"In and Out"
Segmentary gang politics in Los Angeles

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1. Introduction

While still in Finland I read a brief interview in Helsingin Sanomat, the major newspaper in Finland, of a visiting American criminologist who plainly stated that there are no gangs in the United States. This was confusing, while simultaneously confirmed the doubts I was faced with when doing preliminary research on gangs in Los Angeles.

California, the eighth largest economy in the world, was reportedly the home of a multitude of gangs controlling neighborhoods and waging violent wars against each other, the fatality of which became apparent as I browsed the Homicide Report of Los Angeles Times. What had struck me the most in all the material was the precarious and ambivalent status of the people involved in these neighborhood-based groups which seemed to exist economically, socially, and politically quite indifferent to their surroundings. I was dismayed by the prevalence of violence, but as a student of cultural anthropology intrigued by this supposed divide between the so-called great society and the world of gangs I had become vaguely acquainted with in documentaries, films, and music, and which was now confirmed by the academic literature I could get my hands on.

But despite all this opposing evidence Finland is a long way from Los Angeles, California, and the big question had once again resurfaced: Were gangs just a media hype, a self-perpetuating teenage fad gone awry, reified and shaped into a marketable shock horror story, and developed into a self-serving academic cottage industry? With my plane tickets already booked, I was disheartened by the unambiguous statement in the interview. I was making a veritable clown of myself. Well, if nothing else, the weather was supposed to be great.

Once in L.A. my doubts vanished into thin air. "It doesn't really take a genius to evaluate the situation," as Noel, a former gang member put it. What also became apparent as I randomly ran into the hip, the well-off, and the white in the city is that you can live your life in Los Angeles and remain quite oblivious of gangs. Divisions in terms of ethnicity, class, and space in the City of Angels surpassed all my expectations, as did the pervasiveness of moral individualism which effortlessly vitiates the historical weight of these divisions. The aforementioned divide, the difference, the great fetishism of anthropology, was surely there, apparent on a very concrete level of experience, although

* (http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/homicidereport/)
the tattoo claiming “Only the Strong Survive” on the neck of an old gangster sitting on a curb and the “I Love Me” license plate of a Hummer gliding in Melrose Boulevard seemed to me proclamations of the same reality, just from the opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum.

The phrase “in and out” was used by the people I met, mostly former gang members, to denote their back and forth movement between the incarceration system and the society outside. The phrase also points to their geographical, economical, and political exclusion and the consequential differentiation of social existence and political concerns from those of the so-called conventional society. Ultimately I adopted the phrase to the title of this work because I believe “in and out” to be an apposite description of the state of in-betweenness which characterized the lives of the people, all former gang members, included in this study.

One incident which casts light on the realities depicted by the phrase served as an apt introduction to the subject for myself and suits as a finale for the ongoing one: I had just recently arrived to L.A. and was on my way to Long Beach on a Metro Blue Line when four guys, heavily tattooed and slightly strung out sat next to me. They were on their way back home, freshly released from “the system” talking away about a gang war about to go down in the facility they had just left behind. One of the guys, 43 years of age I overheard, left the company with a laconic note: “The last time I was out for six hours.”
1.1 Research questions and theoretical framework

“It is not unusual for segments of a population that do not benefit from participation in the political economy to remain outside the law (outlaws) while within the borders (even at the center) of the polity. In contemporary urban areas – say Washington D.C. for example – there are populations whose political and economic behaviour more closely approaches that of local group level societies, with high rates of male death by violence, limited leadership of small groups by valiant males, loose collectives of leaders (who sometimes co-ordinate from prison), and endemic violent competition over territories and resources. Although in the state, they are not politically of it. They live for the most part outside the bubble; the state tries to limit their disorganizing effects on the rest of society, but is surprisingly powerless to bring their behaviour under control.”


This is an exercise in political anthropology with a focus on gangs in Los Angeles. In my study I will examine gangs as a form of social and political organization in state-level society. The premise of my analysis will be markedly social. Instead of moving on from abstract notions of citizenship, I approach the question of gangs onwards from social processes on a local level and proceed to examine the ways in which these interrelations unfurl onto broader political relations. I will tackle such a vast topic through the academic literature on the subject and the material collected during my three months of fieldwork in Los Angeles in 2008.

Thus, beyond this underlying paradigm the focal subject matter of my work are the lives of young men, all former gang members, in the City of Los Angeles. Caught up and torn apart in and between the neighborhood, “the (incarceration) system”, and “the legit society,” it is the shared contradictions and experiences of the world in and between these three poles, which connect the lives of the people in this study (instead of, say a certain locality). Eventually, what I wish to accomplish through my work is a glance into the lives of the people involved, in accordance with their level of willingness (on which this whole study quite naturally rests on), and into the social phenomenon of gangs in Los Angeles.

The analysis is based on a somewhat outmoded dichotomy which runs through a lot of the literature on gangs. The modality of gangs has been recognized to differ in some crucial way from the appropriate forms of social existence in modern state-level society. This decisive difference has been framed in temporal or spatial terms, which usually intertwine
and the discussion has followed the classic anthropological dichotomies of primitive/modern and uncivilized/civilized. In 1927 in his classic study of gangs in Chicago, Frederic Trasher stated: “The broad expanse of gangland with its intricate tribal and intertribal relationships is medieval and feudal in its organization rather than modern and urban” (1963 [1927], 6). Trasher situated gangs on “the frontier” of civilization: “The advance of civilization into a wild country is heralded by marauding bands which result both from relaxed social controls and attempts to escape authority” (1963, 33-34). Mostly situated in neighborhoods occupying the least favorable position in the spatial hierarchy of the city, gangs represented for Trasher the barbaric and untamed beyond the inevitably progressing reach of the political order of the state. More recently, Susan A. Phillips has formed this observation into an outright question: “Why, after all, would reliance on a local group be necessary in a state-level society?” (1999, 84). Conceived as uncharacteristic of modern state-level societies many scholars have associated the impetus for gang formation to a lack of community control, social disorganization, or other explanation based on the idea of some crucial social or cultural dysfunction.

Although I hope to move away from such a line of reasoning the dichotomy is still present in my study. Instead of providing a patronizing evolutionary framework for the study, the dichotomy enables me to highlight the difference between de facto social organization of gangs on a local level and a certain modernist self-understanding of sociality still somewhat prevalent in the so-called First World societies. Loïc Wacquant has argued that during the postwar period advanced nation-states of the capitalist West, such as the United States, increasingly “came to think of themselves as peaceful, cohesive, and egalitarian societies – in a word, as civilized” (2008, 15. Emphasis in the original). Restructuring of social relations extended the chains of interdependence, spurred a plethora of organizations, and pacified social exchange through the monopolization of the use of public violence by a centralized bureaucratic state leading towards “the ineluctable reduction of inequalities of condition, particularly those derived from ‘ascribed’ positions and identities” (ibid.). Traditional social bonds were to be replaced by impersonal forms of identification rooted in commodity relations and abstract civil ideals, giving birth to the free enterprising individual. Instead of enduring bases of social structuring, ethnic divisions were conceived as backward and reactive, as transitory impediments in the natural course
of modern society towards universalism. Similarly poverty was constructed as a residue of past inequities or as the product of individual deficiencies. (Ibid.)

As we know, such a modernist vision has come to stand in stark contrast with reality. The promises of increasing material well-being have surely materialized for few, but have proven unsubstantial for the rest. One example of the extent of this discrepancy in the United States is the astounding fact that in 1995 the net wealth of Bill Gates alone was greater than the combined net worth of the poorest 40 percent of Americans (106 million people) (Harvey 2002 [2000], 43). Indeed, the inequalities of condition have grown more striking than ever, and continue to follow ethnic lines. As David Harvey among others has argued, the doubling of the global labor force between 1965 and 1995, the rapid growth in world trade combined with trade liberalization have bred unforeseen polarization and wide-ranging social convulsions and upheavals (ibid. 41-43). Globally such developments combined with the growing urbanization seem to have introduced, in an unforeseen scale, an urban population unincorporated into the formal economy. According to UN-Habitat's conservative estimation, by the year 2030, 5 billion of the world's total population of 8 billion will live in cities and 2 to 3 billion of these people will somehow exist outside the formal relations of production (2003). Drawing from Un-Habitat's report Mike Davis concludes that this outcast proletariat is not a labor reserve army in the nineteenth-century sense but “a mass of humanity structurally and biologically redundant to global accumulation and the corporate matrix” (2007a, 127).

More importantly for the study in hand, the so-called traditional social bonds and local identities were of course never swept away by abstract civil ideals. Even if one would understand people to live out the image of a free enterprising individual they do it from and frequently within localities, embedded in a more or less bounded set of definite social relations. This constitutes one of the basic contradictions of modern life, which even the emerging cosmopolitan gentry of our day can't quite escape. As Jonathan Friedman has argued, the global elites live in the same small social worlds as the rest of us do: “Yet they complain of the fragmentation at the bottom of society as a product of xenophobia. Thus while they have retreated upwards the people in the street who do the same thing do not fit their perspective of the world” (2005, 28).

Recently John M. Hagedorn has presented that around the world organized groups of
armed young men, disillusioned with the myths of modernity (namely the 1960s evanescent promises of social progress), are filling the voids left by weak, repressive, racist, or illegitimate states: “Demoralization today means, for large segments of the U.S. black community, as well as for many Latinos, other U.S. minorities, and much of the third world, that survival and identity are delinked from the political goals of the state and abstract notions of democracy or hopes of socialism” (2008, 59). Gangs, highly local and largely ethnically based social organizations which exist by and large outside the legitimate political economy and exercise considerable public violence as they wage war against each other on the streets, are emblematic of such developments.

I will indeed argue that due to the economic restructuring which took place in California since the early 1970s and a change in the state's policy towards the effected populations, neighborhood-based social organizations have in many places throughout Los Angeles become the primary social, economical, and political institutions for the disaffected youth (especially men). To me, insights developed in relation to non-state societies seem useful in discussing this sphere of life where social, economical, and political relations are intertwined in a way which contradicts, if not always the reality, at least the self-understanding prevalent of such relations in modern state-level society. In my analysis I follow Susan A. Phillips (1999) who has drawn from Evans-Pritchard’s classical theory of segmentary lineage systems (1940) to discuss the social organization and political interrelations of gangs in Los Angeles, although I do revise the principle of segmentation in accordance with Paul Dresch’s work (1986). Pierre Clastres’ (1974) insights about primitive or non-state societies are also visited, mainly in relation to gang tattoos, but also to accentuate a certain modality present in local group level sociality. Further, I attempt to grasp this modality and the interdynamics between segmentary groups and the state through a conceptual framework developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980).

Thus I am not exactly in the epicenter of anthropological theory here. Nor are gang studies any of the avowed pinnacles in the arguable ascent of the social sciences. Nevertheless I am precisely where I want to be in terms of a sound, socially grounded analysis of a phenomenon which is increasingly appearing in the centre of the global reconfigurations between capital, the state, and the population. For the reader struck by the rather outdated vein of analysis present in the study I will simply reiterate Bruce Kapferer’s
critique of contemporary social science:

“The social has become a vacated category. Thus, there is often a shift away from a concern with social
relational and interactive structures, as well as institutional and organizational formations. The
complexities of their internal dynamics, their structuring processes, and the forces of their effects on
human action within and beyond them have increasingly been neglected in social sciences” (2005, 1-2).

This is not a hard ball to catch by any means. The few modest propositions put forward in
this study are:

- Gangs in Los Angeles are markedly horizontal and territorialized social organizations
  through which individuals become embedded in a larger system of historically formed
  social interrelations.

- The individual and the interrelations through which he/she becomes a socially
  meaningful actor are constituted in accordance with a segmentary principle based on
  honor.

- The interrelations between gangs and the state apparatus cannot be understood outside
  this segmentary nature of gangs (there are indeed two different modalities at work
  here).

- The fact that the reproduction of social interrelationships in certain neighborhoods in
  Los Angeles today is relatively detached from the conventional social, economical, and
  political institutions supported by the state is a product of historical developments
  which mirror a more general transformation in the role of the state.

I have chosen to organize the bulk of my study into three chapters in accordance with three
intersecting but somewhat distinct settings of life. The neighborhood, the system, and the
legit society are all vague linguistic categories which recurred in everyday speech and in
the interviews I conducted and they all designate, if not a certain locale, at least a socially
distinct sphere. While the neighborhood and the system were categories usually spoken of
in the past tense, the legit society was for most of the people a prospective but uncertain
and precarious horizon. This sense of insecurity and in-betweennes is the subject matter of
the last chapter, which most faithfully depicts the realities I encountered during my
fieldwork. Ultimately, this tripartite division struck me as a meaningful way to organize my
material and should thus be treated more as a personal choice of working categories than as
an exhaustive presentation of reality “out there.”

I will begin by providing a brief note on my fieldwork and continue by presenting a historical account of the political economy of Los Angeles interlaced with the history of gangs in the city. I will also briefly present some elementary information about gangs in Los Angeles. In the second chapter I will suggest that instead of individual pathologies gangs are grounded in elemental social processes on a local level. Through these neighborhood-based institutions individuals become positioned in a vast system of social interrelations constituted in accordance with the principle of segmentation. I hope to present that to some extent inter-gang politics, embedded in a fabric of immanent social relations and based on a sense of honor, do indeed fall outside the enclosing “bubble” of Johnston and Earle in the opening quotation above. The interdynamics between segmentary gang politics and the political order of the state constitute the subject matter of the third chapter. My discussion revolves around the incarceration system and the police and later on I will approach the historical interdynamics between gangs and the state on a more abstract and general level of analysis. In the fourth chapter I will elaborate on this analysis of the interdynamics between segmentary groups and the state as I shift the attention to the retreat of the state from the social and the work of non-governmental organizations dealing with gang members. In the fifth chapter I focus on the contradictions people face when they try to move away from a life in a gang towards the so-called legit society. It should be noted that most of the themes will be developed and added on throughout the whole study and the discussions are rarely confined solely to one specific chapter. The chapters are thus intended to complement each other on multiple levels. A failure of clarity in the chosen manner of presentation is a risk I have been willing to take.

Despite the fact that the dichotomy outlined above is directly related to the existence of the modern state no thorough discussion of the subject is included in this study. A single clear-cut definition of the state or a prolonged discussion about the subject wouldn't so much lend scientific credence to the analysis as cripple it. The concept enters my analysis mainly through the theoretical framework of Deleuze and Guattari who tend to treat the State (often spelled with a capital S) as a transhistorical property of all human associations, a centralizing and universalizing repository of self-reproducing power. Thus I find it useful
for the purposes of my analysis to discuss different – undoubtedly very concrete and historical – political and administrative entities (the federal state, the local state, the city) under the single concept of the state, except where explicitly stated otherwise. In a similar vein I have not found it meaningful to come up with a universally applicable definition for politics, although I hope the breadth and ambiguity of the concept will be laid bare in the course of the study.

1.2 “No more problems” - note on fieldwork

“... Like I was telling that girl who lives down the street from me, that long as you don't start asking questions they're not gonna worry about you. But like I promised her, if I get the word I call her and tell her to stay in the house and watch TV... you know... put your drapes down, you know? Cause if you don't see nothing then you got nothing to worry about... “

- Sonny

“No more problems, no more problems”, assured Luis in his broken English accompanied by a characteristic toothy grin that I had grown familiar with in the last two months. We were eating our evening tortillas and I had asked my roommates if they knew what had happened earlier that day. Obviously this was no topic for a conversation over a meal – nor for any other time for that matter. “No more problems”, “cholos” and “loco” were the only information to be obtained from Luis or Juan who, I believe as well as I, knew the particular smile Luis would pull on his face at such moments of unease.

That afternoon I had been awakened from my bleary-eyed hangover by nine consecutive gunshots that rang out in what seemed like just outside the barred window of my room facing the street. I waited for a few minutes before I guardedly took a look outside the front door. Our landlord, who lived next door, was in our front yard on his knees going about his indefinable maintenance work as if nothing had ever happened (for the moment I firmly concluded that the old man was deaf) while the family next door were talking on the sidewalk by their car, glancing nervously every now and then over the street to the direction where the shooter had vanished. Despite being obviously shaken by the incident the young mother had her child on her arms, so I figured that whatever had happened was now over. Her father was apparently indignant about the shooting, probably because of the presence of his daughter and grandchild, and was tensely walking up and down the street. I closed the door and went inside cautious not to show too much interest in the event. This seemed
to be the preferred way to go about these matters.

We continued chewing on our tortillas in silence broken by the usual screaming tires, rap and cumbia blasting through car speakers, sirens, and police helicopters that routinely began hovering over the neighborhood as soon as the dusk set in. Earlier that week two kids had got shot at in the neighborhood, but this time there were no casualties, someone had just fired his gun in the air.

From the start it had become painfully clear that I would be unable to stick to the original subject of my research (the creation of differences and political interrelations between gangs) and my high-flown intentions to observe “segmentation in process” were finally shot down that day as someone fired his gun in the air for some reason. To communicate something to someone else? Maybe, or maybe just for the fun of it. The point is – I never found out.

My introduction to the neighborhood had been all but soothing. After a few days stay I walked back home from a nearby club and got robbed barely outside our house. “I guess they [one of the local gangs] just wanted to find out who you are,” was quite an unanimous evaluation of the incident. What soon followed was a curious mixture of misunderstanding, overstatement, gang bravado, and distrust. One day one of the local youngsters beckoned me to come to the porch of his family's house. “I heard the gangsters around here don’t really like you man. I heard they gonna fuck you up! You and me, we gotta do something about it.” To me this all seemed like an apparent scheme of some sort as till that point I had only seen a few guys hanging around in the neighborhood who appeared totally uninterested in my presence. Abashed and disturbed by his allegation I told the youngster I had no idea what he was talking about and left him yelling on the porch. However, the following days I sensed certain hostility in the neighborhood: kids had started to throw up gang signs as I strolled past them and during the night I could hear hollers obviously aimed at me. Later on I found out a friend of mine, to whom I on the very same day told about the incident, had without my knowledge intimidated the boy’s whole family. Obviously his move, which broke to me after few weeks, had placed me in an awkward situation in the neighborhood (although my friend was convinced that he went about the matter exactly the right way). Eventually the tension calmed down and apologies were traded, but the incident
left a disturbing aftertaste for the rest of my stay in the neighborhood. For the three months that I spent in the neighborhood I was a *huero* (meaning white man, and tellingly, police), my presence and intentions remaining a more or less disturbing enigma for most of the locals.

One brief exchange of words was quite emblematic of the limitations that my field research would face in general. During one of our numerous car drives around the city, Rosie, a doctor of anthropology, mentioned to Noel what a good “informant” he was. “What?! Fuck no! You know what we call ‘em? We call ‘em rats, snitches. I ain’t no fuckin snitch! We kill rats!” Another interviewee Mynell broke the prevailing logic down in a pretty straightforward manner: “There’s a rule that outsiders, the people that you don’t know, people that you’ve never seen in your neighborhood before... You can’t trust them, you don’t know them, you didn’t grow up with them.” People were willing to tell their life stories and reflect on their personal experiences, but always remained “discreet”, careful not to “disclose too much information” or “expose the game.” On occasion if someone would cross this line I felt uncomfortable with the situation myself, having adopted my position as a potential cop.

There was also a general paranoia, very well-founded in fact (see Vargas 2006, 119-122), among the organizations that I visited. People were constantly on guard about talking too explicitly on the phone, sending e-mails, and even having undercover agents watching their houses. Alex Sanchez, the present director of Homies Unidos, an organization working with gang members in Pico-Union and Koreatown areas, had just received a letter from the Department of Criminal Justice that his phone had been under surveillance for a year. Noel, a former gang member, who at the time was living with Rosie in a neighborhood unfamiliar to him, would routinely keep watch on the cars that drove by or were parked on the side of the road and listen to dubiously busy helicopter action in the sky as we smoked our cigarettes on the porch, sometimes continuing this between the curtains as we moved inside to watch a movie or whatnot. At times Rosie would address out loud the supposed agents listening to her house or cell phone during a call, leaving me unaware if this was done as a joke or no.

My three months of fieldwork consisted of spending time in tattoo removal clinics,
different organization offices and events, conversing with people, or just sitting back and observing the scene. Twice a week I helped people with their homework in a charter school for “at-risk youth” that also served as a social center for youths and attended the rallies and meetings held by the social justice organization centered on the school. I visited a local college to attend a course about jails and followed two court cases. During my fieldwork I met people actively working with gangs in numerous ways ranging from academics to former gang members, the site of their work varying from Los Angeles City Council meetings and courtrooms to parks and street corners. Most importantly I got to know individuals who had been in a gang, majority of whom didn’t consider themselves to be actively involved anymore. Some of these people were my neighbors, some I met in the charter school or through different organizations, and some were simply “handed over to me” by a third party as good people to talk to, momentarily catching each of us off-balance. I made about a dozen recorded interviews but found informal talk and chatter much more easy and rewarding both personally and study-wise. As already hinted above, I lived in an almost exclusively Latino neighborhood near Downtown L.A. with Luis and Juan, who had both immigrated illegally from Mexico and worked long hours six days a week in a nearby bakery.

1.3 The backdrop
My aim here is to locate the historical setting of the study at hand in very broad terms. Of course the context in which the lives of the people studied are to be situated can be expanded indefinitely. I however confine myself to a presentation of the history of political economy of the City of Los Angeles and a fragmentary history of the two largest gang systems in L.A. (Chicano and African-American). Authors such as Alejandro Alonso (2004), Susan A. Phillips (1999), Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), Mike Davis (2006 [1990]), and James Diego Vigil (1988, 2002) among others have pointed out to the linkages between changes in the economical structure (mainly deindustrialization), immigration and racism, geographical segregation and gang formation, which are also brought out in this section. I believe it is necessary to present these linkages to the reader as they will resurface further on in the study. By no means is my aim to promote an unproblematic approach to the dynamics between these macro-level factors and the social phenomenon of gangs. While I think in general terms accurate, the links drawn must also be seen in the context of the
political debate concerning gangs and minority rights as social scientists and academics have largely become the narrators of the history of gangs. The sheer vastness and interconnectedness of many of the issues brought up and the evident limitations placed on this study unavoidably make this section no more than a preliminary backdrop for the analysis to follow.

Located at the far most fringe of the North American westward expansion Los Angeles has, in words of Mike Davis “come to play the double role of utopia and dystopia of advanced capitalism” (Davis 2006 [1990], 18). Los Angeles is the entertainment and homeless capital of the First World (2007b [2006], 36); “a bright, guilty place”. It is also locally termed “The Gang Capital of the World.”

This postmodern metropolis is a “complex landscape of contradictions tensely combining --- city and non-city, high technology factories and nineteenth century sweatshops, some of the most expensive luxury-housing in the world and the cardboard hovels of the homeless” (Soja, et al. 1985, 1; as quoted in Abu-Lughod 1999). A notoriously malformed and disconnected behemoth of a city, Los Angeles is an almost endless patchwork of seemingly unattached places and localities, an anthropologist’s pipe-dream, or a nightmare, wrapped together by cracked up freeways stretched to their extreme limits. Certainly the ideal scene for a serious episode of ethnographical vertigo defused by the pure magnitude and diversity of it all.

Founded in 1781 El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de la Porciúncula was part of the Spanish New World Empire before becoming part of Mexico after its independence, and was subsequently purchased by the United States after the Mexican-American War in 1848. Instead of a single center growing outwards Los Angeles was from the start patched together like a “crazy quilt” out of dozens of small towns and settlements that had developed around large independently owned ranchos. The establishment of San

* See for an example the documentary Bastards of the Party (2005) where Athen Park Blood Cle “Bone” Sloan traces the history of his own neighborhood and African American gangs along the lines of Mike Davis’s analysis in City of Quartz (1990).

* One major factor behind the geographical sprawl of the city can also be found in the fact that still in 1930,
Pedro port and the connection to Southern Pacific Railroad’s cross-continental service linked Los Angeles to the national and international networks raising it to a status of a regional metropolis. In the period between 1880 and 1890 the population of the city rose 351 percent opening up a huge market for land speculation. By the 1920s the internal migration from the Midwest had made the previously all-Hispanic Los Angeles the most Anglo of all American metropolises. The war-oil-industry during World War I furthermore spurred the growth of the city. Los Angeles area quickly became the center of the oil equipment and services industry, the second-largest tire manufacturing center with significant furniture, glass, steel, aircraft, automobile, chemical, and trucking industries. Still the city's employment profile was curiously “post-industrial” with a third of the population working in trade or transport and over a fourth in the service sector. (Abu-Lughod 1999, 133-138, 152.)

In the 1930s Los Angeles continued to attract industry because of its cheap energy and what Janet Abu-Lughod calls “docile” labor force, kept in check by the Red Squad of the city’s police powers (1999, 238). California's labor force has always been diverse (Gilmore 2007, 31). Asian, Mexican, African-American, and Anglo “temporary guest workers” without citizen rights have historically provided cheap labor for the construction of railroads, agriculture, and industry. Especially the coexistence of the descendants of the original Mexican population, the “guest workers,” and of Mexican immigrants (legal as well as illegal), and their descendants has proved to be a perennial issue in the area. During the Great Depression there was a growing animus towards the immigrant population and about one-third of the Mexican and Mexican-descended population was more or less driven out of Los Angeles. (Abu-Lughod 1999, 238-241.)

