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GANGS AND
THEIR WALLS

"Thee Mystics rule," one of them yelled from the other side of the school fence. . . . I froze as the head-stomping came dangerously my way. But I was also intrigued. I wanted this power. I wanted to be able to bring a whole school to its knees and even make teachers squirm. All my school life until then had been poised against me: telling me what to be, what to say, how to say it. I was a broken boy, shy and fearful. I wanted what Thee Mystics had; I wanted the power to hurt somebody.
—Luis J. Rodriguez, Always Running, La Vida Loca:
Gang Days in L. A.

There are no other gang experts except participants.
—Sanyika Shakur, A K.A. Monster Kody Scott, Monster:
The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member

street-gang graffiti: lexicon and syntax
The above quotation of Shakur is an important critique of anyone presuming to comment, as I will shortly, on street gangs and their graffiti. I will discuss street gangs even though, at most, Edmundo and I along
with Dan Anderson, a second research assistant who worked with us most particularly on this project, scuttled along the periphery of a few gangs. We interviewed those individuals who accepted us and became friendly with a few, and occasionally we stumbled onto caches of information that we had no right to see. I never aspired to be a gang expert. I turned to street-gang members, however, because, in my interpretive scheme, they embodied the question of how one creates respect under conditions of little or no respect with an intensity that acted like a searchlight revealing the rest of the community. Street-gang members explicitly wrote out their needs for respect, and the more I realized this particular fact, the clearer it became to me that the Don Angels, the Valerios, the Juárez, and the Martins were expressing, perhaps in more muted fashion, similar needs. My point might be phrased this way: This entire book is, in one sense, a collection of ways by which a variety of people created respect under conditions of little or no respect. Obviously, there was not just one way but many, and many of these ways were not acceptable to different members of the neighborhood. Each way, then, reflected someone’s desire and someone else’s rejection. In order to understand and integrate the stories of this book, then, I turn to the most glaring manifestations of desire and frustration, and the appeal of the hyperbolic so as to highlight the common structure, the single story under the many.

What is necessary to understand first are the syntactic elements and lexicon of Angelstown’s graffiti and how that syntax and vocabulary operated in a variety of other media to create a thick semiotic full of redundant messages. I will concentrate on the lexicon of the Almighty Latin King Nation because I know more about their organization. The emblem of the Latin Kings was either the five-pointed or the three-pointed crown with the five-pointed being more common. Members of the nation referred to the crown as la corona. Each point of the corona was jeweled and represented a particular ideal. Oftentimes the figure of a man with longish hair, trimmed mustache, pointed beard, and a tear drop was drawn wearing the crown. This figure was called el rey, “king,” and associations with “Christ the king” or the “king of kings” were not uncommon. (The term “king of kings,” however, was also used for the highest leader of the Nation, a leader who was rumored to have visited the area at least once.) Not appearing in graffiti but still an important emblem of the Latin Kings was the lion, the king of the jungle.

The colors of the Latin Kings were black and gold. Of course, all street gangs in Angelstown used black as one of their colors, but for the Kings, black signified the “dominant color of the universe,” the “darkness of the immense night,” and the “alpha and the omega.” Gold represented the sun and the “bril-

liance of the mind.” Black and gold were described as the two colors of creation, “existing since the beginning of time and enduring forever.”

The number that ruled over the Latin Kings was five (five-pointed crown, for instance), and their abbreviations were ALKN (Almighty Latin King Nation), LKN, and LK. Again, not appearing in graffiti but still an important part of “representing” oneself as a Latin King was the left side of the body, as in wearing an earring in the left ear, cocking one’s baseball cap to the left, or folding one’s left arm over one’s right. The number five, the phrase “All is well,” and “representing” to the left were also used by a larger alliance of gangs called the “People,” which in Angelstown consisted primarily of the Kings, Vicelords, and, for a while, the Insane Deuces. The other gangs in this alliance, however, had different colors and symbols. For instance, the colors of the Vicelords were red and black, and their symbols were typically a pyramid, a crescent moon, a cane, a top hat, and a martini glass. The Insane Deuces, in contrast, used green and black as their colors, and their symbols were dice, the spade playing card, and the number two.

Battling against the Latin Kings were rival gangs belonging to another conederation called the “Folks.” In Angelstown, the Folks gangs were primarily different branches of Disciples, and these included Black Gangster Disciples, Satan’s Disciples (sometimes called Spanish Disciples), and Maniac Latin Disciples. These gangs all “represented” to the right and used a variety of symbols such as pitchforks, 6-pointed stars, a devil’s tail and horns, and a heart with wings.

Lexical Items Most Common to Angelstown’s Major Street Gangs

Almighty Latin King Nation:
alliance: people
major symbols: 5- or 3-pointed crown (la corona), el rey (king), lion
colors: black and gold
number: 5
abbreviations: ALKN, LKN, LK
phrase: “All is well”
direction of representation: left

Vicelords:
alliance: people
major symbols: pyramid, crescent moon, cane, top hat, martini glass
colors: red and black
number: 5 and/or 7-4-11
abbreviations: VL, VLN
phrase: “All is well”
direction of representation: left

**Insane Deuce Nation:**
alliance: folks (formerly people)
major symbols: dice, spade playing card
colors: green and black
number: 2
abbreviations: IDN, ID, D

**Disciples (including Black Gangster Disciples, Spanish or Satan’s Disciples, and Meniac Latin Disciples)**
alliance: folks
major symbols: pitchfork, 6-pointed star, devil’s tail and horns, heart with wings, swastika
colors: blue and black; other colors with black also designated specific disciple groups
numbers: 6, 7-4
abbreviations: BGDN, BGD, SDN, SD, MLD
phrase: “All is one”
direction of representation: right

As I said earlier, graffiti was only one medium to make use of the basic lexicon. Hand signs, tattoos, jewelry, clothes, oral language, and miscellaneous objects used the same vocabulary to signal one’s gang affiliations and to insult other gangs. For instance, the hand signal of the Latin Kings consisted of the thumb, index finger and pinky extended outward with the middle fingers folded into the palm. One way to shake hands with another King was to extend one’s hand in the described position while clasping only the thumbs, thus forming a five-pointed corona across both hands. In terms of jewelry, one of the leaders of the Kings was known for a very large gold crown that he wore on a chain around his neck. Other Kings wore gold rings containing the design of a lion or belt buckles with the appropriate symbols. Among the Deuces, a small but vivid green stone placed in the center of a black braided cross hanging from a black braided necklace was popular.

The most conspicuous way to mark one’s affiliation, however, was to wear one’s colors. A goal of a young Latin King, for instance, might be the assembling of as many clothes as possible referencing the colors and emblems of the Kings. The referencing could be enormously elaborate, the only limit being the inventiveness and willingness of the King. Basketball shoes worn with five holes left open (five being the ruling number), Pittsburgh Pirates baseball hats (black and gold with a P signaling “People”), a sports jacket from the Iowa Hawkeyes (black and gold) or the L.A. Kings hockey club, or any item from Miller Genuine Draft: Beer (black and gold) might be used. Other gangs, of course, appropriated their own mainstream symbols according to their special lexicons. For instance, the red and black of the Chicago Bulls were suited to the Vicelords, and the green in Notre Dame and Oakland Athletics paraphernalia was suited to the Insane Deuces.

