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FROM INSCRIPTION TO INCORPORATION:  
THE BODY IN LITERACY STUDIES

**Crip Walk, Villain Dance, Pueblo  
Stroll: The Embodiment of Writing  
in African American Gang Dance**

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**Abstract**

*The African American gang practice of writing while dancing is part of a non-standard gang written tradition that crosscuts multiple expressive media. In dance, feet become primary media of written production as gang members spell out affiliations, nicknames, enemies, and memorials to the dead. Because gang members integrate writing with ephemeral expression, gang literacy expands scholarly constructs of writing that rely on materiality, durable form, and a lack of sociality or context. In such performative media, gang members thus provide a novel frame for questioning how literacy constructs impact racial politics in the United States. [Keywords: Gangs, Dance, Writing, Literacy, Ethnography of Communication, African Americans, United States]*

“Look, it’s double Dutch.”

“What?”

“It’s double Dutch!”

“What?”

“Just look at it!”

“Oh...oh yeah!”

Thus ran the exchange between myself and a nine-year-old boy, one of five young men who introduced me to the Crip Walk, a gang-related dance, in November 2000. After making sure that I understood what he was saying, the boy ran to jump in with his companions. It *was* double Dutch. Two boys, one at either end, mimed the motions of coordinated jump ropes while three others hopped and jumped in between. Periodically the boys would switch, handing off invisible dueling ropes to continue the performance. At one point, their sync was disrupted by some negotiation about who was supposed to be doing what. One boy, then thirteen, pointed, motioned, and commanded, and the choreography was quickly again underway. Then the eldest, a tall fifteen, knelt to the ground, tracing letters with his index finger to spell out the names of the “homies that had been lost.” “He’s writing RIPs,” the littlest boy had explained to me earlier (RIP is a common gang memorial saying based on the traditional “Rest in Peace”). The other boys soon joined him, each writing the names of dead companions, or sometimes crossing out enemies with mimed spray paint. Then they Crip Walked in miniature with two fingers, as if the dead continued to reside in the hands of those that remained (see Plate 1).

The unexpected presence of double Dutch jump rope and invisible written commemorations of the dead had come in the midst of a video taping session consisting of myself and five boys from Imperial Courts, a public housing development in Watts, California. This development is home to the Project Watts Crips, who are more commonly known as the “PJ Watts” Crips. I had first found about gang dancing in 1995, when a young woman had demonstrated and tried to teach me two gang dances. The first was a version of the multifaceted “Crip Walk,” a generalized name for the dances that will take up the bulk of this paper. The second was a specific neighborhood dance called the “Villain Dance.” Like the Crip Walk, which spelled out the word “Crip” or other signifiers of Crip identity with complex footwork, the signature moves of the Blood Stone Villains instead spelled out the word “Villain.”



**Plate 1: Miming writing and dance in Imperial Courts.**

These danced demonstrations provide a vivid example of gang members' preoccupation with the power of written representation and its crossover into inter-modal forms of written and oral expression. Gang dancing extends the expressive culture of African American Bloods and Crips to a semiotic arena that blends movement with writing to create powerful body-centered images of gang affiliation. It also links the usually distinct fields of incorporation and inscription, where the assumed abstraction of written media fuses with the corporeality of physical domains.

Gang dances in Los Angeles are widespread, rich in textual potential and adaptable to a variety of gang needs and circumstances. None of my existing knowledge of the Crip Walk or related dances, however, prepared me for the complexity of what the five young men from Imperial Courts would show me in November of 2000. As they danced, the boys combined written representation with memorializing, mimesis, and movement. In doing so, they were challenging common associations with writing by integrating their written system into a body-centered performance that merged words and letters with the sweat, joy, and sensuality of dance.

The significance of such combinatory practices has helped to shape my thinking with regard to how gang writing is linked to race in the United States. Before analyzing examples of videotaped dance clips, I review briefly ideas from scholarship on writing, linking it to African American cultural experience, to debates on the place of the oral in written traditions, and to the position of gangs in American society today.

### **Gang Writing as Counterliteracy**

Urban youth, gang members, and kids flunking out of school turn literacy hierarchies on their heads. Although the rise of ancient urban centers is entirely bound up with the development of writing in history, scholars generally frame urban populations in the modern-day United States as part of a growing crisis in illiteracy. This paper argues that local neighborhoods, ghettos, and inner cities have instead served as fertile ground for literacy innovation among those people who are usually targets of educational intervention.<sup>1</sup> The writing of youth marginalized from mainstream standards of literacy integrates mind and body, seamlessly interweaves oral and literate practices, and, in the manner that Brian Street (1984) and Keith Basso (1974) suggest in their work on the subject, help us recognize how multiple literacies intersect with social life.

Traditionally, scholarship on writing has tended to emphasize the independence, abstraction, and autonomy of writing rather than centering it within orality or daily life (Goody 1977, Basso 1974). Whether intentionally or not, much of this literature has reinforced Cartesian mind/body dichotomies that later were expanded by Levi-Strauss and others into the divergent categories of savage and civilized. Many scholars since have begun to establish methodologies that move us beyond such binary divisions. In particular, they suggest that the study and ethnography of writing in practice allow us to re-think the place of writing in society. Shirley Brice Heath (1982), for example, describes literacy “events,” arguing that the social context of literacy belies traditional distinctions between oral and literate culture. For Heath, children first encounter writing in oral contexts, where people read bedtime stories, or even coupons and the mail in social settings with social outcomes. Keith Basso (1974) further argues that all writing should be placed squarely into the ethnography of communication. For him, studies of writing should investigate the “social patterning of this activity or the contributions it makes to the mainte-

nance of social systems” (Basso 1974:431). Brian Street (1984) takes the concept of literacy even further, flexibly treating the multiple literacies that force us to question autonomous constructions of writing. All of these works contribute to a changing scholarship on writing, which recognizes the importance of ethnography, which prioritizes local exegesis on writing, and which charges that context is the most powerful centerpiece for the analysis of written systems.