“The ‘creative destruction’ of World War II boosted the California and national economies out of Depression” (Gilmore 2007, 35). As the population of Los Angeles nearly doubled between 1940 and 1960 this also marked rising ethnic tensions in the city (Abu-Lughod 1999, 245, 247) as thousands of Mexican and African-Americans (from 1940 to 1944 the black population of Los Angeles grew over 100 percent) moved to Los Angeles to fill the jobs opened up by the blooming war economy (Alonso 1999, 72-73). These newcomers were confined to live in substandard housing within specific racially

94 percent of all dwelling units were single-family homes.
determined boundaries. Mexican immigrants’ bases of settlement were the enlarging *barrios* in East Los Angeles (Abu-Lughod 1999, 249) while the African-American population concentrated in the Central Avenue area spreading south and westwards (Alonso 2004, 664-665). The social and ethnic homogeneity of different neighborhoods was maintained by restrictive covenants legalized in the 1920s that denied non-whites access to property ownership (ibid., 663). These housing covenants were bolstered by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) who denied loans in areas not covered by covenants and real estate brokers whose licenses could be revoked for integrating neighborhoods (Sikes 2004, 585).*

Alejandro Alonso, who has emphasized the importance of race/racism in relation to the dynamics of gang formation, associates the emergence of first African-American groups that he depicts as “gangs proper” to this period of intensified migration. Although there were few family oriented African-American groups referring to themselves as “clubs” (*the Boozies, Goodlows, Blogettes, Kelleys, Driver Brothers...*) prior to 1940s these were small in number and not much is known of them (1999, 72). Vargas among others has presented that these groups functioned more like social clubs and mutual aid societies than gangs (2006, 179). According to Alonso: “Several of the first Black clubs to emerge in the late 1940s and early 1950s formed initially as a defensive reaction to combat much of the White violence that had been plaguing the Black community for several years” (ibid., 72-73). In areas like Huntington Park, Bell and South Gate white teenagers formed street clubs like the *Spook Hunters* to terrorize black youth. “Their animosity towards Blacks was publicly known as the back of their club jackets displayed an animated Black face with exaggerated facial features with a noose hanging around the neck” (Alonso 1999, 74). One of the clubs started by African-American youths in Aliso Village was respectively called the *Devil Hunters* (ibid., 76).

The *barrio* residents in the 1940s faced similar harassment as groups of off-duty sailors entered the neighborhoods to beat up inhabitants. During World War II the strong

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* The removal of these covenants in the 1950s had very little impact on the high level of racial and socio-economical segregation that prevails in the City of Angels today as homeowners associations engaged in the defense of property values and neighborhood exclusivity have found new ways of controlling the in migration to neighborhoods (Davis 1998, 153-219).
parallel culture of Chicanos with their own radio stations and newspapers was considered by many to be a threat to national unity. In ten days of June 1943 about two hundred sailors and *pachucos*, early zoot-suited Chicano “gang members”, clashed over several days in what is known as the Zoot-Suit Riots. (Phillips 1999, 110-111.) According to Abu-Lughod the incident further widened the gap between Mexican-Americans and the system of local law enforcement as the police accompanied the sailors, watched the beatings and jailed the victims (1999, 249-250). Susan A. Phillips has also noted that the Zoot-Suit Riots marked a brief moment of unification for the warring *pachuco* gangs in the *barrios* (1999, 196). By this time the *pachuco* gangs had already been around for a while. In the 1920s Emory Bogardus had made a remark to city officials about the “boy gang” problem in the *barrios* (Bogardus 1934, ref; Vigil 2002, 31). Luis J. Rodriguez who prefers the term “street organization” has presented that the first East L.A. *barrios* (*La Loma, La Bishop, Palo Verde, White Fence and Maravilla*) were established in the early 1920s and are today among the oldest continuous street gangs in the United States (2003 [2001], 33).

The post-war period was time for expansion and dispersal of industry in Los Angeles. The orientation towards local and western markets switched in favour of national and international markets and industrial sites spread farther from the city's central core as the mass-transit system was cut back considerably and largely replaced by freeways. For many private ownership of a car became the prerequisite for work. (Abu-Lughod 1999, 251-253.) “Furthermore the freeways often gave spatial definition, in massive *concrete* form, to the social barriers of class and race that had, up to 1948, been maintained largely through ‘legal’ instruments” (ibid., 254. Emphasis in the original). By 1960 the city of Los Angeles had a population of close to 2.5 million due to the post-war “baby boom” and internal and foreign migration. Abu-Lughod has presented how the city lacked the governmental structure to cope with this growth in demographic and spatial magnitude, leaving many of the poorer residents devoid of even the basic amenities (schools, fire and police protection, hospitals, adequate water and sewers...) (ibid., 258). Needless to say the uneven distribution of amenities followed ethnic lines. “Whole inner city neighborhoods underwent population succession, as better-off whites left for the periphery” (ibid., 258).7

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7 For a detailed account of this process in the case of Compton, the location which more than any has become to be identified with gangs, see Sides’ article *Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares,*
In Watts several of the black clubs were organized geographically by the housing projects in the area. During the 1960s as the white clubs disappeared in large (due to the white flight), the geographical boundaries within the recently emerged all-black residential areas became the new frontiers of violence for street gangs:

“The Gladiators, based at 54th Street and Vermont Avenue, were the largest Black club on the Westside, and clashes between other Black gangs were increasing as intra-racial violence between Black club members was on the rise. By 1960 several clubs emerged on the Westside and rivalry between Eastside and Westside clubs developed, along with infighting among clubs on the same side of town” (Alonso 1999, 77-78).

Alonso argues that the rivalry between Eastside and Westside gangs of this time was rooted in the socio-economic differences between the two. Westside youths were thought as being upwardly mobile, less intimidating and lacking the “street smarts” of the economically inferior Eastside residents. (Ibid., 77-80.) It must be noted that more than half of the gangs in Los Angeles around this time were Hispanic.

The skirmishes of these early gangs ceased during the Watts Riots of 1965 and old rivalries were put to an end as the black youth united themselves against the LAPD and the National Guard. (Ibid., 77-80.) On August 11, 1965 in Watts an altercation between a black motorist and a white police officer escalated into six days of “civil disorder” that resulted in 4,000 arrests and 40 million dollars worth of damage (Abu-Lughod 1999, 263). Following the uprising young people began to build political, community based organizations to address and contest social injustices, especially police brutality. Several of these youths came from the gangs of the 1950s and early 1960s. For an example two leading Slausons, Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter (a famous “warlord”) and Ron Higgins, became organizers for the Los Angeles Chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP), the purpose of which was to monitor the actions of the LAPD. Ron Wilkins (aka Brother Crook) created the Community Alert Patrol which was also formed to keep watch on police brutality. (Alonso 1999, 80.) Community workers and even the LAPD were astonished by the virtual disappearance of the gang hostilities as the indicators East and West gave room for the perceived antagonism between black and white (Davis 1998, 297).

The Mexican population, by the 1970s some 1.7 million in Los Angeles metropolitan area, remained politically somewhat less conspicuous but shared the same mistrust against

the police and political apparatus (Abu-Lughod 1999, 266). The emergence of the Brown Berets (established in 1966) and the Chicano movement during the civil rights era also coincide with a lull in gang activity (Rodriquez 2003, 34). In 1970 people of Mexican origins clashed with the LAPD first on New Year’s Eve, on anti-Vietnam War march on August 29th, and finally the celebration of the anniversary of Mexican independence turned into a battle between the partakers and the police (Abu-Lughod 1999, 265-266). These incidents have been seen as analogous to the Watts Riots: “All that had to be substituted was the word ‘Mexican American’ for ‘Negro’ and ‘barrio’ for ‘ghetto’ in order for the conditions to be identical” (Morales as quoted in ibid., 265).

By the end of the 1960s and early 1970s the FBI and LAPD had subverted both of these movements through use of counterintelligence actions, infiltrators, and direct use of violence (see e.g. Alonso 2004, 667; 1999, 89; Davis 2006, 298; Escobar 1993, 1492-1495). There exists a shared understanding among scholars that the following period saw the birth of many of the modern gangs in Los Angeles today, namely the Crips and the Bloods (African American gangs), the 18th Street, and other major Chicano gangs (Alonso 1999, 90-95; Rodriguez 2003, 35; Davis 2006, 299-300). In 1975 it was estimated that there were 580 gangs active in Los Angeles (Alonso 1999, 5).

According to Abu-Lughod, Los Angeles’ industrial economy continued to expand till the late 1980s creating new manufacturing jobs (1999, 365-368). This expansion hardly reflected the general quality of life: during the 1980s in Los Angeles County 40 percent of children lived below or merely above the official poverty line (Davis 2006, 306). While the population growth in the region paralleled economic expansion, the immigrant growth subsequently fuelled selective expansion in the “cheap wage” sectors. The poverty rate rose from 10.9 percent in 1969 to 15.1 in 1989 as the centrally located (read, within easy commuting reach) unionized Fordist-type plants were replaced by garment production, often under sweatshop conditions and low-paying service jobs (1999, 365-368). Wacquant has presented that: “--- between 1978 and 1990, the county of Los Angeles lost 200,000 jobs, most of them high-wage unionized positions in industry, just as it received an infusion of nearly one million immigrants” (2008, 29). Consequently unemployment among young blacks and Latinos in South Central exceeded 60 percent in 1992 (ibid.).

On April 29th of the same year riots flared up in the city when four police officers
charged over the beating of a black motorist Rodney King were acquitted. The riots, characterized as multi-ethnic (Davis 1992, 57), concentrated in South Central Los Angeles and lasted for six days. In addition to LAPD National Guard, U.S. Army soldiers, and Marines were deployed to contain the riots which ended up in more than one billion dollars worth of property damage and 53 victims. Besides the obvious issue of police abuse and racism economic disparities, poor living conditions, and widespread unemployment have been recognized as the underlying causes of the riots (see e.g. Davis 1992) and the term uprising is often used to describe the events (see e.g. Gilmore 2007; Vargas 2006). The riots also marked a historical truce between Blood and Crip gangs in South Central.

1992 also saw a peak in gang-related homicides which totalled 803 (only topped in 1995 with 805 homicides) (Alonso 1999, 95). Drugs had been flowing in quantities into major U.S. cities since World War II, but in Los Angeles the rerouting of the major cocaine trail from Florida to Southern California via Mexico and the emergence of crack (freebase form of cocaine), which took place in the early 80s, raised the economic stakes of the cocaine retail trade largely controlled by gangs on the street level. This marked a steady rise in violence (Rodriguez 2003, 34; Davis 2006, 270) as well as in gang membership which according to Alejandro Alonso rose in Los Angeles County from 30,000 in 1980 to 150,000 in 1998 (Alonso 1999, 7). Anthropologist João H. Costa Vargas tells us of his neighbor (a former gang member) in South Central who reminisced how during the mid-80s shotguns and automatic pistols used till then in gang wars gave room for AK-47s, Uzi submachine guns, and M-16 semiautomatics as more money flowed into the communities through the escalation of the drug trade (Vargas 2006, 6-7).

The unequalled economical opportunities opened up by the drug economy are surely welcomed by the people on the losing side of the markedly polarized economy of Los Angeles today as well. As Vargas among others has presented, the small niche of well-paying technology-related occupations is accompanied by a huge and still expanding sector of low-wage, often below subsistence work (2006, 47). Despite the often grim economical opportunities and working conditions below those of South China, Hong Kong and Vietnam there has been an unending flow of immigrants pouring into the area (ibid., 47-48). One of the most significant migrations has been the influx of Salvadorans escaping the brutal civil war who by the mid-90s numbered over 500,000 in Los Angeles (Rodriguez
Apart from being the largest Mexican metropolis after Mexico City, the ethnic diversity of Los Angeles is attested by the fact that the city has the largest Salvadorean, Korean, Iranian, and Filipino diaspora populations in the West. This stunning ethnic diversity of Los Angeles is arranged throughout the urban geography in clear patterns and unemployment rates, income, and percentage of persons below poverty level continue to reflect the changing ethnic arrangements. (Vargas 2006, 47.)

1.4 L.A. gang basics

It is extremely hard to come up with reliable statistics about gangs in Los Angeles today. Estimations of the amount of gangs and gang members vary considerably. The figures journalist Tim Ruttens presented in 2008 are as good as any: “conservative analysts estimate that as many as 40,000 people belong to the 700 gangs or so in the city of L.A. Countywide there may be as many as 1,200 gangs with 80,000 members” (Los Angeles Times 2008a).

This multitude of gangs in Los Angeles today ranges from overtly racist White Supremacist gangs, biker gangs and Skinheads to Asian gangs which in their organization and hierarchy emulate Chinese triads. My study however evolves around gangs that are an outgrowth of the African-American and/or Chicano gang systems of which I will elaborate on in the next chapter. For some time now there has existed a number of Salvadorean, Armenian, Filipino, Cambodian, Thai, Chinese, Hmong, Vietnamese, Samoan, Tongan, etc. gangs which have been organizing themselves in the manner of the previously established gang systems of Chicano and African-American youth before them (Rodriguez 2003, 38; Phillips 1999, 64). Gangs in Los Angeles are divided along ethnic lines, although gang conflicts are primarily intra-racial and more related to geographical proximity and specific histories. Rather than ethnicity, it is social interrelations, territoriality, certain organizational features, and a shared system of symbols that are the qualifying factors at work here.

There is a huge variation in the size of gangs in L.A. The number of people in a gang can vary from 10 to thousands of members (ibid., 82-83). Thus, while the 18th Street gang can boast to have tens of thousands of members in hundreds of cliques around Southern California (Davis 1999 [1998], 377-378) in the neighborhood where I resided there was a gang active that at the moment had reputedly only two members (a pair of brothers).
Gangs in Los Angeles are usually neighborhood-based, markedly territorial groups (Alonso 1999). The spatial boundaries of gangs do not change considerably over time and gang territories tend to follow features of built urban environment, like industrial areas, freeways, and railroad tracks, which constrain social interaction (ibid.; Phillips 1999). Similarly to membership, the size of gang territory varies substantially. In an interview one former gang member told me how they used to watch over the turf of their gang which was just a dead end street, while some gangs have presence in multiple neighborhoods. The area of the gang and its boundaries are marked by graffiti, which also makes visible the interrelations between neighboring gangs (besides the practice of crossing out rival gang’s graffiti gang members can also include extensive enemy lists in their graffiti) (ibid.).

Gangs are definitely part of the drug trade, but mostly as small businessmen handling street-level distribution (Davis 2006, 313). Gangs are also engaged in a plethora of other criminal activities ranging from robberies, petty theft, and extortion to violent crimes usually related to inter-gang disputes and warfare.

Despite their substantial size and engagement in economically profitable criminal activities gangs in Los Angeles in general have no hierarchical structure or overarching leadership. Some individual gangs may have presidents, usually older members in the streets or in prison with respect and influence, but their power relies on the willingness of others to follow. Phillips argues that often there are not even leaders in the neighborhood level of gangs. In comparison with other gangs like the Chicago/New York based Latin Kings and Chicago based Gangster Disciples Los Angeles gangs are distinctly horizontal in their organization. (Ibid., 80-81.)

Still law enforcement agencies continue to consider gangs as highly organized and hierarchical pyramid-like bureaucratic organizations “linked in a broad chain of drug distribution and terror” (Hagedorn 2008, 18). Such an approach can be argued to emanate largely from judicial purposes. Attempts to break up gangs by locking up their leaders or “key players” have hardly ever been successful. If a gang has for some reason developed a hierarchical organization it usually breaks easily into more decentralized segments. (Ibid., 20.)

However, it would be erroneous to treat gangs merely or even primarily as criminal networks. Gangs in Los Angeles are often intergenerational and embody a strong family
ethos whether or not gang members share blood ties within and across generations (Phillips 1999, 113-117). It should be seen as self-evident that as social groups gangs are constantly transforming. Sudhir Venkatesh and Steven D. Levitt have presented how the social relations of a Chicago based gang Black Kings took a “corporatist” turn during the Reagan era reflecting the free market spirit of the times (2000). Many former gang members I met during my fieldwork complained how respect, trust, and loyalty were giving way for more individualistic and pragmatic concerns in the gang life. Although I do hold that kinship is still the prevailing gang idiom and ideal, there is certainly a constant tension between a family and a business ethos at work.

Aside from everyday sociality gang members can come together for sports, picnics, and holidays. Frequently they hold carwashes to raise funds for funerals and participate in important events during the life course of the gang’s members. Differences between gangs are actively produced in various ways, but most importantly by graffiti and tattoos, to which in the case of Los Angeles-based gangs Phillips' book *Wallbangin’ Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (1999) is an invaluable guide. Gang members also signal their differences in colors, clothing, speech, hand signs, music, and dances. Gang’s initials, numbers, and symbols represent historical political designations within the gang system and, as Susan A. Phillips has argued, seem to develop an almost mystical character: “Gang members from specific neighborhoods celebrate different numbers, dates, holidays, birthdays, years and even entire eras to strengthen their affiliations and reify their concept of a common gang entity” (ibid., 275). This symbolic codification appears to be most elaborate among the two primary African American gangs, the Bloods and the Crips (ibid., 243-249). Mynell, a Blood, gave me some examples of what he termed “our own language”:

“We place every word with a C with a B. So, let's say that I say: ‘What school you go to?’ I would say: ‘What bool you go to?’ If I say: ‘What kinda car you got?’ ‘What kinda bar you got?’ ‘Are you cool?’ ‘I'm bool.’ ‘You wanna cigarette?’ ‘I wanna bigarette.’ ‘You're kickin it.’ ‘I'm bickin it.’”

Crips practice such speech avoidance the other way around placing B with a C. The importance of such symbolism cannot be understated. During the 1992 gang truce in South Central Los Angeles clear codes for individual conduct were written down in a peace treaty, which, for an example, dictated that gang rags (scarfs of the gang’s color) should be worn only three inches out of the rear pants pocket as a sign of respect (Vargas 2006, 188).

Unfortunately I’m unable to focus on this symbolism within the confines of this
study, although it is in the very center of the discussion here as it constitutes a quintessential aspect of gang politics and can even be seen as emblematic of a certain social modality I’m trying to grasp here. I will however keep on returning to the issue in the course of this work.

All the gang members I spoke with emphasized that they could only speak about their own experience in their specific gang. I share their reluctance to generalize too heavily about gangs. All gangs are unique and changing social organizations with their specific characteristics and histories. I will elaborate on the issue of gang definition in the following chapter.
2. The neighborhood

In the present chapter I will attempt to approach gangs onwards from local sociality with an emphasis on *inter*-subjective instead of *intra*-subjective processes. Thus, instead of taking transgression of law and the often ensuing analysis of individual pathological drives (no matter how socially transmitted or grounded they are perceived to be) as a starting point I will proceed from social dynamics rooted in local settings. In my analysis I follow Susan A. Phillips who has argued that gangs in Los Angeles constitute systems based on segmentary opposition. Against the implications of a rigid enclosing structure or a mechanism of integration I argue in lines of Paul Dresch that the concept of segmentation, grown unquestionably dusty over time, can still be a viable conceptual tool if understood as a constituting structural principle based on the maintenance of honor. Furthermore, I present that through gangs individuals are constituted as meaningful actors in the larger social milieu and thus gangs can be seen to serve as sites of reproduction of social relations within and between neighborhoods.

2.1 “Amputations from the trunk”

“No one seems to be able to explain where gangs come from or their fierce spread through society.”
Phillips 1999, 63.

The subtitle above is picked up from Luis J. Rodriguez’s reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson. An ex-gang member, these days a poet, an activist, and a writer, Rodriguez describes gangs as “mutated forms of organization,” amputations from the trunk of society (2003, 30). Scholars have tackled the topic with comparable clarity. Despite the extensive literature about the subject in urban sociology gangs have remained to be a form of social organization that by its character seems to escape the grasp of social sciences. Ambiguously ahistorical while premodern; class conscious while instinctual, the nature of these “families,” “crews,” “nations,” “sets,” “organizations,” “movements,” “clicas,” “neighborhoods,” “clubs,” “tribes,” “corporations” vanishes into endless euphemisms and analogies thrown around equally loosely by media, scholars, and gang members themselves.

However this is not a cry for unity in definition, quite the contrary. I tend to agree with John M. Hagedom who has criticized the “old-fashioned positivist venture” of some
scholars to find a precise definition of a street gang (2008, 30). First of all, acting as “advisors to the king” these scholars mainly benefit criminal justice officials waging war on “gang-related” crime (and consequently their own careers) (ibid., 30, 134). In many places throughout the world, but especially in the U.S., gangs are *de jure* criminal actors and I find it difficult to see the contemporary exercises in gang typology as more than an outgrowth of the excessive administrational attention given to gangs (see e.g. Valdez 2003 and Klein et al. 2001). Secondly, as Hagedorn argues, “If there is any constant in today’s gangs around the world, it is their changing forms, how they can be categorized at one point in one way, and then a few months or years later they can adapt or become something quite different” (ibid., 31. Emphasis in the original).

As we have already seen, the borderlines of gang conflict in Los Angeles have changed substantially throughout the 20th century. The early neighborhood skirmishes gave room to racial clashes, and at least in South Central the established gangs have later been argued to have fought along class lines. During the 1960s gang youth were mobilized in the civil rights movement, after the suppression of which the borderlines of the ongoing conflict started to take shape in accordance with the territorial administrative subdivisions (compass points, boroughs, neighborhoods, blocks, streets). Barrios and Brotherton have also described the phases of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation in New York, an organization which they argue began as a prison self-defense and self-help organization, developed to a drug dealing street gang and by the end of the 90s was attempting to establish itself as a legitimate political and spiritual group (2003, 119-135; 2003, 136-157).

Scholars have also criticized the idea of the gang as a monolithic social entity by pointing out the diversity in the level of individual involvement and experience within gangs (e.g. Venkatesh 2003, Vigil 1988), an assertion which I believe should be taken as a given in our understanding of human life in general. I will deal with Hagedorn’s own, in my opinion highly relevant, approach to gangs in the next chapter, but at the present moment I’ll try to cast light on the phenomenon from a rather mundane perspective. I have chosen to discuss Los Angeles-based gangs under the title “neighborhood” here to emphasize the inextricability of these groups from their respective lived localities.

### 2.2 A walk in the Hazard Projects

I met Jerry just outside Ramona Gardens (also known as [Big] Hazard Projects after the Big
Hazard gang based there), the oldest public housing project in Los Angeles established in 1941. My neighbor Raul had set the meeting up as he and Jerry were in the same domestic violence class. We had driven around these housing projects with Raul but he refused to drive in there: “*It’s easy to drive in, but it’s harder to come out if you’re an outsider.*” Now in his 50s Jerry lived just outside the projects to take care of his mother who still lived in the projects. On his one arm he had a faded Hazard tattoo reaching from his elbow to his wrist and on the other X3 claiming a membership in Mexican Mafia. Their family had lived in the projects for three generations and Jerry was proud to say he would be the last one of his family there.

“*Right now you’re probably the safest person in here*”, he assured me as we walked past a miniature altar decorated with flowers and candles set up beside the street for a youth who had been killed there recently. “*There’s only one like me*”, Jerry stressed over and over again explaining that majority of his friends were either dead or in prison. He had been in and out himself for most of his life, but he told me that for the last twenty years he had been inactive in the gang. “*Don’t trip even if I look around all the time. That’s just a habit you know. I’m not afraid of the people around here, it’s the cops that I’m afraid of:*” As a patrol car later drove past us he explained that there was a gang injunction in the area and that the police could arrest him for just being there: “*But it’s good that I have a white face with me. They think you’re a reporter or something.*”

As we trailed our way deeper into the projects Jerry told me of several people killed by the police and reminisced how several hundred gang members used to chase the police out of the projects back in the 70s. He would point to the bushes he’d thrown police in and a pavement where officers forced him to lie down as a kid pressing their knee against the back of his neck: “*I couldn’t wait to get old to kill these motherfuckers.*” In the middle of the projects we came upon a large mural dedicated to twenty-one-year-old Smokey Jimenez killed by sheriff deputies in August 1991. This killing resulted in a three-hour melee in the projects. A picture of Smokey’s face is flanked by a poem which ends: “*So open your ears, Listen now and listen clear, No longer are we going to fear, Your storm troopers when they appear.*”

There are about 2,000 people living in Ramona Gardens in 497 apartments spread over 13 hectares (32 acres). The projects consist of aligned crude two-story barrack-like
buildings with bars on the windows, to which Jerry referred constantly: “People around here don’t steal from each other, and if they do, nobody will call the fuckin cops. We handle that stuff ourselves. It’s just to get them used to that prison environment.” Jerry’s nephew and his friends were sitting in front of one of the apartments drinking forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor and listening to Bone Thugs-n-Harmony (popular rap group), accompanied by repeated crows of roosters from the background. “In ten years these kids are dead or in prison. They all just stuck in here.” As a testimony to his bleak vision Jerry pointed farther off to older men and women holding alike bottles. He told how they all go in and out of prison, but always end up back in the projects. “I go to jail and come back years later and that same man is still sittin right there drinkin beer.”