In short, the possibilities for appropriating mainstream symbols and recontextualizing them into new meanings were almost endless. These appropriations pointed to one of the most important characteristics of Angelstown’s street gangs and, I believe, American street gangs in general. In the public sphere, street gangs and particularly “hard-core” gang members may be viewed as a kind of anti-society,5 as barbarous and verminlike, so completely outside the fold of the human community that they deserve to be removed. Indeed, as I will show, street gangs for very understandable reasons sometimes played with this very rhetoric creating from it hyperbolized images in which the mainstream could witness its deepest fears. In gobbling up the images, the mainstream felt that it had the evidence that proved the legitimacy of its views. But, I would argue, constructing such legitimacy was based on the same logic of violence outlined earlier, in so far as the mainstream positioned itself atop a moral high ground from which to judge and punish. What quickly disappeared in this moral scenario was a more accurate and complex picture, namely, that, even as a street gang adopted its transgressive pose, the gang was structured with numerous appropriations from the mainstream. In other words, the appropriations of mainstream material, so visible during a gang member’s display of his or her colors, might be understood as a kind of synecdoche of an entire system of appropriations through which street gangs constructed themselves. Therefore, to understand the display of colors was to understand that the mainstream’s cultural material was the very fund that a street gang tapped in order to make its meanings. The mainstream may have circulated its fund of cash and iconography,6 but the street gang performed a symbolic conquering of the mainstream when mainstream meanings gave way to gang meanings. For the most part, the mainstream could not interpret gang meanings, and thus a secret, esoteric, subterranean world was made. Here, then, in this most com-
mon of gang gestures, the display of colors, was the ambiguous structure of the street gang, borrowing from the mainstream even as it formulated a radical departure.

Such an analysis of the relationship between mainstream or dominant society and its antisociety suggests that a culture might be understood as a fund of topoi, any of which might be a foundation for building a systematic idea. Such a fund can as easily supply arguments and beliefs for the creation and maintenance of, for instance, a democratic state as it can for the destruction of the same state. Of course, the persuasiveness of any particular idea at a particular moment in a culture's life depends on numerous factors such as the socio-economic context through which the idea circulates. At any rate, a society and its antisociety—or, more individually, the "conformist" who maintains the status quo and the "deviant" who tears it down—are, in some sense, hinged to each other. The spine of such a hinge may very well be a cluster of related topoi. Through a variety of examples beyond the displaying of gang colors, I hope, in time, to show the strength of this analysis.

Thus far, I have used linguistic metaphors to describe much of the "lexicon" of Angelstown's street-gang graffiti and how that lexicon became "articulated" across a wide variety of "communicative" strands that conveyed largely redundant "meanings." I have argued that all this resulted in a kind of thick semiotics. I have also suggested that these meanings were appropriated from the mainstream, but that they underwent a translation to emerge as gang meanings that, for the most part, could no longer be read by the mainstream. Moreover, this process of appropriating conventional meaning followed by a translation into esoteric meaning was a synecdoche for gang life itself.

Continuing the linguistic metaphors, I will turn to the "syntax" of graffiti. The most prominent syntactic elements were a group of markers that might be called "negative morphemes." To a certain extent, these morphemes also operated across media. Two of these morphemes were reversals and upside downs. For instance, to reverse a letter in a rival gang's abbreviation or to draw a rival gang's symbol upside down was to disrespect that gang. A reversed "K," therefore, beside an upside down corona meant that someone was disrespecting the Latin Kings. Similarly, to "throw down" the hand sign for the Latin Kings was to disrespect the Kings. Or, taking another example, to disrespect the Insane Deuces one might draw an upside-down spade alongside an upside-down 2 (the spade and 2 being two of the primary symbols for the Deuces) alongside a reversed "D." Similarly, one could disrespect the Deuces by "throwing down" their hand sign (index and adjacent finger extended as in the symbol of victory). Because the Deuces and Kings were battling each other, one would expect to see alongside the disrespected symbols the other gang's symbols drawn in conventional fashion. Disrespect, therefore, was syntactically marked through reversals and upside downs—negative morphemes, if you will, "non," "un," or "not"—whereas respect was unmarked. Indeed, the notion of respect relied on the conventions of standard writing insofar as street-gang graffiti was typically written linearly from left to right and followed standard spelling. This last point is important, for it suggests that convention in signaling respect was the baseline on which a transgressive order was manufactured. This structural dependency of the transgressive upon the conventional, of the markers of disrespect upon those of respect, was similar to what I argued earlier about gang meanings being dependent upon and appropriating mainstream meanings. (And this structural dependency recalls the dependence of the transgressive alter upon conventional talk discussed in chap. 3.)

Two other negativelike morphemes characterized graffiti. These consisted of "K," meaning "killer," and a squiggly line that canceled a rival gang's graffiti. To draw such a line was to "crack" the graffiti. For instance, imagine that the Latin Kings had drawn their corona and written beside it their initials, ALKN. A rival gang member could disrespect the Kings by "cracking" the corona with a squiggly line drawn through its middle and by adding a "K" after ALKN. In short, such a gang member would be announcing himself or herself as an Almighty Latin King Nation Killer. Or imagine a member of the Insane Deuce Nation writing out the abbreviations IDN and a Latin King adding a "K" to make IDNK, in short, Insane Deuce Killer.

Four Negative Morphemes

- reversed letters
- upside down letters/symbols
- addition of "K" (killer)
- cracking (drawing of a squiggly line through the letters and symbols of a rival gang)

The term "killer" is worth exploring further, for it functioned not only in graffiti but also in everyday talk and in the throwing of hand signs. "Killer" and "love" were structured opposites equivalent to the "throwing down" of a rival gang's hand sign and, in contrast, the "throwing up" of the hand sign of one's own gang. Indeed, when a gang member "threw down" a rival gang's hand sign, he or she was often labeled as a "killer" of that gang: "King killer," "Deuce killer," "MLD killer," or whatever. In contrast, when a gang member "threw
up” his or her hand sign, the person would be saying implicitly, if not explicitly, “King love,” “Deuce love,” or whatever. The term “love,” then, was the structured opposite of “killer”; however, “love” was not written out and, hence, was the unmarked term in Angelstown’s graffiti, whereas “killer” was the marked term.

Even though the conventions for using the four so-called negative morphemes (upside downs, reversals, K or killer, and cracking) were mostly standardized and even consistent across other media, there were subtle rules or habits in gang graffiti that were, for me at least, hard to explain. Most of these puzzles concerned reversals and upside downs. For example, the opportunity to reverse every initial in a rival gang’s name was, as far as I could tell, never taken advantage of. Why not reverse or throw upside down, for instance, each letter in ALKN of the Almighty Latin King Nation or the MLD of the Maniac Latin Disciples? Instead, the typical reversal was on the “K” and the “D” respectively, and the other letters were left alone. These observations suggest that the marking of disrespect may have had a set of subtler rules or habits that I have not adequately described. My inability to explain why some letters were vulnerable to disrespecting and others were not suggests that the full system (if there is one) for using the negative morphemes has not been fully displayed here.

