INTRODUCTION

This collection will show throughout that the complexity of gangs mirrors the complexity of the communities in which they are found. One dimension of the complexity of the latter is the diversity of opinion that normally exists within it. With regard to the “gang problem,” there are competing definitions—not only of its nature, but also of appropriate solutions to it. In addition, attempts to represent and speak for the community serve to problematize the concept as a unit of analysis. Is the community a concrete space—for instance, a collection of neighborhoods? Or is it instead a matter of collective identity, a “symbolic” community that extends only as far as people can be found who share a particular cultural identity or system of beliefs or “collective representations” (Hunter 1974)? To address these questions and the substantive issues concerning the relationship between gangs and communities, we have brought together the following eclectic range of textual representations, modes, and subjects of inquiry and theoretical positions related to the question of gangs. The reader will notice that there is no attempt to produce a uniform statement, but instead to provide a forum for critical issues as a way of advancing a nonreductive understanding of gangs. In our view, in order to broaden the understanding of gangs it is necessary to problematize the systemic references that make sociological explanation canonical rather than reflective and critical. We hope this volume will make some headway in that endeavor.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Each of the chapters in part 1 involves an attempt to show the limits of conventional theorizing about gangs. In the first reading, Sudhir Venkatesh points out that gang research and theorizing continue to be defined by the “ecology perspective,” originally adopted by the Chicago School. Focusing on immigrant groups in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, which were assumed to be both disenfranchised and poorly organized, researchers like Thrasher (1927) and Shaw and McKay (1931) argued that second-generation immigrant gangs formed deviant subcultures in relative isolation from mainstream society. Unlike what is typically perceived by contemporary researchers, however, the disparate works of the Chicago School did not
pathologize the notion of subculture. Rather, the concern was with the creation of social identity through symbolic systems of communication—folklore, songs, and poetry—which were deemed significant sources of motivation and bond, regardless of the extent of crime and mayhem. Venkatesh points out that although such concepts as “disorganization” are elemental (under various headings) to contemporary social research, the concern with the social identity of gang members initiated by the Chicago School has not been maintained, save for a few exceptions. The cultural dimension of gangs, according to Venkatesh, is especially relevant in contemporary society, which he characterizes as post-Fordist (referring to the crisis of capitalist accumulation that occurred after World War II). The corresponding shift in the locus of social identity from production to consumption is not unique to gang members, but instead is part of the environment to which they must respond. In turn, it is important to understand the nature of that response, rather than depicting gang members as passive or merely reactive. In addition, Venkatesh underlines the need to take into account the cultural and political dimensions of the gang scene. This involves not only a greater focus on symbolic codes and styles but also a more specific focus on the full range of activities of gang members.

In chapter 2, Avelardo Valdez addresses the issues of variation and change in Mexican gangs around San Antonio. Although “Chicano” gangs have traditionally been more territorial than other kinds, Valdez points out that the growth in lethal violence and well-organized criminal activities marks a break with a well-documented territorial ethos. Increased male joblessness and decreased government services for the poor also create a situation in which large numbers of adults can be found in gangs. Those adults, according to Valdez, play a mostly negative role, largely determining the degree to which an organization is criminally oriented. Unlike earlier times when the presence of adults made the gang more of a family, as when the “cholo” lifestyle was passed down from generation to generation beginning in the 1940s on the west coast, today in the San Antonio area at least, they are more important in maintaining a drug supply. And they are more able and willing to use instrumental violence in order to maintain obedience within the organization and to keep competition away. Valdez also finds several different types of gangs and substantial variation within types, as determined by commitment to goals, degree of organization, and constitution of their membership. In contrast to Venkatesh, Valdez does not find any-
thing positive in his sample of gangs, but instead a deterioration of prosocial elements that previously existed.