In a parking lot next to a gym we saw a van that belonged to CBS News crew. It turned out that two girls had just been killed in an alleged scheme to rob a taxi driver and the news crew was there to shoot the requisite footage. “The only time they’re here is when something like this happens. They just repeat these stereotypes.” In spite of all the Hazard Projects had bred doctors and all kinds of celebrities, Jerry was eager to add. In a baseball field behind the gym there was a Community Resource Fair going on: few people walking lazily around the makeshift stalls of about a dozen organizations. From my experience these events seemed to attract more activists from organizations outside the communities than people from the neighborhoods who they were trying to reach out for.

Jerry told me how he had ran different programs in the area till five years ago when funding had been cut and how they had cleaned up the gym from all the gang graffiti. Graffiti was still absent from the walls inside the gym, but covered most of the empty surface in the housing projects. Still hopeful of running a program of his own in the future Jerry was highly critical of outsiders who help with different community projects, but aren’t familiar with the life of the people in the housing projects: “At the end of the day they can just drive back to wherever they live.”
2.3 The pathologized neighborhoods of social sciences

“There was always activity around me, like people drinking out in the streets, using drugs, a lot of disruption. The neighborhood was always active with something. I didn’t come from a neighborhood where everything was all quiet and everything in place. So I guess growing up around it, it just locked in my mind that I was... what I needed to be part of and I joined the gang when I was around 8 or 9.”

Alejandro.

“Pirus – we originated in Compton. Compton is... it’s a bad city you know? It’s not a good city, you know? There’s a killin in there every day. Somebody dies, you know? It’s really like that. We’re in L.A.”

Mynell

It is not just the poultry stepping around the sunburned lawns of Ramona Gardens that evokes the late Oscar Lewis’ dim evocation of life in Casa Grande or any other vecindad of Mexico City here (1989 [1961]). The loose or negative relation to larger institutions, underemployment, daily struggle for subsistence, high rates of crime, broken families, fatalism, substance abuse, prevalence of violence, short-sighted hedonism, and distrust of law enforcement and political authority are all features of what Lewis’ called the “culture of poverty,” transmitted from one generation to the next in marginalized and impoverished urban enclaves, of which the Hazard Projects in East Los Angeles would definitely serve as a model example (Lewis 1989, 20-23). Lewis’ idea of a distinct subculture of the poor that disables them to take full of advantage of opportunities around them has been rightly criticized for not drawing a clear line between symptoms and causes (see e.g. Wilson, 1993, 4). In his classic study Tally’s Corner (1967) Elliot Liebow described a somewhat similar “shadow value system,” although as a consequence, not the cause, of the dire situation of the African American street corner men he studied in Washington D.C. (2003 [1967]).

An address by Gregory Thomas, from community organization Watts Gang Task Force, in Los Angeles City Council meeting that I attended echoed this line of reasoning:

“Let’s face it. We live in a culture that hasn’t clearly been paid attention to... I mean, young people grow up and are coached to be gang members, to be killers. Actually it’s an honor, in many of the challenged communities that we serve, this population that we serve, it’s an honor, it’s a code of honor for a young person to grow up to be a killer, to grow up to engage in what we call gang-related-motivated violence, by way of committing homicide.”

If not really a “culture” of its own, it is agreed in my study that we are dealing with social
organizations that have in some important ways broken away from the larger society, and
which flourish in the “challenged communities” like Ramona Gardens. “Challenged
community,” certainly a rhetorical compromise before city council members and general
public, must be identified here as a euphemism, as ludicrous as its pious, that erases a
history of systematic racism and neglect by authorities, a term that strongly connotes some
crucial social or cultural dysfunction.

Mike Davis' note that the Library of Congress’ bibliographic system recognizes
“street gangs” as a subset of “social pathology,” is exceedingly descriptive of the general
tone of discussion about the phenomenon (2008, xi). Sudhir Venkatesh has similarly argued
that the academic literature on gangs has been locked in “the dogma of criminology” (2003,
5). The public focus tends to concentrate upon gang-related killings, “the crisis - the
spectacular event”, detached from the social context, as William Foote Whyte already
argued in 1943 in his study of an Italian American slum in Boston (1993, xvi). The analysis
at large has been confined to explanations of gang members “deviant” activity in terms of
their “deficiencies” (Hagedom 2008, 87-88). This pathological approach is to a different
degree shared by academics, media, and by some of the organizations and gang members
themselves.

Underlying the general discussion about gangs and urban poverty we find Emile
Durkheim’s notion of “anomy,” an early attempt to conceptualize social deregulation and
alienation brought by radical economic changes caused by the industrial revolution (1984
[1893]). The discrepancy between the value system of society internalized by the subject
and the objective structural limitations has been a salient explanatory schema, reproduced
in numerous forms, in explaining the existence of modern street gangs, understood as
adaptations to the harsh conditions of the ghetto, although lately the economical
restructuring referred to has been deindustrialization (see e.g. Cohen 1961 [1955]; Vigil
1988 & 2002; Sampson & Wilson 1995). Although my study attempts to bypass this classic
paradigm, I tend to agree (with some reservations) with – what Venkatesh calls the
underclass school – in that “the contemporary street gang is a product of post-war
systematic factors that have deleteriously affected the economic and institutional fabric of
inner cities” (1997, 89. Emphasis mine). Simultaneously I hold in lines of Alonso and
Hagedorn that race and racism should be noticed as crucial factors behind the phenomenon
and especially the different trajectories that street gangs take in relation to the state (Alonso 2004, Hagedorn 2008, 65-83). My intention is not to reduplicate these studies here, although I will return to some of the issues later on in the study.

At this point I should also underline that I attempt to discuss gangs specifically as forms of social organization. Thus gangs are not treated as an administrative problem, social evil, suicide machine, or as a human tragedy. All definitions and questions present in the current political debate about gangs are left open in order not to get tangled in the discussion mainly concerned with providing a solution to a social problem. My reluctance to tell a morality tale here should not be taken as an attempt to deflect attention away from human suffering in the lives of gang members and people around them.

2.4 “We call it neighborhoods ‘cause the neighborhood is where you live”

“The gang, in short, is life,...”
Trasher 1963 [1927], 3. Emphasis in the original.

“Now, don't think we're fuckin rocket scientists to, you know, understand organization. We're watchin organization right now. Watchin a basketball game. There's two teams, two different colors, they organized, they playin together, so they know each other. It's the same thing. You see it every day. You go to work. What do you do? You work with the same people, you're organized, you know the people that you work with. Same thing. You go to a street corner and you go to a gang - they're all your friends. You know what they have. You know who has the dope, who has the guns. You know where to go to get this and you know where to go to get that. It's organized.”
Raul

Faced with the sensationalistic portraits in the media today, apparently (and purposefully) estranged from lived social realities, it is useful to reiterate certain common-sense arguments from Frederic M. Trasher’s classic study *The Gang* (1927). In his study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago, Thrasher recognized how gangs evolve from spontaneous play-groups: “The gang has its beginning in acquaintanceship and intimate relations which have already developed on the basis of some common interest” (1963 [1927], 27). Instead of some quasi-mystical force, an anti-social virus taking over the youth, we simply find *human sociality*. Many of the gang members I interviewed traced the origins of their gang to a local car or sports club, which only later developed into a street gang. As I have already noted, street gangs in Los Angeles continue to be “all-around” social institutions for the local youth.
Thrasher noticed gangs to be interstitial groups which occupy “a period in the life of the boy between childhood, when he is usually incorporated in a family structure, and marriage, when he is reincorporated into a family and other orderly relations of work, religion and pleasure” (ibid., 32).

In the case of gangs in Los Angeles this still holds true for the most part, but it’s important to note that the state’s heightened focus on prison punishment and a lack of economic opportunities have increased the average age of gang members (Phillips 1999, 346). Venkatesh has argued that in certain neighborhoods gangs have become institutions where youths grow up, develop skills, and through which they attempt to realize upward social mobility (2001, 3). Like Raul explained, one’s livelihood is usually inextricably tied to the gang:

“You have to slang dope, you gotta do something. Cause you can’t just stand on street corner. How you gonna clothe yourself? Your parents ain’t gonna... you know? They only do so much for you, but, you know, there comes a time when you gotta have to do something for yourself. I mean if you don’t go to school, and most gangsters don’t cause they think they too good to do it. They drop out like junior high, high school. They never graduate. So what they gonna do? It’s not like they can hold a job... Like: ‘Okay, I’m ‘a work in McDonald’s.’ Workin in McDonald’s for a gangster is fucking sad. I wanna see a real gangster say: ‘I work in McDonald’s and I’m proud of it.’ Nobody, you know? It’s common sense.”

Indeed, for parts of the population in Los Angeles the neighborhood gang has become the most accessible social and economic institution around (Phillips 1999, 70). In terms of career choice the neighborhood gang usually outweighs low-wage and long hours with no realistic prospects of promotion in the service or construction sectors. The relatively old age of many gang members becomes rather clear by just observing the street scene in certain neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

The greatest deficiency of Trasher’s analysis is the suggested “disorganization” explanation. According to him, it was the lively but disorganized neighborhoods of Chicago which provided an environment for the gangs to flourish (1963, 363). I believe, conversely, that what Trasher found in the form of gangs in these neighborhoods was precisely what he failed to recognize as such, organization.

It is axiomatic that the neighborhood is first and foremost a place to live: it’s “a social product, structured through the interaction of the persons, groups and institutions that are embedded in definite social relations” (Venkatesh 1997, 90). In many urban settings, like
Los Angeles, the institutionalized neighborhood gangs are, and have for a long time been, a part of the lived space of the neighborhood, in other words, they are nothing external to it. As Sudhir Venkatesh has noted gangs also have a formidable role in the creation of neighborhood geographies:

“by laying claim to certain ‘turf’ (i.e. by symbolically appropriating spaces, policing areas, and monitoring the behaviors of strangers) and offering services such as protection for residents, the gang effectively imposes onto this formal space a symbolic map that residents of the neighborhood are aware of and use to guide their own travels” (ibid., 90-91).

Usually the people I talked to could with ease give an elaborate gang mapping of their respective neighborhoods, even if not part of a gang themselves. These spaces are often contested. In the neighborhood where I resided the gang graffiti across the street was almost daily crossed over by a rival gang and/or painted over by the landlord (possibly to reassure the white, well-paying outsider), although the numerous carvings in the sidewalk provided a more lasting map of gang boundaries.

Through his unequalled fieldwork Sudhir Venkatesh has provided a description of the complex interrelationships between the community residents and the local drug-dealing gang in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes (2008). The setting in Chicago’s densely populated public housing projects differs in numerous ways from the situation in Los Angeles, but we are reminded here that gangs are embedded in their respective neighborhoods via numerous social ties (family/kin, friendship, business) and thus are to some degree inextricable from the communities in which they exist. Still it would be erroneous to treat gangs as synonymous with their respective neighborhoods. There is likely to be considerable resistance and outright animosity within the neighborhood towards the gang which brings a lot of violence and disruption to the locality by its activities, although the gang’s de facto monopoly of violence in the neighborhood keeps this resistance from building up to an open conflict. In Ramona Gardens Jerry pointed out several people who still refused to even talk to him because of the things he had done in the past as part of the Big Hazard gang.

Most of the people I interviewed during my fieldwork were attempting to leave the gang life behind, but continued to hold a strong affiliation to their respective neighborhoods, which they conceived to be synonymous with the local gang. Both the neighborhood and the gang were something people “just grew into.” In Sonny’s case this
happened through kin ties:

“I was born into the neighborhood – automatically – just because I was born – automatically – I didn’t have to get jumped in or... you know? I had to make my bonus, prove myself to the neighborhood, but I was already in the neighborhood cause my uncles... they’re the ones who started the neighborhood.”

Mynell, who was literally born in his neighborhood, recognized that he got into the gang by “just growing up:”

“When I officially officially joined I was 11 years old. But from 7 to 11 I was, you know, just hangin around, you know, representin that neighborhood, sayin that that’s where I’m from, stuff like that.”

Chino told the same story: “Me, since I grew up in the neighborhood I was never jumped in because I been puttin in work for a long time so I didn’t have to get jumped in.”

Initiation ceremonies, to which Mynell above refers to as the beginning of his “official official” membership, are common among gangs and usually involve beating the candidate for a certain time (“jumping in”) or an offensive against an enemy gang or a random stranger (“busting a mission”) (Phillips 1999, 144; interviews). Significantly these initiations normally formalize the already existing affiliation with the gang.

People’s accounts of the life in their neighborhood are filled with memories of violence, drugs, and drama, but equally the neighborhood unfolds as a nucleus for strong emotional bonds, lasting social relations, and pride:

“They're the people you grew up with, you’ve known them for years and... That’s to say, you know, that I’m from where I’m from, regardless, to the day I die. No matter what happens, it’s still all just in you. -- - I still love that place to death because it’s where I grew up. It’s my... it’s my house, what can I say, you know?” (Raul).

Even if inactive in the neighborhood, many former gang members, like Renee in this case, place value in the continuation of the neighborhood’s gang tradition:

“You know I support them in a way. You know, I wish like everybody would be okay and not gettin into trouble and all that kind of... But then in another way that’s my neighborhood and I want... I still have pride for it. And I still want people to know like ‘Them fools know how to take care of business,’ you know? Yeah, like, makes me feel good that my homeboys are still out there.”

Similarly Sonny, now 57 years old, who talked a great deal of getting kids out of gangs, shared the same ambiguity over his neighborhood:

“I don’t have to prove myself no more. Those days are gone. Like I tell my homies [homicie = homeboy = close friend] – my little youngster homies – you carry the flag now, I’ve already carried it. It’s your turn. You learn... you gotta learn... You gonna get your lumps and scars and... you know, earn your respect.
But like I also told them, don’t ever disrespect the neighborhood by being something that you’re not.”

Names and tattoos are perhaps the most durable markers of a connection to the neighborhood. Street or neighborhood names continued to be used – depending on the context – by many. Susan A. Phillips has discussed how these names can be invented, inherited, or contested within the neighborhood (1999, 145). Chino elaborates on the meaning of neighborhood names that are passed on: “Like Shorty, for an example, Shorty from 36th Street and if Shorty from 36th Street have a fuckin younger homie, Little Shorty, Baby Shorty, you know? Shit like that. But you earn the name. You gotta live up to your name, you know what I’m sayin?” Once earned your name and the clout it carries on the streets is not an easy matter to leave behind.

Equally neighborhood tattoos were held in value: “But I feel like, that I’m always because of my tattoos, because of family... I’m always gonna be from out here [his neighborhood]” (Chino). Many people asserted that these tattoos were something they wouldn’t remove, even if they wanted to depart from the gang. Phillips has discussed the importance of tattoos and the “layers of identity” represented through them (ibid., 156-167), to which we’ll return in a short while. For now it suffices to notice the importance of tattoos in symbolically anchoring the person to his/her neighborhood. By tattooing their neighborhood alliance on their bodies gang members make themselves an easy target for the police and rival gang members (like Sonny said, “It’s like puttin a bull’s-eye on your back”), but one could almost say that is exactly the point: “Gang members are willing to die for neighborhood places that eventually become charged with the meanings of their own lives and deaths. They are willing to die for the pride they feel in their neighborhood” (ibid., 115). Like Mynell put it:

"They’ll be: ‘Where you from?’ And then, if you’re a real gang member, you’re not just gonna say... You’re not gonna deny where you from, cause you’re supposed to be loyal to... --- No matter where I’m at, whether it’s an enemy hood or not, I stand my ground and represent where I’m from.”

2.5 “My stompin ground”

One night, after spending the day in San Pedro Port, Chino and I were walking over to his place, a garage converted and rented out as a small apartment. We had decided to crash at Chino’s apartment in South Central as it would have taken me hours to get back to the neighborhood I was living in and it was already way past midnight. We had just stepped off
the bus where Chino and some other guy had gotten into a discussion about graffiti, which led to their institutional histories and finally to the mandatory question “where you from?”

I had witnessed a lot of similar meetings during my fieldwork: two complete strangers in a bus stop or a metro car would introduce themselves by their neighborhood names, ask each other where they had done time and end up pondering if they might share any friends, asking about their whereabouts and doings. Just the other night Chino and my neighbor Raul (also known as Chino in his neighborhood), who then met for the first time, had had a long discussion about neighborhood names and identity. Raul, who now has a steady job and is eight years older than Chino, insisted that one should introduce oneself by “the name your mother gave you”, and only if the question comes up should one introduce oneself by one’s neighborhood name. Chino for one felt that he’s Chino from South Central, no matter what. That night on my neighbor’s balcony the discussion meandered out to the kids and the killings, the neighborhoods, the prisons, Nortenos and Surenos, Aztec and Mayan heritage: ultimately to the importance of “knowing where you come from.”

To pick up on our overnight walk, I must admit I had felt a bit uneasy about Chino speaking out loud of his neighborhood affiliation in a crowded bus. As we walked down the street Chino pointed at the street and explained that this was the boundary between the gang he was affiliated with and the neighboring Crips clique. I asked if we were in his neighborhood now: “Nah, that’s on the other side. This is the 49th Street right here.” “Well, do you guys get along?” “Nah, not really.” I asked if we should rather walk across the street in that case: “Hell no! I don’t walk around here, I stomp. This is my fucking stompin ground right here! All the 40s.”
2.6 Segmentary gang politics

“Once I decided to be in that gang I already had enemies. Like I went into a system that already had rivalries. Something was happening apart from me going... something had happened... So, for me it was like, now I represented something being affected, or being attacked by somebody else. So, now I had to back that up. Now I had to retaliate. Cause somebody’s attackin us, so now we gonna attack them. You know what I mean?”

Renee

In her book Wallbangin’ Graffiti and Gangs in L.A. (1999) anthropologist Susan A. Phillips provides a unique description of the structure of inter-gang relationships in L.A. which enabled me to understand the broader symbolic map in and through which Chino and I were travelling that night and within which he so firmly positioned himself.

Phillips has rightly pointed out that in classic gang studies gangs have mainly been discussed as “singular, unconnected entities” (1999, 80). According to Phillips most of the gangs in Los Angeles today are part of a larger system of gangs within which they negotiate feud and alliance, status and prestige (ibid., 79). “Gangs are political in the face of their internal relationships to one another, among the local networks that most immediately influence their everyday lives” (ibid., 78). She suggests that the concept of segmentary opposition – applied to non-state politics from 1930s onward – is applicable in describing the Chicano and Bloods / Crips gang systems as they exist in L.A.

In Evans-Pritchard's classic formulation Nuer tribes are split into segments, which further segment into parts, and so forth. Each of these segments has a distinct territory, name, and what Evans-Pritchard calls “a sentiment.” (1969 [1940], 139-142.) “The members of any segment unite for war against adjacent segments of the same order and unite with these adjacent segments against larger sections” (ibid., 142). Evans-Pritchard underlines that among the Nuer there’s always contradiction in political values for these groups exist only in relation to other groups and the political affiliation of persons is always dependent on the particular situation. According to Phillips all this applies equally to gangs in Los Angeles:

“--- the information from graffiti as well as that garnered through interviews --- demonstrates that both black and Chicano gangs conceive of their system in just such a manner, writing on the wall and on their bodies each element of the segmentation as it becomes more and more broad --- Losing the ‘lineage’ part of the segmentary lineage opposition makes sense when dealing with gangs that can link people
together whether or not they are blood relatives” (ibid., 356).

This compact description of segmentation suffices for now since Phillips applies Evans-Pritchard’s principle fairly loosely, defining segmentary opposition primarily as a “nested form of political affiliation – a structuring of identity that starts with the individual and extends progressively broader, like a series of concentric circles” (1999, 79).

According to Phillips the African American gangs segment from the ground up along the lines of age, street, gang, gang family, region, and finally the primary Blood/Crip designation (ibid., 247, 262). On the primary level Crips outnumber Bloods by about three to one and this unequal composition seems to keep Blood cliques unified against their common enemy. Crips on the other hand are involved in a lot of infighting between different gang and street sets. A good example of the dynamics of fission and fusion in these wars is Kody Scott’s autobiographical account of the war between Eight Tray Gangster Crips and Rollin’ Sixties (part of the Neighborhood Crips gang family) that split the whole Crips momentarily into half in the early 1980s (2000, 55-83).

Phillips writes: “--- the core of gang membership is a street-level identification and ideology. Gang members on the street exist as groups of unified street sets (or cliques) who share a larger neighborhood identity that opposes other gangs – usually their closest neighbors” (ibid., 246). So, we’ll try to get somewhere from Chino’s boast that all the 40s are his stomping ground. Now, Chino told me he belonged to the Fuck That 48th Street Hustlers, a clique of Rollin’ 40s, a Crip gang controlling the streets from 41st till 49th. I don’t have information on how far this area extends to West or East, although Crenshaw Boulevard in the West would be something of a “natural” boundary. According to Chino, the Rollin’ 40s has six cliques:

“You got the Rollin’ 40s Avenue clique, you got the Darkside 40s, you got the Parkside 40s, you got the Western Side 40s, you got the Neighborhood 40s, you got the 48th St. 40s. So, there’s six cliques for just one gang.”

Within these divisions there are also street based divisions, apparent from the exchange of words between Chino and I above. Now these divisions are further complicated by what Susan A. Phillips calls age-graded cliques (ibid., 168). Chino explains:

“All the cliques are different, like there’s cliques within cliques, it’s funny... Like for an example right here it’s the 40s Avenues gang, but Avenues is just a clique, 40s is the gang, you know what I’m sayin?”
In the clique Avenues they got the BGs [“baby gangsters”], the YGs [“young gangsters”], and the OGs [“original gangsters”] from the Avenues clique. With the Neighborhood 40s the same thing, and with the Darkside 40s the same thing, and the Western 40s, and the Parkside 40s, and so on.... So, it’s like BGs, YGs, and OGs in one clique, you know, and everybody gets along – all the cliques.”

These sort of loose progressive age-based sets were reported by Trasher in 1927 as well: “If numbers are sufficient, a differentiation may be made by the boys themselves, on the basis of age, into ‘midgets,’ ‘juniors,’ and ‘seniors,’ or more often just ‘juniors’ and ‘seniors’” (1963, 61). To the best of my knowledge among gangs in Los Angeles these cliques are not defined clearly and while the movement between them is certainly recognized it remains largely unritualized. Age-based cliques simply mark the successive generations introduced to the gang, and while they might often constitute something of a corporate group within the gang, age-based cliques retain an intimate relationship with the older members.

Following Phillips’ model Chino could probably be positioned as a YG from 48th Street clique of Rollin’ 40s gang, which in turn is to the best of my knowledge affiliated (at least to some extent) with the Neighborhood Crips gang family located in South Central and belonging to Crips (obviously). What complicates the matter is that Chino says Rollin’ 40s to consist of six cliques, and it also remains obscure to which of these 48th Street falls into (the 48th Street 40s would seem obvious, but later Chino talks about the 40s Avenues clique “right here”). As in the classic model of segmentary opposition applied here the structural relations between different segments are maintained by feud and warfare (Evans-Pritchard 1969, 190) I asked Chino who they fought against in their neighborhood. He answered broadly:

“Usually we fight against people who have killed one of us - one of the gang members you know? Back and forth: you kill one of us, we kill one of yours. Just neighborhoods that wanna start beefin and stuff like that. It’s everybody against everybody – everybody killa – you know what I’m sayin? You know, you got CK [“Crip killa”], you got BK [“Blood killa”], and then you got everybody killa. Out here we fight against any- and everybody, and anybody who wants some is gonna get some. That’s how it goes. You don’t punk out for nobody.”

My material around the issue of segmentation is scarce and no systematic inquiry into the issue was possible during my brief fieldwork. From now on I will rely on Susan A. Phillips’ material, even if this tentative attempt to apply the model she has outlined seems to imply that the different levels of segmentation shouldn’t be conceived as too lucid or clearly defined.
Among Chicano gangs the primary division is made between Norteños and Sureños referring to Northern and Southern California. Unlike in the case of Bloods and Crips, the Sureños in Los Angeles are not in the vicinity of their Norteño enemies, and thus don’t split on the city streets according to a binary division in the manner of African American gangs. The division is based on competing prison gangs: Mexican Mafia (or “La Eme”) based in Southern California and Nuestra Familia (“Our Family”) based in Northern California. (Ibid., 245, 149-150.) “With the powerful emergence of La Eme in the mid-1960s, and the subsequent development of Nuestra Familia, street gangs in various parts of California began to claim either ‘North’ or ‘South’, and to affiliate at the street level with the symbols and categories of those prison entities” (ibid., 150). According to Phillips this division is rooted in ideological differences over language, heritage, and race relations as the Sureños continue to speak only Spanish as a point of pride, and refuse to ally with African-Americans in the prisons as the Norteños – who in turn emphasize their Mexican American identity – do (ibid., 152). In an interview Sonny told me about the origins of this divide, a sort of a “founding event” I heard many times from different people:

“It all started over a pair of shower shoes. Somebody stole a pair of shower shoes and then they whooped a guy from East L.A. and that’s when they all got together... They whooped the guys from the South... I mean from the North and that started that. Then it grew, it grew in time.”

A similar founding event can also be traced back in the case of Bloods and Crips (see Alonso 1999, 94-95).