So far, I have been examining the “lexicon” and “syntax” of gang graffiti. But also very observable in graffiti were certain stylistic elements. Those who put up graffiti, as I was told often, had special talents. Sometimes the authors of gang graffiti would sign their names, but it would be a mistake to take such signings as only self-acknowledgments of the authors’ talents. Such an interpretation would overshadow the major purpose of graffiti, which was to explicitly enact a degree of violence against another gang or to implicitly do so by celebrating the power of one’s own gang. At any rate, much graffiti went unsigned, but, signed or not, at times there were stylistic characteristics performed with flair that garnered for the graffiti writer considerate respect. One such characteristic was called “Old English script” by gang members and entailed a considerable amount of fancy lettering reminiscent, perhaps, of that found in illuminated manuscripts. Stylistic elaboration, then, of the core symbols and abbreviations of one’s gang was at the heart of the very decorative Old English script.

However, I know of at least one example of another kind of elaboration that did not follow the “look” of Old English script. This particular example of elaboration used conventional lettering to create visual puns to amplify a set of redundant meanings. This piece of graffiti was particularly frightening on first viewing. It was drawn by a Latin King (King Sinister, I presume), whom I did not know, at a time when the Kings were being gunned down by the Disciples, the Spanish Disciples, the Insane Deuces, and the Maniac Latin Disciples. Done in blood red with a thick application that sometimes dripped, this stretch of graffiti seemed to stylistically capture in ways that I had never seen before the violence and paranoia of the moment. In the left-hand corner, as if introducing the graffiti, was a jingle: 5 Kings Gunning/10 Deuces Running. (I presume “Deuces” was meant, but since the lettering only provided a reversed “D,” it is possible that “Disciples” was also being runned.) The juxtaposition of this structure, a kind of childlike rhyme, with such a violent semantic amplified the haunting and threatening quality of this stretch of graffiti. Further, both in the lettering of the jingle and other words throughout, there occurred certain visual puns that created redundant meanings. For instance, throughout the graffiti the “i” was typically dotted with five pointed stars, the number “5” being one of the numbers identified with the Kings. In fact, “5” occurred in various places: for instance, below the corona and in various arrangements of red dots above the corona and other places. In other words, the number “5” echoed
throughout the stretch of graffiti, thickening one of its central, if implicitly understood, messages: King love.

Simultaneously, put-downs of at least four gangs (Deuces, Spanish Disciples, Maniac Latin Disciples, and Gangster Disciples) were just as thickly and redundantly placed. Since these four gangs constituted the strength of the Folks confederation, King Sinister was saying, in effect, that he or she was a Folks killer. Of the four gangs, the one most singled out for disrespect was the Deuces. Almost every letter “G” in this stretch of graffiti, for instance, had a trailing flourish, an upside-down “2.” Moreover, two of the prominent symbols of the Deuces, the “2” (followed by a “K morpheme” explained earlier) and the spade, were drawn upside down in the main “text.” Also singled out were the Maniac Latin Disciples whose initials were also followed by the “K morpheme.” Thickening the message of disrespect was the drawing of the letter “T” in a variety of words. Its top bar was bent downward forming an upside-down pitchfork with red dots below each of the three prongs. This flourish on the letter “T” echoed, of course, the upside down pitchforks in the “main” text and elsewhere by which the author boldly announced himself or herself as disrespecting all Disciples. In short, these flourishes or visual puns elaborated, indeed, saturated, in novel ways the two central meanings in this stretch of graffiti: King love and Folks killer.

Most graffiti lacked the stylized elaborations of either Old English script or the idiosyncratic visual puns just described. Since this stylized, ornate work was especially respected, it deserves further comment. So-called Old English has a long precedent in American street-gang life. Luis Rodriguez, for instance, talks about “old English” among Latino street gangs in the 1960s and 1970s in Los Angeles: “I had on a T-shirt, cut off at the shoulders, with ‘The Animal Tribe’ in old English lettering on the back written in shoe polish . . . ” He also describes the use of the word “Thee” in such street-gang names as Thee Impersonations and Thee Mystics: “‘Thee’ being an old English usage that other clubs would adopt because it made everything sound classier, nobler, better.” For Rodriguez and other gang members, then, this oral and written style they called “Old English” was class and noble, and this representation sounds my earlier argument about persistent innescapes linked to equally persistent outescapes. Old English in the context of the 1980s and 1990s in Angelstown was also class and noble, and in both eras, I would argue, Old English, as emblem of a romanticized past, allowed its purveyors to rupture the humiliation of the present. In this sense, Old English was a site for creating the stylized difference of street-gang life. In appropriating this style, gangs made it their signature writ large. Moreover, Old English was part of a larger iconography that included thumpers, Too Low Flows, hair and clothing styles, and so on, each one a special site for creating an exaggeration that might be awarded respect. This iconography, then, represented a kind of confluence in which Old English as evocation of the past blended with other styles that evoked the modern. Each style was a site that could offer the remaking of one’s world—or at least a rhetorical remaking behind which lay a version of the real world, biting hard, insisting that it be made over through any means necessary. It should be obvious that what I have discussed concerning Old English script is equally true of the idiosyncratic visual puns of “5 Kings Gunning/To Deuces Running,” for, in my interpretive scheme, both exhibited ornate, precise styles, which were versions of the “neat and clean” that redeemed, so to speak, an outscape that was neither neat nor clean.

If Old English script and other ornate visual styles were important elements in the public display of graffiti, there were other physical characteristics that need further discussion. Graffiti, as part of the warfare between rival gangs, was the use of language in the place of—although, at times, as a kind of—weaponry. It could be used, for instance, to proclaim a particular gang’s territory or the courage and audacity of a rival gang member who had dared to enter enemy territory to disrespect the local gang. Under these circumstances, inscription often led to erasure either by a property owner or rival gang member often followed by another round of inscription and erasure. In short, the ephemeralness of graffiti meant that an evening’s work could disappear only to reappear again the next night. When graffiti became layered in this way, one message atop another, a wall became dense with authors. Authors had found a way to scribe themselves over each other in their need to make themselves individually and socially known. This system of inscription and erasure resulting in layered messages, then, was the physical trace that one could read, if one knew how, of the system of respect and disrespect that could rightfully be called the emotional origins behind the warfare of graffiti. Or phrased in the language of the prior chapter, it was the logic of violence, the need to take the moral high ground at the expense of another, written out on the walls of the city.

Other physical characteristics of graffiti included its size as well as the varied surfaces that it could occupy. These characteristics helped to create a special presence in the midst of public space. Often, graffiti was hidden in alleys that offered protection to the graffiti writer, but many times it boldly occupied a more visible public space. The occupation of public space—better yet, its domination—might be compared to what I argued earlier about the domination of public sound spaces through thumper sound systems. Both were “loud” and operated within the same system of respect and disrespect. Graffiti, of course,
could occupy a variety of surfaces: interior or exterior walls, fences, dumpsters, concrete supports of expressways, garage doors, doors, and so on. It could even turn the corners of buildings. In taking over these spaces, it created a kind of “rulership”—a loaded and potent term in the context of gang life. Such rulership declared through the medium of graffiti not only who controlled the hood, but simultaneously and implicitly established a new set of rules that violated those of conventional print space. (Conventional print space might be understood here as a sheet of paper, a store sign, a billboard, in short, any space that has been designated for the use of print by some authoritative system and hence regulated by that system through ordinances, systems of standardization, and so on.) Graffiti in minimally observing these conventions, indeed, in writing over them, declared itself outside the law, an eruption that was potentially uncontrollable in the midst of public space. Graffiti implicitly declared metaphorical ownership wherever it desired and in the face of property owners whose own system of rules was being rendered impotent. It is no wonder, then, that graffiti in Angelstown quickly became an issue in the larger battle for control of public spaces. Indeed, while I was doing research, graffiti surfaced during city council meetings. Council members discussed graffiti resistant paints, youth agencies that might be used to remove graffiti, and, finally, passed an ordinance that compelled, among other things, property owners to clean up graffiti on their premises.