In one sense, re-matching oral and written traditions constitutes a struggle over physicality. The mind and its handmaiden—writing—have been portrayed consistently as civilizing agents over sensual and indulgent bodies, a fictive process that masks the rawness of human experience with a veneer of cultural symbolism. The use of writing as a tool of colonial oppression is thus strongly linked to categorical definitions of self and other historically based on this veneer. Niko Besnier’s work on literacy also draws the same conclusions. Besnier (2001) asserts that

...when literate communities are embedded in a colonial context, or when they constitute different social classes or gender groups in a complex society, the differences in their literacy activities are no longer simply instances of the heterogeneity of literacy as a mode of communication. Rather, they become part of dynamics of domination and resistance, structure and agency, and reproduction and change. In such contexts, certain literacy activities are valued, exalted, and employed as gate-keepers restricting access to institutions and other organs of power. Other are devalued or simply not defined as literacy or communication at all (Besnier 2001:142).

Today, othering discourses surrounding writing continue to be successful because of widespread popular belief in the dichotomies that the scholars noted above are attempting to challenge. Writing finds solid footing on the foundation of Cartesian mind-body divides which, in the United States, have been particularly damaging to communities of color. Consider bell hooks, who writes of African Americans in the U.S.: “Both then and now I think about the meaning of healing the split between mind and body in relation to black identity, living in a culture where racist colonization has always deemed all black folks more body than mind” (hooks 1995:204). Writing’s link to the violence of institutional oppression has always been close to its analysis. Lévi-Strauss himself

stresses the pernicious uses of writing on the part of the civilized: "If my hypothesis is correct, the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings" (Levi-Strauss 1967:292; see also Daniels and Bright 1996:2).

How, then, do we analyze writing as part of social struggle, racist colonization, or enslavement? If violently oppressed bodies are producers of writing, how can we use their bodily practice to rethink relationships between rationalism and need, abstract thought and existence? Thomas Csordas (1994) analyzes the dominance of semiotic, "nominal" arenas over phenomenological, "experiential" ones, providing an integrated theory of incorporated representation within human lived experience that is useful for this topic. As he writes, "The distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy. Representation is fundamentally nominal, and hence we can speak of 'a representation.' Being-in-the-world is fundamentally conditional, and hence we must speak of 'existence' and 'lived experience'" (Csordas 1994:10). The divisions between semiotic and phenomenological arenas to which Csordas and others refer (see Leder 1990; Ricoeur 1991) are accentuated even further when scholars attempt to connect writing as an abstract nominal form to experiential realms. In particular, examining the relationship between writing and the body engenders conflict because it binds what is supposedly insulated from physicality to the very epicenter of sensation, feeling, and emotion.

Allen Feldman's work on political terror in Northern Ireland suggests that, as the body enters a political field, the "optic discloses the formation of the political subject, the discontinuities between formal ideological discourse and political practice, the performance codes shared between adversaries, and the material conditions within which ideological reproduction takes place" (1990:9). The enduring qualities of writing negotiated within the corporeal spheres Feldman describes not only disclose the material conditions of reproduction but become the site upon which those conditions are based. Extending body-centered politics into the realm of writing ties the corrupt body to that which has traditionally been considered outside of the physical. Anthropologist Marc Blanchard contends that "...the idea that writing is the successor to voice and its civilized substitute and enforcer...just confirms in the subordination of writing to speaking, the very authority that oppresses in the first place"

(1994:295). In Blanchard's view, Western thinking internalizes only the constructs that reify its superiority. His work on tattoo alludes to "the particular pain" (1994:288) of using one's own body as a messenger that must navigate contrasting fields of social interpretation. Black bodies in particular need no brand, tattoo, mutilation, or torture to communicate this pain; the virtue of their blackness carries a message of pain without the compromise of corporal intervention.

Dwight Conquergood's (1997) description of graffiti writing among Chicago gang members stresses how gang members transform dominant literacy practices in a manner that "transposes embodied oral performance, the spoken word, into a visual text..." (357). According to his analysis, "Property owners react to graffiti writing with revulsion because they viscerally experience it as a flagrantly sensuous sign of gang *presence*, as the contaminating touch of grotesque bodies out of place" (Conquergood 1997:357, emphasis in original). His analysis demonstrates how embodied aspects of material culture challenge dominant hierarchies of signification. For Conquergood, "'Local' and 'vernacular' are not strong enough adjectives to capture the moral outrage and repression that this literacy practice provokes. Graffiti writing is a counterliteracy that...must be situated within the discursive and visual practices of power and control that it struggles against" (354-355).

Gang counterliteracy places writing directly into the hands of those popularly depicted as modern-day savages, animals, or defiled subhumans—as blacks in America were once depicted; as gang members in America still are. What does it mean to bring "letters" into worlds considered to be primitive, uncivilized, and undereducated world? Conquergood describes gang writing as disrupting "the literate-illiterate hierarchy that naturalizes class privilege and supports the uneven distribution of cultural capital" (1997:354). Gang counterliteracy has become a powerful part of what bell hooks terms an "outlaw culture," just one example of the many "cultural icons that are defined on the edge, as pushing the limits, disturbing the conventional, acceptable politics of representation" (1994:4-5). In analyzing the culture of outlaws, hooks contends that no form of African American representation can be interpreted separately from the patriarchal culture of mainstream, white society. No matter how isolated such cultural forms appear, hooks emphasizes how white media and mainstream society persistently classify black cultural expressions as uncivilized, primitive, or exotic (1994:10; see also

her treatment of gangster rap, 115-123). Within an oral culture of outlaws, writing is no longer linked to the controlling violence of colonialism or slavery. In gang dancing among Bloods and Crips, the answer lies in connections between black bodies in motion, social and structural violence, African American expressive culture and the position of writing in what Walter Ong calls a “post-literate” society (Ong 1988). Possibilities of tribalistic, inter-gang violence forever follow a writer of graffiti, a wearer of tattoos, or a performer of gang-related dances.

