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Matthew Desmond, author of *Evicted*

VICTOR M. RIOS

HUMAN TARGETS

SCHOOLS, POLICE, AND THE

CRIMINALIZATION OF

LATINO YOUTH

At fifteen, Victor M. Rios found himself a human target—flat on his ass amid a hail of shotgun fire, desperate for money and a place on the street. Faced with the choice of escalating a drug turf war or eking out a living elsewhere, he turned to a teacher, who mentored him and helped him find a job. That job would alter the course of his whole life—putting him on the road to college and eventually a PhD. In *Human Targets*, Rios takes us to the streets of California, where we encounter young men who find themselves in much the same situation as fifteen-year-old Victor. We follow young gang members into schools, homes, community organizations, and detention facilities, watch them interact with police, grow up to become fathers, get jobs, get rap sheets—and in some cases get killed. What is it that sets apart young people like Rios who succeed and survive from the ones who don't? Rios makes a powerful case that the traditional good kid/bad kid, street kid/decent kid dichotomy is much too simplistic, arguing instead that authorities and institutions help create these identities—and that they can play an instrumental role in providing young people with the resources for shifting between roles.

"Training his attention on social problems he himself experienced growing up—street violence, poverty, racism—Rios is an important and original voice. In this patient and insightful relational ethnography, Rios shows how gang-associated Latino youth, often written off as a 'lost generation,' contain multitudes of identities and brim over with promise. But broken schools and justice systems far too often blunt these children's potential and contribute to casting them on the wrong path. *Human Targets* is critically urgent." —**Matthew Desmond, author of *Evicted***

"How do we move beyond the cycle of criminalization, violence, and mass incarceration that American society has been stuck in for the last several decades? Rios draws upon the perspectives of youth—the very ones most likely to be labeled, incarcerated, or killed—to provide insights to lead us out of our state of paralysis." —**Pedro Noguera, coauthor of *Schooling for Resilience***

"Rios delivers a gripping, disturbing, and deeply moving ethnographic account of interpersonal street violence. *Human Targets* is a provocative yet subtle analysis of the relentless social forces that too often undermine and frustrate the everyday lives of a major segment of America's urban population. Extraordinary and important, this book is a must read for anyone seeking to understand the culture of the city today—it needs to reach a wide audience beyond the halls of the academy." —**Elijah Anderson, author of *Code of the Street***

Victor M. Rios is professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* and *Street Life: Poverty, Gangs, and a Ph.D.*

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Foreword by James Diego Vigil

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tive treatment by schools and police. Shorty, a seventeen-year-old Mexican American girl, told us why her arm was in a cast: “The cops tackled me down because they thought I was going to run after a fight that I had with some girl. . . . I messed up my arm and had to go to the hospital because of the tackle.” Other young women reported incidents when police searched and groped them and said police had called them “bitches” and “gang whores.”

Police also sometimes played a role in street politics and, like the Punta Vista teachers, crossed the line into negative institutional socialization. Miguel explains his experience with police attempts to incite gang fights:

Cops also try to provoke us sometimes . . . like if someone from the [north] side did something to our people. . . . They will say something like, “Aren’t you going to go do something about it?”

In the shadow of Golden State Liquors, the gang-associated boys found a safe zone that allowed them to find affirmation and refuge and to communicate with each other and network. Moreover, the street left them exposed to criminalization, police harassment, and incarceration, bearing labels that targeted them as dangerous, potential criminals.