Phillips argues that: “Beyond this primary North-South division gangs fragment to smaller institutionally derived divisions of area codes” (1999, 156). In an interview I was told that the only area code that matters is 213 which used to designate all of Southern California and was associated generally with Los Angeles (now it contains only Downtown L.A. and its immediate surroundings), but Phillips’ material and knowledge surely exceed mine on this matter as well. Under these divisions come regions (e.g. Harbor Area), individual gangs, and their street and age-based cliques, in a similar manner to African-American gangs as presented above.

The similarities between the gang systems in Los Angeles as presented by Susan A. Phillips and Evans-Pritchard’s classic ethnography (1969 [1940]) seem obvious. In both cases we are dealing with an acephalous system consisting of segmented territorialized groups with a
tendency towards fission and fusion. The relations of these groups are maintained by feud and warfare, and even though there are influential men, their leadership is limited and depends on the willingness of others to follow rather than any formal authority. (Phillips 1999, 78-81; Evans-Pritchard 1969, 139-192.) Additionally, instead of leopard-skin chiefs we have OGs (“original gangsters”) retired from “the game” who can mediate local conflicts but in the absence of law and government have little authority outside this role (Evans-Pritchard 1969, 172-176; Martinez 2003, 95-115). Of course my intention is not to size up the tenability of a direct analogy here but merely to recognize the parallels pointed out by Phillips to highlight aspects of the social organization we are dealing with. But at this point I need to define more accurately what is meant by the principle of segmentation in this study.

2.7 Honor

“You ain’t gonna let anyone come that ain’t from your neighborhood come over here to your neighborhood and write over your name, and you’re standing there watchin him do it and you don’t do nothing? Well, who’s gonna get disrespected? I am! For letting him write his name over my name and I didn’t do nothing about it. Or writin over my neighborhood. That’s where it all... you know?”

Sonny

“And it comes down to that word called ‘respect.’ And then, if that word ain’t known around the world... Then I don’t know what to tell you bro. Respect everybody knows.”

Noel

We already noted that Phillips wanted to “lose the lineage part” and she follows Paul Dresch in insisting that it is the principle of segmentation itself that is still useful in describing the way people conceive social relations (1999, 356). This is of course entirely sound. Evan-Pritchard himself stated that the lineage system functions within the territorial system which is “always the dominant variable in its relation to other social systems” (1969, 265). Although Phillips refers to Dresch she doesn’t follow up on his work to systematically elaborate the analogy drawn. What I personally find to be the most original and socially grounded argument in gang studies so far has gone largely unnoticed, possibly overwhelmed by the ethnographical emphasis of Phillips’ book.

Drawing his material from territorialized tribes in Upper Yemen, Paul Dresch
abandons the idea of an analysis in terms of solidary groups or balance of power and instead describes a system of relations which is based on the maintenance of sharaf, “honor presented to the outside world” (1986, 309-311). According to Dresch the segmentary structure is of honor, not of cohesive groups (ibid., 315).

“Honor is the quality par excellence that can only exist in opposition. A tribesman cannot have honor by himself (in the Yemeni case he needs someone to defend it from), nor can a tribe or section, and sections or tribes have little substance apart from this honor that their members share” (ibid., 311. Emphasis mine).

When tribal borders (including not only territory but members and people protected by the tribe as well) are violated, there is a call for collective action, even though Dresch notes that there’s hardly a “massing effect” (as it is only transient groups of men, not all the members of a section, doing the fighting), nor can one predict the outcome of particular events (ibid., 311-314). “The type of events are specified in part by the structure, but the course of events is not and may cross tribal categories in almost any direction” (ibid., 314).

I believe it’s a very open and flexible principle outlined here, which still stays true to Evans-Pritchard’s original idea of segmentation. Evans-Pritchard did argue that instead of social masses concepts should “denote relations, defined in terms of social situations, and relations between these relations” (1969, 266). Drawing from Dumont, Dresch argues that people don’t behave, they act, and “the approach in terms of segmentation characterizes the forms of action available” (1986, 318). The classic paradigm resurfaces here, but I remain uninterested in immersing myself in the ontological complexities of the relation between the individual actor and social structure, which fall outside the object of my study. The following formulation by Dresch is wholly adequate for the study in hand:

“The actor himself (the tribesman) is constituted by the possession of honor, which itself, as we have seen, is a segmentary quality. --- Far from being given, the actor is constituted in accord with the same structural principle as the categories with which he works and the forms of action available to him. People may alter their place in the set of categories, but they cannot be without a place. To be a tribesman is to be part of a set opposed to other sets” (ibid., 319).

It seems necessary to clear up my argument at this point. I believe that Susan A. Phillips’ data is consistent enough in showing that, in the absence of a better model, the principle of segmentation is a feasible, although admittedly vague, theoretical tool to apply in describing the interrelations of gangs in Los Angeles. Marshall Sahlins has noted that
segmentation and complementary opposition are “very widespread – nearly universal – features of human social organization” (1961, 322). Paul Dresch has also pointed out the hopeless abstractness of the concept of segmentation:

“It cannot be derived from observation on the model of perceiving terrain, and it transcends the perception of any informant, or group of them: indeed, it orders within a scheme any number of groups who may seldom if ever lay their eyes on each other” (1988, 52).

To a certain extent gangs in Los Angeles might actually prove to be an exception to this rule as Susan A. Phillips bases her argument mainly on gang graffiti and tattoos, in which the different “layers of identity” are explicitly laid out, which also curbs Sahlins’ critique of the uselessness of the concept (which admittedly regains relevance when I move my analysis beyond the gang systems).

With Dresch’s formulation of segmentary sociality in mind, I hold that against common knowledge gangs do not fight so much over territory and economic disputes as they fight over respect/honor. Divisions such as Bloods/Crips, which fuel warfare, seem to have no other explanation than history and idea: “Their warfare is based on geographical proximity at the same time as it is driven by ideological positions” (Phillips 1999, 245). I’m not suggesting that there can be no pragmatic issues concerned, but that these conflicts take place in historically formed categories which hold considerable ideological weight for gang members who are raised into the system. All the people I interviewed agreed that fights between gangs were ultimately fought over respect. According to Renee:

“I know that in society, like the way society looks at it, it’s stupid to fight over what you’re fightin. You know, initially I guess it’s turf. So they say, but it’s not really that, you know... It’s a lot about respect and you’re kinda born into it.”

It is important to note that gang territories hardly change as a result of these “turf wars” (Alonso 1999; Phillips 1999, 176-177). As Phillips has presented: “Though tied to neighborhood economics and sociality --- such struggles are negotiations of local politics and identity” (1999, 177).

Evans-Pritchard also touched on the issue of honor. He characterized the Nuer as deeply democratic as they shun any authority and noticed their proneness to fight over the smallest of insults. Evans-Pritchard also mentioned the general value in which courage and skill in fighting are held, and how these values are passed on from generation to generation. (1969, 151, 181-184.) He drew a connection between these traits and the social system of
the Nuer: “-- the ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character” (ibid., 181). Speaking of the importance of the duel in the absence of overarching authority, Evans-Pritchard states: “There is no other way of settling a dispute and a man's courage is his only immediate protection against aggression” (ibid., 151). I believe that anyone who has familiarized oneself with gang members (active or inactive) in Los Angeles to any degree can easily note a similarity in ethos here. Raul commented on the lack of hierarchy and order among L.A. gangs:

“Here we go against each other. And here it’s a lotta people. And here it’s to the point where, you know, you tell me something. ‘Who the fuck are you to tell me what to do? You don’t know me. I do my own shit.’ And that's how we are, that's what makes us gangs. We rebel against each other.”

Anthropologist Frank Henderson Stewart has characterized the type of a code of honor outlined here as a horizontal, extra-legal “reflexive honor”, where a failure to respond to an insult in an appropriate manner will immediately diminish or destroy the honor of the insulted party (1994, 64-66). Whatever the proximate reason of the dispute may be, or whether it occurs between persons or groups, the underlying issue is respect/honor, and more importantly, honor between sufficiently similar parties in an equal, horizontal relationship:

“If a homie got lit up [shot] or... you know? Right away we need to retaliate, right away, you know? Nobody’s gonna spread the word the next day: ‘Hey these fools got lit up.’ We’re gonna look bad enough. The same day we’re gonna get back and make sure these fools get theirs, ‘cause as soon as they start talkin about it they better talk, they better...” (Renee)

2.8 Gangs and the reproduction of social relations

“Cause at the end of the day we all represent the same shit, you know? And you know, at the end of the day we still all from the same place. Whether you did it back then and I did it now, and I’m doin it now, it’s still the same category, we still representin the same thing. So, we look at it like: ‘Ok, we’re the same shit.’ We just pass it on from generation to generation to generation.”

Raul

“Military service for the ‘hood, same as my daddy.”

An LA OG to Mike Davis. Davis 2008, xi.

I find Trasher’s early study of Chicago gangs to be a source of continuing importance because of the more mundane aspects of gangs that he highlights. Besides recognizing the
role of inherent human sociality in his analysis, Thrasher argued that interstitial groups such as gangs are elemental in placing individuals in relation with the larger social milieu (1963, 66). Through initiation and progression through age-based cliques gangs accomplish exactly this.

Mike Davis has described gang membership as “intergenerational rite of passage, resonant with patriotic pride” (2008, xi). Indeed, as we have seen, many gangs in Los Angeles have become synonymous with local identity. The people I interviewed had just grown into the gang which usually had a long tradition in the respective neighborhood. A member of a gang acquires a street name and his/her body is usually marked with gang insignia. Tattoos are perhaps the most concrete and publicly visible sign of gang membership. In considering the significance of gang tattoos I follow Pierre Clastres who has discussed how such initiatory markings on the body function as a hindrance to forgetting: “In other words, society dictates its laws to its members. It inscribes the text of the law on the surface of their bodies. No one is supposed to forget the law on which the social life of the tribe is based” (2007 [1974], 186. Emphasis in the original). In Clastres’ analysis this law inscribed on an individual body differs from the written down law of the state. In a local group level society with no central administrational apparatus or a judicial system it is first and foremost a prohibition of inequality:

“They [initiates] consent to accept themselves for what they are from that time forward: full members of the community. Nothing more, nothing less. And they are irreversibly marked as such” (ibid., 185. Emphasis in the original).

Such an interpretation is definitely in concert with my reading of the acephalous and segmentary organization of gangs. Tattooing is a process through which, in a very concrete and enduring manner, youth become embedded in their respective gang and consequently in a historical system of social relationships which precedes their own participation and which is immediately present in the urban settings they live in. Gangs exist only in relation to other gangs and the interrelations between these groups are based on honor acquired through rivalry. An actor is constituted by the possession of this honor and acquires it mainly by engaging in the endemic gang warfare.

The interrelations within and between neighborhood gangs are reproduced from generation to generation. The role of the age-based system can be understood as analogous and compensatory, although not substitutive, to the school system in the reproduction of
societal relations, which axiomatically happens on multiple levels. The geographically based broader levels of segmentation become meaningful through time in intensification and extension of social interaction and in correctional facilities where gang members from all over the city are brought together.

The strength of Phillips’ approach in terms of segmentation lies not only in that it recognizes the way in which individuals and individual gangs are embedded (and constituted through these relations) in a wider context of gang relationships, but also in that it allows an analysis which recognizes the manner in which these relations unfurl to a broader scheme of social and political relations. This is what I attempt to do in the next chapter.
3. The system

“People think we’re like cowboys and Indians. Hell yeah, in a different way. Modernized. Cowboys and Indians... We’re still gettin fucked. You know, cowboys and Indians fucked each others. Indians and Indians fucked each other. To take power over land. ‘Wooo, my god is the sun, your god is a rock,’ ‘Well my rock lives down here on earth...’ You know what I’m sayin? Disputes. Over stupid stuff. But then when you had the cowboy comin in: [mimicking a white manner of speaking] ‘I reckon, I don’t care if your sun is a... your god is the sun or the sun is your god, I don’t really care. What I care is like: I’m the boss now, I’m your god. Believe in Jesus Christ cause he was white just like me! Yee haaaw!’ You get what I’m sayin? And you start believin to stuff like that, you know?”

Noel

Up to now I have attempted to address the fact that gangs are more of an expression of inherent human sociality than individual pathological drives. I paraphrased Susan A. Phillips’ study and hinted that by considering gangs through the principle of segmentation (as redefined by Dresch) we can describe their interrelations and articulate their existence in relation to the larger social system without falling back on the psychosocial explanations mainly concerned with explaining pathologized motivations of individual gang members. I also noted that gangs are sites of social reproduction, through which individuals are placed into a system of expansive social interrelations in and through which the gang and the individual are constituted as socially meaningful actors.

The common meetings between strangers I witnessed appeared to me to attest to the fact that the individuals concerned do recognize a certain common relation of similarity in relation to the larger society. This was also apparent in speech in the form of a shared “oppositional category.” On a crude level of conception white people, the government (and the city administration as its representative), the economic system, and the police seem to merge into a seamless whole which encloses the more elaborated differences in the segmentary gang system. For an example, it was always the first assumption that I was a policeman, which, even though quickly transformed into a running joke, remained something of a natural niche for a white person like myself to occupy. By “the system” I am referring here to an extremely vague linguistic category which clearly stood out in the interviews and which was used to refer to the “order of things” outside the familiar neighborhoods, but could be equally used to designate something more concrete and
singular, mainly the incarceration system.

In the present chapter I will focus on the relationship between gangs and the state. My discussion is three-fold: At first I will examine how the segmentary gang politics unfold beyond the neighborhood. This shifts the attention to the incarceration system which, aside from playing a consequential role in the lives of gang members, is an institutional setting where gang members have historically organized themselves into broader alliances based on ethnicity, or explicitly oppositional political groups. Secondly, I will focus on the situational tendency of L.A. gangs towards gang unification in relation to what gang members conceive as the common enemy, namely the police. Finally, an organizational symmetry between the police and gangs, suggested by the people interviewed, leads me to consider the dynamics between segmentary social organization and the state on a more general level.

3.1 Beyond the neighborhood

“You know, so, there was a time they picked on us, on our culture, on our race, on our values, on our lifestyle. So we created, we created a system like, let’s fight the system back. But we don’t have no money to fight the system back. In a way let’s do what we gotta do and survive, but if they fuck with one of us we’re gonna make a pack, you know? Like a pack of wolves, make a pack and if they fuck with us we gotta do what we gotta do. You know what I’m sayin? We ain’t fuckin with nobody, don’t fuck with us.”

Noel

The discussion on the balcony between Chino and Raul sparked off by the issue of names touched on a variety of relations meaningful in their lives. The discussion began from the youngsters eager to “put in work” for the gang and earn their respect, moved on to the prison divisions of Nortenos and Surenos, and finally to the Aztec and Mayan heritage.

What was posed against the segmentary gang politics by Raul that night was unity in terms of shared origins. In an interview conducted later he explained: “We all come from the same place dude. And we hate each other and we divide each other when truly this was our land. It’s just for them to work us, to work their system. You know?” A similar point of view was shared by many of the people I encountered, like Alejandro, an ex-gang member in his thirties, who worked as a project coordinator in an organization helping gang youth: “But see, a lotta people in gangs really lose their identity. People that are born here in the U.S. and are Mayan descendant. I say I’m Mayan descendant. When people ask me, I
answer them I’m Mayan descendant.” For the purposes of my analysis I adhere to my analytical perspective here and treat these voiced positions as situational political values, as a “set opposed to other sets.”

As already mentioned, Raul worked steadily and had moved out of his neighborhood to live with his girlfriend: “I choose, I try to choose... or, I try not to, you know, involve myself where I might come to a confrontation --- But if somebody fucks with me, that still comes out of all of us cause that’s what we are – we’re gladiators.” In his 28 years he had served eight years in prison, had got shot nine times, and was presently more detached from the gang life than Chino in his twenties. Chino spoke up for the youngsters in gangs and impressed on their duty to “put in work” for a killed homie, although they both, like almost everyone I spoke with, agreed on the ultimate insanity and destructiveness of gang warfare. Commenting on the recent shootings in the neighborhood Raul concluded: “I understand these fools out here, but then again they don't know that they'll never see sunlight in their whole life.”

3.2 In and out

“No, the number should be bigger! 25 out of a hundred. Seriously. I grew up here, I see, I mean I read, I watch the news and see homies gettin locked up. I think they have the figures wrong.”

Alejandro

The above is Alejandro’s reaction when I told him about a study I had just read which found that more than one in every 100 adults in the United States is now confined in jail or prison. Actually, according to the study, the nationwide numbers for Hispanic males between the ages of 20 to 34 is 1 in 25 while for Black males the same figure is an astounding 1 in 9! (Pew Center on the States 2008.) One can only imagine what the figures would be in neighborhoods like Ramona Gardens or where Alejandro had grown up.

The California state prison population has grown nearly 500 percent between 1982 and 2000 and African-Americans and Latinos make up two-thirds of the state’s 160,000 prisoners (Gilmore 2007, 7). This expansion of the “penal state” mirrors the national development: between 1975 and 2000 the United States became the world leader in incarceration as the number of people behind bars grew five-fold. The introduction of legislation, which sponsors sentence-enhancing and creates a plethora of new crimes, has
effectively filled the incarceration system in California (ibid., 107-113).

Gangs are in the very center of this development. The STEP (Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention) act of 1988 *de facto* criminalized gang membership and directed all local law enforcement agencies to identify "suspected gang members" and "gang associates" and enroll them in a state-wide database called CalGang (Davis 2006, 282; Gilmore 2007, 107; Siegel 2003, 223-224). The RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations) act has been expanded to include gangs as criminal organizations and to enable trials of juveniles as adults. The result has been an increase in the number of incarcerations and longer sentences for gang members (Martinez 2003, 113). At the moment of writing there are also 37 gang injunctions in effect in Los Angeles targeting a total of 57 gangs (LAPD 2009). These injunctions outlaw named individuals in a designated area from congregating together, talking on the street, littering, or remaining in public for more than five minutes (Siegel 2003, 220-221). They also prohibit wearing certain clothes and making certain hand gestures. Recently a young man was charged with violating an injunction and held on $15,000 bail as he flashed a gang sign in a photo taken with Santa Claus at a shopping center (Los Angeles Times 2008b). Together with the prevalence of violence in the streets these measures have effectively turned some of the respective neighborhoods into ghost towns by criminalizing social interaction. In community organization meetings one could hear stories of family members arrested for talking to each other.

These present-day measures were already foreseeable in the statement made by a former City Attorney Ira Reiner in 1982, which neatly sums up the current policy as well: "The objective is to use each occasion that a gang member is arrested for a crime, no matter how minor, as a means to remove them from the streets for as long as possible" (as quoted in Davis 2006, 282).

As a matter of fact the previous subtitle “Beyond the neighborhood” might not be the most adequate when discussing a horizon which opens up in the incarceration system. Gang members spend a significant part of their life behind bars, and like Loïc Wacquant has asserted, today in the U.S. the penal system and the ghetto seem to have merged into a single carceral continuum (2000). Although Wacquant restricts his discussion to African-Americans, his depiction of "--- a redundant population of younger black men (and
increasingly women) who circulate in closed circuit between its [carceral continuum] two poles in a self-perpetuating cycle of social and legal marginality with devastating personal and social consequences” (ibid., 384) is completely tenable among Chicano and numerous other “minority” populations in Los Angeles today. It is an especially accurate summation of the itinerant lives of gang members.

Mynell’s case is representative and worth going through at length. When I talked with Mynell he was just released from jail. Rosie had been helping Mynell for a while with a variety of practical issues. She had got him sneakers and clothes the day before as he didn’t have any family to turn to in such matters. Mynell was feeling markedly uncomfortable outside after spending more or less the last eight years behind bars. Due to a past assault by a guard during a riot in jail Mynell was wearing a hearing aid. Just before he was released he had failed to attend an institution count and had got brutalized by a guard again:

“Handcuffed me, take me in a room somewhere, hit me in the face with a flashlight, stomped on me a couple of times. Almost bled to death but it was either let me bleed and die, or take me to a hospital, so he took me to the hospital. --- Ever since that I have serious, you know, weird headaches on and off like something is squeezin my brain, you know?”

This time he had ended up in jail for violating his parole.

"I was stayin at this little halfway house in a Crip neighborhood. I’m not a Crip - I’m a Piru. We Bloods. So, got shot couple of times over there, got jumped, you know, stuff like that. I just got tired of it. I kept tellin my parole officer like: ‘I’m in a gang zone over here, I can’t be over here.’ She wouldn’t move me so I just left. I went on a run basically.”

The idea behind these halfway houses is to facilitate people’s reintegration to society and to reduce the risk of recidivism. Insensitive to gang boundaries, this policy was accomplishing just the opposite in Mynell’s case. Eventually Mynell got caught:

“I was just drivin – I was in my turf though – I’m from Compton. So I was out there on my way to take my girlfriend and her kids some breakfast, police pulled me over, ran my warrants, ran my name, found out I had a warrant, found out that I was wanted, and took me in. So, I ended back in the system.”

Now that he had been released he was placed in the same halfway house again. Mynell tried to keep a low profile in the area in order to not get caught in a situation with the local Crips. He avoided wearing burgundy which is the color of his gang, the Pirus, but was also cautious not to wear blue, a Crip color:

“So, what I do is I kinda wear nice buttoned-up collar shirts... My glasses look as if... what they call a
‘square.’ So that way I don’t bring the attention to me, because if I bring the attention to me I’m not gonna back down.”

In spite of all, Mynell wore his gang colors inconspicuously. The frames of his glasses were burgundy and under his low-keyed disguise he flashed his burgundy boxer shorts.

Initially Mynell got into ‘the system’ when he was thirteen years old:

“Yeah, my neighborhood, I was carryin a twelve gauge around, you know... Puttin in work on my enemies, tryin to kill my enemies. So, I seen an enemy, a familiar face. So, I ran over to him. Asked him where he was from, he tell me and I shot him, shot him with a twelve gauge.”

Prosecuted as a minor, Mynell was locked up till he was 18.

“So then I got out. Stand out for a good two weeks. Stole a car and had a gun ready to go kill somebody, at least that’s what I wanted to do at the time. End up crashin the car, police end up being behind me, I jumped out, I ran. They caught me, took the gun, towed the car, took me to jail. So I did another year on that, the violation itself.”

After he was released Mynell ended up violating his parole again and went to county jail for 30 days. He was able to stay out for about a year and a half before he got back in:

“My parole officer locked me up for two weeks before cause she thought I had a dirty drug test, but I didn’t. So she had to let me out. After that, stayed out and then I ended up violatin again which brought me to jail and got me out today.”

The last time I heard, Mynell was back in jail. He had constant problems with his parole officer who, besides refusing to relocate him to a different neighborhood, made him take parenting classes even though Mynell had no children. Eventually he decided to serve the rest of his sentence behind bars instead.

Noel had been in and out for a good part of his life as well. He had fought a murder case for which he was facing 35-to-life and, against all odds, won.

“Like the most time I’ve been incarcerated was like 3 years and a half, you know? So before that was like two years and six months here, six months there, two weeks here, you know? I’m so... when you talk to me about time – I could do time.”

Among the people I met plenty of similar stories could be reproduced. People are usually introduced to the penal system at a relatively young age and consequently marked for life, like Chino:

“Man, I’ve been in the system since I was about 12 years old. You know? Usually like the school districts in Los Angeles have ties with LAPD, so, when I was in the 6th grade I so-called committed my first crime by bringin a knife to the school, you know? They tried me and convicted me of a crime, you know?”
3.3 The prison reshuffle

Incarceration does not put an end to gang conflict. In fact according to Hagedorn, the prison should be seen as a quintessential institution behind contemporary street gangs: “Rather than prison being a place to send gang members in an attempt to break up the gang, gangs have adapted and have used the prison to advance their interests” (2008, 12). Similarly Phillips has argued that gangs have actually subverted the prison system by making punishment just another aspect of gang life (1999, 213). One of the most repeated concerns I heard during my stay in Los Angeles was that many young people were actually eager to go into prison as part of their “gang career.” Alex Sanchez, a former gang member and the present director of Homies Unidos, talked about this aspect of the prison experience:

“When you come out you come out a new man. You come out with new knowledge about the system that you’re part of. And you come out and everybody idolizes you and all the younger kids look up to you, cause that’s where they wanna get. They wanna... the ultimate goal is to go to prison and to come out and be called a veterano, a veteran.”

Often, getting locked up signifies a step up in a gang career and earns one respect when back in the neighborhood.

Behind bars the warfare continues but the neighborhood based segmentary gangs are united into broader ethnicity-based divisions: “Prison forces people into hostile, racially based situations where they must turn to one another for protection. This process only cements the relationship of street gangs to high-level prison groups, which are based on existing gang networks” (ibid., 70).

“Doesn’t matter what street corner you’re from, what neighborhood you represent. Either you’re Southside, you’re Northerner, you’re Crip, you’re Blood, or you’re White Supremacist, or even Chinese, cause it all becomes a race war” (Raul).

Even though I’m not in a position to go into prison politics in-depth, the fundamental borderlines of the conflict can be laid out. Mynell explained the situation from black perspective:

“Well, in here you go to prison, your color: red, blue, burgundy – it don’t matter no more because we have to stick together. So we put that aside, we still where we from, but we put it aside and we unite as blacks and we go against the Hispanics which are the Southerners. And then we go against the white, like the White Supremacists and Nazi Low-Riders and all of them.”