For African American gangs, dancing is just one of many body-centered expressive genres suggestive of performative patterns established during slavery. The violent oppression of black African identity during the slave era meant that danger was inherent in overt expression. Slaves were explicitly forbidden to learn to read or write. They were forced to rely on orality and performance—and thus on ephemerality and subtlety—rather than on permanent material displays. Deborah Gray White (2000) writes that: “...the best defense against unpredictability [in the slave world] was silence, the key to secrecy. It kept masters ignorant of everything that went on behind their backs. [...] Silence protected the slave quarters. It kept the slave family and the slave’s religious life removed from white invasion” (182). Such patterns remain a powerful legacy within Black America, where linguistic traditions such as preaching, signifying, the dozens, rap and so forth provide creative counterpoints to the silence alluded to above (see Abrahams 1970, Kelly 1997, Mitchell-Kernan 1972, Morgan 2002, Rose 1997). From silence and silencing grew practices of encoding, informed by African rhythms, beats, and oral traditions. African Americans since slavery have honed the ability to be simultaneously invisible and visible, to participate in the myriad “hidden transcripts” that both protect divergent roles and identities (Scott 1990). Today, much of African American gang expression—danced or otherwise—constitutes an opposition to the larger society that recalls the subtlety and ephemerality of this historical inheritance.

Negotiating positions of subdominance, hypervisibility, and invisibility is particularly important for an analysis of gang writing. The combination of mystified totemism, black bodies, and violence defines the rawness and thus the attraction of gang written representation both inside and outside the gang community. The uncivilized specter of resistance in gang culture has become one of its primary attractions to outsiders. While this resistive stance does not guard black cultural life against “white invasion”

via co-option, neither does it guard against the continued influence of white patriarchy and domination on the interpretation of cultural forms. Slave-bound patterns thus clearly continue—not only in black American cultural expression but in the constancy of white reaction to blackness.

### **Gang Written Systems**

Let me now turn to a more formal treatment of gang writing as a written system. Gang members within the three major gang systems of the United States have created comprehensive written practices through which they position themselves within political systems of their own making. African American Bloods and Crips, as well as Chicano gangs, originated in Los Angeles and have now spread nationally and internationally (Phillips 1999). People and Folk, a third, multi-racial gang system, originated in Chicago and now dominate parts of the North and Southeast, as well as the Midwest of the United States (see Conquergood 1997, Cintron 1997). Each gang system has a multigenerational written tradition, through which individual gang members designate neighborhood identity and territory, personal and place names, enemies and allies, and broader markers of ethnic and social identity. In thus communicating their identities, gang members bring writing into totemic systems of classification, where social systems and modes of representation are linked in a classic Durkheimian sense. This section analyzes gang writing as one of the world's modern written systems and situates interrelationships within a range of gang semiotic genres.

All forms of gang writing in the United States are what Daniels and Bright (1996) characterize as adaptations of existing written systems. Gang writing uses some pictography and sign language alongside a base of Roman letters, both Arabic and Roman numerals, and words related to the standard literate traditions of the larger social world. Like many non-narrative forms of writing (lists, indexes, inventories, and the like), much of gang writing can be written and read multi-directionally. Gang writing may rely on singular ordering sequences, but it may also derive this order from features not usually considered grammatical, such as scale or artistic elaboration.

Gang writing in all its forms is rule-driven. It bears a distinct syntax and lexicon, and represents speech to a greater or lesser degree. As Ralph Cintron points out in his work on gang graffiti, "Indeed, if my earlier descriptions of street-gang graffiti relied heavily on linguistic terms such as

‘syntax’ and ‘lexicon,’ it was to prepare the foundation for describing graffiti as a special kind of narrative genre whose deeper meanings were not explicit but which rested on a large substratum of related but private oral and written texts” (1997:176). Cintron indicates that the range of subjective experience that gang graffiti represents may be limited, but may also communicate wider concepts such as “respect” or “heart.” Graffiti thus becomes a narrative tactic, related to other gang forms both written and oral, which can relay abstract concepts as well as concrete ideas.

Adams and Winter, two scholars who studied graffiti in Phoenix, Arizona, also make use of extensive linguistic metaphors to investigate their topics (Adams and Winter 1997). While Cintron describes the rampant crossing out and disrespecting practices in writing as “negative morphemes,” Adams and Winter describe graffiti as comprised of “utterances,” “turns,” “monologues,” and “dialogues.” The linguistic investigations by the above authors suggest that gang writing is the rule-driven representation of direct speech. For example, Adams and Winter describe how “gang graffiti also typically includes general dialect characteristics of the communities in question,” (344) going onto describe how African American gang members create written versions of African American Vernacular English pronunciations through phonetic spelling, such as writing gangsta for gangster.<sup>2</sup> They write, “we refer to graffiti writing as utterances. While the term is generally associated with spoken language, the interactional nature of the writing, the norms governing its use, plus the lack of complete phrases and clauses in the writing make the choice of this term appropriate” (1997:344). Already, gang writing in its strictest form (graffiti), crosses boundaries between communicative genres usually treated as distinct.

Scholars tend to treat orality as ritualistic, performative, and locus specific, while writing bears the distinction of abstraction, possibilities of interpretation in multiple times and places, and the ability to separate from original arenas of production. Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) presents several such distinguishing characteristics in her chapter called “The Linguistic Facts of Life.” This chapter is included in a broader study of accent precisely because of the widespread agreement among linguists about the features of language she describes. One element of this argument describes how writing and speech have distinct histories and properties. Unlike speech, she indicates, writing is without context, it is not produced socially, and its audience is removed primarily in time and space. It is durable and rigid, while speech is ephemeral and tolerant of ellipses.



**Plate 2: Eastside Foe Tray, Duse Gangsta Crips.**

Gang writing, because it links writing, the body, and sociality, counters the above distinctions. The combined traditions of hidden metaphor, social history, and written performance within gang genres both reinforce and disrupt ideologies surrounding conceptions of writing such as those reported by Lippi-Green. Gang writing clearly acts both as “visible speech” (DeFrancis 1989) and as a representation of abstract notions that cannot be expressed orally. It frequently evinces a marked grammatical and oral equivalence. The written statement “43’2GC” in Plate 2, for example, is equivalent, if not precedent, to the oral statement “This is East Side Foe Tray Gangster Crips,” or “East Side Foe Tray Gangster Crips,” either of which may be used during a gang confrontation to identify a neighborhood to potential enemies.

