# CHAPTER 3

# NORTE AND SUR: GOVERNMENT, SCHOOL, AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

*Stereotypes dominate the debate about gangs. The most popular stereotypes are those that emphasize the criminal tendencies of gangs and the social and personal pathology of gang members. This is no less true for academic criminology, because the leaders of the field have adopted the control ideology of criminal justice agencies.*

*Albert DiChiara and Russell Chabot*[1]

## Introduction

Research on gangs, especially on Latino gangs, has long espoused the conviction that gangs are a territorial phenomenon. Both in research and in the dominant public imaginary, "the barrio" has long been portrayed as very nearly synonymous with "gang turf." Like its semantic cousins "the ghetto" and "the projects," the barrio has been understood as primarily an urban spatial entity defined by poverty, danger, and social dysfunction among "ethnics," now Jewish, now Irish, now Italian, Black, or Latino, one succeeding the other,[2] depending on urban migration patterns. The barrio is imagined from the outside as an entity within the city where the centrifugal/centripetal processes of labor economics, having already cast off heavy industry to overseas locations and managerial workers to the suburbs, now engulf in poverty those that could not or would not be assimilated into "productive" citizenship. The barrio then becomes a kind of vortex, virtually inescapable for those who grew up there, ignored by authorities who refuse to invest in its infrastructure,[3] riddled with poverty, and salted with terrible schools



leading to dead-end jobs that render its population multiply marginal and socially vulnerable:[4] an underclass. In the much-reviled but still present underclass framework, gang members are the stepchildren of the city, and gangs themselves are at best marginalized and malformed playgroups, at worst social tumbleweeds collecting adolescent and adult psychopaths. The flip-side of the barrio-danger portrayal, mostly present in the entertainment media, is that youth in street gangs symbolize the attraction of danger, of disorder, of rebellion, individualism, and nonconformity: a distinctively American longing for youth, for rebels, and for a cause.

This chapter is divided into two sections: A preamble notes the necessity of focusing on noncriminal aspects of gangs and challenges researchers to move away from traditional, criminality-oriented definitions pervasively presented by law enforcement agencies and scholars. The main body of this chapter is a selective synthesis of the published literature on gangs, specifically of concepts of localism and territoriality within the definition of the gang itself. These concepts are selectively drawn out of the gang literature in order to create the framework for understanding, in the next chapter, the complex and shifting ground in the concepts of Norte and Sur as they are employed by youth in discourse.

There are currently many and varied introductory texts on youth gangs in general,[5] including girls in gangs,[6] so I will refer the reader to those works for systematic reviews of the field. While in chapter 5 I directly address some of the claims in the literature on girl gangs, this chapter focuses on Latino gangs to provide the context for Norte and Sur. From the beginning then, as far as researchers are concerned, gangs have been about social control and deviance; about American migratory adaptation; about inner-city streets;[7] about the (multiply) "marginal man;"[8] about poverty and the "underclass;"[9] and about masculinity.[10] It is relatively recently that other aspects and locations of gangs have been studied: rural and suburban gangs,[11] non-violent gangs,[12] internationally structured gangs,[13] and female gangs[14] have started to come into focus. Comparisons with other groups not traditionally considered gangs have also emerged, as well as questions such as "Why aren't fraternities considered gangs?"[15] Political, civic, and pro-social activities of gangs have also just begun to be considered by Margarita Muñiz, Sudhir Venkatesh, Marie "Keta" Miranda, and David Brotherton and Luis Barrios,[16] as have other angles such as the historical dimensions of gangs.[17]

In the pages that follow, I define the concept of hemispheric localism and review the scant documentation on Norte and Sur, the gangs which are at the heart of this study and which are believed to have started in the prison system and then moved to the streets. In the process of moving out of the prison system they have become more akin to the "street political organizations" recently defined by David Brotherton and Luis Barrios:

> [A street political organization is] a group formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced.[18]

It is this conceptualization that I will take as an operational definition for the "gangs" in this study. Whereas American gangs of all ethnicities have been understood by public policy and theorized by scholars to be about physical territory or territorial control of capital flows, including the prison versions of Norte and Sur, the "street political organization" counterparts to these prison gangs in the Northern California Bay Area transcend these traditional definitions. Norte and Sur at the street level are groups who use concepts of territoriality to recognize power inequalities around them and who do battle over ideological positionings with respect to these conflicts. There is no supplation in the discourse of young people: there is no abandonment of allegiance to the beloved "Varrio Norte" or "Varrio Sur," and its specific streets. What these youth have done is to take an already polysemous binary (Norte/Sur) and extend its meaning. Chapter 4 of this book documents the semantic shift of Norteño/Sureño from a primary denotation of territory to broader understandings by members as shown in discourse projected through concepts of language, race, class, and nation. This ideological projection, with its widening recursive repetitions,[19] functions as an interpretive framework that allows participants to invoke a global-hemispheric dimension. Members' concepts of the mission and purpose of the gang as a social organization respond to broader contextual pressures that include members' knowledge of Latino migration dynamics, their own gangs' internationalization, as well as their understandings of worldwide political relations. It is this ideological projection from young people's own condition, and their recognition of its embeddedness in and analogy to wider domains, that defines hemispheric localism and serves as a vehicle for the politicization of youth.

## Preamble: A Focus on Gangs but Away from Crime

David Brotherton observes that although an interest in the criminal activities of gangs appears to be self-explanatory, a concern with anything else regarding them requires an explanation.[20] Why is it that scholars feel the need to *justify* exploring non-criminal aspects of gangs?

Albert DiChiara and Russell Chabot protest the focus on criminality, arguing that while such an emphasis might be useful for obtaining federal funding for research, it erases other aspects of gangs, especially the gang's grounding in the community, and "the gang's response to the social forces that negatively affect their community, sometimes in the form of positive activities and political activism, [ . . . a] truly organic feature of the urban gang."[21] As we observed in chapter 2, definitions of gangs by the police and by teachers expand in widening circles, and throw a blanket of suspicion over minority youth who have very little to do with the criminally propelled concerns under the traditional definitions of gangs. At the same time, it is my contention that the Norteño/Sureño gang battles have emerged organically as on-the-ground responses to the preoccupations of everyday life for Latino youth in California – migration, class, citizenship, race, and language. It is precisely this definitional seepage in both directions (authorities are more willing than ever to label Latino kids; Norte and Sur are more than anyone else providing youth with a forum for political participation in the issues of the day) that results in the commonality, the *pedestrianization* of gang affiliation, and makes it imperative for researchers working with youth to shift their focus away from traditional, exclusively crime-oriented definitions of gangs.