**graffiti, street gangs, and the public sphere**

Recent discussions of the notion of the public sphere provide a theoretical framework that yields a wealth of insights into graffiti and street gangs. The notion of the public sphere was richly conceived by Jürgen Habermas in such works as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society and Lifeworld System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (volume 2 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*). Despite the value of this concept, however, Habermas’s specific model of the public sphere raises considerable doubts. Stanley Aronowitz, for instance, argues that because Habermas’s model is dependent on rationality as a “presupposition of public communication,” the public sphere is understood as a “restricted space” rather than a participatory one. Aronowitz clarifies how Habermas’s model asks the citizenry to transcend their material conditions as well as their emotional states and to become like Habermas himself, someone who has undergone the “rigorous training of scientific and cultural intellectuals. For only those individuals who have succeeded in screening out the distorted information emanating from the electronic media, politicians, and the turmoil of everyday life are qualified to participate in social rule.”

This notion of the public sphere as restricted space is of major importance when considering street gangs and their graffiti. Within a restricted public sphere, not even contesting parties represent the entire realm of contestation that cycles throughout a society. The breadth and depth of contestation does not become aired partly because not all the varied voices have been certified, sometimes literally, to speak in such a public sphere. Without such voice, the ability to have some say over social rule becomes difficult, and this situation compels both individuals and groups to develop a series of, as de Certeau suggested, tactics. For de Certeau, a tactic is mobile; it makes use of the cracks that appear within the “surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. . . . It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse, . . . an art of the weak.” In short, de Certeau’s interest in quotidian practices acknowledged the power to act in everyone, regardless of his or her place in the hierarchy and despite the fact that tactical actions are always framed by the dominant power. From the perspective of de Certeau, street-gang graffiti in Angelstown was a particularly interesting tactic.

It was as a tactical action, then, that street-gang graffiti claimed metaphorical ownership (or, to use one of the street terms, “rulership”) over public spaces.
In other words, when graffiti declared ownership of a particular neighborhood by a particular street gang, that ownership functioned as part of a “shadow” system that had no legitimacy inside the system world. Since ownership in the system world was certified during the exchange of cash, the ownership that graffiti declared was, in comparison, metaphorical, or what might be called a tactical response to the system world. In this sense, street-gang graffiti and its inherent bravado and the willingness to back up that bravado with force were substitutes for cash, its metaphor so to speak—but a metaphor that individuals willingly spilled blood for.

Interestingly, a “shadow” system, as the metaphor implies, depends on themes and models provided by and circulating through the system world. Using the metaphor heuristically, which is how all metaphors work, one might say the following: the system world is the “substance” that casts the shadow, a shadow that has the shape but is not equivalent to the system itself. The result is that the shadow system mimics the system world through the many appropriations and improvisations upon the system world’s material. One example of mimicry was that most street gangs that I knew preferred to label themselves as “organizations,” and I remember members of the Vicelords pointing proudly to the buildings owned by Vicelord chapters in Chicago as proof of their organizational status. At any rate, mimicry rarely wishes to be exact, for its own artful dodges or tactics maintain a difference that the shadow system celebrates as its identity, its own space sheltering and nourishing its guerrilla life against a public sphere that is, as Aronowitz said, “exclusionary”—or at least perceived to be exclusionary.”

The more Dan Anderson and I looked at street-gang graffiti, the more we were convinced that it was not only a tactic of action (metaphorical ownership) but also a tactic of language. By “tactics of language,” I mean that graffiti was an important narrative “tactic” available to gang members for the public expression of their subjectivities, subjectivities that were constantly being suppressed by the public sphere. Indeed, if my earlier descriptions of street-gang graffiti relied heavily on linguistic terms such as “syntax” and “lexicon,” it was to prepare the foundation for describing graffiti as a special kind of narrative genre whose deeper meanings were not explicit but which rested on a large sub-stratum of related but private oral and written texts. In short, graffiti was the condensed narrative of more subterranean narratives and the only one to enter broad public spaces. (A caveat: Granted, graffiti as a genre allowed for only a limited range of subjective thought to be communicated, and so it cannot be compared to more flexible and powerful genres that are synonymous with subjectivity; but this comparison of genres misses the point. Graffiti, as I have said, was all about passion-ate utterances of respect and disrespect. As it was so often described to us, graffiti was an expression of “heart,” a potent street term that conveyed one’s courage and love, indeed, one’s identity with a particular street gang. As a genre, then, it delivered the turmoil of these subjective feelings in a method, style, and content that functioned outside the communicative and economic rules of the public sphere, and so graffiti was suppressed. This is the rather narrow but precise understanding that I claim when describing graffiti as gang members’ subjectivity, or “heart,” made public.)

In order to clarify the point that the Angelstown graffiti might be interpreted as condensed, public narratives whose roots reached into subterranean texts consisting of more elaborated, private narratives that circulated through the shadow system of street gangs, I will turn to the fact that the term “nation” appeared in both kinds of narratives. The term “nation” or its abbreviation “N,” as in ALKN (Almighty Latin King Nation), was commonly written out in graffiti of Angelstown. Moreover, I have already explained how major gangs referred to themselves as nations or organizations as in the Insane Gangster Satan’s Disciples Nation (also known as Spanish Disciples) and the Maniac Latin Disciples Nation. It should be no surprise, then, that terms such as “nation,” “empire,” and “organization” were part of the daily talk and the official written documents that circulated among gang members. To make my point, I take the following example from a letter authored by a gang leader and widely dispersed to gang members in other chapters of the same gang: “All sections of our Nation must come together to form this structure of power, to put all minds, hearts, and dedication to help this organization structure grow stronger.” And notice the word “empire” and continuing emphasis upon solidarity in related documents: “My brothers, this is just the beginning of our Empire. This is a new era of the 90’s, which we shall improve with time, to become a great organized power. That we will use to build a predominant (having superior strength, influence, or authority) Empire.” (All quotations from street-gang documents, their spelling, syntax, and so on, are exact.)

Why should the trope or topos of nationhood hold such a special place in the shadow system of street gangs? In my interpretive scheme, the topos of nationhood provided the shadow system one more way to mimic the system world. But why should the same trope be so important for both the overarching nation as well as the many gang nations in its confines? What sort of need does this shared trope satisfy? What sorts of imaginations does it rhetorically conjure? An illuminating set of essays collected in Nation and Narration (1991, edited by Homi Bhabha) makes a case for the discursive construction of nationhood among nation states of the system world. (It would seem ironic and significant that insights derived from such studies can be applied also to the construction
of nationhood in the shadow system, but this, indeed, is one of my assumptions. A shared perspective of these authors is that authority busily composes "its powerful image" by constructing such "national objects of knowledge" as "Tradition, People, the Reason of State, High Culture," and so on and represents these as holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity." Ernest Renan in 1882 discussed the strategy that such narratives might take:

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions for being a people. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, and in proportion to the ill that one has suffered.

