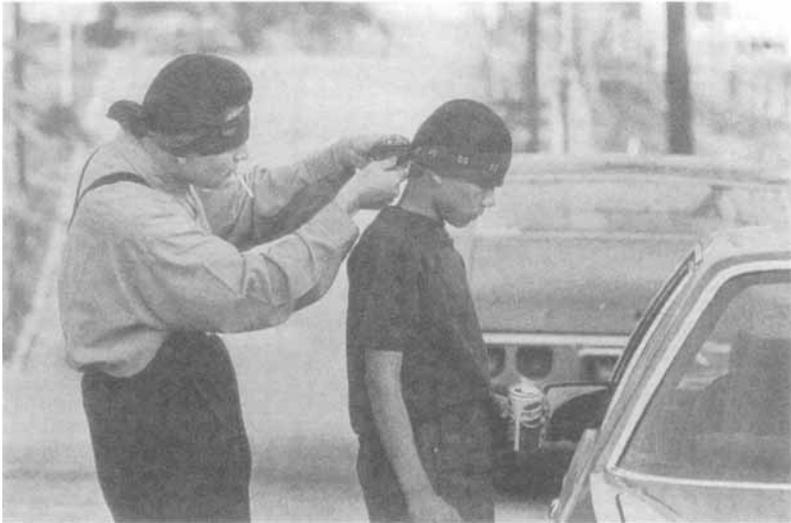


Fig. 8. Home Boys/White Fence. Copyright José Galvez. Used by permission.

Extrapolating from the classic study on the ideological creation of the “moral panic” around a “mugging problem” in 1970s England (Hall, et al. 1978), Marjorie S. Zatz notes that the creation of a moral panic around Chicano gangs is more often than not propagated by “the social imagery of Chicano youth gangs, rather than their actual behavior, that lay at the root of the gang problem” (1987, 153). Zatz is critical of this misleading, racialized and class-biased discourse in which youth gangs are “defined as a serious social problem—a problem to which the media and law enforcement agencies responded vociferously and vigorously” (153). Moreover, because quick-fix solutions to prevent gang formation have yet to be uncovered, attempts to stop violence are too frequently masked by the desire to “control” gang members. These means of control are often coded in military-style terminology and practices which endorse tactics that are comparable to (talk about) wiping out undesirable populations and that ignore the socioeconomic conditions and conditioning particular to those populations. The goal is to seize the criminal in an attempt to control his/her purportedly inherent defiant nature.

Not surprisingly, photographs have been used to identify the criminal and to pin-down the alleged suspect/subject of gang activity. Photographs give credence to identify a suspected gang member, based on a shaved head, baggy pants, white tee-shirt, body posture, and other signifiers of the gangster stance. Victor Burgin rightly notes, “a photograph is not to be reduced to ‘pure form,’ nor ‘window on the world,’ nor is it a gangway to the presence of the author.” Rather, “Photography is one signifying system among others in society which produces the ideological subject in the same movement in which they ‘communicate’ their ostensible ‘contents’ (Burgin 1982a, 153). In turn, the subject of gang photography must ultimately pose a set of questions and problems for the ideological forces through which imaging is necessary in the name of (self-) representation but never an innocent practice.

## Notes

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1. My use of the term dialogic is informed by James Clifford, extrapolating from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, when he claims that "ethnographic writing cannot be construed as monological, as the authoritative statement about, or interpretation of, an abstracted, textualized reality" (1988, 42).

2. Although the groundbreaking work of Mary Louise Pratt (1992) is often credited as suggesting the practice of autoethnography, others have employed the term, before and after Pratt. For example, see Lionnet (1989), Buzzard (1995), Chow (1995), Muñoz (1995), and the recent collection of essays edited by Reed-Danahay (1997) which adopts the term for its title. Françoise Lionnet, who uses the term three years before the appearance of Pratt's book, argues that Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on the Road* is exemplary of autoethnography in that "the book amounts to a kind of 'figural anthropology of the self'" (99). Taking her cue, my sense of autoethnography is that it indeed refers to a cultural self-inscription.