State entities exercising de facto control over public ideologies routinely utilize and fund the research of scholars studying gangs. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement, judging by the citation boosts that academics receive in police and school documentation, and by their employment in the legal system and in government hearings as expert witnesses. Most central to what concerns of police are the dimensions of criminal activity among the gangs: quantitative documentation of

the number of gangs, extent of violence, number of drug arrests, extent of underage sex and drinking, witness and victim intimidation, interstate commerce, extortion, racketeering, loan sharking, prostitution, etc.[22] These are the statistics that the police turn over to the government in their justification to fund police-work (the more dire and alarming the problem, the better the funding), and they are the same statistics that are routinely handled by the media and fuel ongoing "moral panics."[23] The overdramatization of the gang threat is acknowledged even by researchers who collaborate with the police;[24] a recent example from Tucson, Arizona is the doubling of the personnel and budget of the gang task force; in this case, funding was obtained based on the idea that the gang threat was increasing in *other* cities. A policeman interviewed on the nightly news said: "Tucson hasn't experienced an increase, but when it comes, we want to be ready!"[25] Pre-emptive strategies have a couple of different effects: on the one hand, in order to keep state and county-supported funding, police departments have to show results, busting youth and designating gangs based on whatever cohorting groups exist in the area (taggers, car clubs, etc.); on the other hand, increased police attention leads to competition for notoriety among youth who compete to break into top-ten "badass" lists.[26]

In order to better understand the criminal aspects of gangs, both researchers and the police engage in extensive mapping of gang territory;[27] in the decipherment of gang graffiti,[28] and even in its representation within police documents. An example of this is shown in Figure 3.1, from a stack of documents that was given to SJHS administrators in a gang prevention workshop conducted by the police. I've modified the handout to obscure the specifics of the police department and school district, but preserved the details of the drawings. If its purpose is utilitarian, we must ask ourselves: Why is street style so artfully copied? And what is the purpose of visually fixing young people in these illustrated police thesaurii?

Documents emanating from state-sponsored institutions are primarily aimed at controlling, tracking, and obliterating gangs; thus it may seem a quixotic enterprise to write a book about young people who claim to be in gangs and to believe that it does not contribute to the purpose of destroying them. One of the baseline decisions that I've made here is to avoid systematic documentation of police concerns – i.e., hard partying and status offenses such as running away that disproportionately impact girls.[29] It is sometimes difficult to divert the attention of (not so) well-meaning academics and journalists who operate from

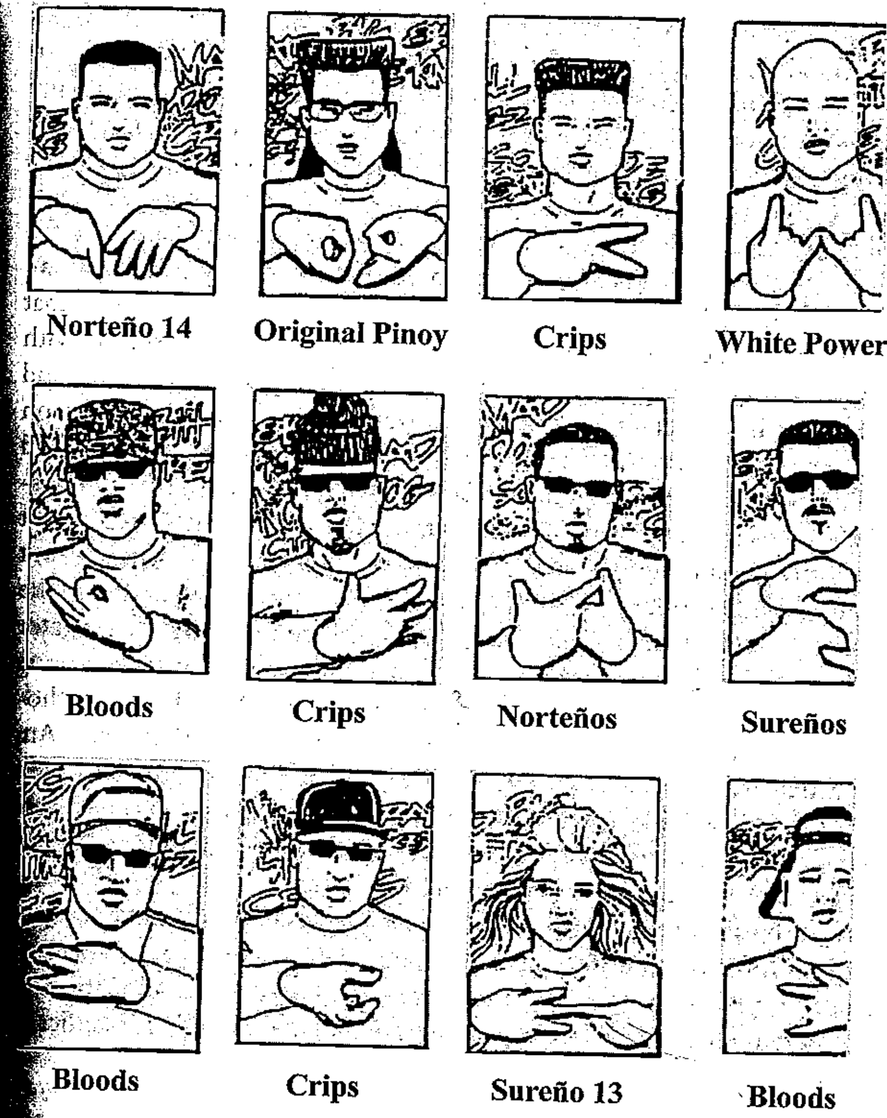


Figure 3.1 "Gang Signs:" Fog City Police Department handout to teachers.

their own stereotypes and really want to know: *Did they do drugs? What drugs? Did they have lots of sex? Is it true you have to have sex to get into a gang?* (The latter was dismissed as ludicrous in this and other studies interviewing girls directly.[30]) *Did they drink a lot? Did you participate?* (No. And this next one from a male mathematician:) *Can I hang out with you and some of those girls?* (Um. Hell no!) These are all the questions that I am *not* seeking to answer, though sometimes they are addressed

in the interviews by participants who are well aware of the stereotypes surrounding gang youth.