It may be that the topos of nationhood incorporates something of Renan’s strategy wherever it is found. At any rate, one can hear it fully inherited in a street-gang document describing the annual picnic honoring the birthday of the gang’s founder, their “Beloved King,” as if the distances of time, culture, and socioeconomic context could not separate Renan’s heroic, historical Europe from that of an American street gang in the 1990s:

On this day we shall all give thanks to our Beloved King, the day in which the heavens had sent Him down among us, to bring us together as a family.

This very Special Day is when all of our family comes together, to show the Honor, Love, Respect, and Greatfulness, we all have for the Beloved King. Having Him among us is a blessing, because it’s Him who loved us enough to show this Nation the way to a key, which opens the door to Life.

He never gave up the struggle or hopes of this Nation to become as great as it is now. Holding on was a must, and holding on He has did, never letting the Family fall.

As we, given Him the power and strength, He in return gave us the knowledge and understanding to believe in who and what we can become. The one powerful Nation of an Organization, and a Great Loving Family of Sisters and Brothers.

The topos of nationhood—perhaps, in whatever context it should appear—would seem to be, at best, subtly coercive, for its task is to have disparate, individual wills voluntarily meld themselves into a community (brotherhood/sisterhood). At worst, for instance, in a totalitarian state, the coercion is far more blatant. At any rate, in the enumeration of nostalgic legends, heroes, and a common lineage, of shared sorrows, sacrifices, cultural topos, institutions, language, rituals, honor, and so on, the past is constructed as a kind of animus that continues to—or ought to—inspire the present and make it virtuous long into the future. In short, a dedicated community—a “Loving Family of Sisters and Brothers”—can span the continuum of time and transcend the forces of decay, and it is this dedication that the topos of nationhood tries to instill in the very depths of the individual will as an identification that is more than merely persuasive. If the topos of nationhood can evoke such dedication, then the human longing for continuity, cohesion, stability, and power becomes satisfied, and in this forming of an enduring community we abate our loneliness and our fear of chaos so that even death, particularly in the case of war, can be reinterpreted as sacrifice. It is in these ways and others that the topos of nationhood attempts to create a kind of single photograph of countless people that is passed around as everyone’s reality.

At some point, however, if the topos of nationhood should cease to inspire dedication, then the many fault lines hidden below its coercive efforts begin to stir. Some of the most disturbing fault lines would be those invented by street gangs: declarations of independent nationhood via rival geographies, laws, traditions, and systems of authority in the very belly of the overarching nation. In making such declarations, the shadow system mimics or turns itself into a metaphor of the system world, and in that mimicry the system world sees the chaos that its vencer of continuity, cohesion, stability, and power were meant to seal.

The irony is that in having pursued the topos of nationhood, the system world set the stage for its own attempted assassination. For the topos of culture are available to everyone, and during those times when the rhetoric of the overarching nation fails to inspire some of its citizenry with the mystique of solidarity, the rhetoric of a gang nation is ready to work out its version of the same magic as one response to the increasing organizational status of rival gang nations. It is at these moments that the system world becomes terrified. One of our gang-member friends captured it this way when talking to Dan. Interest-
ingly, our friend described the picnic/celebration day of his gang, a gang linked to but not the same as the one whose documents I quoted from earlier. (Incidentally, all the major gangs that I know have their picnic days, and these moments seem to be a show of strength when the fault lines hiding below the overarching nation become quite public.) Our friend spoke of 2,000 of his brothers and sisters wearing “a sea of baby blue and black” at a state-wide gathering. The police had the area circled but kept their distance, knowing they were outnumbered. Meanwhile, the gang members and their families ate free food and played games provided by the leadership. From the perspective of the lifeworld of the gang members, the scene was “righteous” in so far as it asserted a defiant and just empowerment of their nation over and against the system world’s more bankrupt authority.

I have been describing marginalized groups in American culture as fault lines. I have also described how the topos of nationhood has been appropriated by street gangs and others as a kind of mimicry of the overarching nation, and, thus, how the overarching nation finds its very nationhood threatened by independent systems of authority, laws, traditions, and even geographies and weaponry. However, such a view of gang nationhood appears to be mostly oppositional, as if a shadow system had specifically emerged to oppose the system world. Such a view, I believe, is misleading for two reasons. First, gang nationhood in the Chicago area, it seems to me, was a formidable response to the threats posed by rival gangs who had been amassing over time their own organizational status. In short, it was largely within a system of gang rivalry—rather, than a way to defy the overarching nation—that street gangs imagined their nationhood. This vision of nationhood as rivalry was particularly true for young gang members, who, in my view, were politically self-conscious only intermittently. However, the gaining of a kind of political self-consciousness might occur through the experience of jail. For some, the experience of jail could function as a kind of rite of passage in which one could get, as one gang member told me, “wisdom.” “Wisdom” and “360 degrees of enlightenment,” which was a concept that circulated through at least two gangs, might lead to seeing one’s gang nation as specifically opposed to the overarching nation. To experience imprisonment was to experience the oppressions of society in their most concentrated form. In addition, jail provided one the opportunity to hear the politically sophisticated lore that had been written over the years by the more mature brothers from one’s gang. (I have already quoted from some of this lore.) In short, I am trying to avoid the suggestion that all gang members saw their nationhood as explicitly opposing the overarching nation. Second, and more significant, is the fact that opposition is rarely whole and seamless, and thus char-

acterizing street gangs and others as necessarily and defiantly opposed to the overarching nation misses important subtleties. The term of choice in this text has been “appropriation,” more so than “opposition.” For instance, in contexts of power differences, “opposition” suggests only resistance and its strategies, whereas the term “appropriation” suggests a use of “tactics,” in de Certeau’s sense, as well as envy felt by the less powerful toward the more powerful. In short, mixed into the oppositional soup concocted by the shadow system of gangs were degrees of envy and desire of the system world. It is from such an understanding that one can make sense of how being a policeman or a Marine or, I have no doubt, fighting in a war defending the United States, might be seen as desirable occupations and actions despite the fact that one’s gang nationhood expressed implicit opposition to the overarching nation.

Or take the fact that at least one gang saw its nationhood largely, although not entirely, in the context of improving its efficiency in organized crime, and, thus, urged its members to get an education. I quote from official documents again:

The gangbanging, getting locked up, or getting high on hard drugs, isn’t the way anymore. Education is the key to our success, in every way. All organizations have become powerful with this key to knowledge. Now it’s time for us to reach out and take hold of this key, that will open all doors to give opportunities to the Organization as well as yourself.

What we are trying to accomplish, they call it organized crime. There will be those that will try to stop us …

These examples suggest that in the construction of gang nations in Angelstown the topos of nationhood seemed to have functioned with different ends in mind. For instance, it functioned rhetorically by mobilizing the rhetoric of menace, strength, and independence for at least two audiences, other gangs and the overarching nation. But it also mobilized the rhetoric of solidarity and status for a third audience, the gang’s own membership. Similar rhetorical conjurings are evoked, for all practical purposes, by nations of the system world. In short, it was as if the shadow system, during its mimicry of the system world, had found the topos of nationhood and in so doing fashioned for itself a kind of hyperbolic pose that could be aimed at three audiences.