CHAPTER THREE

Cultural Misframing

(with Patrick Lopez-Aguado)

For gang-associated Latino youths in Riverland and at Punta Vista School, *cholo* style—a shaved head, baggy clothes, and visible tattoos—portrayed one dominant identity. *Cholo* can be translated as “gangster,” but that is imprecise, as the meaning is more nuanced than that. *Cholo* also refers to a larger subculture that dresses and acts in ways that some may perceive as thuggish or gangster-like; however, certain Latino communities embrace the idea of *cholo* precisely because it is not associated with crime and violence, but rather with a youthful, temporary, caricatured identity.¹ Family and community members may mock or ridicule youths for their style, but condone it because, often and for the most part, it isn’t a threat to anyone—it’s just that, a style. Some community members have a complex and fairly accurate understanding of youths who gravitate toward *cholo* culture. They believe that this is a temporary and fluid identity. Youngsters will adopt *cholo* culture to get away, for leisure, to feel empowered. However, schools and law enforcement don’t understand this complex identity and instead label *cholo* style as criminal style. After police and schools convince parents about their children’s criminality, many youth also experience shame from their parents, which can turn the family into another institution of criminalization (see Rios 2011).

Previous to police or school labels, *cholo*, like “punk” subculture, is not necessarily associated with crime among parents and relatives of youths. Young people who dress in a punk style and listen to punk music might garner derision from older community mem-

bers, but they are not necessarily considered criminal conspirators. In this sense, community members understand *cholo* subculture as a multidimensional practice with crime being just one component that is sometimes utilized by a small group of youngsters. Schools and police, however, have a fixed understanding of *cholo*. This subculture is about attitudes, choice of style, and a temporarily enacted performance, and, thus, it is a very fluid label that can be deployed and retracted based on those choices on any given day. A youngster could dress *cholo* one day and then business casual for work the next, without stigma—at least not until schools and police translate *cholo* as “gang member.” Law enforcement is immensely powerful in defining *cholo* subculture as criminal. Schools and other community members are heavily influenced by police labels and discourses and respond by treating young people as criminal threats—with suspicion, harsh discipline, and calls to police.

Thus, through this collective social process, institutions and their agents—from police, whom we expect to be punitive, to parents, whom we might not—impose a fixed and stagnant identity on the otherwise fluid style expressions of youths placed at risk. I refer to this as cultural misframing. Cultural misframing is the process by which institutions construct, define, and impose simplistic, fixed, negative identities on individuals based on misunderstandings of their symbols, language, expressions, and actions. Conventional institutions often misunderstand marginalized individuals’ cultural frames. They, in turn, impose labels on these individuals that redefine their intentions, actions, and thoughts. This cultural misframing leads to dire consequences. Once again, these youths become human targets, menacing or disreputable individuals who require punishment. Therefore, *cholo* is a youth subculture like many others—punk, jock, surfer, skater, hipster—but when it is criminalized by law enforcement, other institutions and authorities are given carte blanche to dole out discipline and punishment. Once they are treated as outcasts, youths seek ways to restore their dignity and resist a system they perceive as repressive.

Cholo style in Riverland stemmed from the youths’ deep-rooted

desire to transform their social conditions and resist discriminatory treatment. When they adopted *cholo* style, youths took ownership of their difference, making it something they created. They could control how they were identified and differentiate themselves from the privileged class they were expected to aspire to, but were obstructed from joining. Flaco, a nineteen-year-old gang-associated youth explained:

If I grow my hair out then I’m a conform. Why do I want to do something they want me to do? I want them to accept me for me.

As individuals who encounter “multiple marginalization”—economic, social, interpersonal—youth in barrio gangs experience some of the most extreme consequences of inequality (Vigil 1988; Durán 2013). In Riverland, youths were caught between two cultures and marginalized in both, too far removed from one and not yet accepted by the other (see Martínez 1998). Youth often join neighborhood cliques to resist the racial and economic subordination that leaves their communities vulnerable to exploitation (Janowski 1991). Street groups offer, not only some support for youth in the barrio, but also the cultural empowerment that comes from being able to reject a society that rejects them. Subculture theory in criminology argues that some individuals living in poverty will develop deviant subcultures and commit crime as a means to resist and reject a mainstream system that has rejected them (Lemert 1951; Becker 1963).