Gang concerns with safety, conflict, and communication arose within an existing literate tradition. Gang needs, rooted in daily protection and survival, simply nudged gang members to adapt aspects of an existing written system into a novel form uniquely suited to their purposes. This is what Daniels and Bright (1996) refer to as “bisystemy,” where people create more than one tradition of literacy within a single linguistic sphere.

Aspects of bisystemy are evident in the uses and meanings of gang initials. Above, the initials “es43GC” stand for “east side Foe Tray Gangsta

Crips,” an African American Crip gang based around 43rd Street and Central Avenue in Los Angeles. Although the initials comprise a written format unique to gang culture, each element stems from existing written or spoken forms that represent particular gang concerns. First is the city-wide designation that distinguishes eastside from westside. This is clearly based on standard English literacy, but in the gang world carries its own sociopolitical significance. Second, the numbering sequence “Foe Tray” is based first on Black English Vernacular (“Foe” for “Four”) and second on Creole gambling terminology (“Tray” is an alternate spelling of the word “trey,” commonly used to mean “three” in cards and dice). The numbers together stem from the city-sponsored designation of 43rd Street, which is also ultimately based upon standard English literacy. Third, the word “Gangsta” derives from a black English spelling of the word “gangster,” which prioritizes the distinctive African American street pronunciation of the word. Fourth is the term “Crip,” a word whose origins are debated, but that has emerged most strongly in the gang community as one of two broad designations of African American gang identity (Blood and Crip).<sup>3</sup> Crip gang members today cite a multiplicity of acronyms that constitute the meaning behind this word: “Community Revolution in Progress” or “California Independent Pistol Slangers” are just two versions. Each element of this statement combines traditions of writing and speaking, and recalls historical and cultural traditions well framed within both urban life and the racial identity of the writers.

The statement of gang identity in Plate 2 is just the beginning of a detailed system of writing for African American gangs, the complexity of which is mirrored in other forms of gang writing in the United States (see Phillips 1999). Table 1, based on the work of linguist Naomi S. Baron (1980), demonstrates how the placement, semantic range, stability, and syntax of gang writing depend on the media through which it is expressed. Topics may range from current love interests<sup>4</sup> on the part of a specific gang member to past or present enemies on the part of a specific gang. Some aspects, such as gang identification, bridge all expressive genres. Others, such as membership lists or memorials, apply only to some. While Jack Goody (1977) might not consider gang writing a “fully developed” written system, taken as a whole, the formal features of gang writing are broad enough. They are also different enough from that of the larger society to classify gang writing as a unique form of writing, defined by particular systems of users, forms, functions, and topics (following Basso 1974).

**TABLE 1: Comparison of Expressive Genres for African American Gang Writing**

	PLACEMENT	CONTEXT/USES	SEMANTIC RANGES	STABILITY	DURABILITY	SYNTAX
<b>GRAFFITI</b>	built environment	conflict, affirmation	<i>broad:</i> membership lists, gang identification, memorials, love, enmity, alliance, sayings	high	high	flexible
<b>TATTOO</b>	whole body	prison, street	<i>broadest:</i> gang identification, memorials, love, family, saying, images	high	highest	flexible
<b>SIGNING</b>	hands, arms	conflict, greeting, posing for pictures	<i>most limited:</i> gang numbers/initials	high	low	rigid
<b>DANCE</b>	whole body/feet	parties, dances, clubs, houses	<i>limited:</i> gang identification, memorials, enemies, mimesis, daily life	medium: varies between gangs	low	flexible

Neither graffiti, nor tattoo, nor dance, in and of itself constitutes gang writing. Taken as a totality, they express the multi-sited nature of gang literacy, and the varied locations in which writing is composed and interpreted. Table 1 demonstrates how three of the four major genres of written expression in African American gang culture are body centered. Some are directly expressed by the body itself (hand signing, dance); others work from a body as canvas (tattoo); yet others that seem separate from the body (graffiti) may continually reference body imagery through content. What does it mean when a hand sign imitates the physical shape of a letter, only to be re-represented in graffiti or tattoo in pictographic representation of that sign? What does it mean to write invisible words and letters with ones fingers or to use hands to imitate a word-based dance? Gang members play endlessly with crossover in expressive genres that extend domains of interpretation along with the basis of written production.

Plate 3, for example, represents a tattoo on the back of a man from the 7-9 Swans neighborhood (said “Seven-Nine Swans”), near 79th Street and Central Avenue in Los Angeles. The image of a hand that would form the shape of the 7-9 and a Swan (with two fingers for wings, pinkie for the tail, and thumb for head), is placed beneath the skin in tattoo, and indeed is placed all over the Swans neighborhood in graffiti. In all cases, people objectify the body to become metaphorical walls on which letters are



**Plate 3: Tattooed hand signs representing Family Swan Bloods.**

inscribed. Such semiotic overlaps as evidenced in Plate 3 recall the power of multiple grammatologies: Derrida's embedded signification combined with a comprehensive, self-referencing written system.

However it is expressed, gang writing signals identity in hostile social worlds where affiliation equals protection. When written on disembodied walls, this protection comes from the definition of abstract political landscapes, control over the use of specific gang territories, and the association of names with neighborhoods. Gang members thus use writing to "commu-

nicate at a distance” (Goody 1986). As Goody suggests, “writing represents not only a method of communication at a distance, but a means of distancing oneself from communication” (1986:50). Gang members use writing to indicate both presence-in-absence and power in numbers—to represent their neighborhoods without the risk of physical presence. However, even when they use embodied media—hand signing, tattoo, or dance—gang members also rely on visual rather than verbal means to communicate identity in ways that range from the permanent to the evanescent.

### **Dancing with Literacy: Extending the Boundaries of Communication**

The development of gang dancing began in 1960’s Los Angeles with the “Slauson Shuffle,” when members of the large African American gang known as Slauson Village would dance in unison to a particular song. Although Slauson members did not dance out the letters of their gang name on the ground, as later gangsters would, this was an early association of a particular style of movement linked to a particular gang identity, which distinguished African American gangs from gangs of other ethnic groups in Los Angeles.