Other important topos cycled through the names that gangs had chosen for themselves. For instance, among the Vicelords and the Almighty Latin King Nation, images of royalty were evoked in the very names. Members were either
“lords” or “kings,” and, at least among the Latin Kings, female members were called “queens.” In some of the gangs, the imagery of royalty was even institutionalized so that in one gang two of the highest offices were titled King of the Nation and Prince of the Nation, and, in another gang, Inca and Cacique (the first term references a ruler or member of the ruling family from the preconquest Incan empire, and the second term is a Spanish word meaning “local political boss” or headman of an Indian people). In addition, we have already seen the leader of one gang addressed as the “Beloved King.” What is important to remember in all this, however, is that the topos of royalty existed alongside another organizational structure, that of a corporation, and this latter topos was consistent with how gangs thought of themselves as organizations and nations. This interchangeability of the corporate model with the courtly suggests that both topos were not contradictory but simultaneously served the same end, which I took to be a rupturing of the relative powerlessness of one’s social conditions. One gang phrased it this way: “We . . . have the blood of royalty in our veins. We are the guiding light of our people, place wisdom in our minds, love in our hearts and fortitude to withstand the trials of time. . . . Our ultimate goal, the awakening of our people to their oppressed state, that [the gang’s symbol] may lift our heritage to its rightful place among the thrones of Kings and Queens.”

If gangs used numerous topos to construct their power (the topos of royalty and its romanticized vision of the past alongside the topos of nationhood and corporation “hood” and their romanticized visions of the modern), there remains an important evocation that must be considered, that of madness, disorder, and irrationality. Returning, again, to the very names of some of the prominent gangs in Angelstown—The Insane Gangster Satan’s Disciples Nation, The Insane Deuce Nation, The Maniac Latin Disciples Nation—it is clear that the theme of madness and disorder played a special role. Not only did the names of gangs rely heavily on this theme, but individual members sometimes adopted its imagery in naming themselves. The acquisition of street names, as Dan and I were told several times, typically had something to do with a personal characteristic that was noticeable to others. For instance, one of our friends came to be called “Draggin’,” a name that he did not like because it suggested how long he had flirted with joining a gang without making a commitment. “Rico,” whom I talked to inside and outside of jail, got his name by being of Puerto Rican descent, and he began to call me “Smiley.” Not even the majority of names were associated with madness and disorder, but those that were—and here’s a small selection: “Psycho,” “Loco,” “Mental 2,” “King Sinis—

"topos"—were significant, for these names, in my interpretive scheme, were important elements in an overall topos of madness/disorder that, along with the other topos already discussed, helped to construct gang power. Moreover, the topos of madness/disorder was not limited to the Latino gangs of the Chicago area. In California, Sanyika Shakur, for instance, described his own gang name as “Monster,” described many similar names for other gang members, and talked often of cultivating a “mad-dog stare” to frighten potential enemies. The topos of madness/disorder in all these instances helped to project unpredictable, menacing violence. Such a projection could protect oneself or one’s gang from future threat. The topos of madness/disorder helped to create a “rep” that no one wanted to “mess with”; hence, this topos was integral to the “pose” and the ideology of violence described in the preceding chapter. In mobilizing this system, one acquired respect under conditions of little or no respect, and such power was to be envied, for in making others afraid, one had acquired a kind of freedom from challengers.

But there is more behind the topos of madness/disorder that can be uncovered. In our culture, the topos of madness/disorder is paired to the topos of rationality/order. They form a kind of Janus figure. Or they might be called inseparable twins since birth. Pursuing this twin birth, of course, is a formidable endeavor. It would entail spinning off into the depths of the many histories of many cultures where we might find versions of Apollonian and Dionysian imagery very much in place. In Madness and Civilization, however, Foucault has limited himself to the modern world and traced the emergence of a “caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason’s subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point.” For Foucault, only a recent “caesura” separates the two topos, but, over time, madness had no truth to tell—or so it came to be seen. Madness became confined to the asylum, in part, because much of European society during the eighteenth century began to evolve a new social order based on rational principles. The keepers of such a social order saw themselves as men of good sense and shrinmed a bourgeois morality that regarded laziness, crime, poverty, and unreason as differences to be eradicated. In ceasing to be the “sign of another world,” madness lost its ancient value as a kind of irruptive truth-telling except in those curious and special instances where it reappeared in such figures as Nietzsche, Van Gogh, Artaud, and so on.

Of course, what Foucault little appreciates is the possibility that the evolution of psychiatry also represents the good intentions of curing a special form of human pain. By not appreciating this possibility, his analysis is less complex
forces, perhaps, my earlier claim about counterdiscourses embodying resistance and envy simultaneously. My central point, however, is that the street gangs of Angelstown, even in their marginalization are part of a continuum, a thought system, if you will, that is more than just the history of gangs in the United States. In their appropriation of a variety of topoi, gangs represent a contemporary incarnation of thought systems ingrained in the society at large. The reaction against the topoi of madness/disorder, particularly when it becomes embodied in gang-related shootings, is that it represents both a threat to life as well as a withering away of the social controls that shore up the strongholds of the system world. Tracking such reactions to graffiti and gangs in the context of Angelstown is my next project.

limits of the public sphere

Nancy Fraser wants to believe that a subaltern counterpublic has emancipatory potential. She puts it this way:

I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly antidemocratic and antilegitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization. Still, insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, a good thing in stratified societies.\

In so far as a counterpublic of this sort represents an oppositional interpretation to the status quo and its concentration of power, Fraser would hope that here lies the fertile ground for the emergence of a dialectic between the subordinated world and the system world. Even though she is careful not to romanticize such counterpublics, she finds value in the ways in which these counterpublics act as public spheres bubbling up through the layers of a stratified society with, perhaps, a lack of “decorum.” It is through such means that they may articulate and act out their conditions of subordination in order to secure greater participatory privileges and dissolve the pernicious concept of a comprehensive public sphere.
I am not certain that Fraser and others would allow street gangs to be called a subaltern counterpublic. Indeed, maybe here is the test case, a most difficult one, for a Fraser-like interpretation of the public sphere. In short, at what point do well intentioned theorists defend and honor a subaltern group as a legitimate “counterpublic,” and at what point does a group become labeled criminal and lose almost all participatory privileges? Or the problem might be phrased this way: How expansive can any participatory democracy be when, lying at the farthest limits of its embrace, there exists criminality that is, at least, partially determined by the same socioeconomic and power differences that give rise to subaltern counterpubrics? For instance, I have described gang graffiti as “condensed narratives” that emerge from a “shadow system” to occupy public spaces. Graffiti is the evidence of an intense need to acquire power and voice. From this perspective, then, gang graffiti might be considered part of the public evidence of a larger subaltern counterpublic formed as one response to socioeconomic disparities. Graffiti becomes criminal, however, because it functions outside the economic and message-making rules of the system world. Its illegality, of course, is not particularly serious, but the shadow system from which it emerges, the subaltern counterpublic, so to speak, is, in the eyes of most people, seriously illegal when it entails killings and drug dealing.