It's not that I think that delinquent behaviors are irrelevant to my work on the nondelinquent aspects of gangs. Three factors temper any ethnographic impulse to exhaustively document: 1) as noted above, Latina and Latino youth already face profiling and increased suspicion at multiple levels, and there are few voices that balance the debate to refocus on what young people are saying, what their reasons and hopes are when they call themselves gang members; 2) a second concern is that I learned of the details of people's lives in a privileged fashion, with youth often begging me not to tell their teachers/parents/the cops, and I learned these details knowing that young people only signed off on consent forms because they honestly believed no consequence would come of it; and 3) research circulates publicly; it is altogether impossible to keep it out of the hands of the police, whose first step might well be chasing down identifiable gang members or scoping out identifiable locations. "We find 'em, we fix 'em, we fry 'em," was the motto of one police respondent to the National Gang Investigator Survey.[31] This book is my response in negotiating the trust that young people placed in me, and my attempt not to contribute to further pathologizing of youth or to the sexualization of young women of color. Am I participating in some sort of code of silence by not revealing their every last detail? Maybe. Am I avoiding young people's continued persecution by the police by spotlighting factors that have traditionally been of little interest to law enforcement? I hope so.

For the purposes of this chapter, and in order to provide necessary background to argue for the formation of new concepts of localism among the young Norteñas and Sureñas, I limit my examination to the documentation of existing dimensions of territoriality, specifically for US Latino gangs.

## Localism and Territoriality in Gang Research

Localism in political science and sociology is understood as a valuation of the local (local organizations, local development, local space/time and local commodities)[32] which stands in contradistinction to cosmopolitanism or globalism.[33] Localism can be conceived of attitudinally as a loyalty to one's local attachments, and behaviorally as a willingness to support and participate in the economic, social, and political affairs of one's locality.



Much research on gangs has understood them to be at the core about "defensive localism," where the loyalty aspect can take on a combative stance. Christopher Adamson explains:

> [Historically, t]he gang has performed important community functions which can be subsumed under the rubric of defensive localism. These functions include defense of territory, the policing of neighborhoods, the upholding of group honour, and the provision of economic, social, employment, welfare and recreational services.[34]

Defensive localism then is a gang's protective stance toward its capital, whether it be human, social/cultural, economic, or territorial. Such capital has traditionally been thought to be centered on the concepts of turf and neighborhood,[35] or on the protection of material exchanges taking place in a neighborhood, i.e., "drug turf,"[36] or prostitution rings.[37] Spatialized interpretations have their roots in the early sociological work on gangs within the human ecology paradigm which took as its main laboratory the city.[38] This paradigm tried to account for the lack of integration of underprivileged European immigrants and African-American internal migrants into American cities,[39] with one of the main emphases being the transmission of "Old World" ethnic gang traits to the "New World" gangs.[40] According to Fredrick Thrasher's 1927 study of 1,533 gangs in Chicago, "[Gangs] are one symptom of a type of disorganization that goes along with the breaking up of the immigrant's traditional social system without adequate assimilation to the new."[41]

These early localistic/territorial ideals in the literature have dictated "that gang members live in the territory they defend as their turf," so that according to Joan Moore, Diego Vigil and Robert García,[42] new theoretical explanations were needed in the 1980s just to account for "fictive residence," that is, membership in a neighborhood gang by a non-resident of the neighborhood.[43]

Malcolm Klein, in his book *The American Street Gang*, still considers territoriality as one of the "less controversial" definitional parameters to characterize gangs, though his definition of "street" admittedly goes beyond the merely territorial and is intriguingly meant to characterize the *practices* of gangs (hanging out on the streets of one's neighborhood more often than not without specific plans, just looking for excitement). In Klein's conceptualization, skinheads, white supremacists, bikers

and lowriders are not really street gangs if they are "inside, working on their materials," or outside cruising purposefully on their rides.[44] Klein sees aimlessness, lack of employment opportunities, and an apolitical nature as a reason for gang youth being in the street in the first place, and predicts that this type of bored loitering is conducive to the gang halfheartedly indulging in "cafeteria-style crime – a little of this, a touch of that, two attempts at something else."[45] Research accounts that emphasize lack of "productivity," worrying about whether youth will be able or motivated to join the adult work world, raise some important issues regarding the influence of ambient adults in the lives of youth.

## Youth Gangs and Their Adults, Yesterday and Today

Street gangs in the United States have been documented as far back as the founding days of the state,[46] observed in Philadelphia from the 1780s.[47] Fredrick Thrasher initially hypothesized that (white ethnic) gangs were a transitory, age-graded phenomenon that young people grew out of as they entered the world of work, and that (white) gangs would fight each other as their shifting residential patterns brought them into contact. A combination of intermarriage among the various white immigrant groups and defensive behavior against black migration contributed to the rise of interethnic white gangs which focused more on territorial defense and on attacking blacks than on attacking other whites on the basis of (Polish, Irish, Jewish) ethnicity.

There is an important difference between the traditional white gangs and contemporary minority gangs in terms of the pathways to adulthood: minority youth of today have few social parachutes to slow their fall if they should get in cafeteria-style trouble. Christopher Adamson documents and contrasts the history of European-American and African-American gangs, observing that white street gangs benefited from the patronage of adults, who would mobilize white youth not only for voting campaigns, but used them to forcibly maintain segregation by encouraging attacks on African-American migrants in the cities of the Eastern Seaboard and the Midwest.[48] Politically powerful adults in cities such as Chicago would sponsor gangs, contribute to their treasuries, and take members under their wing.[49] They might also lessen police crackdowns in exchange for some of the gang's profits.[50]



So embedded were the white youth gangs in Democratic machine politics and in power structures in Chicago that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a career in gangs could easily morph into one in politics: it did for Cook County Commissioner Frank Ragen (the founder of "Ragen's Colts" gang, whose motto was "hit me and you hit two thousand"),[51] as it did for longtime Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, at seventeen a member and at twenty-two president of the Irish-Catholic Hamburgs, a gang based out of the Hamburg Athletic Club which engaged in more brawls than sports. When he became mayor, Daley complained, "all the [police] ever wanted to do was hit you over the head . . ."[52,53]