But beyond rejecting their rejecters, even the most disreputable gang-associated young people reported a deep desire for acceptance, recognition, and incorporation into conventional society. They imagined themselves in a nine-to-five job, with a high school diploma or even a college degree. In all interviews, I asked the boys, “What would it take to get you off the streets, to stop you from being arrested again?” A fifteen-year-old’s response spoke for most: “Shit! A job! Pay me twelve dollars an hour and I’ll even wear skinny jeans, homie!”

Such a statement lays bare the intractable links between the lack of socioeconomic opportunity and the multiple cultural frames these youths are forced to navigate, each tied to a set of institutions in which these young people struggle, and usually fail, to be recognized and respected. So while these Riverland youths would not conform to an exploitable labor status and stigma, they would accept viable opportunities.

The problem lies not in a stubborn identity these boys have adopted whose foundational pillar is to oppose conventional values and practices, but rather, the boys' multiple and conflicting identities: One advises the boys to reject the system because it has rejected them; another demands they prove their worth through working and going to school; and yet another nudges them toward prison to reach the next level of "hardness." In a proverbial Cherokee story, a grandfather tells his grandson that there are two wolves within all humans: one filled with love and compassion, and another filled with fear and anger.

The grandson asks, "Which one wins, grandfather?"

The grandfather responds, "It is the one that you feed."

Similarly, gang-associated youth are dealt multiple frames: some conventional, others deviant and delinquent. The frames that are "fed" more support, more resources, and more affirmation from community institutions are those that resonate most with the boys. The boys who adopted a *gangster* style did so because those frames received the strongest positive support within their local context. For them, conventional culture—white, middle-class values, styles, frames, and tastes—were associated too often with negative interactions with authority figures, which reduced their influence. Time after time, teachers or police officers failed to demonstrate a belief that gang-associated youths could follow conventional frames, a lack of faith that deflated the youths' sense of belonging and association with such norms. Instead, they turned away to align deliberately and forcibly with the more accepting subculture. Their positive interactions with peers who understood their experiences strengthened those subcultural scripts that rejected conventional norms.

In separating themselves, gang-associated youths developed their own cultural performances and used unique stylistic appropriations to mark their difference. They commonly wore oversized work pants and large white or blue T-shirts. A few regularly wore Dodgers or Cowboys jerseys, which corresponded with the blue themes common among *Sureno* street cliques, gangs that have symbolic or real affiliation to the Mexican Mafia prison gang. Whether closely networked to the mafia or simply autonomous adopters of *Sureno* style, the youth who dressed that way donned a label signifying "gang" to other youth and to authorities. Other youths wore black T-shirts or hoodies saying "Riverland" or "South Side." Few ever wore conventional brand names or logos, like Nike or Hurley. Many wore white sneakers kept impeccably clean, and their hair was always either shaved or cropped to about half an inch or less.

Tito illustrates *cholo* style. When I first met him, he was wearing khaki-colored work pants, several sizes too big, pulled up high around his belly and fastened with a black belt. Over his large white T-shirt that hung loose to his mid-thigh, he layered another shirt, which made him look bulkier than he actually was. His head was shaved, and he had letters representing his neighborhood tattooed on his forearms.

Thirty-four of the initial fifty-seven gang-associated youths in our focus groups had tattoos, which embodied a style that they could call their own, outside the norm. A few went beyond this stylistic explanation and referred to a tattoo as a means of resisting mainstream expectations—a "symbolic challenge to the overt and indirect forms of domination," according to cultural theorist Ben Olguin (1997) who argues that the Latino male body has become a central battlefield in the war on crime, where alleged gang members become hyperpoliced:

The "adorned" body of the collective and individual "Hispanic male subject" is read and also written on by a variety of narrators—police officers, prosecutors, and judges, as well as prison administrators, guards, and even prisoners themselves. These interventions help

transform the body into a network of signifiers that at once affirm the “suspected” and/or “convicted criminal’s” personal identity while simultaneously confirming his abject status in society. (161)

In this struggle, these Latino males reclaim their bodies by inscribing their own meanings, performance, and resistance onto themselves. Olguin describes the act of tattooing as “the Latino (*lumpenproletariat*) practice of ritually marking a space for the purpose of laying a symbolic and even material claim on it” (162). This reclamation of the body from a punitive landscape is infused with gang and barrio references, as well as religious, cultural, and family images. Among the Riverland boys, tattoos included images of the Virgin Mary, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Jesus Christ, Aztec symbols, the word “Riverland,” and family names.