For the most part, the public sphere—Fraser’s “actually existing democracy”—in Angelstown is fundamentally closed to gang graffiti writers and street gangs. As evidence, I offer a series of events that occurred between the summer of 1990 and early fall 1992 while Edmund and I were conducting intermittent fieldwork. On 4 June 1990, a Black member of one of Angelstown’s primarily Latino street gangs was shot and died a day later. Two other members were shot during the episode. A few days after the shooting, a street ceremony was improvised by gang members who had lost their “brother.” The ceremony was staged at the location where their comrade had fallen. The ceremony included flowers that were the same colors as the gang’s, large memorial candles, flower-covered crosses, and a placard with a religious saying as well as the street names of other gang members. The local newspaper reported the event, interviewed some of the participants, and took a picture showing about four gang members crouched before the shrine and wearing “hoodies” (street term for sweat-shirts with hoods) that helped to cover their faces. Many of the gang members were clearly throwing down (disrespecting) the hand sign of the rival gang responsible for the shooting. The picture and article appeared on the newspaper’s front page on 7 June.

The newspaper received numerous complaints, and letters were published in the “Letters to the Editor” section. One letter was from the departing presi-
... As Christians, the juxtaposition of a "memorial"—complete with crosses, flowers, candles, and references to prayers and God—with the gang members and all they stand for, including the death threat, amounts to blasphemy. While it is not the Gazette which planned the "memorial," to cover it in this manner shows tremendous insensitivity to Christian believers of all denominations.

It is indeed unfortunate that this young man and others have fallen prey to gang violence, but we do not condone the representation of this teen as a martyr of gang warfare. The "colors" that gangs live by are also the colors that they kill and die by.

May it not be that another human being (innocent or otherwise) dies because the Gazette has chosen to glamorize, and thus promote, participation in street gangs. If so, may it forever be on your conscience.

A variety of letters before, after, and much later conveyed a sense of dismay concerning street gangs and a general lack of awareness about the natures of gangs. For instance, the following letter suggests that what the prior writers feared concerning the newspaper's role in promoting the death threats of one gang actually came to pass. The connection, however, is highly suspect since the writer seems to be unaware that the gang rivalry in Angelstel at that time was not primarily between Blacks and Latinos but, in fact, between two primarily Latino gangs (the Latin Kings and the Insane Deuces). Moreover, it is not even certain which gang the accused men belonged to or if they were, indeed, even gang members. The letter is lightly edited in order to convey its central points more efficiently:

I read an article in the Gazette on June 7 about a young black man killed by two Hispanic men, members of a rival street gang, on June 4.

... The next day, a group of black men, members of a street gang, came to the Century Lane neighborhood, romping the street at night and terrorizing the neighborhood. The new screen door to my house was destroyed.

I am not a member of a gang, I am not Mexican or Puerto Rican, and I do not have any business with them. I would like to know why I have been included in their hate. Why do gang members destroy property of innocent people?

If someone can explain this to me, I am ready to listen.

On June 20, the newspaper published an editorial the following apology in response to the complaints that had been received. I have edited the essay in order to sharpen its main points.

... We strive continually neither to sensationalize nor underplay the news we report.

Occasionally, however, we stumble. That, in essence, is what happened June 7, when we published a front-page article about a make-shift roadside service conducted in memory of youth gunned down in an apparent gang-related attack.

The problem was not so much the written account—a narrative we hoped would bring home the senselessness of the loss of life it connoted—as it was the photo, containing both gang "colors" and symbols, which accompanied it.

... Since our error went public, our entire news staff has sat down with the police, and we have reviewed and given further definition to our gang-coverage guidelines.

In the process, we have learned just how much both we and, we suspect, many of you didn't know about street gangs and the many pitfalls into which any of us unwittingly can fall.

We'd be willing to bet, for instance, that few law-abiding citizens are aware that such commonplace terms as "people" and "folks" are gang terms that bear no relationship to the definitions most of us associate with those words.

... We are better prepared, now, and we will continue to endeavor not to do anything that can be construed as either glorifying or specifically recognizing any gang.

... Gang activity is a problem for all of us, and it will take all of us working together to minimize, if not eradicate completely, this blight upon our own home turf.

"All of us," of course, includes the mayor, the City Council, the police, the courts, the schools, the churches, groups like Mothers Against Gangs, every other community organization, parents, every law-abiding citizen and this newspaper.
During the next year, numerous articles, editorials, and letters to the editor concerning street gangs were published in the newspaper. One particular editorial published thirteen months (July 1993) after the above editorial stands out because of how it defends the social order. My editing eliminates only important identifying markers.

**Park District Sends Gangs Good Message**

An ounce of prevention, as Ben Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" reminded more than two centuries ago, truly is often worth a pound of cure.

Thus, . . . Park District Board recently tried to give area park goers their own ounce of prevention, by means of a new set of policies designed to ban gang activity at all of its family recreation areas.

To be sure, parks, trails and other facilities under the district control generally are not overrun by members of street gangs.

Neither are Park Board members and district administrators fool-hardy enough to think that mere words on a paper are going to put a stop to those few incidents of gang activity, begging by street people and other potential nuisances which do occasionally occur.

Those words do, however, strengthen the hand of park district police—with the full weight of the law behind them—to physically remove so-called "undesirables" in the scattered instances where they do cause problems.

**New rules ban gang colors, insignia, signs**

Primarily, the new security rules prohibit all who are wearing known gang colors, emblems and insignia, or who attempt to communicate with gang-related hand signs, from entering and loitering at any park district property.

This is nothing particularly new in what park district police have long sought to accomplish.

However, with so much negative feeling seemingly so rampant about the overall status of the social order these days, it is good to see the district's trustees formally codify what long has been standard practice.

The next step, of course, is to ensure that these new official policies translate into the same kind of aggressive enforcement effort that thus far has marked the first weeks of operation of the park district's beautiful . . . Family Aquatic Center at Howell Place and Montgomery Road in Angelstown.

Indeed, a fine control and enforcement effort there has kept the facility free of incident and helped ensure it remains the inviting family recreation center it was designed to be.

It also, of course—as do the newly passed anti-gang policies—send a loud and clear message to society's less-desirable elements that this is indeed our community, and they are not welcome.

That's a good message to send.

During this same year, the newspaper reported disagreements between the newly hired police chief and the mayor. In time, the police chief lost the confidence of the mayor and city council and eventually resigned. The mayor was paraphrased as saying that the police chief had come under criticism for not effectively attacking the "city's gang crime problem" and for not addressing the "morale problems within the police ranks." By August 1993, a new police chief had been chosen, and by early September the new chief had installed a "zero-tolerance" crackdown on gang violence. One measure raised the number of officers assigned to "full-time gang patrol" from eight to twenty-five. This new unit represented "about one-sixth the department's combined patrol officers and investigators." Other measures included special tactics such as "street-reclaiming neighborhood sweeps" and the promise "to seek aggressive prosecution of gang members accused of crimes—and stiffer sentences for those who are convicted." These measures and others were seen as fulfilling some of the pledges made by the new police chief, pledges that were meant to appease a very nervous city council whose agitated constituencies, concerned about crime and street gangs, had already influenced recent elections.