Nonwhite gang members have never had developmental path into the structures of state power, even if they did exhibit an interest in politics. Political and civic action among African-American gangs include neighborhood protection services by the Black Sisters United in Chicago,[54] the Black Gangster Disciples' involvement in grass-roots organizing,[55] and the Vice-Lords' 1960s urban renewal programs.[56] David Brotherton and Luis Barrios[57] document the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN)'s emerging political consciousness, their renunciation of violence and the role of religion. Less well documented are political activities of Chicano gangs, though John Donovan considers the Norteños to be a "stray branch of the Chicano movement."[58]

## Chicano Gangs

Mexican-American youth gangs have radiated out of the epicenter of migration that is the Los Angeles/US–Mexico border region, and have certainly played a part in Los Angeles politics, most notably in the 1940s during the Zoot Suit Riots.[59] The most detailed studies of Mexican-American gangs in Southern California during the 1970s–80s were conducted by Diego Vigil and Joan Moore and their research teams. An anthropologist and a sociologist, they provided early models for conducting collaborative research with pintos *(Chicano prisoners)* and gang members,[60] models that have had a enduring impact and inspired the work of Irving Spergel, John Hagedorn, Marie "Keta" Miranda, David Brotherton and Luis Barrios.[61] Diego Vigil and Joan Moore concentrated on problems such as anomie, social reproduction, and the continuity of social order and disorder under societal strain theory.[62]

Mexican-American gangs provided Vigil and Moore with several counterexamples to Thrasher's classic[63] definition of gangs: 1) Mexican-American gangs were not a transitory phenomenon that youth left behind as they grew up. Many active members were in their thirties and forties, and there were generational continuities in gang membership that provided deep familial ties to barrios and to the politicized Chicano rights movements;[64] 2) Mexican-Americans were not becoming more assimilated, as Thrasher had predicated was the function of European ethnic gangs. Moore attributes this to visible phenotype differences and to racism and continuing residential segregation;[65] 3) Because of this residential segregation, lack of city investment in barrio infrastructure, continuing immigration and growing population density, there were structural barriers to employment opportunity that created general scarcity and overcrowding. Moore stresses that contemporary American gangs "are overwhelmingly Black and Hispanic youth. [ . . . ] when we talk about gangs we are talking about quasi-institutionalized structures within the poor minority communities."[66] In East LA, the targets for gang violence were often adjacent or newly arrived Mexican-American groups rather than groups of other ethnicities. Particularly significant for an understanding of Norte and Sur, these early studies help explain how gang dynamics were transformed from interethnic white rivalries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to intraethnic rivalries today. These indications of conflict between long-established residents and newly arrived immigrants of the same ethnicity arise again and again with immigrant gangs (for instance, some accounts of the San Francisco Chinese gang Wah Ching attribute its formation to recent immigrants' formation of societies for protection against established Chinese-American residents).[67] Such conflicts presage the workings of the migratory-status divide between the Norte and Sur gangs, and help us understand how language, which in its variation serves to distinguish different immigrant generations, can become on the one hand a "gang identifier" for the police and on the other a source of and carrier for oppositional meanings within the gangs, as we will see in chapter 4.

## Hemispheric Localism

The concept of *Hemispheric Localism*, coined here for the first time, should strike one as a bit of a paradox. If localism, especially defensive localism, is the valuation of the immediate community, and a group's propensity to defend it, then how can localism be hemispheric? I argue that hemispheric localism is a projection onto the hemispheric political stage of processes that began locally in the history of groups of Latinos in California, and that through processes of symbolic analogy and metonymy this meaning system becomes projected as a wider political analysis. Young people involved in Norte and Sur become political analysts (and actors), organizing their experience through the lens of their participation in these groups, synthesizing their understanding of the larger processes of race, language, capital structures, and global power relations, with increasingly larger ideological projections such that the "Global North" and the "Global South" become tangible and explainable. Young people, in other words, interpret, animate, take sides in, and make sense of global realities around them through the scope of Norte/Sur gang affiliations. These affiliations are positionalities both in the historical sense and in the perspectival sense: not only do gang groups display historical continuities in terms of group formation and political thought in the Mexican–US borderlands, but by "taking sides" as a Norteña/o or a Sureña/o, youth interpret and stancefully deal with the world around them. The young people we hear from in the next chapter had no problem deciding which new students had the potential to be a Norteño or Sureño, whether the newcomers were Salvadoran, Mexican, Indian, or Japanese. At each decision point, an organic/dynamic evaluation took place; I posit that these evaluations took the following factors into consideration:

1 language use;
2 language ideology;
3 perceived phenotype/race;
4 performative speech act (claiming);
5 country of origin;
6 perceived economic position;
7 social class prior to immigration; and
8 neighborhood residence.

These factors are not listed in order of importance, but they should give the reader an idea of the complexity of allegiances in what is traditionally understood as simply "neighborhood," or "turf" wars. The combination and differential weighting of these factors resulted for the young participants in broad ascriptions along the continuum of Norte

and Sur. These evaluations structured relations of membership and even attributional understandings of world regions.

In order to explain in the next chapter how the complex combination of factors that I call hemispheric localism arises in the discourse of youth, I must first take us through the literature to explain the various kinds of localisms that different entities in the public sphere use to define Norte and Sur. Despite Sur having been the subject of a widespread moral panic in 2005,[68] there is not an extensive or even a modest literature on Norte and Sur Latino gangs, not even a single academic book aside from this one dedicated exclusively to the conflict. Nonetheless, the US government recently had hearings to evaluate the looming threat to national security that Norte and Sur might represent.