3. See, for example, Luis J. Rodríguez's 1993 autoethnographic novel *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*

4. See the anonymously written "A Troubled Eye: Robert Yager's Photographs of Life in the Gangs" in the *LA Weekly* (May 26-June 1, 1995): 28. Omar Valerio-Jiménez brought this issue to my attention.

5. The term, and concept of, "ethnographic authority" is borrowed from James Clifford. See his book *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), especially pp. 21-54.

6. My aunt recently informed me that her boss, a white male judge, refers to "those types of Mexican boys" as "White Shirts." The white undershirt is an article of clothing that is historically and presently popular with Latino young men. The undershirt worn as an "outer" article of clothing speaks to the affordability of such clothes, which are in turn made fashionable by style-conscious youth. I am also reminded of Chicano rapper Kid Frost's remarks in a 1993 interview with Lorraine Ali: "The only reason parents were buying clothes like that was they did not have the money to buy nice clothes for their kids. They went and bought work khakis, and they would buy them big so the kids could wear them for the next two years. The canvas shoes were five bucks, and you crease your khakis and put on a white shirt and that's it. That's been my culture

and me ever since I was a kid" (Ali 1993, 72). Similarly, Armando Rascón notes, in writing about Chicanos and fashion, "Fashion is always located at the intersection between economics and culture. Difference is its ultimate consequence" (1993). Precisely that difference issues rhetorical challenges to the laws, described by Hebdige, that inform racist and class-biased judgment.

7. In a similar vein, consider the photographic manipulation of O. J. Simpson on the cover of *Time* magazine (27 June 1994) which darkened his face, thus suggesting the correlation between his blackness and his guilt. See Crenshaw 1997 for a discussion on the racial underpinnings of this image.

8. Klein writes, "None of this [racism, urban underclass poverty, minority and youth cultures, fatalism in the face of rampant deprivation, political insensitivity, and gross ignorance of inner-city/inner-town America who don't have to survive there] excuses street gang crime or violence; instead, it says that gang crime and violence can be understood. Once understood, they might—just might—be alleviated. If so, we all—all of us—be benefited" (1995, 234).

9. Aside from the photos I will mention here, other examples of autoethnographic photography produced by Chicano/a youths include the exhibition "Living Young" by the Latina Teen Project showcased at the American Friends Service Committee Center, Pasadena, California, in August 1994. Photos from this show were published in the *LA Weekly* (5–11 August 1994) accompanied by the article "Developing Youth: The Latina Teen Project's Pictures of Living Young." Also, see Rodriguez 1994 for a selection of photos and poems by young Chicano/as and Latino/as from the Pico-Aliso Housing Projects in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles. These photos display an aesthetic sensibility similar to Yager's when photographing gangs although these young photographers distinctly command a sense of familiarity with their photographic subjects that he can not.

10. Although Susan A. Phillips credits "the largest collection of gang drawings and photographs ever compiled" to "Teen Angel, Chicano artist and founder of *Teen Angel's Magazine* (established in 1981)" (1999, 38), one distributor of the magazine informed me that *Teen Angel's* is the creation of a middle-aged, white man in southern California who resides in Rialto, the location of the post office box where contributors are informed to send their money, correspondence, and photos. As disturbing as this may be on many levels (i.e.; issuing authenticating claims for self-representation without questioning the social positioning, economic gains, and/or authorial liberties of the publisher)—and perhaps at the risk of contradicting the thesis I offer here—the magazine rightly notes *Teen Angel's* aims "to give a voice to the young people from the varrios. To empower those who have traditionally been denied freedom of

speech and had their first amendment rights suppressed by the predominant power structure.” As Phillips writes, the “magazine is an important document of gang artistic and social development throughout the state of California and beyond” (38). Thus, the photos published in the undeniably questionable ethnographic arena of *Teen Angel’s* nevertheless bring into relief self-inscriptive moments of artistic representation.

11. Kobena Mercer calls the “burden of representation” a “predicament . . . whereby the artistic discourse of hitherto marginalized subjects is circumscribed by the assumption that such artists speak as ‘representatives’ of the communities from which they come—a role which not only creates a burden that is logically impossible for any one individual to bear, but which is also integral to the iron law of the stereotype that reinforces the view from the majority culture that every minority subject is, essentially, the same” (Mercer 1994, 214). I am indebted to Iain Chambers for making me aware of this important point with respect to gang photography.