When serving time the Sureno gangs unite with the white prison gangs while African
Americans unite with the Nortenos. Mynell continues:

“We had a real bad riot so I went up North and then it was still us against Hispanics, but this time it's Hispanics against the Northerners too. So, Northerners are allies when up North.”

The violence within the “system” can actually be even more striking than in the streets. To Raul serving time had been an eye-opening experience:

“I seen a lotta shit go down in there... I seen fuckin people get sliced up; I've seen some dude gettin thrown over a pier... And it was like, I started thinkin bout it like, you know, what the fuck are we fightin for, what's really goin on for us, you know?”

Raul's extended description of his personal experience brings us back to the theme of unification and shared perspective introduced at the beginning of this chapter:

“You know, I started lookin at the people that were takin care of us supposedly, all the guards and, you know? And how they used to say like: 'Ah,' you know, 'tryin to keep you in the animal house,' and shit like that. I started thinkin bout it like: ‘Fuck that, I'm a human being!’ And if you really look at it, all these motherfuckers are being paid because we’re here and it’s just a cycle that we put each other... that we go through every day. And I started realizin, and I started like thinkin for myself, I started pretty much just rebellin against like every... like just the system, just the way the system was ran.”

It is in prison where many former gang members and present day “street activists” acquire their knowledge of history and politics and their first experiences as organizers and political activists. (Martinez 2003, 104-105.) Importantly among the gangs in Los Angeles, cultural nationalism and other political movements (Nation of Islam, Marxist/Maoist groups, and other political rights groups) orientated beyond the immediate neighborhood factionalism, flourish mainly within the incarceration system, although both the Chicano and black gangs in the street have flirted with overt political participation from time to time (Phillips 1999, 92). An obvious reason for this can be found in the fact that prison gangs developed mainly after the repression of the 1960s social movements when the leaders of radical political organizations on the streets (often gang members of renown) were locked up. John M. Hagedorn’s statement about gang formation in Chicago, Cape Town and Rio De Janeiro applies to L.A. as well: “the incarceration of gang leaders after the repression of social movements coincided with spectacular increase in the number and sophistication of gangs” (2008, 13). According to Phillips the period of incarceration with the Chicano gangs merely means the extension of the scope of gangster identity already riddled with cultural nationalistic bearings, while the black gangs have their own formal system of prison
affiliation. African-American prison organizations such as Black Guerilla Family and Blood Line Soldiers are reportedly militant in their organization and interestingly even learn Swahili. (ibid., 295; Martinez 2003, 104.) Understandably not too much information is available on these prison groupings, but in general we can follow Phillips who argues: “Prison organizations are strict, more hierarchical, and more fundamentally political” (1999, 295).

The older generation of gang members (OGs or veteranos) are usually behind gang unification movements, the relevance of which can easily escape the younger generation engaged more intensively in the street level politics (ibid., 166). Such a generational difference in perspective was easily discernible in the discussion on the balcony between Raul and Chino. Few gang members grow old in prison without reflecting on larger societal issues around them. When back in the neighborhood, some of them are eager to educate the younger generation of gang members about the social evils shaping their lives. The larger political context of their lives, oftentimes inessential in the lived realities in the neighborhood, gains relevance in the incarceration system, in the very concrete presence of the political authority of the state. Discussing black prison groupings Susan A. Phillips states:

“The issues they preach and the relationship to U.S. politics they address find daily use in an environment where people are taken out of local neighborhood situations and forced into direct contact with the larger enemy - the guards they still call ‘the police’ - that limits their movements and activities by keeping them locked up” (ibid., 298).

3.4 “The biggest gang in L.A.”

When I returned home one day I met Juan and his friend from the bakery sitting in our front yard on blocks of concrete in the shade listening to music, washing their working clothes, and emptying cans of Modello as chatty as usual. This time they were accompanied by a third character who didn’t really seem to fit in. A cholo in his mid-twenties was waiting to meet Luis who wasn’t home yet and was killing time conversing with the older men. After a shake of hands and an enquiry into the cause of my presence in the neighborhood this stranger lifted his shirt to show me the tattoos on his back to let me know who he was. This introduction was followed by a loud and aggressive tirade on how one should never say anything to the police despite their manner of asking. Annoyed and intimidated I tried to
convince the man that I had nothing to do with the police. I understood some of his ire when he demonstrated how the police had twisted his friend's arm behind his back when he had failed to talk to them. While imitating the exchange of words he continued to enact the tightening of the policeman's hold till he was about to fall on his face, then he stood up to switch roles, pointed his index finger to where his friend's head would have been in this pantomime and simulated a gunshot sound.

It is difficult to escape Elroyesque overtones when discussing L.A.'s finest, and one hardly finds a need to, although a crusade to bash idealistic views on the workings of the police would be a ridiculously bright-eyed venture, and a tad overdue, even among the most well-bred of social scientists. In his brilliant *City of Quartz* (2006 [1990]) Mike Davis has provided an exhaustive (even if by now outdated) summary of LAPD's dubious semi-military war on gangs and its effects in the respective communities (ibid., 267-322). What I intend to do here is to discuss LAPD from the point of view of the people I met: as the set opposed to other sets, in other words, as “the biggest gang in L.A.”

The notion of police as a gang stems more from direct personal experiences than any betrayed ideals of law enforcement. Chino told me:

> “There's times when I haven't done anything and they approach me and I've got jacked [robbed] by the police. There's times I've got beaten up, got left in a random neighborhood for me to get caught slippin [off guard] by some other 'hood.”

Transporting gang members (or people identified as such) to enemy neighborhoods seems to be a popular practice (with often severe consequences) among the police. Minority youth and gang members are always suspect, and open to interference by the police, to the point that some people were actually saving receipts whenever they bought something to have an alibi ready for the police. People from the school I volunteered in were hesitant to drive me back to my neighborhood on Thursday nights (termed as “CRASH [Community Resources against Street Hoodlums – LAPD’s gang unit] nights,”) because of the heightened level of police harassment during those days of the week.

The analogy between gangs and the police was drawn without hesitation and the notion was generally deemed to be quite self-evident: “The LAPD – the biggest gang in L.A. You know? Carry guns, wear black suits, drivin black and white cars. They have their uniform, we have ours, and that's the way it goes” (Raul). Chino among others told me how
the police were also part of the underground economy:

“They recycle the system, they tax people. They’re part of this crime cycle. Lotta police officers are not respected out here. Everybody knows that they’re the bad guys... They try to point their finger at us and we point our fingers back at them, you know what I’m sayin?”

Mynell adds to the analogy:

“Yeah, in the county jail the police are our worst enemies cause there they… that’s their turf. I look at the police as a gang too. But they’re more legit with their... they have a badge, that their gang. They pretty much do whatever they want inside because we’re in their turf, you know?”

The jail is recognized as the police’s neighborhood and the legitimacy of the law enforcement is after a brief hesitation connected to possessing a badge – a gang symbol among others. However, gangs in Los Angeles don’t regularly fight with the police even if they readily draw a parallel between LAPD and other gangs and even if there definitely would be honor to be attained by directly confronting them.

The analogy is not far-fetched though. In 1999 LAPD’s Rampart Division’s CRASH unit was found to have engaged in bank robberies, drug deals, and organized prostitution rings (Zilberg 2004, 759-780). “Officers were also accused of wounding and killing unarmed gang members and planting guns and drugs on their victims” (ibid., 780). By the end of the year 2000, seventy LAPD officers had cases pending against them. The hard-core of LAPD’s anti-gang unit had their own tattoo; they partied after successful missions, and rewarded killings and assaults with plaques thus acting almost as a mirror image of the gangs they fought against (Rodriguez 2001, 87). Sudhir Venkatesh also found the police in Chicago routinely collecting protection money and robbing the local gangs (2008, 219-246). He was told by a local social worker who warned him not to write about the police: “You need to understand that there are two gangs in the projects. The police are also a gang, but they really have the power --- Never, never, never piss off the police” (2008, 238-239. Emphasis in the original). Two weeks later Venkatesh’ car was broken into by the police (ibid., 239; 243).

The enmity between Latino and African-American communities and the LAPD goes back a long way. “Since the days of the legendary Chief William Parker in the early 1950s, the LAPD has been regarded by LA’s black community as a redneck army of occupation” (Davis 2006, 271). In fact, Davis’ apparently hyperbolical description of LAPD’s reputation in the 1950s can be taken almost literally: In Parker's time LAPD actually went
to the South to recruit whites who had been in the U.S. Army or Marine Corps and shared the chief's animosity towards racial mixing (Davis in documentary film *Bastards of the Party* [2005]). It is not a rhetorical overkill to describe LAPD’s policing strategy as an “occupation:”

“As part of its ‘Astro’ program LAPD helicopters maintain an average nineteen-hour-per-day vigil over 'high crime areas,' tactically coordinated to patrol car forces, and exceeding even the British Army’s aerial surveillance of Belfast [written around 1990]. To facilitate ground-air synchronization, thousands of residential rooftops have been painted with identifying street numbers, transforming the aerial view of the city into a huge police grid” (ibid., 252).

After I left the Watts Labor Action Committee meeting in South Central L.A. I could count six helicopters hovering above the area with one glance.

In terms of prevailing attitudes Davis’ comment still applies equally well to Latino communities like Ramona Gardens. When Jerry and I stood in the middle of the housing projects ready to set out he told me what I heard so many times during my fieldwork: “What if all the gangs in L.A. got together and start to fight the police? They wanted themselves a gang war and they got one.” In many neighborhoods gang unification against the police has been a recurrent course of events and a continuous daydream since the days of the Watts Riots in 1965 when old enemies like the Slausons and the Gladiators united against the LAPD and the National Guard (Davis 2006, 297). According to Phillips this development was also visible on the walls of the neighborhoods as overtly political graffiti appeared alongside the cryptic gang markings of the day (1999, 298). As I have already presented, a similar development with the Chicano gangs occurred a bit later.

The 1992 Riots had a similar effect. Just weeks before the events a truce had been negotiated between Bloods and Crips in different neighborhoods and during the riots gangs were negotiating truces on their own. Although this truce proved to be short lived I believe it’s accurate to say that the momentum of the riots helped to carry it on as long as it did despite the continuous hampering of these efforts by the police. (Ibid., 302.) Too young to have participated in the events himself, Chino told me about 1992 with enthusiasm:

“You could look outside the window and see one part of town gettin burnt up and you could look far way and see like clouds of smoke and stuff like that... Everybody had the idea to retaliate against the pigs, the police, which is the bigger gang, the biggest gang out here, biggest gang in the whole country.”

According to Phillips in 1992: “Gang members became less concerned with neighborhood affiliations and rather more concerned with positioning themselves against larger
institutional structures like the LAPD” (ibid., 300). Once again, the level of conflict could be read from the neighborhood walls. Graffiti such as “Crips, Bloods, Mexicans, Together Tonight,” “KKK [Ku Klux Klan: White Man] Killa,” and “LAPD 187” [California penal code for homicide used by gangs to mark enemies for death] appeared on the walls of certain parts of LA (ibid.).

The fact that both the 1965 Watts Riots and the multiethnic 1992 Riots were ignited by police brutality and that the Mexican-American population experienced in the 1970s analogous clashes with the police (also termed as “antipolice riots” [Abu-Lughod 1999, 395]) and that all of these occasions contributed to gang unification movements seem to suggest that as the occasion arises the segmentary frame of reference can be extended to incorporate the state apparatus in the form of police. This is also explicitly attested by graffiti which I have earlier recognized as one of the mediums by which the political interrelationships between the gangs are expressed and maintained. Importantly the police are the primary institution and the most visible presence of the state in the neighborhoods where gangs flourish. Thus the state seems to enter the segmentary gang politics (which, as I have suggested are focused on issues of honor between similar parties in a horizontal relationships) mainly through the city’s police force which in addition to its presence on the streets appears to hold a certain affinity with gangs as attested by the similarity of their functions and factual workings on the streets.

### 3.5 Politically incongruous?

Thus far I have articulated gangs’ existence in relation to the state through the principle of segmentation on a very concrete level. Their overt engagement in, or orientation towards, state-level politics has appeared as passing moments of opposition in the context of broader uprisings as parts of discontent “minority” populations, although the incarceration system has been recognized as a locale where this latent relation of opposition may be prolonged to produce a more stable orientation towards state-level politics. This dynamic is well in line with the principle of segmentation as presented in the previous chapter.

Between segmentary groups politics is a fabric of immanent relations, “inextricably bound up with and encrancinated in the social” (Taylor 2005, 50). Symbols imprinted on the body and neighborhood walls, wearing gang colors, and flashing hand signs are means to
place oneself in a system of segmentary divisions in a very immediate way. In line with Clastres’ famous thesis, the endemic warfare between gangs seems to ward off the establishment of a stable center of power capable of incorporating the various segments (2007, 213). Gang unification movements in Los Angeles have proven short-lived, even if gang members might agree on certain political goals to be achieved in the existing order of the state and might be able to mount the required political leverage by uniting for a common cause. For most of the time engagement in local-level segmentary politics based on honor also seems to keep the state apparatus from entering the lives of gang members in any meaningful way.

The war gangs wage on the streets is of course a direct breach of the sovereignty of the state. We have seen that the state attempts to suppress gang warfare through law, but by criminalization of gang symbols and even social interaction of gang members the state merely succeeds in partially encasing the conflict in its penal institutions. By following the analogy drawn by gang members themselves I have noticed that the police force the state mobilizes to enforce the law seems to run the risk of becoming one of the gangs on the streets. In fact, if we follow Charles Tilly we have no reason to consider the coercion apparatus of the state as an actor different from gangs (1985). Incidents like the Rampart scandal presented above are significant merely because the police force has assumed a certain independence from the law of the state, thus losing and potentially harming the aura of legitimacy the state supposedly enjoys.

To me this interface, or moment of convergence between these political levels, appears as an interesting starting point to approach the interdynamics between gangs and the state outside the segmentary frame of reference which I have been following so far. Susan A. Phillips has briefly hinted in her study that gangs mirror the Weberian state in their claimed monopoly of violence in their respective neighborhoods (1999, 349). On a more abstract level this idea of gangs as micro-states, or of states as macro-gangs (Tilly) appears persuasive in all its simplicity, but grossly erroneous in light of the historical dynamics involved in the development of such social formations. I wish not to follow this lead, nor do I wish to use the normative jargon of the political sciences. Instead, I have chosen to approach the historical interdynamics between gangs and the state on this more abstract and general level of analysis through a loose and somewhat unorthodox conceptual
framework presented below.

### 3.6 The state and the war machine

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004 [1980]) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have discussed the dynamics between groups of the rhizome and the arborescent type. Whereas the arborescent state apparatus is concerned with conserving its existing organs of power, rhizomatic, segmentary groups “operate by the diffusion of prestige rather than by reference to centers of power” (2004, 395). Echoing Clastres, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the state apparatus constitutes the form of interiority “we habitually take as a model, or according to which we are in the habit of thinking” (ibid., 390). Thus segmentary groups appear to us at first glance as rudimentary and less organized, as primitive anachronisms in relation to the state. Against this evolutionist vision Deleuze and Guattari draw a parallel between the form of sociability in gangs and “high-society groups” as depicted by Proust, arguing that politics embedded in a fabric of immanent relations is no less complex form of a social organization despite the fact that they do not produce stable political powers, nor is the existence of such groups confined to the past. (Ibid., 395.)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, segmentary groups are variations of what they call *the war machine* which exists exterior to the state apparatus, outside its sovereignty and law (ibid., 388-398). According to them, what escapes the grasp of the state are worldwide machines (multinational commercial organizations, religious formations) but also “the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of the state power” (ibid., 397). What I am especially interested in here is the relation of exteriority Deleuze and Guattari keep referring to:

“...what escapes the grasp of the state are worldwide machines (multinational commercial organizations, religious formations) but also “the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of the state power” (ibid., 397). What I am especially interested in here is the relation of exteriority Deleuze and Guattari keep referring to:

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“In their discussion Deleuze and Guattari are outlining a fundamental difference in modality. But does this difference imply an inescapable opposition? Are the state and the war machine set on a collision course from the start by their differing modalities, are they destined to a relation of hostility? According to Deleuze and Guattari, segmentary groups of the rhizome type do indeed flourish outside the state, but the two shouldn’t be conceived as
independent of each other. Rather, their relation is one of “coexistence and competition, in a perpetual field of interaction” (ibid., 398. Emphasis in the original).

In fact they argue that the state can appropriate the war machine, for example in the form of a military institution. After the state has appropriated the war machine, the latter tends to change in nature and function. It becomes a disciplined apparatus directed against its own kind and / or against other States. But importantly the war machine will always remain somewhat outside the sovereignty and law of the state and will continually cause it problems. (Ibid., 388, 391, 395, 461.)

Now, Deleuze and Guattari are the notorious and acclaimed virtuosos of incoherence and mine is an extremely selective misreading to say the least (is there even a potential for orthodoxy in their case?). Thus I should probably stress that I am utilizing aspects of concepts here, not following a marked path. Nevertheless, I believe my reading of their conceptual framework resonates well with a variety of issues I have already brought up.

On the level of analysis concerned with forms of social organization it seems obvious to me that gangs as segmentary groups, which work through the diffusion of prestige, can be discussed under the concept of the war machine. While one should remain cautious not to take the concept too literally it seems to resonate well with Marshall Sahlins’ (1961) discussion of segmentary groups. Sahlins has presented segmentary lineage system to be an ephemeral predatory form of social organization (I will systematically keep on ignoring the lineage part here) which develops in the context of intertribal competition. I must abandon the evolutionary framework of Sahlins’ thesis, but his reading of the segmentary organization seems highly relevant to my analysis. According to Sahlins segmentary lineage organization is an advantageous but eventually a self-liquidating system, “a substitute for the fixed political structure which a tribal society is incapable of sustaining” (ibid., 342). Such an organization emerges when a tribe intrudes into an already occupied habitat and equally as a defense mechanism against such an intrusion (ibid.). Further, Sahlins argues that segmentary lineage organization is only effective in intertribal competition:

“Limited economic coordination, the relativity of leadership and its absence of coercive sanction, the localized, egalitarian character of the polity, the ephemerality of large groupings, all of these would doom a segmentary lineage system if brought into conflict with chiefdoms or states” (ibid.).
In Deleuzian terms, the war machine will perish when confronted by a directed, disciplined military organ of the state apparatus (the war machine appropriated by the state).

In light of the material I have presented thus far, I suggest we treat the police as a war machine appropriated by the state, although Deleuze and Guattari seem to disagree on this (2004, 388). Nevertheless, I believe I’m qualified to take this stance. In the specific case of Los Angeles I would note that aside from the general notion of police oppression prevailing within certain parts of the city, the LAPD has throughout its history enjoyed, what Janet Abu-Lughod has called “inordinate” political independence, and has historically continued to kill more people than any other police department in the largest U.S. cities (Abu-Lughod 1999, 393-394). The City of Los Angeles has constantly been in trouble with its runaway police force in the form of lawsuits and has paid remarkable compensations for its malpractices (Los Angeles Times 2004), the latest major incident being the May Day protest of 2007 when police attacked a crowd of peaceful demonstrators (Los Angeles Times 2008c). Most importantly, while unquestionably hierarchical in organization, the police force is a territorially segmented machine within which strong horizontal ties of fraternal solidarity are cherished. I do admit this is not an appropriated war machine proper. It has not developed outside the state but has instead been recruited and trained. Still the institution stands in a relative independence in relation to the sovereignty and law of the state bearing many of the traits and characteristics of the Deleuzian war machine.

This is a suggestion on an organizational level, which I will mainly elaborate in the next chapter. While the other theoretical linkage to be established will concern social reproduction in light of the interior / exterior divide drawn by Deleuze and Guattari and will mainly surface at the end of the present chapter and in the next one, I need to expand my perspective beyond Los Angeles to further validate the relevance of my approach.
3.7 Armed young men

“But people are starting to realize: You know what? I'm not gonna get pushed around anymore. You know? You were intimidating like 20 years ago, but now, I don’t think you scare me anymore bro. You got access to guns – so do I. I may not have like a thousand soldiers but I got 20 soldiers and we’re gonna make sure we get educated and we get the right weapons. You might have the technology but we got the old school. We got the eager to go to war. Stand our ground. You know? Because whatever generation comes up I want them to do that same shit too. But not to be criminals, but aa... just to stand your ground. You got to defend your family, defend your country, whatever you got to do.”

Noel

I already touched upon John M. Hagedorn’s view of the mercurial nature of gangs in the preceding chapter. Hagedorn suggests we widen our perspective on the phenomenon of gangs: “The best definition of gangs, as I have argued, is an amorphous one: they are simply alienated groups socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions” (2008, 31). Hagedorn says these groups consist of “young people, particularly armed young men” (ibid.) and that they can take the form of “ethnic militias, drug posses, vigilantes, mercenaries, political parties, or even religious police” (ibid., xxiv). Elsewhere in his work Hagedorn adds “terrorists,” revolutionary guerillas, police, and military into the list of organizations which incorporate these “angry young men” (ibid., 24). Convincingly Hagedorn presents a plethora of examples of these oftentimes indistinguishable groups from Brazzaville to Kosovo, from New Zealand, Nairobi, and Mumbai to Rio de Janeiro, Kingston, and Chicago, just to name a few locations. (Ibid., 33-49.) All the groups he describes have “mainly originated in group processes largely outside official religious and state structures,” even though their relation to the state varies from direct opposition to a hand in glove collaboration (ibid., 47. Emphasis in the original). Furthermore, as already noted, these organizations often prove to be quite volatile and prone to change from one type to another, if a clear definition has been possible in the first place.

We find that there’s a plethora of groups of armed young men often engaged in violent confrontations with similar groups. More importantly we note that these groups to exist as parts of the state apparatus or outside of it, sometimes switching sides with relative ease. The quintessential qualifying factor for such a group to be defined as a gang is simply the position in which such an organization stands in relation to the law and sovereignty of
the state. This of course accords well with the dynamics of the war machine and the state as presented above.

On the level of social reproduction Hagedorn’s stand is also instructive in all its simplicity. If we leave our reified social entity "gang" in the background we are faced with the category of “young men” and the ensuing question about the incorporation of young men into the existing social, political, and economical order upheld by the state. To further cast light on this issue I find it useful to read through the fundamentally different historical trajectories of two Chicago-based gangs as presented by Hagedorn.

### 3.8 Hagedorn’s tale of two gangs

The Hamburg Athletic Association (HAA) started off as a street gang in Bridgeport, a rugged Irish neighborhood of Chicago in the early 20th century. According to Hagedorn the difference between these social athletic clubs and other gangs of Chicago was more than nominal in the sense that they were usually sponsored by local politicians to intimidate voters just like the early “voting gangs” in New York. (Hagedorn 2008, 66-67.) Hagedorn refers to Trasher who in his 1927 study described the close ties between gangs and politics in Chicago at length. According to Trasher, majority of the political bosses of the day had “received valuable training for politics in a street gang” (1963, 313-314). Financial support and political favors such as legal immunity were regularly traded for votes, influence, and money, and with a tone of disenchantment Trasher stated:

> “The study of gangs conveys a very vivid impression that the whole structure of municipal politics is at base a complex of interpersonal relationships and mutual personal obligations which make service in the interest of an impersonal public and an abstract justice very difficult” (ibid., 320-321).

In the 1919 race riots in Chicago the HAA and other similar associations played a formidable part. White gangs and “athletic clubs,” typically protected by the police, tried to burn down homes of black residents, opened fire, and threw bricks and rocks at them. Three years later the Race Relations Commission report found the HAA to be one of the chief culprits of the riots, but bombings and riots continued well after the the 1919 clash whenever black people moved beyond the neighborhoods assigned to them (by restrictive covenants like in L.A.). (Hagedorn 2008, 67-71.) Hagedorn criticizes Trasher’s study of Chicago gangs heavily for downplaying the significance of race in his analysis: “To say that Chicago race relations in the 1920s exhibited ‘friction’ is like saying there is ‘friction’
between Israelis and Palestinians” (ibid., 71).

Throughout its existence the HAA has been incorporated into the political life of Chicago in varying degrees. The HAA is still active and in the mid-nineties 70 percent of HAA members were reported to have been city employees, “a percentage that would undoubtedly be elevated if city contractors were included” (ibid., 72), as contracting out city services has become the principal form of political patronage in Chicago. A present-day member told Hagedorn that the members today have the same last names as the members back in the 1919 as the club is intergenerational, handed down from father to son. (Ibid., 73.) The same person defended the HAA against accusations of having been a social club, an athletic club, and a street gang by saying that it was difficult for it “to be all three at the same time” (ibid.).

The history of the Conservative Vice Lords (CVL) tells a rather different story. It grew from the black street gangs of the notorious Lawndale on Chicago’s west side, a predominately Jewish neighborhood, where black people had been moving in since Bronzeville could no more contain the growing black population. The CVL incorporated into itself numerous neighborhood gangs and they fought against other black gangs in the west side and also against the white gangs in territorial disputes.