## Norte and Sur: The Government, Police, Research, Community Perspectives

> *Mr. BURTON. You said there is no connection between al-Qaeda and any of these gangs, like MS-13. Can you tell us why you said that? There are a lot of people in this country that are concerned about the gangs in Central and South America working with terrorist groups that might want to do us ill.*
>
> *Hearing before the 109th US Congress, April 20, 2005*

In April of 2005, whipped partly by the fervor surrounding post 9–11 protection of the United States from foreign entities, the United States Congress held hearings on the Gang Deterrence and Community Protection Act of 2005 (HR1279), before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. Several gang experts were brought in, and this is part of the testimony that Congress heard:

> Gangs from California, particularly in the L.A. area, have a major influence on Mexican-American and Central American gangs in this country and in Latin America. Hispanic gangs in California have separated into two rival factions, the Norteños, which are primarily found in the Northern California area, and Sureños, found to the South and predominantly in the urban areas surrounding L.A.
>
> A rivalry exists between these factions [ . . . ] most Hispanic gangs in California align themselves under the Norteños or the Sureños. [ . . . ] Hispanic gangs aligned under the Norteños will generally add the number 14 after their gang number, those under the Sureños will generally add 13.[69]



A couple of months later, Congress held more hearings on gangs, this time to consider the Alien Gang Removal Act of 2005 (HR 2933), legislation that would allow for the immediate deportation of anyone who could be demonstrated to even associate with gang members. As part of the hearings, Congress heard the testimony of Michael Hathmon, staff counsel for the Federation for American Immigration Reform:

> When I was a young man in Southern California, the term 'Mexican street gang' more often meant a car club devoted to cruising rather than street racing. [ . . . ] This was a quintessentially American social phenomenon. A gang member may not have been college material, but a good auto body and upholstery worker didn't need a white-collar job to make a decent middle-class living. [ . . . ] The role of foreigners in the rise of criminal gangs is undeniable [ . . . ] this legislation responds to a dangerous vulnerability in public safety and can be feasibly integrated into our existing immigration regulatory scheme.

Although at the time of this writing in 2006, neither one of the 2005 congressional acts had passed (they seemed to have stalled at the hearing phase, pending other immigration reform), the proceedings in the first excerpt clearly portrayed the Norteño and Sureño gangs as not only territorially based *in* California, but as active exports *from* California in the first place. In the second excerpt gang members themselves are portrayed as having progressed historically from uneducated, benign nuisances who were nonetheless "quintessentially American" (so much so that one could wax nostalgically about how well they stayed in their place) to dangerous, subversive criminals whose ranks are fed by a continuous stream of immigration from outside America. The ominous refrain, "this is no longer West Side Story," is a recurrent one not only in government accounts of gangs but in police and media accounts as well.[70] Interestingly, this discursive move on the one hand attempts a break with romantic notions of gangs present in homegrown Americana; on the other hand it has the function of de-Americanizing Latino gang youth, rendering them discursively eligible for deportation, especially the Sureños as currently targeted through alien removal proposals affecting MS-13. By passing proposals that drastically lower the bar for gang identification (merely being seen in a photograph where

others are throwing gang signs would render one a deportable gang member), scores of peripherally involved youth and others in the community are imbued with guilt by association.

As in other domains of discursive production of gangs, government hearings show that the Norte/Sur gangs are understood as both spatialized within California and simultaneously drawing upon elements coming from outside the body politic. By depicting young Sureños organized at the street level (defined to include minors as young as eleven, in HR 2933 above) as part of "dangerous" or even "terrorist" movements, government authorities run the risk of completely mischaracterizing the object of their intended description, so distorting them that they become monstrous and unrecognizable.

Compare the following statements on Norteños and Sureños, the first (a) by an educational ethnographer calmly describing the transnational cholo element in a high school near Sacramento, California; the other (b) by an expert witness (Paul Logli, president, National District Attorneys Association) who raises every level of alarm when called to testify at the congressional hearing for the Gang Deterrence and Community Protection Act of 2005, discussed above:

> (a) "Chola/o refers to a Mexican-American street style that sometimes marks identification with gangs but *can merely mark racial/ethnic belonging* [emphasis mine . . . ] there were two groupings of cholas/os which represented two gang affiliations: sureño (south) and norteño (north). The sureños tended to be immigrant students who primarily spoke Spanish, while the norteños tended to be second-generation Mexican-Americans whose primary language at school was English.[71]

> (b) We know that we have come to look at stateless terrorists as our enemy and we're developing ways to stymie those attacks. And I would advance to you the theory that we are facing the same challenge and threats with the transnational gangs that are almost freely operating within our borders. In my jurisdiction, we have recently seen an increase of Hispanic or Latino gangs that are now engaging in the typical turf wars [ . . . ][72]

Are these two statements really talking about the same thing? Clearly we would want to distinguish Latino gangs as a form of "ethnic belonging" from claims of "stateless terrorism," but the criteria for gang identification for youth gangs and prison gangs are one and the same at the level of the government and the police.



## The California Police Perspective on Youth

In my dealings with Sor Juana High School teachers and school counselors, I encountered copious evidence that materials distributed to teachers in the mid-1990s by law enforcement authorities all over California routinely tied language and immigration status specifically to the targeted identification of minority youth as gang members, and the portrayal of immigrant families as potential incubators of gangs and criminal activity. In a pamphlet entitled "GANGS: Keep them out of your community!" risk factors listed as contributing to gang-involvement include not only "low individual self-esteem," but also "coming from a Limited-English speaking home."[73]

In support of a report called "Gangs 2000," widely distributed to police departments, schools, and teacher associations in California, the California Department of Justice, Bureau of Investigation reports its distribution of a questionnaire to 105 criminal-justice agencies in California with gang units.[74] One of the questions asked of these criminal-justice agencies was: "What do you believe is the biggest contributor to the street gang problem in California?" Among the top answers: "Immigrants experiencing a new culture and language difficulties."[75] Additionally, in the same document, it is reported that an expert panel was convened composed of representatives from police and sheriff's departments, probation departments, the California Youth Authority, crime prevention units, and the school system. Panelists were asked to identify emerging events for the purpose of forecasting gang trends. The two events having the largest cross-impact in the expert panelists' perception of criminal street gangs in California were: "(1) the non-white population [of California] exceeding 50 percent; and (2) the immigration quota changes [referring to the Immigration Act of 1990 which raised the ceiling of the total number of immigrants per year]."[76] California officials and authorities in this government document explicitly point to the "non-white" population and to immigrants (and their cultural and linguistic characteristics) as being the most important factors in the presence of gangs. The fact that these documents are distributed as required reading to teachers all over the public school system, from the elementary grades all the way through high school – teachers are encouraged to act as informants and evidence-gatherers for the police[77] – means that immigrant and other minority youth face the high burden of being stereotyped as a potential gang member even before setting foot in the

school. If Norte and Sur youth gangs are indeed street political organizations as I claim, or just mark "racial or ethnic belonging" as per Julie Beattie's understanding,[78] the teachers would never know, given the official documents that muscle their way to their desks. All that a teacher would know before meeting a child or youth is: if this child is Latina/o, if this child is an immigrant, and if their family speaks a language other than English, they might be in a gang. That's quite a way to start the school year.