Ric Curtis (chapter 3) illustrates the turning points in the development of the gang scene in New York City. During the 1960s, the city experienced a mass exodus of its predominantly white middle class followed by most of its industrial sector. Social services were drastically reduced, even as unemployment skyrocketed. It was in this context that New York developed a heroin “epidemic” that caught the attention of the whole country. Going into the 1980s, the epidemic seemed to subside. Yet, as Curtis points out, the drug trade was merely consolidated in the hands of a few “owners” who ran drug crews. Ethnic tensions developed in the process between the owners, who were predominantly Dominican, and the workers, who were predominantly Puerto Rican. Aggressive buy-and-bust tactics in the 1980s served to exacerbate this tension. Street-level dealers took the fall and subsequently came to rely on each other for protection in prison. It was out of this situation that the Latino “supergangs” emerged. Groups like the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN) and the Asociación Ñeta developed “a culture of resistance,” something lacking from the “drug crew” phenomenon. But as the organizations grew, the state was systematically dismantling their leadership, resulting in the rapid growth of loosely structured street organizations. As Curtis demonstrates, those groups were not interested in taking over the drug trade, but instead represented an attempt to impose order on what had become an unmanageable situation. During the mid-1990s, they became better organized and more oppositional, articulating a message that was simultaneously antidrugs and antiviolence, and that gave voice to the grievances of young people in the Latino community.

In chapter 4, Kevin McDonald’s study of homeless youth in Australia contrasts their mode of organization to that of “gangs” and other forms of “youth culture.” Youth culture is understood as a mode of response and adaptation to dominant social trends that affect young people especially. The American “gang” is understood as a unique phenomenon that emerges in the context of industrial capitalism marked by sustained waves of immigration, ethnic conflict, and machine politics. Contemporary capitalism, by contrast, is increasingly global and unrestrained in nature, effectively subverting regional and cultural distinctions. Thus young people throughout the urban world are confronted with similar problems, including unpredictability, uncertainty, and an ever-present “demand for self-esteem.” One
consequence of this mode of organization, according to McDonald, is the emergence of a form of violence in which the goal is success at any cost, without “reciprocal” limits.

**GANGS AND POLITICS**

Although the reason to be concerned with the criminal aspect of gangs is self-explanatory, a concern with anything else regarding them requires explanation. Yet gangs are not criminal organizations in the strict sense of the term. That is to say, the existence of “other,” noncriminal dimensions is not only a matter of what some groups have in some form or another and that others are lacking. Rather, given a range of members with conflicting and contradictory goals, there are always noncriminal reasons for joining and noncriminal agendas that surface periodically. In addition, the ultimate form that any gang takes at any particular time also depends on outside factors that need to be brought into view, including the nature of its relationship to activist groups, politicians, patrons, and other parts of the community.

In the language of Albert DiChiara and Russell Chabot (chapter 5), gangs exist on several continua that include not only a range of activities but also commitments to specific goals. The authors point out that a range of goals, criminal and noncriminal, emerges naturally from these types of organizations. The relationship among disparate goals and between goals and means is neither straightforward nor fixed. That is, gangs will find both criminal and noncriminal ways to achieve goals that are criminal, noncriminal, or some mixture of the two. The important fact is that gang formation is lucid and reflects local concerns. To the same extent, the group must be able to elicit some degree of support, or at least sympathy, from the community. Thus the formulation of goals often involves extensive planning, depending on the nature of the group, its goals, and its relationship to the community organizations and leaders. Inasmuch as goals involve attempts to develop and coordinate resources and establish consensus, they can be referred to as “projects.” The group that the authors describe, Los Solidos, one of the biggest gangs in Hartford, sees itself as a political organization, “albeit one that saw fit to use criminal activities to further the interests of its members.” Unlike earlier times when political boss machines operated on elaborate systems of patronage, the authors point out, gangs now have reason to be suspicious of the motives of politicians. In its literature, the Los Solidos gang depicts politicians
variously as self-interested, inept, corrupt, and “sell-outs.” At the same time, it maintains alliances with certain community leaders who occasionally serve in the role of “patrons.” (The “frame” with the greatest resonance between members and outsiders is that of “institutional failure.” Thus, in the Los Solidos handbook, a future worth striving for involves members opening up businesses, becoming doctors and lawyers, and broadening the self-help function—erasing the distinction between the group and the community.) Overwhelming pressures of the street undermine the gang’s ability and desire to become more involved in the civic affairs of the community.