Because this followed a popular dance craze surrounding a Del Tones song of the same name, gang dancing has never been isolated from influences outside of gang culture. Today, gang dances that include writing<sup>5</sup> remain primarily associated with African American gangs, and people generally perform them individually or in groups at parties or dance clubs. Although the dances vary greatly, within gang circles they all share a written component (see Plate 4). Each dancer writes, in dance steps, a gang name or initials, using right or left feet, either in place or moving across the floor and often using handsigning in combination with these moves. The Crip Walk, Pueblo Stroll, and Villain Dance in Plate 4 are just three examples among many. Most African American gang neighborhoods within the city have worked out formulae for representing their particular gang insignia through dance. People dance them out at parties and clubs, and, like traditions ranging from jazz to rap, engage one another in creative style competition. Dance is most importantly a social activity. In this social arena, a dance like the Crip Walk can also be situated within a broader range of popular dances that wind in and out of trends, such as the Clown Walk, The Old Man Walk, and the Cry Baby, just to name a few. This section

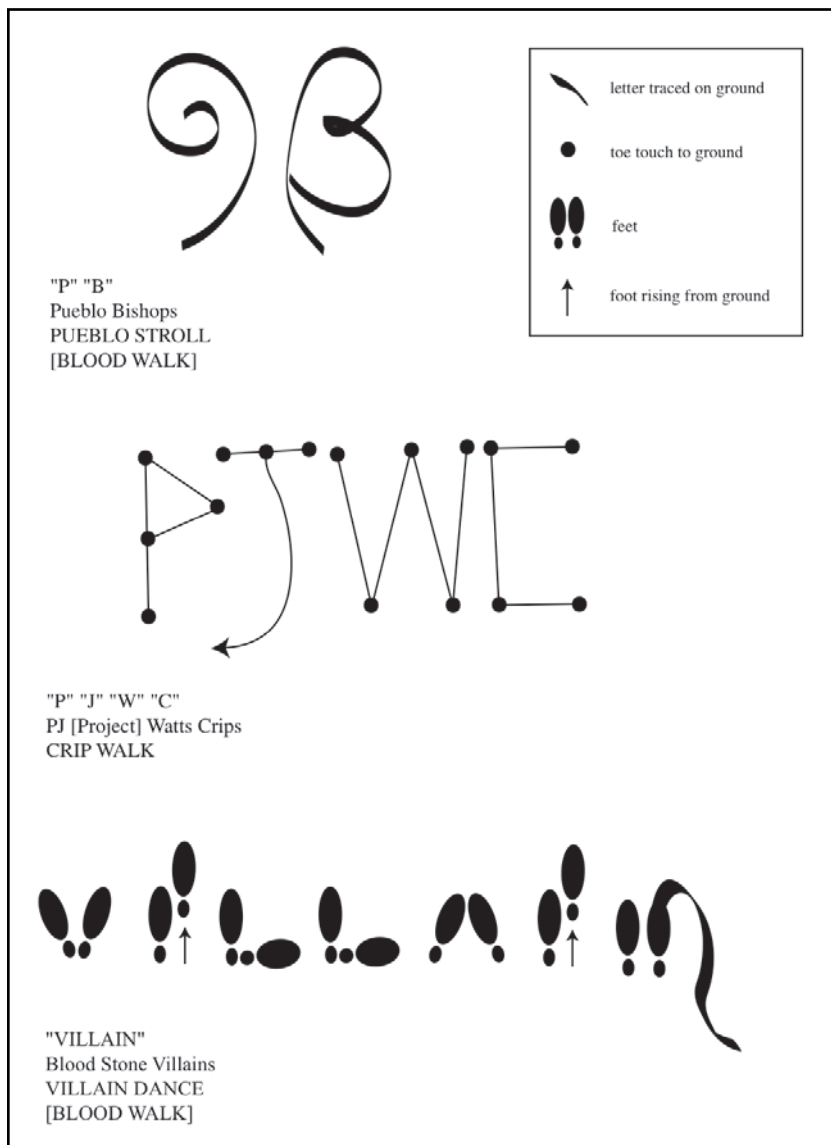


Plate 4: Diagram of three gang dances.

describes four video clips shot in November of 2000. I present the clips to give readers an idea of the complexity and subtlety of gang dances, and also to explore the themes that emerge within their content. These include links with other forms of gang expressive culture, childhood play, and symbols of death and remembrance common to the gang life.



**Plate 5: Dancing the “B” for Bishops.**

CLIP 1: The first clip shows a man of about 35 who does an older generation of dances. He is a Blood and had originally intended for his sons to perform in front of the camera for me. When they failed to show up, he took this burden upon himself after some prompting over the phone from a mutual friend (“I know you still got those moves up in that ass!”). Three of us were sitting in a unit of the Pueblo del Rio low-income housing development in South Central Los Angeles, in the upstairs bedroom that belonged to a friend. After the phone call, she put on some music. He began dancing in the hall-

way, while I shot the video out of her bedroom door. His body and hand movements were as smooth as his footwork, which traced in circular movements the letters “P” and “B” for Pueblo Bishops, the Blood gang to which he belonged (see Plate 4 and Plate 5).

During this initial clip, this man literally re-teaches himself the dance: he gets better and smoother as he goes along, as if his body itself helps to reacquaint him with moves that have remained unpracticed for years. His own bodily memory reminds him how the right foot forms the circular P shape, then how his left forms a rounded backward B shape. Far from being a foot-centered performance, his choreography is a whole-body drama, and the subtle spelling would have been blind to me had I not already known what was going on. After we stopped the video, he described how people would “look at a nigga crazy” when he used to perform these dances in public at clubs. Gang dances are arenas of potential conflict precisely because they represent particular gangs—a risky endeavor in a world full of enemies. Out of the four sequences I describe in this section, this clip most straightfor-

wardly recalls basic gang identity—reduced here to the two fundamental initials (P and B) that stand for the Pueblo Bishops neighborhood. Because of the difficulty interpreting what people write even within gang culture, gang members frequently combine their dancing with handsigning, the forms of which are generally more familiar to a range of enemies and allies.