What, if anything, does this selection of newspaper articles spanning more than a year's time provide? I suggest that it provides one kind of window onto the public sphere, but the view through this window is of dramatic events whose depths remain hidden. Whereas real people lived out these events with anger, fear, sorrow, dismay, and so on, the newspaper—trapped by advertising revenues, deadlines, economic pressures, the need to respect conventional morality, and who knows what else—never entered the emotional turbulence that coursed through a variety of opposing voices, including those of gang members. The result is washed-out life and a bleaching-out of the potential of a participatory public sphere. If the public sphere is that "theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk," the Ge-
emotional frameworks and social conditions than from pictures in the *Gazette*. It is also doubtful that the *Gazette* conveyed a significant death threat that the rival gang didn’t already know about. The Deuces, for instance, did not need a newspaper to tell them that the Kings were disrespecting them. Any argument that maintains that the media glorifies, gives credibility to, or encourages the social nastiness that they report on—in short, that some individuals imitate the news, and some do—has to coexist with the equally or more powerful argument that consumers of the media also interpret, discard, ignore, or remain significantly unaware of whatever spectacles the media may present. The bridge that runs between the media and individual consciousness is full of obstacles and detours so that public consciousness remains multiple. Indeed, some of its variations perversely resist the shapings that power of any kind would like to fabricate.

But is it not a tedious and unfair project to judge as false or irrelevant the arguments belonging to people one disagrees with, particularly if this means failing to understand the emotional frameworks that are attempting to speak through the arguments? From this perspective, arguments cannot be lightly discarded as illogical or groundless. Indeed, they are more like indirect pathways through emotional life, and they can be traversed so that they no longer hide what needs to be heard. In this sense, the argumentative talk that comprises the public sphere and from which policy making emerges is less an arena of rationality than an arena of obscured fears. At any rate, in my view, the arguments made in the letters to the editor and the editorial apology can be traversed so as to reveal important aspects of how real public spheres work. For instance, the funeral occurred in a small and already deeply concerned, even perplexed, community, for the city had never experienced frequent street-gang slayings. The letters and apology, then, seemed to reflect a kind of emotional overload neatly captured in the July 1991 editorial: “so much negative feeling seemingly so rampant about the overall status of the social order these days.” And, as if to retrieve some semblance of social order, the same editorial evoked numerous stable icons: for instance, a founding father of American tradition, Ben Franklin, and his “an ounce of prevention... is often worth a pound of cure”; the hallowedness of family; and the idea of a community as cordoned-off from “nuisances” and “less-desirable elements.” These evocations of stable order helped to justify the enforcement policies of the park district. The irony, however, was that in protecting public property in the name of the status quo, the property no longer seemed so public. In short, the maintenance of social order is also the maintenance of exclusion. In these letters and editorials, the public—and by extension the public sphere—remained exclusive because at the limits of any
what in the complexity of city life but not as completely as one might like: The city’s policies nourished in their cores cancerous fears that were never eradicated and thus consistently prevented other policies from emerging, and because of this incomplete understanding of what was happening inside its social body, the city could not realize the cure that it desired. What specific policy might have worked? I am approaching quicksand on this one, but if I were to maintain the faintest of hopes in broad public discourse, and I doubt that I do, I would argue for pushing further back the fence line electrified by fear by encouraging gang leaders and membership to participate in public forums with majoritarian society, by insisting on careful documentation of the assumptions and beliefs of all parties so that they could be later deconstructed, and by insisting that these forums move toward concrete truces, programs, and proposals. Such an approach, I realize, tumbles back into the optimism of Fraser and the more recent writings of Habermas.\textsuperscript{39} In the Angels’ Town of 1990 and 1991, such an approach would have been outrageous. The approach then and continuing through 1996 has been the unremitting enforcement of powerlessness upon those whose actions speak of a need for power. The assumption behind this approach, of course, has been to not recognize the maverick or to give him/her voice because in doing so maverickness itself will be encouraged across the entire social body until all icons of stability collapse. Better to stamp it out until it is extinguished.

\textit{Conclusion}

Here at the end of this chapter I encounter, it seems to me, one of the central conundrums of critical ethnography. The approach taken by the city, that of unremitting enforcement, offered itself as the only “real” solution. Other solutions run the danger of appearing anemic, eccentric, or groundless. For instance, my reading of street-gang graffiti through the lenses of linguistic metaphors (lexicon, syntax, condensed narratives of subjectivity) runs violently counter to any “commonsense” understanding grounded in the property rights of law-abiding citizenry. I also realize that my interpretations of street-gang culture butt heads with a “commonsense” understanding of criminality. My analyses derive from and argue for a big-picture version of social justice. In this picture, one can all too easily afford generosity and compassion. But there is also a more immediate picture, a local picture, and when we find ourselves in it, we often quickly discard the big one, for the local is urgent and pressing. It squeezes us painfully, annoyingly, and it disciplines us into a kind of honesty concerning the limitations of ourselves and others. From its perspective, the big picture looks like a waste of imaginary labyrinths, a sense of social justice that

- defined public lies a fence line of fear electrified by a need for self-preservation. The boundaries of the fence line remain murky because public liberalism may espouse a code of tolerance whereas public conservatism may espouse less tolerant measures. Wherever the fence line lies, however, many who are excluded are magnetized to it, for in testing it one derives power, a power that is otherwise ensconced among those who maintain or abide by the social order. Power derived from testing the fence line might be called reversed power. Hence, those who test may be represented in the public sphere as wild-eyed mavericks toppling the social order, and the self-representations devised by the excluded, as I have suggested among street gangs, oftentimes hyperbolize the maverick label through the topoi of nationhood and madness/disorder in order to test with even more power the very fears that limit the public sphere.

What is important to remember is that the public sphere of modern stratified societies, whether imagined as impossibly comprehensive and bourgeois or imagined as sets of feisty subaltern counterpublics with their own argumentative styles and ways of being, is constrained by whatever becomes its collective fear. Locate the anxiety of a public sphere, and one will have located the limit for engaging in rational discourse and, hence, for constructing a participatory democracy. In this sense, a public sphere cannot “think” beyond what terrifies it. And certainly it is the very stratification of society itself that fosters the emergence of systemic fears, for fears tend to consolidate around divisions and differences and to make these more “real” than what might otherwise be the case. Fear in these instances, then, becomes a kind of touchstone, deriving substance from vagueness, invisibly infecting the possibilities of policy making, and shaping, also invisibly, much of the style and substance of resistance. From all this, I am left with two conclusions. First, the articulation of virtues that occurred in the pages of the \textit{Gazette} were a kind of circling of the wagons by which Angelston’s “law-abiding citizenry” began unconsciously to consolidate communal fears in the guise of virtues and thereby passed a flurry of anti-graffiti ordinances and police actions claiming “zero-tolerance” of gang. Second, in articulating those virtues, the nonvirtues were simultaneously, if sometimes implicitly, articulated. Thus, on the one hand, those in power could now more easily recognize (and sometimes over-recognize) what they hoped to prevent; and, on the other hand, those most deeply alienated from majoritarian power could now more easily mobilize the styles and substance of hyperbolic resistance. Did any of the new city policies work? Given the fact that gang-related homicides increased in the following years, one might say that the policies did not, but such a reply is probably too much of a generalization. What I am left with instead is a metaphorical interpretation that is grounded some-
has never been and never will be. Angelstown’s experience with graffiti and street-gangs is a powerful example of a local picture shrinking any possibility of a bigger picture of social justice. Are there ways to dodge the conundrum? Can one argue critically for a big picture of social justice and simultaneously find solutions that make sense from the perspective of the local? I think so. The rhetorical trick might be to find insights and solutions that are not inconsistent with the reigning ideology but whose implementation has the slow-moving power to alter insidiously the existing institutions and ideologies that constitute the local. The solution presented in the prior paragraph lacks the necessary subtlety, perhaps, and yet rhetorical invention must begin somewhere.