Like the HAA before them the CVL transformed from a gang into a community organization during the 1960s civil rights movement. (Ibid., 74-76.)

“The CVL started businesses and youth and cultural centers and ran a community cleanup program with the Blackstone Rangers called ‘grass not glass.’ They took part in parades and celebrated their heritage, just as the HAA had done in Bridgeport” (ibid., 77).

At first, this change was welcomed by politicians interested in votes in the Twenty-fourth Ward, but the political support and funding was cut short when Mayor Daley, a former member of the HAA, declared “war on gangs” shortly after the riots following Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination and the police riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention (ibid., 76-79). By that time the Black Panther Party (BPP) had gathered remarkable support in Chicago and many black street gangs had united with smaller gangs and begun to get involved with politics. According to Hagedorn the black gangs were thus following the footsteps of the Irish gangs before them, but once in power the HAA offshoot Daley “could use the police powers of the state to crush his enemies” (ibid., 79). This he did. Foundations
and corporations were pressured to cut off funding and a major job training grant for the CVL was vetoed by Daley, the BPP leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed by the police, the CVL and Blackstone Rangers leaders were imprisoned on phony murder charges, and CVL members locked up. (Ibid., 78-80.) “They got them on drug charges, anything they could,” a contemporary member told Hagedorn (ibid., 80).

“With private jobs scarce and access to public jobs through CVL programs gone, youth reverted to the streets” (ibid.). Daley didn’t succeed to kill off the CVL:

“The CVL did not die, but institutionalized on the streets, supported by drug profits. The incarceration of so many of its members did not break the gang but gave it another space to occupy and training to rebuild on a criminal basis” (ibid., 81).

Hagedorn draws a sharp contrast between the social exclusion faced by the CVL and the success story of the HAA while he rightly underlines the similarities of these groups. In an interesting paragraph he tells us of a retired police commissioner who reminisced about his club days in Bridgeport with him. “When I asked him what happened to all his wild friends, he thought for a moment, then answered, ‘I guess they all became police officers.’” (ibid., 73).

3.9 Interior / exterior
What we have above is a historical example of the interconnections organized groups of young men can have with the state apparatus which we can conceptualize through my reading of Deleuze and Guattari and use to facilitate our understanding of the material I have presented thus far. I mentioned in my reading of Deleuze and Guattari that the dynamics I was interested in was the relation of interiority / exteriority they suggested. If indeed the sovereignty of the state needs to internalize, appropriate life on a local level in order to reign over it we are faced with an immense exterior and a chronically insufficient process of capture. The strength of this simple formulation is the manner in which it breaks away from our predominant understanding of society, as based on the notion of a social contract, “a conscious act or event of some kind which initiated the existence of society” (Wagner 1974, 103). As Roy Wagner has presented, this understanding of society as a participatory social arrangement makes it a very problematic one. What ensues from such a configuration are the numerous problems of recruitment, participation, and integration, with which an educated cadre of social scientists and other numerous experts (including
anthropologists) wrestle with. (Ibid.) Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation doesn't presuppose the existence of a social bond, or an unbidden gravitation of subjects towards a center of power. On the contrary, it is the arborescent state apparatus which has to constantly bind and internalize life to conserve its existing organs of power.

Thus, a relation of exteriority implies not a preceding societal bond dismantled but simply a bond which remains unwoven in the first place. In other words, the fact that the reproduction of social interrelationships in certain neighborhoods is relatively detached from the conventional social, economical, and political institutions supported by the state does not suggest a pathological disorganization on a local level but a deficiency in the state's process of internalization / appropriation / capture. Despite our internalized conviction the society does not exist for the state. The society is quite capable of reproducing itself outside the sovereignty and laws of the state and will inexorably do so. On the abstract level of analysis society simply precedes and exceeds the sovereignty and law of the state. This is all self-evident but has a tendency to be forgotten when transgression appears as a starting point and the main paradigm of analysis.

In the historical example Hagedorn presented from Chicago we see that the relation of groups grounded in elementary processes of sociality on a local level and the conventional political institutions were intimate in the case of the HAA but non-existent as far as we know in the case of CVL and thus ultimately and simply related to race. To the Irish population, membership in the gang on a street-level was an interstitial phase through which they established themselves in a larger social milieu to the extent that some of them were even able to build a political career through the social ties established during the undoubtedly wild gang days of their youth. Later the HAA appears as one of the conventional local institutions (if not considered one from the start) with intimate, although largely unofficial, ties to the city administration.

To the black CVL-members engagement in a perfectly similar intergenerational local group wasn't as advantageous in conventional terms, although I doubt it was any less effective and meaningful on a local level of sociality. In terms of influence or participation in the city politics their social milieu was markedly horizontal, if not outright flat. The essential institution of the city which received them was the police as soon as they had tried to stake a claim on a conventional political level, something which became briefly possible
during the civil rights movement. Similar to the HAA, the CVL continued to exist and can just as well be considered a conventional local institution today, although a criminalized one.

The historical dynamics of gangs in Los Angeles seem to follow the pattern in Chicago. We find that groups, which began as neighborhood car and sports clubs and, similarly to Chicago, fought against alike white groups, were quite early on locked in a battle against each other. Industrial jobs abound, gangs still occupied an interstitial phase in the life of boys and young men at this time. During the civil rights movement gangs tried to claim a political role, but were outright suppressed by the state. This marked the start of the ongoing conflict which in the midst of economic restructuring “turned inward” once and for all, or rather, for now.

Compared to the HAA and other Chicago gangs of the time as portrayed by Trasher and to the Italian gangs of Boston in the late 1930s which Whyte studied (1993), what we see missing in the case of Los Angeles gangs are any kind of linkages to the social, economical, or political institutions which function within the political order maintained by the state. If we return to the claim that gangs with age-based cliques are instrumental in connecting people to their larger social milieu we see that instead of the city hall, or the tire plant, the horizontal and vertical social ties extend to the incarceration system. As we have seen the current situation is a product of historical development. The exterior of the state comes forth as a concrete historical fact as ties between the local worlds people live in become more detached from their surroundings. As participation in the political economy declines, alternative modes of social reproduction appear. Following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, I argue that in the midst of these historical developments street gangs as community institutions experienced new pressures as a direct result of limited access to political economy and the state’s reduction of social services (2007, 54).

To conclude the present chapter, I state that the segmentary social organization I have addressed through the bulk of this study so far comes forth as an expression of broader historical dynamics concerning the reproduction of the often intertwining categories of class, race, and space outside of which the current indifference and latent antagonism of
gang members towards the state cannot be understood. As Wacquant has argued, for the disaffected youth,

“the police constitute the last ‘buffer’ between them and the society that rejects them, and which they therefore refer to as ‘the enemy,’ trespassing in a territory where their rule is often openly contested and incites defiance and hostility that can extend to verbal and physical aggression” (2008, 33).

For these youth the incarceration system appears as the primary form of social, political, and economical incorporation into the political order of the state. Thus the so-called inward focus on the level of populations evident in the inter-neighborhood segmentation and warfare retains its primacy over broader political concerns as attempts to participate politically in the state have been systematically repressed. It remains largely a matter of personal political orientation if one is to treat the appearance of the segmentary political organization and the primacy it has assumed among disaffected youth as a form of disorganization, as a lack, against these historical developments. Nevertheless, it is a social fact.
4. The legit society

The focus of the chapter is on the state's attempt to incorporate, what I have identified as a “surplus population.” I have already discussed the role of law enforcement and prisons in this process and I wish to complement this picture by looking at the work of numerous non-governmental organizations operating in Los Angeles. What I came across in Los Angeles was a plethora of non-governmental organizations that attempt to facilitate gang members’ transition to the so-called “legit society” by a myriad of programs ranging from tattoo removal to job development and anger management classes. Although the work of these actors can’t be situated in the field of official politics in any straightforward manner, they are perhaps the most effective organs dealing with gangs in L.A. today. These organizations, that draw their personnel from ex-gang members to academically trained individuals, serve in an intermediary role between different political levels and play a pivotal role in voicing the concerns of youth and community members at large to the general public, politicians etc. Most of the people involved in this study were, or had been involved with some of these organizations, which were the main providers of resources for the gang involved people to “help them come back on the right track and have them be productive citizens of society basically,” as one program coordinator put it. For gang members these organizations represent themselves (and are equally conceived as such) as a gateway to “the legit society;” a study opportunity, or more frequently, legitimate wage labor.

The beginning of the chapter will cast light on the broader political context in which these organizations are working and later on I’ll move on to a Los Angeles City Council Meeting I attended during my fieldwork, where a city-wide gang intervention model, put together by the representatives of these numerous organizations dealing with gangs in the city, was approved by the council.

Through the very concrete material presented here I wish to specify the rather abstract and rudimentary theoretical framework adopted from Deleuze and Guattari in the previous chapter. The gang intervention model presented in the City Hall and, more specifically, the tattoo removal operation, can be seen as isolated examples of the process of internalization / appropriation / capture we already discussed in relation to the histories of HAA, CVL, and gangs of Los Angeles in the light of the reproduction of social relationships.
I will close the present chapter by considering the structural interdynamics between the state and the war machine through two tangible examples of a social transformation which, to my mind, bring out interesting organizational parallels and help me to make a few conclusive remarks about the segmentary form of social organization.

4.1 Excess of life

Although this is not an analysis of public policy it is impossible to bypass a discussion of certain macro-level developments which have had profound, or even determinant effects on the current situation in Los Angeles. Loïc Wacquant has argued that as we discuss urban marginality the state should not be understood as merely a remedial, but as a \textit{generative} institution that coproduces “the very problems of which neighborhoods of relegation are at once receptacle, crucible and emblem” (2008, 270). In the United States population covered by social insurance schemes has decreased for three decades, while programs targeted at the poor have been cut and turned into instruments of surveillance and control (ibid., 268). The amount of people living under the official poverty line in the United States in 1992 was larger than at any time since 1964 and a good third of Black and Latino households fell into this category (ibid., 26) thus constituting what Wacquant has called “redundant population” (2000, 384).

I have already discussed the economic restructuring which took place in California since the 1970s and the consequent growth of this redundant population. In her book \textit{Golden Gulag} (2007) Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues: “At the most abstract level, about a million people in California have been locked into isolated enclaves by being locked out elsewhere” (ibid., 74-75). As the federal state retreated from the education funding and employment programs for unskilled workers, responsibility for social problems moved to the local state level. According to her, the state participated in the production of this “surplus population” through specific actions and inactions as “defunded community-based organizations no longer provide services and training to youth, and abandoned educational programs no longer provide opportunity for advancement” (ibid., 76-77). One of the most substantial indicators of the state’s indifference towards whole segments of population have been the rising dropout rates in certain Latino and Black high schools - as high as 63-79 percent (ibid.).

I will not dwell upon Gilmore’s detailed political analysis, but only highlight the
effects of the transformation from what Wilson calls the welfare-warfare state to workfare-warfare state as the post-war pragmatic care bestowed on labor was transferred to capital (2007, 53). The state’s legitimacy and social necessity was regained by identifying the containment of crime as the key concern (ibid., 85-86). What ensued was the largest prison building project in the history of the world by the state of California, which I have already touched upon in the previous chapter. Gilmore’s conclusion on the matter is rather exhaustive:

“The correspondence between regions suffering deep economic restructuring, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among men, and intensive surveillance of youth by the state’s criminal justice apparatus present the relative surplus population as the problem for which the prison became the state’s solution” (ibid., 113).

The state’s current approach towards the problem of surplus population seems to consist of excessive reliance on criminal justice apparatus and penal institutions. Still at the same time the city was also attempting to incorporate the prevention and intervention work of the so-called third sector of semi-independent actors into its policy of dealing with gangs. In the following I attempt to contextualize these apparently contradictory developments in a larger framework of changing forms of political power as presented by Nikolas Rose.

4.2 Beyond politics?
Working with a loose Foucauldian framework in Powers of Freedom (1999) Nikolas Rose has analyzed changes in political power and especially the government of conduct mainly in the U.S. and England. Rose underlines that he is not presenting a simple historical succession of certain forms of government of conduct and indeed he evokes all the phrases from “polycentric” and “multi-vocal” to “heterogeneous” and “micro-locale” in order to avoid such accusations. I shall, however, present snippets from his analysis in a similar manner. By such an act, I wish not to injure the infinite complexity of this world, nor the people overseeing our proper reverence for it. I am especially interested in the neo-liberal transformation of the role of the state which began to take shape in the second half of the twentieth century.

Even though Rose is reluctant to enter into a discussion on whether the United States ever had a welfare state or not, he does argue that from the 1930s onwards United States
adopted a Keynesian conception of the regulative role of the state. This entailed an obligation for the government to play an active part in controlling economic conditions for social ends. (1999, 98-99, 127.) Rose terms this “government from the social point of view.” These measures focused particularly, although not exclusively, on the conduct of the poor and culminated in the family, “shaped, educated, and solicited into a relation with the state” (ibid., 130, 128). The family was to produce healthy, responsible, and adjusted social citizens, the image of which was elaborated in relation to problematizations of conduct (delinquency, maladjustments, labor problems) within institutional sites such as the juvenile court, the school, and the factory. Although far from reality, lifelong employment was the primary means for social integration and ideally the state would ameliorate the hardships of the “unfortunate.” According to Rose, the idea of this “social state” was grounded in the image of social progress, the gradual improvement of conditions of life. (Ibid., 128, 133, 135). “It thus seemed possible to bind all strata and classes into an agreement for social progress of which the state was, to a greater or lesser extent, the guarantor” (ibid., 135).

Rose argues that during the latter part of the twentieth century there seemed to emerge an overall agreement over the failure of the social state in guaranteeing progress for all the citizens (ibid., 141). This sentiment was evident in the uprisings of the 1960s I have discussed earlier in this work, as well as the backlash they triggered off. The logics of the social government were to be overturned:

“The relation of the state and the people was to take a different form: the former would maintain the infrastructure of law and order; the latter would promote individual and national well-being by their responsibility and enterprise” (ibid., 139).

The economic rationale of this reconceptualization was that the state had grown too large and was undertaking projects which the private sector could handle more efficiently. The state would secure the framework of law and order within which active, autonomous, self-governing actors (individuals, families, communities, and, of course, firms and corporations) reconceptualized as entrepreneurial subjects would seek well-being according to their relative assessment of costs and benefits. (Ibid., 139,141-142.)

Rose argues that within this new neo-liberal arrangement government of conduct becomes radically detached from the formerly dominant idea of a coherent society. Instead of social planning, paternalism, and bureaucracy, we now encounter the self-governing
individual assisted by a cadre of social professionals:

“For the majority expertise operated --- in terms of a logic of choice, through transforming the ways in which individuals come to think of themselves, through inculcating desires for self-development that expertise itself can guide and through claiming to be able to allay the anxieties generated when the actuality of life fails to live up to its image” (ibid., 88).

Anyone reading this is probably quite familiar with this internalized form of power over conduct, crystallized in the image of yours truly sitting behind his laptop writing this text in self-appointed forlorn pursue of an ever-withdrawing and frail image of social justice attainable through cosmopolitan quasi-intellectualism. However, a minority, who Rose terms the “usual suspects,” “urban underclass,” a “socially problematic and heterogeneous population of ‘anti-citizens’,” remain outside this regime of civility racialized, spatialized, moralized, and criminalized (ibid.). This category of persons is allocated to a range of new para-governmental agencies and a multitude of non- and for-profit organizations who attempt to govern their “clients” according to the new regime of autonomy and choice. In what follows, Rose’s analysis couldn’t be more apposite in describing the situation I encountered in Los Angeles. I will quote him at length:

“Equipped with counseling skills and psychotherapeutic ethics, a radical politics of rights and empowerment or a commitment arising from personal experience, ‘volunteers’ come to play a key role in the proliferating agencies operating on the margins, establishing relations with those in distress that are no longer mediated through a complex of bureaucracy of care. It is no critique to note that these workers in the twilight world of the marginalized so often deploy the logics of normalization, social skills, self-esteem and so forth in order to ‘empower’ their clients at the same time as they contest the politics which has made these the organizing principles of ‘social’ policy” (ibid., 89).

I should note that the objective of addressing larger systemic injustices and, on the other hand, providing immediate help to, for an example, people just released from prison in the form of anger management classes and a job opportunity don’t always coalesce into a coherent strategy, but in the lived messy realities such infidelity to the cause is a prerequisite for action.

Rose goes on to present how such actors are increasingly rendered accountable for their work according to a financial rationale (ibid., 151-153), an important aspect to be recognized behind the city-wide gang intervention model. But before moving on to an account of the City Council Meeting where this model was introduced, one more aspect of Rose’s analysis is directly relevant to my discussion to follow. Nikolas Rose suggests that a
“third way’ of governing” has been put forth against the welfare government of the past and the market based, individualistic model which emerged after it. Rose terms this “third space” of natural, extra-political zone of human relations as “community,” associated between state power, free market and autonomous individual suspect. (Ibid., 167-168.) “This third space must --- become the object and target for the exercise of political power whilst remaining, somehow, external to politics and a counterweight to it” (ibid., 168). The emphasis here is on the local interpersonal relationships of trust which the economic government should recognize and endorse. Rose is quick to note that such an image of self-organization and spontaneity of care also equals the reorganization and reduction of public services and resources through the objectification and instrumentalization of local relationships (ibid., 172). Despite its long salience in political thought, community became a sector for government as the term was increasingly conceptualized through expert discourse:

“Community here was a point of penetration of a kind of ethnographic sociology into the vocabularies and classifications of the authorities --- Communities became zones to be investigated, mapped, classified, documented, interpreted, their vectors explained to enlightened professionals-to-be in countless college courses and to be taken into account in numberless encounters between professionals and their clients, whose individual conduct is now to be made intelligible in terms of the beliefs and values of ‘their community’” (ibid., 175).

The term “community” was conspicuously present on the occasions that I ran into other “well-meaning outsiders,” such as myself. Another volunteer in the charter school wanted to be “part of the life of the community” wherever he would work as a teacher in the future; a sociology student, interning in the El Monte Police Department, was planning a career as a police officer who would “get to know the community;” and of course there was me, an anthropology student fantasizing about a “community to live in” as part of his fieldwork. In addition to this new, emerging college-bred generation of community-minded specialists of sociality, a status has also been opened up for “natural,” “indigenous” authorities of the community, whose authority rarely rests on any explicit codes or rules of conduct (ibid., 189). Both of these types, as well as a variety of the broader issues tackled above, were present in the Los Angeles City Council Meeting on 13th of February 2008.

4.3 “License to operate”

The people who had gathered in the Los Angeles City Hall that day were expecting to see a
change in the city’s policy of dealing with gangs. For almost a year, thirty people from
different gang prevention and intervention organizations working in Los Angeles had been
brought together under the title Community Engagement Advisory Committee (CEAC) to
draft a policy proposal, a “Community-Based Gang Intervention Model” (CBGIM), which
brings together the knowledge, experience, and expertise of people with a long history in
working with gangs in Los Angeles. “Historic” was the refrain of the day. From now on the
proposed model would serve as a blueprint for gang prevention and intervention work in
the City of Los Angeles and complement law enforcement strategies in the city’s attempt to
tackle the gang problem. Despite being a grass roots, “community-based” effort centered in
Los Angeles, the CBGIM is explicitly defined as regional, state-wide, and federal proposal
(see appendix: Community Engagement Advisory Committee’s “Community-Based Gang
Intervention Model”: Definition and Structure, 3).

In the model the CEAC is defined to have been advising city council member Tony
Gardenas, the Chair of the Ad-Hoc Committee on Gang Violence and Youth Development
on “issues of youth development” and “community-building efforts” (ibid.). The CBGIM is
defined as an approach that:

“provides hardcore, specialized, street-based mediation and mitigation to stop or prevent violence
between gangs and the concurrent redirection of individual gang members and their families in ways that
brings progress to themselves and their communities” (ibid., 4).

The stages of intervention identified in the model include individual, family, street,
neighborhood, community, school, and prison while the work is defined as providing
services and resources on all these levels. The intermediate role of the organizations doing
this work is apparent as mediating the relations between gangs, controlling rumors, and
developing truces are defined as objectives, as well as mediation between gangs and the
community at large (including institutions such as schools, Neighborhood Councils, etc.).
Furthermore, the model includes job training, development, and placement; educational
support and services; housing and living services; legal services; drug and gender related
services; tattoo removal; mental health and recreational services; arts and culture programs;
faith-based and indigenous services, etc. (Ibid., 6-9.)

In other words the model consists of a comprehensive set of services and resources
which are seen to be lacking from the specific communities. The non-governmental
organizations, whose representatives made up the CEAC, have been producing and
providing these services on the local level for years, but have generally lacked the funds to do so. That the model was even discussed in the City Council Meeting meant for many of these people that the work they had been doing received some appreciation and that the needs of the people they see themselves representing had finally been listened to.

What becomes explicitly laid out in the model is the process of appropriation / internalization / capture that I discussed on a fairly abstract level in the last chapter. Thus instead of producing an evident moral argument in terms of public policy, I suggest that we can see in the model an example (one possible variation) of the very concrete process of binding individuals to the political order of the state. It is crucial to recognize how this process of “internalization,” entails management of life in the most intimate individual level by local actors as the state has practically retreated from direct management of the social. Indeed, the model has been produced by a cadre of community-based actors. While working on a voluntary basis and motivated by human concerns, these organizations keep a certain distance from official quarters. As already mentioned in the introduction, there’s a strong distrust among the NGOs working with gang members in L.A. towards the official political apparatus. The major motivation for cooperation seems to be funding. Alex Sanchez from Homies Unidos explained:

“We haven't gone to ask money from the city. But our former executive director Bates Green and the board that we had wanted to stay away from that because they were being intrusive. We had to meet certain guidelines, we had to basically do the work in style that they wanted and we couldn't be able to help a certain population we help, so we kinda stayed away from that. We understand that it's our money. --- So now we're changing our minds around in going for the necessity of going for these funds that are our money. So we are gonna be approaching them for some funding, but most of the funding has been around private foundations and individual donors.”

The people in these organizations can be conceived as politically dissident citizens who have organized themselves on a level of community to demand the state to provide them with similar resources and services as, what is conceived to be, the population in general. Regardless of the varying political orientations and motivations of individual actors and organizations, their work, situated in the extra-political zone of human relations, is instrumental in integrating the social to the official political apparatus.

About a week earlier I had attended a meeting of the Watts Labor Action Committee where
it was regretted how unfortunate it was that former gang members, working with gangs and highly influential in their respective neighborhoods, kept their distance from such meetings. This level of gang intervention work was also brought up in the City Council meeting when council member Tony Gardenas asked the CEAC representatives about their “license to operate.” What followed was a dialogue rehearsed for the occasion in the Watts Labor Action Committee meeting:

Tony Gardenas: “Can you tell me what you mean by license to operate?”

Gregory Thomas: “License to operate simply means the willingness or the ability to engage in high-risk conflict mediation sessions with individuals who are more likely to shoot and kill other gang members. Plain and simply that relationship is developed through respect and trust and more than likely that individual who has the license to operate were former gang members themselves.”

Tony Gardenas: “Now this license, does it have a seal of the State of California on it? The City of Los Angeles? The County of L.A.? The federal government? The president of United States? Where does this license actually come from? When does this license become a reality?”

Gregory Thomas: “Well, the license actually comes from the streets. I mean, in some cases individuals go through the certificate program in CalState [California State University] L.A. and become certified gang intervention workers, but that in itself don’t do it. Individuals need to have first-hand knowledge and insight and respect to how that culture exists and the various strategies and components that are necessary to deal with individuals who are engaged in that type of lifestyle.”

In the dialogue above we discern two different modalities of politics. The segmentary politics embedded in immanent social relations is translated into terms of the political apparatus of the state. Relations of mutual respect and trust come to be understood as a “license to operate.” Apart from the dramatics of political theatre involved here, it is noteworthy that political interrelations between gangs (de jure criminal actors) are in such a manner recognized to exist beyond the reach of the state apparatus, and that former gang members, who have established themselves as socially “legitimate” actors within this context, are identified as persons capable of mediating these relations. The problem has become how to harness these local interrelations to serve the political goals of the political apparatus, namely the incorporation of a surplus population organized in a segmentary manner and politically largely incomprehensible to the state.

These people got “another license to operate” from the City of Los Angeles that day. The model was eventually passed unanimously by the City Council amidst a feeling of exhilaration and relief. However, on the November 4th 2008 ballot in Los Angeles the 30
million dollars yearly funding for the anti-gang work (Proposition A) defined in the model was narrowly defeated rendering the decision largely impotent for the time being.

4.4 Tattoo removal

Now, instead of trying to hastily cover the vast range of work these non-governmental organizations do, I will concentrate on tattoo removal, a simple medical operation performed on the body of the individual, in which, I suggest, we can recognize the process of appropriation / internalization / capture on the most concrete and personal level.

I attended tattoo removal sessions in two different clinics run by Rosie, one in East Los Angeles, the other in the Echo Park/Westlake area. The personnel in the Echo Park/Westlake clinic were all former gang members who in most cases had removed their own tattoos and gotten educated for their jobs. These small clinics were open to everyone, but the bulk of the patients were current and former gang members who were directed to Rosie’s clinic through different organizations working with gangs. For example, Homies Unidos offered tattoo removal sessions free of charge to anyone who completed their twelve week program called Epiphany Project.