This version of the so-called “Pueblo Stroll,” as shown by the 35-year old Blood above, runs stylistically counter to versions of the “Crip Walk” I describe in the rest of the clips. I had the chance to video tape five young men, ranging in age from 9 to 15 years old. They were two sets of brothers, along with a friend, from Imperial Courts, another public housing development claimed by the PJ Watts Crips. I taped the boys for about two hours, frequently passing them the video camera, so that I could shoot still photographs, or else having one of them take stills. They seemed to enjoy these activities as much as the dancing, and they proved themselves to be far more adept at video camera operation than I. By the end they were sweaty but happy, and I arranged to give them free movie passes and two copies of the video in exchange for their time. It felt like a true collaboration, and everyone seemed pleased with the outcome.<sup>6</sup>

The relative youth of the five boys (ages nine, eleven, eleven, thirteen, and fifteen) who perform gang dances is indicative of the power their neighborhood identity carries very early on. Dance is one among many forms of gang-related cultural expression that are available to young people, that they can add to and expand upon as they grow. This type of cultural knowledge must be in place at a young age, because it allows young people to negotiate hostile, gang-oriented circumstances that begin in junior high and high school.

Younger children learn from their older siblings and friends how to do these dances. One of the boys in the video described it to me:

Showing off your...[yeah dog...]...moves...[intimidation]. Cause like everybody over here. Like the big, like our homies, sometimes they do dances and then they show us, and then they tell us to do it and all that and stuff. And then we practice at our little parties. And we just know how to do it.

At one point, the youngest boy started to joke with me, groaning that they not only had to do the dances, but that I wanted them to explain everything too?

CLIP 2: In the first clip of this series, the 13 year-old boy spelled the initials “PJWC,” which stand for PJ Watts Crips. First, he formed the P in blocks with his right foot, toe pointed forward and arms generally not above the waist. After he had traced four key points of a triangulated P with his foot on the ground, the boy rendered the J three dimensionally by kicking his foot backwards. First, his right toe made three dots to form the top line of the J. He then wrote the curved body of the J by kicking back his right foot, and with each kick he would slap his hand against the heel of his rising shoe (see Plate 6 and Plate 4). He rendered the W by blocking out the five main points of the W on the floor. Last, he wrote the C in similar manner, by tracing its four key points onto the ground with his toe. During the entire performance, his left foot would move from side to side to propel his motion across the floor, while his arms helped to balance him during this complex routine. When he was done, he had written the initials “PJWC” in about four feet of floor space. He repeated the performance three times: once with his back to me, once to the side,



**Plate 6: Slapping his heel to form a three-dimensional “J.”**

and once facing me, eventually walking forward and laughing.

The boy’s emphasis on block style letters was unlike the smooth rounded letters of the 35 year-old in the example above. All the boys I taped that day relied exclusively on their right feet as writing implements, much as they would on their right hands. This formed a contrast to the Pueblos example, as well as the Villain dance, both of which utilized left and right feet for writing in different ways. Letters can be adapted to fit any neighborhood circumstance, and different generations have different styles. Each generation

schools the next on performative techniques, and new generations subsequently add their own twists.

I had started out taping just two boys, the thirteen year old and his nine year-old brother, who were then joined by their two step-brothers and a friend. All of them were dancing and spelling out alternately, PJWC, for PJ Watts Crips, or BSC, for Bull Side Crips, the side of the housing development that they were from. “Those are the hood letters,” one of them told me, explaining. All of these spellings were somewhat within the realm of what I had expected in terms of gang dancing. But once the boys formed a larger group, they began dancing in unison and doing things I had not anticipated—kneeling on the ground and writing with their fingers, for example, which they told me were “the names of the dead homies.” This comes up again in the following sequences.

CLIP 3: The third clip is the double Dutch jump rope sequence I used to introduce this paper. During this sequence, two boys began miming imaginary jump ropes, linking their gang-based identity to a rich genre of African American childhood expression. The three remaining boys Crip Walked in between, hopping and jumping around in the middle, as they would have with real jump ropes (see Plate 6). They would occasionally switch off rope swinging duties with the other boys, who would then take over and dance. I was frankly stunned by the appearance of double Dutch jump rope in the middle of this Crip Walk sequence (or vice versa, in this case).

The arena of dance is a powerful crossover of schoolyard and neighborhood play activities with gang culture. I have often watched young girls making up dance routines or jump rope together in the context of their play. The integration of these traditionally feminine pastimes into gang cultural expression (and their combination with graffiti, hand signing, and other masculinized expressive genres) effectively switches them from girl-centered to boy-centered activities—something that has made double Dutch increasingly popular with both boys and girls alike.

When I discussed jumping rope and dancing with a teenaged girl from Imperial Courts, she began to tell me excitedly of a male friend that knew how to Crip Walk while doing double Dutch, something he frequently did at parties. Another, older gang member from this same neighborhood indicated that many people in the neighborhood learned how to Crip Walk by doing it with actual ropes. In attempting to check how representative these comments and activities were, I asked a thirty year-old man from the Pueblos neighborhood (not the man in the first video clip) about



**Plate 7: Five boys mime double Dutch jump rope.**

aspects of the boys performances from PJ Watts. He indicated that they used to do all the same things in his neighborhood—dancing with fingers, writing on the ground, and throwing up handsigns while dancing in a variety of ways. He went on to say that, when he was younger, they used to perform the dances with real jump ropes as well as imaginary ones. He said: “That’s how they come with the Crip walk, with the hopping and jumping and all that.” At first, this combined commentary lead me to believe that double Dutch might potentially be one origin of the dance, although more work needs to be done to create a stronger ethnographic and historical portrait of this practice and its influences.<sup>7</sup> Double Dutch has frequently been cited as an important aspect of New York style break dancing, due to its rhythms and repetition (Gaunt 1998). Double Dutch’s link with Crip Walking impacts one potential form of this dance, rather than serving as abstracted inspiration through its rhythmic components. Double Dutch, however, is not the only form of play present in Crip

Walking. One can find individuals miming a variety of things: rolling dice, skateboarding, spraypainting graffiti, yo-yo-ing, driving a car, fighting, shining shoes. This style of memesis has been present throughout the history of African American dance. On the plantation dancers would “hoe the row” or “shuck the corn.” Later, in 1970s breakdancing, dancers would play battle, row the boat, give CPR. And the legacy has passed along to Los Angeles. Dancers incorporate these into their moves depending upon concerns of daily life, including in this case death itself.