Below is one more example, my reproduction of materials police used in 1996 to conduct a training session with teachers at Sor Juana High School:

YOUTH GANGS OPERATING IN FOG CITY:

A. VARRIO NORTE

Characteristics:
* Claim color Red
* Male Hispanics
* Roman Numeral XIV

B. SUREÑOS

Characteristics:
* Claim color Blue
* Male Hispanics
* Roman Numeral XIII
* Recent immigrants from Mexico

C. TUNAY NA PINOY (TNP)

Characteristics
* Male Filipino
* Claim color Blue in most areas
* Generally Drive Toyota, Datsun, or Honda Civic two door cars.

In these materials we see that recent-immigrant status *does* appear in the description of Sureños, but not language (though presumably Spanish dominance would be an entailment of recent immigrant status). In the Tunay Na Pinoy (Filipino) gang description, merely driving a two-door Toyota, Datsun, or Honda Civic becomes a possible gang



identifier! Other documents identify hairnets, white t-shirts, Dickies pants, and other truly ubiquitous clothing items as "gang identifiers," but given the wide imitation and circulation of youth styles across different subcultures, these identifiers wind up serving as convenient handles for the police and pretexts for the uneven application of clothing standards to some youth and not others,[79] both on and off school premises. Many parents needlessly worry that their children might be endangered by wearing a specific color to school. I try to assuage parents' fears by telling them that if their children do not participate in the symbolic system of gang membership to begin with, then wearing a red jacket, for instance, will not put them in danger (although, as we can see above, this appears to be the diagnostic for gang membership that school administrators and the police apply). In order to be "mistaken" for a gang member by other members, their child would have to follow highly stylized rules of speech, hair, makeup, style of clothing, and even have a certain gait, in which case there wouldn't be much of a "mistake." Since the colors are only secondary characteristics, this is also why certain schools' policies of adopting school uniforms to combat gang membership make very little sense. Any element, even within the confines of a uniform, can be turned into a symbolic marker, and these will shift within the community of members faster than parents or the police can ever track them.

Carlos, the boy who had a crush on T-Rex, was once stopped by the police for a random search because he was wearing a white t-shirt and slicked-back hair under a hairnet. When they couldn't find anything on him except for his wallet attached to his belt loop with a chain, they busted him for carrying a weapon: the chain, they claimed, could be used to strangle someone. Carlos was let go with a warning, but he felt humiliated in front of his family, who relied on him for income. The reason he had attached his wallet to his body, he told me, was because he kept losing it on the bus.

Another glaring characteristic of the material presented above is that, in the mid-1990s, girls were mostly excluded from the descriptions. In the late 1990s, it was even difficult for many police departments to classify girls as potential gang members or to identify girl cliques because working definitions of possible gang members excluded girls as a matter of policy.[80] Nowadays this gap in the research has begun to be addressed,[81] highlighting some of the special issues facing girls involved in gang membership.

## The Gang Research Perspective

The documentation of Norte and Sur at the street level is where research is the scarcest. In the many reviews of gang research, the Norte/Sur dynamic is barely mentioned, and usually subsumed under the older Nuestra Familia/Mexican Mafia (I abbreviate these as NF/MM, but they are also called "La Ene" and "La Eme") prison gangs, obscuring the pervasiveness and different orientation of the younger street component. Information is especially lacking on street-organized Sureños, while narratives of former convicts suggest that the Mexican Mafia explicitly envisioned its structure as similar to the Sicilian Mafia. Gus Frias in particular draws out the purported embodied similarities between La Eme and its Sicilian counterpart: "Their interpersonal skills manifest a restraint with gestures [and] a sparse use of words . . ."[82] This sparse use of words will become important as we examine mechanisms of memory in later chapters.

John Donovan's is one of the only accounts to discuss the history of the Norte/Sur rivalries, based on anonymous Norteño manifestos found within the California Youth Authority and in the prison system in 1985.[83] Donovan calls NF and MM "supergangs."[84] Donovan traces the tripartite influence of Nuestra Familia, the Chicano Rights movement, and the pinto *(prisoner)* self-help movement in the concretization of Norte. I would add as an important factor the role that correctional institute administrative decisions to separate inmates by north/south regional provenance within California had on the creation and strengthening of these regional superstructures.

Nuestra Familia got started circa 1967 in the California Youth Authority's correctional facility in Tracy, California,[85] where the Mexican Mafia had already formed by 1958.[86] Mexican Mafia members, who were mostly leaders of gangs already existing in the Maravilla barrios of LA, began to opportunistically target rural youth whom they derisively called "farmers" or "hicks."[87] The vulnerable youths banded together as a "defensive reaction" to form Nuestra Familia.[88] History is retained in the appellations: "farmer" today circulates not as an insult but as an in-group address term, an emblem of pride used by young Norteños explicitly linking themselves to the Chicano farm workers' movement.

What started as urban–rural animosity between inmates was puzzling to and mishandled by prison officials.[89] As the conflict worsened, and while facing a space shortage due to skyrocketing minority incarceration rates, correctional authorities made the fateful decision, purportedly for the safety of vulnerable inmates,[90] to institute a policy of separating convicts *by the region that they came from within California.* This geographic sorting for the sake of disciplinary hygiene and effective surveillance not only had the effect of recognizing and bolstering the emerging North/South territorial division, but effectively spread this spatial consciousness to the far corners of the California correctional system where, through continuous sorting by the system itself, the now-entrenched NF and MM were provided with a steady supply of new members. By 1978, Nuestra Familia, the Mexican Mafia, the Aryan Brotherhood and the Black Guerrilla Family were the largest and most influential gangs in California prisons, with La Eme being by far the oldest and largest.