In the clinic tattoos are removed by laser which breaks down the ink, which is then absorbed by the body. One usually needs several sessions to remove a tattoo completely and the procedure is reportedly substantially more painful than applying one. Some people had quit the removal sessions after the first time just because of the pain inflicted, while others belittled the whole operation.

Among the customers were young women who wanted to get rid of an ex-boyfriend's name on their ankle, older men and women erasing elaborate full sleeve tattoos as adolescent missteps, or because of painful personal memories. These tattoos were more or less personal markings on the body bound to individual histories. Aside from the potential condemnation the tattoos aroused in workplace or family context, the motivations for removing them were mostly personal.

To a large extent this is of course the case with gang tattoos as well. Tattoos are inevitably personal reminders of the past, but as such gang tattoos do differ from “more personal tattoos.” As we have seen, gang tattoos signal a membership in a group and also visibly situate the person in a vast system of political interrelations between gangs. For an example, we remember the gangster whom I met in our front yard who cautiously lifted his
shirt to show me his tattoos when introducing himself. Raul commented on how tattoos are one of the principal ways of discerning an enemy:

“We define each other by a street corner, by a gang, or stuff like that. And it’s a matter like too where you’re from so you can understand who your enemy is and who’s who. Your tattoos say a lot, you know?”

Speaking of his own tattoo Raul continues: “So, that was like our logo, so... if anybody ever see me, or I have my shirt off and they seen that, they exactly know who I was from.” Gang insignia inscribed on one’s body has immediate social effects in a rather different way than the name of an ex-lover. As I have already discussed, the willingness to have a conspicuous gang tattoo marks commitment to the gang as one is always expected to “stand his ground” if confronted by an enemy. Having the name of one’s neighborhood tattooed on one’s forehead can be lethal when beyond the gang’s boundaries, or will at least considerably increase the possibility of a confrontation.

It wasn’t really hard to distinguish gang members who were in the initial phases of removing their tattoos from the “ordinary patients” in the small waiting room of the clinic in the Echo Park/Westwood district. Besides their usual gangster attire, bald head, and relatively young age, individuals removing their gang tattoos sat on their benches notably quiet with an evident air of anxiety surrounding them. Very few were willing to discuss the reasons for the removal, or anything else for that matter. Despite the banality of the surroundings – a small office with the usual post-it notes and cheesy workplace humor hung on the wall as adornments, telephones ringing, and donuts handed out – it was clear that the tattoo removal was a highly significant event in the life course of these people.

To grasp the significance of the tattoo removal process I return to Clastres’ analysis of initiatory bodily markings. The following lengthy quotation illuminates the connections Clastres draws between the law of the social group, body, pain, time, and memory condensed in a bodily mark:

“An initiated man is a marked man. The purpose of the initiation, in its torturing phase, is to mark the body: in the initiatory rite, society imprints its mark on the body of the young people. Now, a scar, a trace, a mark are ineffaceable. Inscribed in the deepest layer of the skin, they will always testify, as a perpetual witness, that while the pain may be no longer anything but a bad memory, it was nonetheless experienced in fear and trembling. The mark is a hindrance to forgetting: the body itself bears the memory traces imprinted on it; the body is a memory.” (2007, 184. Emphasis in the original).

I don’t think we need to exaggerate the pain of getting a gang tattoo (or getting “jumped
in, “or “busting a mission”) to notice the relevance of Clastres’ observations, which are based on initiations where more severe forms of bodily harm were caused. I believe the modality of gangs as segmentary groups becomes perceivable in the act of tattoo removal. The gang tattoo is a socially constitutive mark. It doesn’t merely denote a relation to a group, but the individual’s position in a whole system of inter-gang relations, which are also implicitly embedded in the skin of the initiate. The marking constitutes the initiate within a relatively bound system of social and political relations between similarly positioned persons and is inextricable from the sense of honor which I have noted to be the structural principle of segmentary relations. What is accomplished in the removal of the insignia is the erasure of such social positioning. The mark taken for life proves to be effaceable after all, and the process emblematically more painful than the former. The society at large reclaims the body of the individual in a process which appears somehow as the opposite of marking, almost as naturalization. We should remind ourselves of Clastres’ interpretation of the law inscribed on the body as a prohibition of inequality:

“They [initiates] consent to accept themselves for what they are from that time forward: full members of the community. Nothing more, nothing less. And they are irreversibly marked as such” (ibid., 185. Emphasis in the original).

Correspondingly the removal of this mark detaches the individual from the horizontal social ties of belonging and “restores” the individual (now positionless) into an abstract society of strangers.

The strong social stigma gang tattoos carry was most frequently stated as a reason for removing tattoos. Many people wanted to get rid of only the most conspicuous gang tattoos, which they thought would preclude them from getting a job. A visible sign of inclusion in a gang equals exclusion from the labor market quite automatically, and as Nikolas Rose has suggested, exclusion from the labor market has more and more come to mean exclusion from the legit society (1999, 257-259). In such cases, it could be said that people attempted to stay “in between:” to maintain the social ties and position established in the gang while simultaneously able to enter the labor market and earn a living without engaging in illegal activity with the risk of prison time or exposing oneself to violence.

There are of course numerous ways of dealing with one’s tattoos and the transition of moving away from a life in a gang, which I’m not interested in classifying. I merely want suggest that a major social transition becomes visible in the tattoo removal process and that
it can be conceptualized through my analysis of the segmentary nature of gangs. To understand the difficulty of such a transition we can return to Paul Dresch’s words about the principle of segmentation:

“The actor himself (the tribesman) is constituted by the possession of honor, which itself, as we have seen, is a segmentary quality. --- Far from being given, the actor is constituted in accord with the same structural principle as the categories with which he works and the forms of action available to him. People may alter their place in the set of categories, but they cannot be without a place. To be a tribesman is to be part of a set opposed to other sets” (ibid., 319).

In the light of the above it is clear that a transition from a gang to a “legit society” involves a rather comprehensive personal transformation. In the final chapter I will elaborate on some of the very practical as well as ontological contradictions and difficulties that people face when they attempt to move away from a gang. But before moving on to the final chapter, I attempt to connect some of the broader lines drawn thus far through two concrete examples of a social transformation.

4.5 Emblematic Transformations

“The law of the state is not the law of All or Nothing (State societies or counter-State societies) but that of interior and exterior. The state is sovereignty. But sovereignty only reigns over what it is capable of internalizing, of appropriating locally.”

Deleuze & Guattari, 2004 [1980], 397.

This dynamic has been the subject matter of the chapter so far. I have suggested that the Community-Based Gang Intervention Model can be seen as one possible blueprint of the way in which an individual is bound through numerous institutions to the political economy and the political order of the state. I noted how tattoo removal serves to extricate the individual from the local system of social relations implied by the gang insignia. Thus the individual is also detached from the segmentary principle of honor according to which these relations are constituted.

Such processes of course presuppose the exteriority of the individual from the political order of the state. This exteriority forms a reasonable starting point on the level of analysis and I have treated it primarily as an insufficiency in the state's process of appropriation / internalization / capture and as the resulting exclusion from the political economy. This choice mirrors a certain transformation in the political role of the state,
which I perceived through my readings of Gilmore and Rose, and termed neo-liberal. I perceived this change in the reduction of public services and resources, and the congruent growth of the criminal justice apparatus and penal institutions. It is marked by the growing importance of, and reliance on, the principle of the free markets, the workings of which the state is to secure through maintaining the infrastructure of law and order. David Harvey has presented how the preservation and extension of state power is crucial to the functioning of free markets, and how conversely the preservation of state power requires the freely functioning markets (2002, 180), which have thus almost evolved to be the state’s raison d’être. I believe this “central contradiction at the heart of neo-liberal political economy” (ibid., 181) warrants my economically-orientated interpretation of the interior and exterior of the state.

Now, I came to consider the interior and exterior of the state in the first place by following a parallel, drawn by the people I interviewed, between gangs and the police. The following two examples of social transformations mark a return to this symmetry. Through the examples I will bring together the discussions about the state and the war machine and the interior and exterior of the state.

Frederic Trasher’s *The Gang* (1963 [1927]) features a fascinating two-piece illustration. In the first picture a convivial group of young boys is posing for the cameraman in a scattershot formation with their flat caps slanted and the remains of a campfire smoking in the foreground. Below we find a picture of the same group of boys dressed in Boy Scout uniforms arranged to a four row formation posing with three boards of different knots placed symmetrically on the sides and the forefront of the picture. In the background there’s the American flag with what appears to be the banner of their Boy Scout troop. Trasher explains, “The group pictured above was a destructive gang which was transformed by skillful handling into the Boy Scout troop shown in the lower picture” (1963, 353).

A transformation has surely taken place here, but of what sort? The group of boys remains largely unchanged. We are told that the old gang leader is still in command and that “--- they [the boys] are as proud of their new task of defending all the property in the neighborhood as they used to be of their clever schemes for making trouble” (ibid., 352). The most apparent change seems to be a transformation in terms of symbols. The “Holy
“Holy Terrors” gang has been transformed to “Boy Scout Troop X” (which presumably stood in a horizontal, yet a competitive relationship to similar groups Y, Z, etc.). Their uniforms stand in sharp contrast with their heterogeneous clothing earlier, and whatever idiosyncratic symbols they might have had before have now been replaced with the Boy Scout banner and the national flag. What seems to be a minor aesthetic rearrangement has transformed a group of boys from a bunch of juveniles to a vanguard of respectable young citizens, a unit in an organization which in terms of its origins and form of organization is an outright extension of the military apparatus.

Now compare the above story to the one presented in Los Angeles Times in 2008, titled “Gang member finds redemption through fire” (2008d). We are told the story of Ramon Maestas, a 23-year-old former gang member from Echo Park, known as Little Ray in the streets, who is working as part of a fire fighting crew through a gang-intervention program called Aztecs Rising. The article draws a sharp contrast between his “two identities:” “Little Ray frightens people when he struts down Echo Park Avenue, white socks hiked to his knees, bald head marked with a tattoo of woman’s red lips, all attitude,” while, “Ramon Maestas, the fire fighter, makes people feel safe. He wins strangers over in his dusty green and yellow uniform; they give him food and say, ‘Thank you for saving our homes’” (ibid.). Maestas has been promoted to squad leader of Front Country Crew 6 and the story depicts him cheering his fellow crew members: “Keep ‘em up dog. You can do it, baby. --- This one’s for the crew” (ibid.) We are told that through the program, “Participants enter a paramilitary lifestyle designed to channel their loyalty for the gang to the fire crew” (ibid.) Maestas still has his neighborhood ZIP code 90026 tattooed across his stomach and has scrawled “Echo Park” across his work glove. On probation and still living in Echo Park he has a 9 p.m. curfew and is forbid to talk to another gang member. “Childhood friends, many of them Echo Park gang members, live on almost every block of his neighborhood. They shuffle casually down Echo Park Avenue, slipping in and out of liquor stores and restaurants. At any moment Maestas could collide with one” (ibid.).

From gang attire to the green and yellow of the fire fighters, from Echo Park 90026 to Front Country Crew 6, from a public menace to a provider of safety, protector of private property. Once again the transformation takes place on a symbolic level, but in contrast to the Holy Terrors case, break away from the initial group is seen as crucial for the
transformation to take place. The reporter writes: “Someday, maybe, his work, not his gang name, will earn him the respect of others.” (ibid.)

Now, the relevance of these two stories to my discussion on the interrelations between the war machine and the state seems obvious. Boy Scout Troop “X” and Front Country Crew 6 appear as disciplined war machines appropriated by the state. But while these groups are explicitly linked to a center of power, the Holy Terrors and the Echo Park gang stand in a negative relationship with the existing organs of power. However, in both cases we come across segmentary social organizations working through the diffusion of prestige (notice “pride” and “respect” as they occur above), which in tandem with their hierarchical structure promote a certain fraternal egalitarianism. Thus the war machine seems to preserve a principle of equality in its segmentary organization even when appropriated by the arborescent state apparatus.

Trasher’s Boy Scout leader and the more recent Aztec Rising program have knowingly utilized the apparent organizational parallels in their anti-gang work. In the first case a whole cluster of social interrelations is painlessly repositioned in relation to the law and sovereignty of the state, while in the second case an individual gang member is detached from a cluster of local interrelations and resituated into another symmetrical set of horizontal interrelations, which despite its methodical and disciplined make-up resembles the social organization he has left behind.

The example picked up from Trasher concretizes Deleuze’s and Guattari’s conceptualization of the war machine and its appropriation by the state. It also gives support to the existence of social organizations of the war machine type in the interior and exterior of the law of state. In the second example we perceive an attempt to keep the constitutive segmentary quality, honor, intact by repositioning the individual into a symmetrical set of horizontal interrelations between equals.

The synonymous role of law and private property as the dividing line in these examples is revealing in light of the interior and exterior discussed earlier. If we hark back to my reading of Clastres we can note that this law of the state stands in a stark contrast with the one found inscribed on the individual bodies of gang members: prohibition of inequality. Tellingly, in the second example the reporter left open the question will the
impersonal and abstract identification through work ever substitute the honor acquired through inter-gang rivalry.

An interesting implication regarding the interdynamics between the state and the war machine surfaces here. Now, we have found an appropriated war machine enforcing the law within the city in the form of police, but we also find it in its archetypical military form on and beyond the borders of the polity. Recently the United States military has focused its recruitment campaigns on poor Latino and African American neighborhoods and public schools. The Army’s “Takin’ it to the Streets” and “Hispanic H2 Tour” have targeted inner-city youth with relatively bleak economic opportunities. The H2 Tour featured a customized Hummer with extensive audio equipment and multiple video screens (for playing the Army’s video game) and visited baseball games, custom car shows, and other events where Latino youth congregate. The Department of Defense and Department of Education have also collaborated to create “Troops to Teachers” program to place military veterans in teaching position especially in poor neighborhoods. (Mariscal 2004.) Mike Davis has argued that with the decline of the clothing industry in California, military service is quickly becoming the only attainable source of income within the official economy for the mostly immigrant populations heavily represented in this industry (2007a, 288). To follow the implications of my analysis above, the markedly horizontal social organization of the military apparatus offers a possibility of immediate social positioning and equality (in addition to a modest income and facilitating the citizenship process) to an extent which the polarized economy in the U.S. does not.

I believe these developments can be treated alongside prison building as one of the state’s responses to its internal crisis and especially the redundant surplus population discussed earlier. In the absence of any scenario to incorporate this growing urban population into the political economy I believe it is not an ideologically motivated overstatement to suggest in line with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri that such a targeted military recruitment amounts to exporting this class struggle in order to preserve sovereignty and order back home (2001, 232), where, one could add, the policy of imprisonment amounts to encasing that very same struggle. The inability of the state to internalize life on a local level, or the retreat of the state from the social, has meant the
creation of an exteriority, imprisoned or alternatively appropriated to enforce the borders of the polity within or without. Thus, in a sense, as Paul Virilio has noted, the American state’s borders are increasingly running and kept guard of inside its metropolises of the twenty-first century (2007 [2004], 19).
5. The limbo

“People like living in a fuckin... in a fish tank. You know, with different type of fishes. I don’t. I’d rather live in a sea if I were a fish, you know? Kick it with whatever fish I gotta kick it with. To survive or to have that option to leave my fuckin fish tribe and go somewhere else. If I survive I survive, you never know. I might meet like – if I'm a little gold fish – my girlfriend could be a Shamu, you get what I’m sayin?”

“What’s that?”

“A big-ass whale.”

Interview with Noel.

Although I lived in an active gang neighborhood there was hardly a chance for participant observation in the area (whatever that would mean in this case). Nor did I visit prisons, or run into the police. I did spend time in organisation offices, tattoo removal clinics, and the city hall, but I cannot claim to have intimate knowledge of their workings. Anyhow, all of these sites, institutions, and processes were heavily present in the day-to-day lives of the people I met during my fieldwork. But the day-to-day present encountered in the field has so far been given very little room in my work. In this final chapter I wish to present an account, which obviously amounts to nothing more than a partial freeze-frame, of the situations which people were living in as I encountered them in the field. I believe the following accounts lend support to the few propositions I have been trying to construct in the course of this thesis. After all, this is the ethnographic present I have been trying to disentangle and interpret through my analysis.

Although I did meet a good number of people none of them lived in the same locale and I was rarely able to spend long periods of time with any of them. I did see Raul who lived next door frequently. I also met Chino regularly in the school that I volunteered in. Both of them invited me into their homes and treated me with hospitality in a straightforward and amiable manner, as did most of the people I met on a more casual basis. However, it was Noel with whom I found myself spending the most time with. Noel lived with Rosie and helped her out in the tattoo removal clinic. I spent a lot of time around Noel and Rosie, who was my initial contact in Los Angeles. Without her invaluable aid and support, not to mention her extensive contacts and knowledge of the city, my fieldwork would have been much more constricted and difficult.
5.1 Raul

Raul and Maria lived next door on the second floor of a two-storey house. From my front yard I could often see the light from Raul's cigarette gleaming in the dark balcony and soon I would hear him yelling to me to come over for a visit. Inside I would find Raul sitting comfortably on the couch sipping King Cobra (brand of malt liquor) from a one liter mug and watching a Lakers game if one was on that night. As soon as I'd step in Raul's girlfriend Maria would offer to cook me some food and no was never taken for an answer.

As I have already mentioned, Raul worked steadily and preferred his current life to his gang days:

"There's not so much I can complain about right now. Have a nice path, I'm cool. I work every day. I drive a nice truck, you know? It's like the American Dream. You wake up every day and go to work. What else can I do?"

Still Raul wasn't all that contented. He was always an interesting person to converse with because of a certain irateness and dissatisfaction he carried with him. He had read a lot in prison and had grown politically quite radical, even though he kept on pointing at the many contradictions in his life: the Nikes, the truck, the big screen TV. Raul's broader political views were an interesting, but not uncommon, brew of cultural nationalism and "street mentality." As understanding as he was towards younger gang members the neighborhood life didn’t really provide a meaningful framework for his life anymore:

"You end up in jail, dead. And the last thing they'll fuckin remember is a fuckin car wash, or a picture. That's the way you wanna be? That's how you wanna be remembered? I wanna be remembered that I was something different. You know? I changed somebody's mind to be more revolutionary. To think outside the box and tell to people: 'You know, fuck you! This is my land, this is who we are and we gonna take this shit back whether you like it or not. Cause I'm tired of your rule, I'm tired of you treatin us like, you know, we're fuckin animals. And puttin us in cages and feedin us guns and givin us drugs to fuckin fuck each other up cause we didn't bring that shit here.' And it all goes back to your origins – to who you are."

Raul still continued to have strong connections to his neighborhood and despite his own political orientation he didn’t foster any daydreams about a radical social change in the current situation in Los Angeles in the near future:

"I mean gangs are still gangs. I still talk to my friends, you know? I still be keepin contact with them. I'm like, you know: 'What's goin on?' 'Fuck these dudes!' They're still goin at it with them. You know? 'Fuck 'em. I'm gonna put in work,' and stuff like that. And I hear this shit and it's true cause it still goes
on every day. Not just in my neighborhood, but just every fuckin day. You see it in the news everyday that somebody got shot. Fool got killed. You know? So, it’s not like, regardless of what I think or what I say... It’s not gonna change anything, you know? I can think the way I think and I can be realistic and I can... But in the end of the day all I can change is myself.”

Walking a tightrope between neighborhood-based loyalties and his “legit life” proved troublesome from time to time. For several weeks we played soccer in a sports park in the middle of his former neighborhood with a team Raul and his co-workers had put together. In the past Raul had got shot a couple of times in the same location. After the game we would always stand waiting under the bright floodlights until Raul was convinced that “everything was all right” and we could leave. After three of Raul’s friends had been killed within two weeks Maria slapped an outright ban on these soccer games. The killings were due to intensification in the conflict between his old neighborhood and their worst rival. Withdrawn from gangbanging Raul was faced with a dilemma:

“I try to stay out of it – I listen to cultural rap and all, but, you know? These guys just killed three of my friends. So what am I to do? I wanna make peace instead of fighting against each other, but there are some people that don’t and that carry guns with ‘em, so... you know?”

5.2 Chino

I met Chino in the charter school. He was always one of the loudest and liveliest characters in the room, and not a hard person to become acquainted with (especially when I in my usual manner carried an unfailing stock of cigarettes with me). Chino had been introduced to the school through a friend of his, finished his high school credits there, and was now participating in the social justice work centered on the school:

“Once I been there, you know, I was exposed to a lot of realities when it came to injusticenes with the city. I was introduced to social justice work and the people who stood behind it and their mission and demands. I participated in actions, marches, rallies, presentations and testimonies in the City Hall with lotta committees and different organizations. It kind of opened up doors for me as far as me being exposed to whole different... being exposed to something out of the box. Slowly and steady I started gettin more involved and now I got a different... a better understanding on what the works is and it kinda motivated me to go out there and get some true answers and speak out a little bit.”

In his twenties Chino was among the few people I met who still lived in his original neighborhood. Even though he took part in the social justice work he was heavily embedded in his neighborhood and there was no way of avoiding the reality out in the streets:
“Gangbangin is deep man. It’s a lotta love there too. People are really passionate about what they doin: gangbangin, hustlin, makin money, killin, whatever you got to do to get the job done. It’s gotta be done, you know what I’m sayin? People are stuck on that mentality because unfortunately this is a city with no pity, you know what I’m sayin? If you’re weak you gonna get taken out. You got to be strong about holdin it down for your gang or your hood and stuff like that. Because if you don’t, you’ll get taken out. Nobody cares man, nobody gives a fuck, nobody has no sympathy fo’ your ass. It’s a survival of the fittest, you know what I’m sayin? Out here you gotta be strong to survive man. Lotta people get caught up doin their struggles man, lotta people get killed man. People get hard and stuff like that, you know?”

When asked by one of the organizers to speak out in front of TV cameras during one of their actions Chino first proposed that he could do it with sunglasses on and a shirt in front of his face, but then backed down all the way: “I don’t care about my credibility, I’m a grown man, but like, some of the guys might think like a second time when they see me: ‘I didn’t know he does shit like that.’” Chino didn’t have a job at the moment and was hustling a living from wherever he could. Always acting pronouncedly confident and positive the future seemed to appear to Chino open in contrast with his markedly dim vision of the current reality:

“Well, me being a person that’s been around... I wanna experience different things, I wanna continue experiencing different things, you know what I’m sayin? I would like to explore and shit like that. Travel to different countries, shit like that. I don’t really like politics cause politics is just nasty man. It’s a hassle man. It’s a stressful thing when you realize that police have more power than civilians. Just hard realities man, the reality is shit, it’s not too pleasin. So, I don’t even want to think about that shit, so... I don’t know what the fuck man... I’m at a point in my life where I don’t really give a fuck man... The world can kill itself and I don’t give a fuck... Let me just continue on with my shit.”

All things considered, Chino’s primary “stomping ground” at the moment seemed clear enough:

“I’m tellin like the situation with the gangs it ain’t too pretty. There’s politics out here in the streets, there’s politics once you get locked up, and there’s political... There’s politics as far as, you know, the state goes. When it comes to government politics and the street politics and you gotta abide by both of them or you’re pretty much fucked. You know what I’m sayin? You’re in between a war zone. You can’t go here, you can’t go there, you know? And I’m on the streets, you know? So, that’s how I feel like, you know?”

5.3 Noel

The most stable social contact I had during my fieldwork was Noel. Talkative, sincere, and well versed in L.A. streets, Noel was the perfect person to know. A trip to the corner liquor
store in one of his cars (whichever of them worked at the moment) could turn into a long drive round the city as Noel would show me places and tell stories of incidents in the past. Equipped with insufficient literacy skills Noel navigated his way effortlessly (and recklessly) around the vast road network of Los Angeles without even looking at the direction signs. On impulse he could stop the car and holler across the street to a stranger with a visible (ordinary) tattoo, introduce himself, and invite her/him (most likely her) to visit the tattoo removal clinic. In gas stations and liquor stores Noel never failed to spotlight his friend from Finland doing “a documentary on gangs.” But behind his genial grin there was a certain unease in Noel which would surface at times.

In his late twenties Noel had been living with Rosie for a couple of years now. His mother was addicted to drugs and couldn’t support him and according to his own words he never really had a father. Noel had two children but his relationship with their mother wasn’t really working out. Although he helped Rosie out in the clinic he was constantly trying to come up with a job or a hustle to make money on his own. This was difficult as Noel had very few marketable skills, a long criminal record, and not many social connections to utilize in finding a job. In the past he had been working for his father-in-law’s renovation company, but such a tangled arrangement never really lasted. He had also worked in Home Depot, but ended up beating up his manager who he said had disrespected him.

Rosie often complained that Noel still had “that street mentality” in him and Noel fully agreed with this. Such a mentality could be manifest in the most ordinary situations. Once, the three of us were out at Santa Monica Beach and decided to have a drink in a promenade bar, but found out that Noel refused to carry any I.D. with him as a precautionary measure in case he would run into trouble. He would also refuse to use public transport, partially as a point of pride, but mostly to avoid a possible confrontation (his pride in question here as well). Nevertheless, on other occasions Noel could start raving at a gang member crossing the street through the car window.