Juan Esteva (chapter 6) also examines the relationship between gangs and politics, focusing on the development of “street activism” among one of the largest and most sophisticated gangs in the country—the Bloods. This research project takes place around a series of events that occurred during the spring of 1999. The New York ALKQN was locked in a feud with a newly created Bloods faction, which appeared to be the aggressor. This created a dilemma for the Kings, because any attempt at retaliation would discredit their claim that they were no longer a gang. But the situation seemed only to get worse. In response, the Kings established contact with the west-coast Bloods and asked for assistance to negotiate a peace treaty with the group in New York. One of the leaders, Bloodhound, was flown in for that purpose. With the cooperation of Bloodhound, Esteva was introduced to a world in which politics and gangsterism are closely related. As the author points out, many of the older gang members and ex-members see themselves as “street activists.” The important facts, in this respect, are that the gang subculture contains elements that support politicization, and that a certain authenticity and moral legitimacy is granted to reformers who have paid their dues in those organizations. Indeed, all of Esteva’s respondents appear to have developed a political consciousness in prison, where they were exposed to political texts and politically oriented associations like the Black Muslims. The effectiveness of such activists is also predicated on their ability to go where others cannot. A wide range of political objectives and strategies are documented in this study.

GANGS, AGENCY, AND AT-RISK YOUTH

In the entire literature on gangs, there is hardly an attempt to explore the spiritual dimension and practices of gang membership (the exceptions are
Campbell 1984 and Conquergood 1993). Yet, as Luis Barrios points out in chapter 7, a substantial part of the culture of the ALKQN involves interpretations of spiritual texts and religious belief systems. Those texts circumscribe rituals as well as, over the last few years, the formulation and legitimation of specific political objectives. In addition, King Tone, the leader, has a Pentecostal background and the ability to deliver “sermons” to large crowds of people in which religion and politics are seamlessly interwoven. Barrios approaches his analysis of the texts, rituals, symbols, and imagery of the group through the framework of liberation theology and argues for a reading of the group as an example of popular cultural religion.

Chapter 8 provides ethnographic data on two groups in New York City, the ALKQN and the Asociación Neta, focusing on members’ quest for individual and collective empowerment alongside attempts to incorporate alternative forms of learning in their rituals and routine activities. David Brotherton examines the evolution of these groups from violent street gangs into what he calls “street organizations”—groups that are engaged in recovering, appropriating, and creating social and political spaces without becoming political groups in any formal sense. He notes that few gang studies have paid attention to education as a source of consciousness development, rather than simply a tool of socialization and social control. Contrary to the assumption that gang members are opposed to learning anything other than delinquency, he finds that, in the case of the ALKQN and the Netas, they maintain both formal and informal pedagogical structures and practices while placing a premium on the pursuit of “knowledge” that they consider practical or liberating.

WOMEN AND GANGS

Although much has been written about gangs, there are only a handful of published studies on female gangs and the role of females in gangs generally. Consequently, not enough is known about why they join and in what ways their participation differs from that of their male counterparts. As the authors in part 4 point out, many of the reasons for joining are the same—namely, camaraderie, protection, and making money. But unique circumstances, particularly family backgrounds, dependent children, and the various forms of harassment and discrimination they must regularly confront are clearly manifest in the decisions and activities of the female gang member.
Dana Nurge's study (chapter 9) of female gangs and “cliques” in Boston takes up the debate of whether female gangs are becoming more like male gangs because of loosening societal restrictions on women—the so-called liberation hypothesis—or whether instead contemporary female gangs resemble their predecessors and are merely treated differently than before, when masculine bias in the criminal justice system was stronger. In Nurge's study, female gangs appear to provide tangible benefits that often include the ability to make money and help with child rearing. Ultimately, the author concludes that the dichotomy applied to female gang members is a false one. Those members cannot be described as liberated as long as they are forced to raise children without sufficient social and economic resources. Nor can it be said that they are mere appendages of men and male gangs.

Many of these findings are confirmed by David Brotherton and Camila Salazar-Atias in their chapter on the Latin Queens in New York (chapter 10). The authors examine the motives for joining and the extent to which those motives are realized in the organization. Their study begins in 1996, shortly after the Queens had started to expand and gain a greater role within the group. Many of the women in this study were found to have suffered high levels of abuse and neglect both from their families and from the state's multilayered child welfare system. They appeared to turn to the ALKQN for social, emotional, and economic support—something that provided a strong impetus for the eventual semiautonomous development of the Latin Queens within the organization.