Nuestra Familia, which has from its very beginning left behind documentation pointing to it as an extraordinarily literate and education-oriented gang,[91] took the bull by the horns to address the lack of education of its incoming inmates by instituting an educational structure within the prison system where better-educated inmates were assigned to tutor other *familianos*, teaching them literacy and numeracy, and assigning to them works such as Marx's *Das Kapital.*[92] A confiscated document of Nuestra Familia from San Joaquin Valley in the 1970s indicates that "Schooling is mandatory and will be done daily [ . . . ] with the exception of Sundays and Holidays. Tests will be given every Friday by the schooling department."[93] Political writings and strategies for consciousness-raising have also been documented.

By 1985, the Norte and Sur youth counterparts of NF and MM were no longer straightforwardly doing the bidding of the older inmates: "young Hispanics are thinking more in terms of their own ideas rather than aligning themselves with the older organizations," claimed a Federal Department of Justice report.[94] This is evident in the anonymous Norteño manifesto discussed by Donovan: "Nuestra Raza's future behind the walls [depends on the will] to adopt new and more meaningful and fulfilling ideals . . . [we shall] learn to function . . . as working, contributing individual[s], vital to the day to day success of the whole society . . . [Our goals are . . . ] advancement towards equal justice . . . [and] aiding those of latin descent *and other minority groups.*"[95]

Donovan identifies as significant in the creation of the Norteños the politicization across the country of persons of Mexican descent that the

Chicano civil rights movement sparked. This politicization becomes essential, as we will see in the next chapter, for the development of hemispheric localism, which recognizes injustice in both transnational and domestic power structures. The Norteño manifesto excerpt above provides evidence of an emerging political consciousness, as well as the recognition of the similarity between the plight of Chicanos and the condition of other minority groups. Aztlán (the mythical homeland of Chicanos), Aztec symbols, and the iconography of the United Farm Workers movement continue to provide potent semiotic resources in both Norteño and Sureño art; the UFW eagle has specifically been adopted by Norteños and is present throughout Norteño websites on the internet. *Teen Angels* magazine, which publishes art, photos, and poetry by inmates in the correctional system, is replete with Aztec/Catholic religious and cholo iconography that has also now boomeranged out not only to the streets but to the malls as well. Available for purchase at the corner store and at such mass chains as Urban Outfitters in many urban areas are yesterday's gang icons. "Jesus is my homie," proclaims a t-shirt usually worn by Christian students and subversive hipsters, with a decidedly Chicano-art-inspired drawing on the front. Ironically, none of them ever get stopped by the police.

## A Description from Within the Community

One of the most articulate, and in my view, accurate, descriptions of the Norteño–Sureño dynamic on the street level that I have seen comes not from the police, Congress, or academic research, but from a community writer for an online magazine called *De-Bug: The Online Magazine of the South Bay*. In mid-2005, contributor David Madrid published an article questioning the San Jose Police Department's crackdown on merchants selling gang clothing, arguing that targeting the ubiquitous symbols worn by gang and non-gang youth alike completely missed the mark and ignored the underlying social dynamic in the community. I believe the following extended excerpt from his article portrays a valuable perspective: that of local community activists who are not employed by the police but who work on outreach with youth:

> Contrary to the City's understanding, the escalating San Jose gang problem is not about colors, but rather is an ideological clash that meets on the streets. The conflict is ultimately between U.S. born Chicanos vs. newly immigrated Mexicans. And since immigration will only be increasing in San Jose in the future, city policies towards solving the "gang issue" must address this root cause tension.
>
> On the streets, the conflict is understood as being between the "North" (Chicanos wearing red) and the "South" (immigrants wearing blue). [ . . . ] Chicanos see themselves fighting to protect their neighborhoods from an invading immigrant force. In my neighborhood, I hear anger from Norteños who claim, "Our City is being infested." They feel compelled to "exterminate." Blue, immigrant Latinos, see their identity as being about the Mexican struggle, one facing discrimination in the U.S., even by Chicanos.
>
> The North vs. South belief system affects all Latinos in these gang-dominated neighborhoods. Youth get labeled, whether or not they are affiliated. It's even common to hear non-gang members use the derogatory terms [ . . . ] to describe the rival gangs of their neighborhoods or social crowd. The ideology of Northern or Southern supremacy has become a common form of discrimination among Latinos here in San Jose.[96]

In the introduction to this chapter I mentioned that Norte and Sur were more like street organizations as proposed by David Brotherton. Although Norte and Sur in my estimation have not gone as far as to foreswear partying like the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation as described by Brotherton and Barrios,[97] some of the evidence presented in this chapter points to increasing politicization and engagement by Norteños and Sureños with a broader vision of what their intentional communities might be about.

The following chapter relies heavily on exact transcriptions of my face-to-face interviews with young people claiming Norte and Sur. I analyze coexisting and conflicting discourses produced by different members when asked how Norte and Sur might be defined and distinguished. This analysis reveals not only that multiple semiotic referents are invoked when a member claims Norte or Sur, but also shows that young people categorize social phenomena around them and interpret them through the prism of the Norte/Sur opposition.

### Notes

1 DiChiara and Chabot (2003: 77)
2 Thrasher (1927)
3 Moore (1991), Acuña (1996), Villa (2000)

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4 Vigil (1988)
5 Cummings and Monti (1993), Yablonsky (1997), Huff (2002), Vigil (2002), Covey (2003), Short and Hughes (2006)
6 Burris-Kitchen (1997), Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn (1999)
7 Sánchez-Jankowski (1991)
8 Park (1928), Vigil (1988)
9 Vigil (1988), Auletta (1982)
10 Erlanger (1979), Vigil (1988), Yablonsky (1997), Mirandé (1998), Smith (2005)
11 Monti (1994)
12 Barrios (2003)
13 Hazlehurst and Hazlehurst (1998), Duffy and Gillig (2004)
14 Quicker (1983), Campbell (1984), Campbell (1987), Portillos (1999), Taylor (1993), Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995), Mendoza-Denton (1996), Joe-Laidler and Hunt (1997), Miller and Brunson (2000), Joe-Laidler and Hunt (2001), Hunt and Joe-Laidler (2001), Miller (2001), Hunt, Joe-Laidler and Evans (2002), Miranda (2003), Shalet et al. (2003), Hunt, Joe-Laidler and Mackenzie (2005)
15 Sanday (1990), Mendoza-Denton (1996)
16 Muniz (1993), Venkatesh (2000), Miranda (2003), Brotherton and Barrios (2004)
17 See for instance Rawlings (1999) on the "lawlessness of reckless youths" in 502 BC Rome. See also Hopwood (1999).
18 Brotherton and Barrios (2004: 23)
19 Irvine and Gal (2000)
20 Brotherton (2003)
21 DiChiara and Chabot (2003: 78)
22 Curry and Spergel (1988), Curry and Spergel (1992), Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), Chesney-Lind, Shelden and Joe (1996), Laidler and Hunt (1997), Fleisher (1998), Hunt, Joe-Laidler and Mackenzie (2000), Cepeda and Valdez (2003), Fleisher and Krienert (2004)
23 Cohen (1972), Lucas (1998), McCorkle and Miethe (2002)
24 Klein (1995)
25 KOLD News 13, Tucson Arizona (2006)
26 Vallaraigosa (2007), Winton and McGreevy (2007a), Winton and McGreevy (2007b)
27 Moore, Vigil and García (1983: 185), Donovan (1993), Klein (1995)
28 Hilliard (1983), Phillips (1999)
29 Chesney-Lind (1993)
30 Moore and Hagedorn (2001)
31 Klein (1995)
32 i.e., the local food movement
33 Gouldner (1957), Ritzer (2003)