Toward the end of this sequence, the boys ceased their double Dutch. They knelt to the ground and began writing memorials with their fingers and lightly touching the index and middle fingers of their right hands to the ground in a soft rhythm (please refer again to Plate 1). It was at this point that I asked the youngest boy what it meant when they put their fingers on the ground in such a manner. He indicated that they were Crip Walking with their fingers, where two fingers became the legs of a miniature dancer. Because this action was integrated with writing memorials, it impressed me both as a resurrection and a veritable dance of death. The repeated motions brought back the dead to dance with them again, while simultaneously reminding them of death’s constant presence within their lives. I explore such themes of death and resurrection in the last clip.

CLIP 4: In this clip, the eldest boy of fifteen kneels on the ground directly beneath the video camera to Crip Walk with the index and middle fingers of his right hand. Simultaneously, he uses his left hand to sign the name of a dead companion named Elbo. The sequence lasts about 30 second total, as his left hand spells out each individual letter of Elbo’s name, while the fingers of his right hand represent Elbo himself performing the Crip Walk. Plate 8 shows the young man’s left hand forming a handsign of the letter “L” in Elbo’s name, while his right index and middle fingers perform the abstracted motions of the Crip Walk. After this is completed, the young man proceeds to trace the letters “ELBO” on the ground with his right index finger, followed by an “RIP,” for “Rest in Peace.” Elbo was one of the youngest gang members to die in the PJ neighborhood at Imperial Courts. He was shot by rivals at only fifteen years of age, and he and the fifteen year old dancer I videotaped were from the same generation of young people.

The significance of death symbolism in dance resonates within an extended framework of gang activities. Gang members commemorate the deaths of fellow homeboys by writing graffiti on walls or in concrete, by making memorial t-shirts, and by observing so-called “hood days,” festivals that cel-



**Plate 8: Signing the “L” in a memorial for Elbo.**

celebrate both life and death within any given neighborhood (see Phillips 2001, Cintron 1997). These activities act as reminders of the dead and constitute a highly conscious process of memorializing, enacted at both individual and group levels.

People remember the dead in countless ways throughout the course of their lives. It is almost a cliché, for example, for gang members to pour some beer onto the ground during communal drinking, saying “for the homies that ain’t here”—so hackneyed a gesture that it has been enacted on an

episode of “The Simpsons,” a popular television cartoon. This evokes the idea of a homeboy who would have otherwise been hanging out sharing a beer with his companions. By the same token, dancing is a communal activity. The integration of written memorials and miniature finger dancers into gang dancing inserts the presence of someone who might at that moment have been dancing with friends to represent their hood together. Dance allows gang members to embody those who have been lost by using their bodies to write the names of the dead repeatedly, as well as by acting out the danced writing that the dead would have performed themselves.

The four examples above demonstrate the variety of social links embedded in gang dancing, from writing graffiti to jumping rope, to making up dances, or memorializing dead homeboys. This is a complex demonstration of how writing through dance intersects with lived experience. For many dancers, writing basic forms of gang identity through the body becomes a competitive forum, not unlike a linguistic duel in which dancers compete with one another as they subtly engage in written wordplay. When dancers integrate their written movements with memorializing through tracing letters or finger dancing, they are engaged in ritualized resurrections and

reminders of the presence of death as an everyday aspect of life. Gang dances thus powerfully demonstrate the abstract concerns of gang life—identity, violence, death, remembrance—even as the abstraction of the writing itself is countered by the physical power of their written performance.

The four clips described above present several challenges. First is the business of describing in words what is performed. This I have attempted to enhance with video frame grabs and diagrams. However, these are woefully inadequate when compared to watching the video clips, or seeing people perform dances live. They inevitably sterilize an otherwise visceral experience for dancer and viewer alike. Second, the styles and content in the clips I describe above are in no way definitive of gang dances from the 60s until now. I intend these descriptions as snapshots—fragments of the potential for expressive communication embedded in gang dances through time. Last, all of the videotaped performances described above were reenactments—special performances designed for my video camera and the furthering of this project. More developed documentation of the original contexts will become important as gang dances, particularly the Crip Walk, become co-opted into mainstream arenas—with or without the writing that traditionally accompanies them.

### **Conclusion: Writing and the Body**

Writing among gangs is as much a part of surviving broader problems of oppression in the United States as it is about living through the internalized violence that endemically plagues gang arenas. Hostilities in both neighborhoods and in prisons, a lack of hierarchical communication, and the need to communicate identity in absentia all force gang members to rely on messages that can be communicated by bodies, separated from bodies, as well as placed upon them permanently. As writing intermingles with the body in dance, gang members not only purify or decorate bodily arenas. They harness the physical power of lettering and person-centered experience. Gang members meld flesh and concrete into coherent representations of gang political life. In these stylized arrangements of social movement, performance and metaphor critically combine. By linking human sweat and blood to an idealized expressive medium, writing becomes the focus of the body's physical transformations.

Dance enters the arena of writing with a clear message: That writing and the body can never be considered as truly distinct. Neither can gang

writing be interpreted without reference to the floors, walls, and skins onto which gang members inscribe it. As both Brian Street and Keith Basso suggest, writing actively represents the socioeconomic position of its makers in the society from which it ultimately derives. Studying the social and physical “place” of writing through ethnography thus opens up relationships between all aspects of human social life and mentality, effectively countering othering language that has encapsulated analyses of writing since Descartes.