12. It would not be inaccurate to distinguish “women’s photographs” from “men’s photographs” in *Teen Angel’s*. Furthermore, when women appear in men’s photographs, they inevitably end up as furniture.

13. González specifically refers to the work of Kathy Vargas entitled, “My Alamo,” from the exhibition *From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography* curated by Chon A. Noriega for The Mexican Museum, San Francisco, California, December 9, 1995 through March 3, 1996.

14. See Teresa de Lauretis 1984 for a discussion on the process of imaging.

15. See Hall’s discussion which engages and extends Sigmund Freud’s 1927 paper “Fetishism.” For a fetishistic reading of gang photography, see *Hunger of Memory* author Richard Rodríguez’s essay on Joseph Rodríguez’s photos in *Mother Jones* in which he writes, “part of the turn-on of these photos is that we can stare without fear of being killed. None of us should stare at such faces in real life” (Rodríguez 1994, 46).

16. Miller’s book, which is actually titled *Sansone’s Police Photography*, is a recent edition of Sam J. Sansone’s 1977 classic *Police Photography*, a book which continues to play a pivotal role in law enforcement, fire service, and security investigations.

17. The “mug shot” is important in this context because it almost never fails to single out, even in group photos, the desired subject of gang photography. Allan Sekula describes the mug shot as “the very exemplar of a powerful, artless, and wholly denotative visual empiricism” (1986, 18). In his essay “Warhol’s Clones” on Andy Warhol’s “silk-screened series of mug shots appropriated from FBI files of the late 1950s” entitled *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*,

Richard Meyer notes that the mug shot “cross-wires the codes of criminality, looking, and homoerotic desire” while embodying the “pleasures of repetition” (Meyer 1994, 83). Indeed, the mug shot helps the police identify and get *their* “most wanted men.”

18. Edward J. Escobar discusses how pachuco/a dress and style provoked hostility in ways similar to the “semiotic guerrilla warfare” provoked by British subcultures like punk. See Dick Hebdige 1979. Also see numerous informational video tapes (such as *Gang Signs: How to Tell if Gangs are Influencing Your Kids or Community* [1996], books (see Sachs 1997), and web sites that inform citizens and parents on how to accurately identify gangs and what signifiers to look for to determine if one’s child is a gang member.

19. Noting the “mushrooming youth market for consumable goods, teen-age spending power gone rampant,” Armando Rascón thinks a “boutique specializing in *cholo-wear* on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles shouldn’t appear so odd” (1994). Articles by Barrios 1979 and Torres 1979 are early yet significant discussions on Hollywood’s money-making attraction to Chicano gang movies; they specifically address Michael Pressman’s 1979 film *Boulevard Nights*. Rosa Linda Fregoso 1995 broaches similar issues by way of questioning Allison Anders’s interest in Chicana gangs in her film *Mi Vida Loca*. See O’Neil 1995 on police reality programming, gangs, and race. For an excellent exception to the distortions of gangs in a popular frame, see Jaime Hernández’s moving 1989 animated novel *The Death of Speedy* (the seventh volume of the *Love and Rockets* collection).

20. Galvez’s famous 1983 photo “Home Boys/White Fence” appeared in the *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (CARA) exhibition (1991, 272). Interestingly, the photo is also reproduced—but not discussed—in the anthology *Constructing Masculinity* (Berger, et al. 1995, 226) based on the DIA Center for the Arts conference of the same name. Indeed, the fact that Galvez is Chicano, Iturbide is a Mexican woman, and Rodríguez is a Puerto Rican man distinguishes them from Yager not only with regard to their distinct racial/ethnic positioning but with regard to their distinct ethnographic and sociopolitical points of view. For instance, Iturbide’s focus on women challenges the gendered economy of the strictly male gangster image-repertory.

21. Or, as the hypnotic verse of Cypress Hill’s famous rap track “How I Could Just Kill a Man” declares: “Here is something you can’t understand/How I could just kill a man.” The irony of this verse lies in the fact that most people would rather look away than attempt to understand.

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