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34 Adamson (2000: 273)
35 See for instance, Klein (1968), Stumphauzer et al. (1977), Erlanger (1979), Moore, Vigil and García (1983).
36 Padilla (1992), Venkatesh (2000)
37 Klein (1995)
38 Thomas, Park and Miller (1921), Park (1952)
39 Venkatesh (2003)
40 Thomas and Znaniecki (1920)
41 Thrasher (1927: 217)
42 Moore, Vigil and García (1983:182)
43 But see Adams and Winter (1997) for a discourse-centered approach to graffiti.
44 Klein (1995: 23)
45 Klein (1995: 22)
46 Haskins (1974), Espinoza (1984)
47 Meranze (1966)
48 Adamson (2000)
49 Thrasher (1927), Cohen and Taylor (2000)
50 Adamson (2000)
51 Willrich (2003)
52 Cohen and Taylor (2000: 120)
53 As a peripheral participant living inside American college fraternities in two separate institutions more than twenty years apart – Johns Hopkins 1987 and MIT 2004 – I can attest to the indulgence with which delinquent behavior by fraternity brothers was treated by the sponsoring elders, many of whom were politically powerful figures who had belonged to the frat and served up current "frat brothers" their first jobs. The white gangs of the 1920s can be thought to have on the one hand turned into the racist skinheads of today, and on the other morphed into some of today's college fraternities, complete with secret, sometimes violent initiation rites, group-sponsored racism and sexism, delinquent behavior, and indulgent attitudes from adults around them.
54 Venkatesh (1998)
55 Hagedorn (2007)
56 Dawley (1973)
57 Brotherton and Barrios (2004)
58 Donovan (1992: 35)
59 Rioting started June 3, 1943 and lasted several days. See Leonard (2006).
60 Moore (1978), Moore and Vigil (1993)
61 Hagedorn (1988), Spergel (1990), Miranda (2003), Brotherton and Barrios (2004)
62 Merton (1938), Merton (1949), Moore and Vigil (1993)
63 Thrasher (1927)

64 See Moore (1978).
65 Moore (1991)
66 Moore (1991: 6)
67 Lee (1999)
68 Especially Marasalvatrucha 13, MS-13, the Salvadoran Sureños, discussed in 109th Congress, Hearing on Gangs and Crime in Latin America.
69 United States Government, 109th Congress, Hearing on HR 1279 (2005: 25)
70 Klein (2006)
71 Bettie (2003: 14)
72 United States Government, 109th Congress, Hearing on HR 2933 (2005: 18)
73 Northern California Gang Investigators Association: Undated, circulated ca. 1993 (1993: 3)
74 California Department of Justice (1995)
75 ibid. (57–58)
76 ibid. (63)
77 California Department of Justice (1995)
78 Bettie (2003)
79 As in the proposal made in 2006 in Tucson, Arizona by Naylor Middle School administration that only Latino children should wear uniforms. Arizona Department of Education (2007)
80 Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994), Curry (1998)
81 Mendoza-Denton (1996), Mendoza-Denton (1997), Brotherton and Salazar-Atias (2003), Miranda (2003), Nurge (2003), Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2004), among others.
82 Frias (1989: 69)
83 Donovan (1992)
84 Frias (1989) and Mendoza (2005), two *veterano* leaders of la Eme, similarly stress their status as supersets by calling them "gangs of gangs."
85 Khan (1978), Donovan (1992)
86 Frias (1989), Mendoza (2005)
87 Donovan (1992)
88 Khan (1978)
89 Donovan (1992: 32)
90 Khan (1978: 66)
91 Khan (1978: 37), Cummins p.c.
92 Cummins p.c.
93 Khan (1978: Appendix F)
94 Federal Department of Justice Report (1985: 92–4)
95 Anonymous B, ca. 1985, cited in Donovan (1992: 30–3), emphasis mine
96 Madrid (2006: 1–2)
97 Brotherton and Barrios (2004)

# CHAPTER 4

# HEMISPHERIC LOCALISM: LANGUAGE, RACIALIZED NATIONALISM, AND THE POLITICIZATION OF YOUTH

NORMA: *What does it mean to claim?*
T-REX: *You claim your barrio*
*You claim your hood,*
*You claim your boyfriend*
*You claim something that is yours.*
*That is really valuable to you.*
*(CGN side B: 8:00)*

One of the boys I met in the tutorial center was a real math and soccer wizard. He would drop by unannounced between pickup games and classes and help his friends with their math homework, since he was in the highest level of calculus that was offered at SJHS. He was a Sureño whose true name I never knew. His moniker was Junior, a name that implied that he had been someone's protégé within the structure of the gang, or that he had started especially young, or maybe someone along the way thought he had a babyface. Everyone called him Junior, even the teachers. With his help the Sureños had been getting pretty good at math before I arrived on campus that fall. And although he liked math better than any other subject and did well in class, it was the only class he was taking that counted toward college entrance requirements. He was in English as a Second Language classes the rest of the day, in bilingual US history and bilingual World Studies, and his elective was auto mechanics. All of these counted as credits toward graduation but not toward college entrance requirements, so no matter how brilliantly he did in calculus, and he did, he would not go straight to college. My guess is that's why he wasn't signed up to take the