GANGS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Social policies designed to remedy the “gang problem” are increasingly justified by the claim that the problem is getting worse and more drastic measures are necessary. An increasingly popular policy initiative, as Loren Siegel points out in chapter 11, is the use of gang injunctions. In this essay, the author traces the history of injunctions to vagrancy laws, which, in earlier times, were aimed directly at the criminalization of poverty. The problem with such laws, from a legal standpoint, is that an exception to constitutionally protected rights, including the right to assembly, is made for gang members. From a broader social policy standpoint, they do not appear to be very effective. Rather, the appearance of increased safety from gangs is bought at the cost of engagement. This is to say that such laws work to cre-
ate pariah groups—not only to reinforce the status of pariah, as is normally the case with antigang laws. For instance, the antigang injunction law enacted in Chicago a few years ago (which was eventually struck down after being challenged by the ACLU) made it a criminal act subject to prosecution for one to talk to a “known” gang member. This would potentially include researchers, journalists, and ministers, among others who have legitimate reasons for such talk. Siegel also demonstrates that “injunction” laws have historically been used typically to work around existing laws and constitutional rights, rather than reinforce them. For example, in the 1930s, after the passage of the Labor Relations Act, companies issued injunctions. Now, after a number of Supreme Court decisions that serve to extend numerous civil rights to marginalized urban populations, many city governments are apparently looking for a way around them.

Phillip Kassel (chapter 12) examines the policy of differential treatment and segregation of gang members in prison. Like other policies that target gang members, there are issues of effectiveness and constitutionality. But, here, there are also administrative and procedural problems that are deemed insurmountable without significant changes in the current system. The most significant problem is shown to be the misidentification of gang members. Because there is little engagement with gang members, identification tends to be impressionistic, lacking uniform criteria and oversight procedures. Kassel also points out that the perception of unfairness heightens antagonisms between guards and prisoners, which makes violence more likely. In addition, it creates a situation in which inmates can violate regulations unintentionally, resulting in unequal treatment and further segregation. For instance, one common stipulation for prisoners that Kassel mentions is nonassociation with “known” gang members. This might make sense if prisoners had some way of knowing for certain who the gang members are—which is more difficult than it seems, given that most gang members in prison are deemed to be loosely associated rather than “hard-core” members.

**GANG PHOTOJOURNALISM**

As the contributors to part 6 demonstrate, gang photography is not only a form of knowledge, it is also a political art form. Whereas photographic images of gangs are often dramatic, the photographer has to make calculated decisions about what to focus on from a stream of disparate activities and
how to contextualize “the image.” This puts the photographer in the role of the ethnographer. But the dramatic image revolves around stereotype—precisely what the ethnographer seeks to subvert by going beneath the surface to capture something essential but not obvious. In addition, the end product is very different, because the photographic image carries an aura of authenticity and appears self-explanatory. The seeming obviousness of certain images of gangs is problematic to the extent to which the goal in producing them is dramatic effect rather than an attempt to address their complexity.

As Richard Rodríguez says (chapter 13), very few images stick in the mind as much as that of the young Latino gang member with a menacing look and a gun. This image, endlessly repeated, takes on an iconic status that also affects the way gang members look at themselves. A particular “look” is cultivated that instills fear in the mind of the observer. But the gang member presents a different self to different observers. For example, he is relaxed with his friends. He is reverential to parents. And he “poses” for pictures with an attitude that demonstrates “self-respect” and demands “respect from others.” A different kind of image is produced by photographers who get to know the gang. In this case, “poses” are more representative of the range of attitudes and activities that constitute life in the gang. This approach serves not only to humanize the subject of photography, but also to capture something real.

In chapter 14, award-winning photojournalist Donna DeCesare provides an elaborate series of photos of Salvadoran gang members on the west coast. This is accompanied by written text that contextualizes the imagery in the Salvadoran civil war, which produced a mass exodus to the United States. Thousands of children of refugees who fled for their lives often found themselves joining the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Eighteenth Street gangs. In the early 1990s, a policy of mass deportation for gang members convicted of crimes brought American gang culture to El Salvador. Within very little time, “acculturated” members began to appear on the west coast and eventually the east. DeCesare’s essay and photos illustrate the many sides of this phenomenon, focusing on the life and death of two brothers whose mother brought them to the United States after being threatened by government forces as a result of her husband’s membership with the guerrilla movement.

In chapter 15, Steve Hart and David Brotherton provide a visual depiction of the ALKQN during its reform years in New York City. In contrast
to most media images of the time, which either cast doubt on the group’s self-reform goals or reported its efforts at political engagement with a mixture of paternalism and cynicism, the authors show members of the group as inspired, complex social agents. Focusing on group rituals, organizational activities, and catalytic moments in the group’s history, they provide a sense of the complexity behind this subcultural phenomenon that fascinated youth both locally and nationwide in the late 1990s.

REFERENCES