The multiple dichotomies of mind/body; civilized/savage; written/oral frame a primary racialized duality that mars the political and social life of American society: that of white/black. As mind is to civilized and to written, so it is to white; as body is to savage and to oral, so it is to black. An analysis of gang dancing both challenges and reinforces this racialized dualism. As bell hooks indicates of writers like Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka, African American gang dancers literally “talk through the body” (1995:203). An optimistic reading sees them overcoming the Cartesian divide, melding mind and body into one. hooks, however, would contend that writers and dancers alike remain unable to challenge neocolonial interpretations that ultimately prioritize black bodies over black minds. No matter how effectively the study of gang culture staves off civilizing discourses in academia, those same discourses retain the power to define precisely because they are rooted in the popular imagination—and in the society that has ultimate coercive power over gangs, gang members, and their expressive forms.

Just as the historical rise of urbanism placed writing in the hands of elites or specially trained scribes, so modern-day writers act out society’s hierarchies of dominance and inequality through the interpretive exclusion they create. Views of urban experience as both savage and urbane powerfully shape the interpretation of gang cultural forms. Gang members seek no legitimacy from mainstream society in their writing. The writing they create has its own legitimacy, which stems from distinct methods of affiliation (segregated, segmented, opposed), and which bears similarity to other types of writing worldwide. Instead of being linked to higher reason and the more “positive” aspects of civilization, writing in the hands of so-called gang “savages” connects persistently to struggles for survival and the complexities of daily experience.

In dance and other forms of embodied gang writing, the emphasis on orality in African American expression blends with the unique materiality

of the written systems gang members have created. Dancers that use writing to remember through movement, or to resurrect the dead through mimesis, powerfully demonstrate that the relationships between writing and the body must be co-analyzed just as they are co-generated. In particular, the relationship between writing and the body is cemented by larger political economies and state-sanctioned violence. The study of this peculiar nexus is critical among peoples subordinated by the structural or symbolic violence of dominant groups. Again, consider Thomas Csordas: “Another inescapable transformation of the body in the contemporary world is being wrought by the incredible proliferation of political violence of all types: ethnic violence, sexual violence, self-destructive violence, domestic violence, gang violence. As much as any of the transformations sketched above, this one has to do with the very meaning of being human as being a body that can experience pain and self-alienation” (1994:3). Writing seems a powerful contrast to bodies that “can experience pain and self-alienation;” just as abstraction seems powerfully opposed to Csordas’s emphasis on violence. The embodiment of writing in the gang world negates both of these oppositions.

The interrelationships between gang communicative media poignantly demonstrate William Bright’s (1996) thesis that “...the choices people make when they put language into written form...are not purely linguistic ones. They involve questions of social interaction; they are complex; they often involve controversy and sometimes conflict” (764). Gang writing can never be considered a purely indigenous written system. It clearly stems from whatever cultural, linguistic, and orthographic resources gang members call into play. Anthropologist I.J. Gelb further writes that, “There are no pure systems of writing just as there are no pure races in anthropology and no pure languages in linguistics” (in DeFrancis 1989). Writing for gangs is a political creature that comments upon both internal and external elements of their system. To use Derrida’s language, it is both “inside” and “outside” gang culture, linked to external societal oppression that necessitates easy replication, permanence, and mobility, and to the internal hostilities that locate safety in physical disassociation. Modern urban spaces and social forms have thus defined powerful new forms of literacy, where living skins prove more durable than cured ones, and where walls and bodies become the libraries that house written texts.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See for example the work of Ralph Cintron (1997), Dwight Conquergood (1997), and Shirley Brice Heath (1982).

<sup>2</sup>Each type of gang writing also bears some distinct elements that comprise its content, lexicon, punctuation, and grammar. For example, gang members' use of dots, quotation marks, diamonds and the like to separate words (i.e. Flaco•Listo•Bullet) constitute primary gang grammatical devices, similar to commas or periods at the end of standard sentences. These work simultaneously as grammatical and aesthetic devices, lending both textual and visual balance to compositions. Gang grammar also revolves around standards of initialling. While in standard literacies, for example, one would write the name "38th Street," gang members instead write "38 Street." Within established gang traditions, the inclusion of the "th" or any other such modifier, such as an "st" after "1st," would be grammatically incorrect. Further, pictographic devices, such as the three dots (:.), stand for particular phrases—in this case, "mi vida loca," or "my crazy life." Gang members have also developed systems of hand signs formed into the shapes of gang initials, which communicate neighborhood identity across distances to friends and enemies alike.

<sup>3</sup>Another indication of gang writing's representation of gang orality comes from an early writing of the word Crip itself. According to several gang members I have spoken to, "CA-RIP" or "CA:RIP," both of which were versions of the word "Crip" sometimes written on walls, actually stemmed from pronunciations of the word that were common in the early 1970s, when the Bloods/Crips system was in the process of developing.

<sup>4</sup>Though most expressions of love are borrowed from the larger society, there are ways of expressing love in a particularly gang-like manner. For example, writing "Manny + Sofia p/v c/s" during the 1970s harnessed powerful protective and loyalty devices established in gang writing proper. P/V stands for "por vida," "for life" in Spanish; C/S for "con safos," literally meaning "with safety"—a protective device thought to reflect any bad sentiments targeted at the message back onto the writer. Characteristic uses of initialling and slashes to separate letters identify this as a composition written by a gang-oriented person.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to distinguish between gang dances that include a written component and versions of the dance that do not include writing that have been co-opted via gangster rap music videos and the internet. Although it is increasingly difficult to separate out the interplay between them, to date the presence or absence of gang signifiers within the dance can act as a distinct demarcation. Those dances that include gang signification are the sole topic of this paper unless cooption is explicitly referenced.

<sup>6</sup>Clearly the exchange was not "fair" in a broader social sense. Social scientists have a long history of participating in and extending the gaze of cooption in urban neighborhoods.

<sup>7</sup>Many other potential links deserve exploration in the development of gang dancing in Los Angeles beyond those examined in this paper. These include both East Coast style break dancing and hip hop culture in general, as well as the dance "stepping" performed in unison by African American fraternity members. These and perhaps others expressive realms, will be fruitful arenas for further research into the origin, context, and development of gang dancing in Los Angeles.

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