Even though he wasn’t actively involved in his gang anymore he carried the gang’s symbol on the dashboard of his car and stubbornly refused to remove any of his tattoos. Surprisingly, after some serious disputes with Rosie, Noel did agree to start removing a tattoo on his back as a token of reconciliation. Rosie was enthusiastic by this turn of events,
but after one session in the clinic Noel refused to continue the removal and in addition got
the name of his neighborhood tattooed on his wrist as well (this time he took the tattoo on a
spot where he could easily cover it with a watch).

Noel still continued to visit his old neighborhood frequently. These visits were not
without risks. Sometime ago Noel had got shot at by the members of his own gang who
didn’t recognize his borrowed car as he was looking for a parking space by the street.
Luckily the bullets were stopped by the steel structure between the front and the back
window. This, he said, was the reason he leaned so far back when driving.

Noel was often markedly torn by his current situation. “I hate this fuckin life. I
honestly hate it so much!,” he opened up one night when we sat smoking in his car parked
in Rosie’s backyard. In the next breath he admitted that if it wasn’t for Rosie he would
either be dead or in jail. In the interviews we made, Noel’s confusion over his situation
came up frequently. I find it hard not to interpret the following comments as Noel’s
ontologically charged contemplations about his state of in-betweenness:

“You gotta work, you gotta be professional, you gotta play the part. Breathe in, breathe out, answer the
phone properly, and then like, it’s all a gimmick. We all live in a fantasy world all over the world. You
get what I’m sayin? And then, like the people that keep it real, all the people don’t like it, like, like
you’re uneducated. ‘He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.’ Well, you know he’s talking about?
Cause he is educated in his world, and when he comes out of that world it’s like, not look friendly to
‘em. You get what I’m sayin? Not look friendly to anybody, when you come outta...”

On many occasions Noel told me that a year ago he wouldn’t have said a word to me.
Nowadays, he often remarked, he met a lot of different people through Rosie and he took a
certain pride in the fact that he was able to converse with them. To me, Noel’s current
situation seemed to be characterized by a certain social disillusionment. Noel remained
detached from his gang but unattached to any alternative social entity. Even though he
could master a certain code of behavior when working in the office of the tattoo removal
clinic, he felt that his position was more of a front, a pretence, than a social position grown
into through lived experience. Such a socially positionless state, I believe, disposed Noel to
reflect extensively upon the different social realities (or what I have discussed as
modalities) he had become familiar with:

“I know I gotta do good, I try to do good, but in a way it’s like sad because... when I was growin up
everything I was doin was fun and... easy. And now that I’ve learned more how a certain society runs...
It’s like bein accustomed to bein in a farm and every time you get hungry in a farm you can go and pick
up an apple. They won’t get mad if you pick up an apple. But when you go to a city and it looks like...
You know, they got a fruit market, they got baskets of everything, but they have ‘em for a reason, cause they’re sellin ‘em. You can’t just go grab one. Somebody is gonna get pissed off. So when you start doin that you start gettin into trouble, you know?”

Noel continues:

“So when you go to the city you get confused. There’s different rules, there’s different... just the pace of life, you know? And everybody has to work to survive. So, I mean, if you don’t have no skills and you grew up just like farmin and you don’t know how to read and stuff like that, when you go to the city you gonna be fucked, so... And then you’ve grown to survive in a certain way, just to... just like everybody around you survived without money.”

Free-floating in the middle of all his frustrations Noel was eagerly trying to find a meaningful orientation in life:

“I’m like... I’m in it till the wheels fall off and I’m still in it till the wheels fall off. But I don’t know for what cause now. And that’s what I’m tryin to find myself, you know? And my cause should be for my kids, you know, should be for my girlfriend, for the people that are around me, my friends. My new friends, my old friends. You get what I’m sayin?”

Rosie was constantly trying to push Noel towards his family, settling disputes and acting as an intermediary in general, but meetings between Noel and his girlfriend seemed to end up in a heated quarrel. Caught in a limbo Noel yearned for a peace of mind, sometimes turning in rather surprising directions to attain it:

“But I became very institutionalized, you know? So, it took me a long time to realize that I was institutionalized. People would tell me, but I wouldn’t... You know? Life was better inside – it’s still better inside than it is out here cause inside you have no responsibility and here you do.”

Several months after I returned from Los Angeles Rosie told me on the phone that Noel and his lawyer had looked into some of his older convictions and figured out a way to get him into prison for a couple of months where he was indeed staying at that very moment. With some amusement in her voice Rosie noted that Noel was constantly trying to call her from inside: he wanted back out.

5.4 “No more studies” - note on fieldwork

“No more studies,” was the first item on the list written on a blackboard in Chuco’s Justice Center where the Youth Justice Coalition had arranged a meeting to bring together youth
organizations, gang intervention workers, and community leaders to discuss ways to exert pressure on elected city officials to fund gang intervention workers on the streets, to flood poor and working class communities with jobs, and to open youth centers in these communities. Apologetically I introduced myself as a student of cultural anthropology from Finland, but was unanimously excused for my research pretensions by the youth sitting next to me: I was doing the study for myself, not for the city or the government.

Walking into one of the organization’s office for the first time, introducing myself and my research subject I was faced with a question: “So, you wanna look at gangs as a disease or something?” When I explained that this wasn’t my approach at all my presence was tolerated, but the response depicts well the general skepticism and even outright boredom many people displayed towards another study on gangs. Quite understandably, a purely academic interest in gangs made little or no sense at all for the people concerned. A study was conceived as a plan of action, not as another particle floating in the pdf-universe of scholarly studies. One repeated concern was if I was coming back and when. Alejandro from Homies Unidos told me somewhat bitterly about students doing research: “They just take what they want and you never hear from them again.” Indeed.

As another consequence of the overflow of gang studies gang members who have been involved with these organizations for some time are quite well versed in sociological gang lingo, which in many cases quite thoroughly penetrates the agenda and operation of some of the organizations. Comments, such as: “I didn’t have a male role model,” or “I did have structure, it wasn’t really that...,” were ready before I had even uttered half a sentence and were given in a disinterested automatic manner. The prevailing paradigms of gang studies have definitely become part of the self-understanding of former gang members, at least in explaining their actions in a larger social context. Many former and current gang members are fully aware of the outsiders’ interest in their lives and shrugging off a social science student is an indispensable survival skill while outside the mean streets of Los Angeles. But then again, “We all play the part,” like Noel liked to put it. Once again, indeed.
6. Summary

As I presented in the introduction my work has been built around three somewhat distinct spheres of life which stood out to me during my fieldwork. The former gang members I met in Los Angeles had been struggling for a good part of their life between neighborhood-based loyalties, the incarceration system, and the possibility of entering the “legit society.” Movement through this tripartite division in my analysis has meant a corresponding expansion in terms of the interrelational structures under scrutiny. But this movement can also be understood in terms of personal growth, even though people’s life courses seldom follow such a unilinear path, something I wished to make clear in the final chapter. Some enduring contradictions do indeed develop between these categories, which is why they make up such a useful framework for approaching gangs as a form of social and political organization in Los Angeles.

I have tried to cover a wide terrain here. The aim of my analysis has not been to lead up to a comprehensive or rigorously fine-grained presentation of the always complex and contradictory lived realities of individual gang members in Los Angeles. There are no self-governing social actors, no discussion about subjectivities, or individual creativity present in this analysis, simply because there is no need to state the obvious. The infinite complexity of, and variation in, individual experiences, motivations and actions, as well as each individual's intrinsic facility to reflect upon these is clearly something impossible to lose sight of. In my work I have tried to provide an outline of the major institutional and interrelational structures by way of which we can approach the existence of gangs in Los Angeles. Such an approach enabled me to understand some of the contradictions the people I met were experiencing as they were trying to leave behind life in a gang.

Throughout my analysis I have examined two theoretical propositions which cut through the tripartite framework: Firstly, I have elaborated on Susan A. Phillips’ thesis that gangs in Los Angeles can be considered as segmentary groups. Secondly, I have tentatively applied Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s model of the interdynamics between the state and the war machine.

I began my analysis from the local level. In a fully motorized, socially disconnected, and heavily segregated city like Los Angeles, the city grid becomes a sort of an innate
framework for the constitution of early social relations. Especially in neighborhoods where ties to larger state sponsored institutions (such as schools), which bring people together over spatial boundaries, have historically been weak, neighborhood-based intergenerational gangs have become the primary social, economical, and political institutions for the disaffected youth (especially men). My analysis begins from the premise that gangs in Los Angeles today are an outgrowth of elemental social processes in these localities. I must be explicit about my distaste for problematizing this sphere of human sociality as such. The reified and pathologized social entity, the gang, should by now give way to a distinctively relational understanding of the phenomenon.

In my analysis I have moved towards such a direction. As local clusters of social relations, gangs exist only in relation to similar formations, between which differences are constantly produced through graffiti, tattoos, colors, clothing, speech, hand signs, music, and dances. This symbolic codification is the terrain through which gangs acquire an identity as distinct social organizations. Analyzing gang graffiti and tattoos, Susan A. Phillips argued that gang members in Los Angeles conceive of their interrelations in a manner similar to the principle of segmentary opposition, as famously presented by Evans-Pritchard. I followed Phillips in presenting that there exists a definite symmetry between gang systems of L.A. and the social system of the Nuer, as described by Evans-Pritchard: In the absence of a centralized overarching authority the interrelations between segmented and distinctly ahierarchical territorialized groups, with a tendency towards fission and fusion, are maintained by alliances, feud, and warfare.

Instead of presenting the segmentary principle as a mechanism of integration, as a clear interrelational system between cohesive groups, I preferred to follow Paul Dresch in my analysis. In accordance with Dresch I argued that segmentary opposition is a constituting structural principle based on the maintenance of honor. Such an interpretation not only leaves us with a flexible conceptual model by which we can conceive the interrelations between gangs, but also accentuates a modality present in local group level sociality. Between segmentary groups such as gangs politics is a fabric of immanent social relations. Territory, inter-gang relations, and gang symbols are inextricably enmeshed with one's name and personal honor on a single integrated level of social existence.

A tattoo on the skin of an initiated gang member encapsulates appositely the
segmentary nature of gangs. In a concrete visible manner gang tattoo marks the equal horizontal relations between members of a gang while it also, unavoidably, positions the individual within a larger system of historically formed interrelations between gangs. In this respect tattoo is also a symbol which potentially invites immediate violent confrontation. Further, this symbol of inclusion denotes an extrinsic social position in the larger society. On all these levels of social interrelations it encapsulates the constitutive segmentary quality, honor.

In general gang members in Los Angeles come from populations similarly positioned in the larger economical and political structures. Disoriented from formal state-level politics they are engaged in segmentary politics on a neighborhood level. In the third chapter my aim was to consider how these local interrelations coalesce into a broader scheme of political relations.

I identified the incarceration system as an institutional site where the neighborhood-level segmentary interrelations between gangs merge into broader ethnically-based categories. Detached from their respective neighborhoods and brought together in the immediate presence of the political authority of the state gang members organize themselves into ethnically-based prison gangs with cultural nationalistic bearings dating back to the era of the 1960s social movements. Within these prison groupings segmentary divisions become of secondary importance, and although prison gangs are mainly concerned with interracial fighting, one can discern an orientation towards state-level politics to emerge.

On the streets gang members in Los Angeles have historically put aside segmentary affiliations when confronted by another state institution, the police. The former gang members I interviewed were eager to draw an analogy between the LAPD and gangs. The analogy extended from symbols and territory to the police's actual workings on the street. I considered this analogy against the history of the major urban uprisings in Los Angeles, which have been ignited by police brutality and have invariably bred gang unification movements. I argued that these incidents bring out the manner in which the state becomes a meaningful political actor in the segmentary frame of reference, which is, through its police force on the street. This was further implied by graffiti on neighborhood walls; normally a
medium utilized to mark segmentary interrelations between gangs. The police seem to bear a requisite symmetry with gangs to be incorporated into the sphere of segmentary politics.

Despite the prevailing antagonism towards the police and recurrent gang unification movements in the context of larger uprisings against police brutality and state repression, gangs in Los Angeles remain largely disoriented from state-level politics. Instead of treating gangs and the state as analogous political actors I approached their historical interdynamics through a theoretical framework adopted from Deleuze and Guattari. The composition Deleuze and Guattari have outlined of the structural interdynamics between the state and the war machine captures the distinctive qualities of these social formations: Segmentary groups operate by the diffusion of prestige and thus do not produce stable centers of power, while the arborescent state apparatus is concerned with conserving its existing organs of power. The segmentary war machine exists in a perpetual relation of coexistence and competition with the state, while remaining exterior to its sovereignty and law. This exteriority implies the state’s incapacity to internalize life on a local level. Deleuze’s and Guattari’s model also accounts for the symmetry noted between the police and gangs: In police we recognized an example of the disciplined variation of the war machine, appropriated by the state and directed against other war machines or states.

The introduction of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theoretical framework, ruthlessly reified beyond recognition I must admit, marks a turning point in my work. The preceding analysis of inter-gang relations and segmentary politics is at this point subsumed to this rough sketch of the interdynamics between the state and the segmentary war machine, and recedes in the background to give way for a closer examination of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theoretical formulation. I began this by following John M. Hagedorn’s global reading of gangs. I proposed a broader understanding of social organizations of the war machine type. If we are to examine gangs in relation to the state we must acknowledge the existence of similar social organizations functioning in a direct relationship with the state apparatus and the similar demographical matrix of such groups.

Following up on this theme I presented Hagedorn’s tale of two gangs. Hagedorn’s juxtaposition between the historical trajectories of two Chicago-based gangs: the Hamburg Athletic Association and the Conservative Vice Lords enabled me to approach the question
about the incorporation of young men into the political order of the state, or in terms of Deleuze and Guattari, the interior and exterior of the state in this regard. In accordance with their formulation I proposed we must not presume the society to exist for the state. On the contrary, the arborescent state apparatus has to constantly bind and internalize life on a local-level to conserve its existing organs of power. Through this formulation I wanted to once and for all discard the prevailing idea of a social or cultural dysfunction as the underlying cause of gang formation. The existence of these local-level social organizations in Los Angeles, and the primacy they have attained among certain parts of the population must be considered against a long history of exclusion from state-level politics and perhaps more importantly, the political economy.

In the fourth chapter of my work I focused on the process of social incorporation. My aim was to concretize the propositions adopted from Deleuze and Guattari by considering the work of non-governmental organizations working with gangs in Los Angeles. In terms of institutions these organizations are the essential point of contact and passageway for gang members to the so-called “legit society.”

At first, I sketched the broad outlines of certain macro-level developments evident in the situation in Los Angeles today. Following Loïc Wacquant and Ruth Wilson Gilmore I argued that the state's retreat from educational and social programs during a period of deep economic restructuring has had a generative role in the creation of what was termed a surplus population. The criminal justice apparatus and penal institutions were identified as the primary means through which the state has attempted to incorporate this redundant urban population. In tandem with this excessive reliance on incarceration the City of Los Angeles was attempting to include the work of numerous non-governmental organizations into its official policy of dealing with gangs. Drawing from Nikolas Rose’s analysis I argued that these developments mirror a more general neo-liberal transformation in the role of the state: While the state provides the infrastructural framework of law and order, the provision of public resources and services is entrusted to a cadre of more or less voluntary actors in the so-called third sector.

I moved on to present an account of the Los Angeles City Council Meeting where a blueprint for gang prevention and intervention work (“Community-Based Gang
Intervention Model”) was approved by the City Council. The title of the model and its author alone (Community Engagement Advisory Committee) make it clear that the anti-gang work in Los Angeles takes place almost solely in an extra-political zone of human relations. Bound to the state apparatus by a lack of vital resources these sometimes quite radically dissident NGOs have come to play an intermediary role between the state and the local communities. I proposed that the Community-Based Gang Intervention Model aptly exemplifies the multi-level process through which the state endeavors to internalize life on a local level. To support my general argument of the existence of different political modalities I also noted how political relations between segmentary groups were given recognition in the meeting. Indeed, as it is explicitly laid out in the excerpt of a dialogue between Tony Gardenas and Gregory Thomas it is the state which needs a “license to operate” on the local level of segmentary politics. In Los Angeles today this can only be achieved indirectly by integrating the locally “legitimate” actors in neighborhoods to the official political apparatus through multiple intermediaries.

To further concretize the process of social incorporation I discussed the tattoo removal operation. At this point I also returned to the segmentary thesis introduced in the second chapter of my analysis. I argued that through the removal of gang tattoo the individual is detached from a plethora of social and political interrelations. The gang tattoo is a constitutive marking by which the individual is positioned in a system of markedly horizontal and equal social interrelations. This holds equally to the social interrelations within the gang, as well as to the social interrelations this respective group has with other similar groups. The individual is socially constituted by the possession of honor, inextricable from his position amidst these relations. The removal of gang tattoo is a thorough personal transformation, which lays bare the positional constitution of the individual actor. Thus the tattoo removal process also marks the gang member's movement from a relatively bound segmentary system of social positioning to a larger, more ambiguous, and abstract set of societal interrelations. For the time being, it is almost as if he has become the inconceivable modern abstraction discussed in the introduction of this work, a free enterprising individual, socially detached and disconnected.

In the final section of the fourth chapter I presented two examples of social transformation which brought together the discussion concerning the interdynamics
between the state and the war machine and the implications of my analysis concerning segmentary social groups. In the first example we came across the Holy Terrors gang transformed into a Boy Scout Troop with relative ease, in fact the social group remained completely unchanged. In the other example we found an individual gang member working as part of a fire fighting crew through a gang-intervention program. I noted the organizational similarity of all the groups in question and the apparent attempt in both cases to achieve a social transformation by preserving the segmentary quality of honor. I argued that in both cases the transformation took place, and was conceived to have taken place, in relation to private property synonymous with the law of the state. The war machine, whether appropriated or not, is a markedly horizontal and inclusive social organization which by its built-in egalitarianism stands in a direct contrast to this exclusive law of the state.

Through my analysis I do not nourish any anthropological nostalgia for the primitive. Gang members in Los Angeles do not live in some self-contained neo-tribal off-worlds, detached from the modern state-level society around them. To frame my analysis in such a manner would be absurd. Gang members in L.A. stroll the streets of the same postmodern metropolis as information technology experts and art directors (although, rarely the same ones). They live as part of their respective families and local communities. Nevertheless they also claim a certain set of a certain gang for which they are frequently willing to kill and to die for.

Thus, as I have suggested throughout my work, in gangs we encounter a modality of social existence which hardly succumbs to the modernist self-understanding discussed in the introductory chapter of this work. The protagonist of this great modern pipedream, its greatest delusion perhaps, the free enterprising individual, is nowhere to be found within the social relational setting I have sketched in my analysis. I have done this through an outdated vein of anthropological thought, which some could condemn as totalizing. To me these abstract generalizations of interrelational segmentary social structures appear as useful as ever in interpreting life-sized individual realities.

Similarly the rudimentary and abstract theoretical framework we adopted from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari appeared useful in discussing the interdynamics between gangs
and the state. The formulation of the state and the war machine bears sensitivity for the distinctive qualities of these social formations and can be utilized in outlining the terms of their very concrete coexistence.
7. Discussion

At the moment of writing Alex Sanchez, whom I interviewed in LA and who has appeared on the above pages as well, is waiting for his trial in federal isolation. Sanchez, aged 37, was arrested on 24th of June 2009 for federal racketeering and conspiracy charges among two dozen alleged gang members or associates of Mara Salvatrucha gang, also known as MS-13 (Los Angeles Times 2009). A former gang member and since an activist and a director of Homies Unidos, a gang-prevention organization, Sanchez is accused of conspiring with fellow gang members to kill a man in El Salvador in 2006 and other crimes as one of four “shot callers” of the gang’s Normandie clique in Pico-Union area in Los Angeles (The Nation 2009a). The accusations are based on information from wiretap, an official announcement of which he had received the very same day I interviewed him. This tragic (and frankly, ridiculous) case against Alex Sanchez highlights the distinctive qualities of the social formations I have discussed.

This is not the first time Alex Sanchez faces trial. In January 2000 Sanchez, who entered the country illegally from El Salvador when 7 years old, was targeted for deportation to El Salvador by the LAPD and INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) before he could testify on behalf of a teenager who contended he had been falsely implicated in a killing (Los Angeles Times 2009). Sanchez had also publicly testified about police harassment of community peace workers. Back then Sanchez’s case became connected to the Rampart police scandal I discussed in chapter 3 and, as the media’s and people’s attention mounted, instead of deportation Sanchez was ultimately granted a political asylum in the US by the INS judge. (The Nation 2009a.)

If deported to El Salvador back then Alex Sanchez would have been at risk from several directions. As an anti-gang activist he had made enemies within his old gang MS-13. As a former MS member Sanchez also faced danger from the 18th Street, a Los Angeles-based rival gang active in El Salvador due to deportations of many of its members there. Then there were the state organized death squads which had executed several gang members in El Salvador. In an interview he told me about the situation he encountered in El Salvador in 1994 when deported there because of his crimes as a gang member:

“Many of my friends started showing up hanged, shot in the back of the head. Other ones had their hands tied behind their backs and they were shot in the back of the head, thrown in ditches and rivers, and sometimes hung naked with their tattoos showing and shot in the back of the head in light poles.”
Besides being a tattooed former gang member Sanchez had publicly addressed these issues of police corruption and violence he had encountered in El Salvador. Even though in the year 2000 he was working as an anti-gang activist in Homies Unidos this didn’t make his situation any better: the organization also has a post in El Salvador and four of its directors have been killed in the past years because of their work. It is hard to get more in-between all political relations than Alex Sanchez at that time.

The situation he faces at the moment is hardly less complex. Waiting his trial in custody anti-gang activist Sanchez is considered by many gang members as a fifth columnist and a legitimate target for retribution. As a former MS-13 member he is also automatically positioned in relation to other gang members and prison gang divisions. But the ambivalence of Alex Sanchez’s status ultimately culminates in the question underlying the charges he is faced with: is he a gang member or not?

The prosecution has argued that Alex Sanchez has lived a double life as a community activist, and as “Rebelde,” or “Rebel” (his former gang name), a gang leader in an international criminal organization Mara Salvatrucha (Los Angeles Times 2009). As evidence of this the prosecution has presented that Sanchez still has the gang’s tattoo across his chest (although he has removed all his visible tattoos), that in a photo taken in the year 2000 he poses a gang sign with his fingers, and that he was seen by a police patrol in a company of known gang members after a sporting event during the passing year (The Nation 2009b). As Sanchez is charged under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) act the focus is on patterns of behavior rather than criminal acts, thus the question of Sanchez’s membership in a racketeering organization (Mara Salvatrucha) is essential.

It should be clear at this point that in order for Alex Sanchez to work with gang members he must to some degree be embedded in the segmentary social and political interrelations pervading the local community he works with. This, of course, does not automatically entail criminal activity. But in the judicial setting the law of the state is exactly that of “all or nothing (State societies or counter-State societies)” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 397). It looks as if the state can only understand an adversary, an opponent, a mirror image of itself. At least in this case the RICO act provides the authorities the judicial means to create one (a stable center of power). The social reality, I argue, does not
succumb to these absolute terms and instead follows more the model of interior and exterior suggested by Deleuze and Guattari.

Sanchez’s fellow activist working with gangs, Father Greg Boyle, has presented, that instead of a conspiratory man-hunt, the case against Sanchez reveals a deep cultural bias and the authorities’ total ignorance of gangs (I don’t think the two necessarily exclude each other) (The Nation 2009a). Indeed, there seems to prevail a curiously deep-seated difficulty in understanding gangs as social formations. (Even gang members themselves regularly utilized the state as a metaphor when trying to explain me the working of gangs, although, the tribe, the family, and the pack were also frequently used as metaphors [more fitting I believe].)

For now, the transcripts of the wiretaps have not been presented to the court, but according to the prosecution in a conversation Sanchez is quoted as saying “we go to war.” No context or further quotation has been presented. (The Nation 2009b.) The sentence can obviously mean anything. But the questionable substantiality of the evidence notwithstanding, it is cruelly ironic that among segmentary groups war is exactly the preventive mechanism that keeps a political apparatus distinct from the social body from crystallizing. Warfare prevents gangs from fusing groups, from becoming a state factor.

Stable centers of power among gangs in Los Angeles are often hardly more than ephemeral by-products of such criminal investigations. If we focus on these mirage-like flashes of the arborescent order of the state we miss what I think is the quintessential aspect of gangs: they are locally-based intergenerational clusters of social interrelations which by their very existence, illegality, and the primacy they have acquired among the urban “surplus population” bring out an exterior (legal, social, economical, and political) within the political order of the modern state. The state authorities’ relentless eagerness to criminalize this sphere of human interrelations whole-heartedly is thus only one development in the creation of a more exclusive social and political interior of the state.

In this light, the urban “social pathologies” in the United States should be revised. It is not the transgression of the law of the state, in many ways concomitant with social inclusion on a local level, which demands explanation here. Rather, the curious enigma for the concerned social scientists to tackle is the still surprisingly persistent conformity to it among the outcast proletariat of the beginning of the twenty-first century.
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