The youths understood that appropriating a *cholo* identity marked them for persecution and police attention because in the public sphere they stood out as a counterpoint to the safe-city image that Riverland worked hard to project. Tito elaborates:

Those fools will tell us to get the fuck out of here ‘cause they don’t want the tourists to be—or the yeah—the tourists and the white people to get scared.

Nevertheless, they remained steadfast in their stylistic stance because their visible opposition appeared to be the entire point.

Although not inherently deviant, *cholo* style is intentionally oppositional to the mainstream (Vigil 1988), and, understandably, *cholo* subculture has an appeal much broader than gang-involved youth. This culture of resistance, and its associated styles and performance, resonates with many unaffiliated barrio youth because it speaks to struggles that affect the entire community. For example, fifteen-year-old Ricardo, who reported not being in the gang and did not plan to join, dressed in baggy pants and occasionally shaved his head. Asked if he thought his appearance might make others believe he was a gang-associated youth, he said,

Yeah, but this is what I like to wear. I don’t care what they think. They still gotta respect me. Just ‘cause I don’t want to be in the gang doesn’t mean I don’t like being gangster.

Youth clearly made this differentiation between being gang members or simply *cholo*, a generic style, and being a bona fide gang member or affiliated with an alleged criminal enterprise.

According to historian Robin Kelley (1997), the gangster appeals to youth as a response to socioeconomic subjugation and as a challenge to authority in general, one in which the marginalized are imagined as all-powerful. Similarly, Stuart Cosgrove (1984) noted that the *pachucos* (Mexican American zoot-suit-wearing youths) of the 1940s adopted a style of dress to contest their social invisibility. To those who wore them, zoot suits were “a spectacular reminder that the social order had failed to contain their energy and difference . . . a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience” (Cosgrove 1984, 78). Segregated from mainstream society and, therefore, alienated from the ambitions of their immigrant parents, the *pachucos* rebelled by flaunting their difference. In the process, they developed a culture that critiqued racism and the unequal American class structure.

Both *pachuco* and *cholo* styles “became cultural productions signifying unique forms of resistance by youth of color against the dominant image of style and culture embraced by other young people of these eras” (Bejarano 2005, 90). In accentuating difference, youth subcultures empower what society has devalued, making their styles attractive to marginalized youth. In a way, adopting an alternative style became somewhat of an informal social movement in which marginalized youth could portray their culture through dress and appearance. But even these representations of resistance are not fixed; youths engage them selectively, based on interactions with power.

Sociologist Erving Goffman posited that individuals construct the impressions they make on others in social settings to create perceptions they want others to have of them. In his dramaturgical

theory, Goffman (1959) compared social interactions to a theatrical play. People constantly engage in “impression management” as they use the resources around them to develop the most ideal impression of themselves. We use aspects of social interactions to convey individual identities through specific forms of dress (Garot and Katz 2003; Entwistle 2001), language (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), and mannerisms (Sudnow 1978). Whether the black leather jackets of the 1950s, the punk styles of the 1970s, or the rap and hip-hop styles of the 1990s, individuals use aspects of daily self-presentation to place themselves within specific cultural contexts and categories, reflecting particularities of their identity, such as class (MacLeod 2008), sexuality (Yoshino 2006), and race (Wieder and Pratt 1989). Among the South Riverland youths, “impression management” centered on demanding dignity, with their impeccably clean clothes and sneakers emblematic of that stance.

Gang association for the Riverland boys became a performed identity that defied mainstream values and the criminalization of their community in that it provided a platform from which they could distinguish themselves from authority figures’ expectations (Garot 2010; Durán 2013; Mendoza-Denton 2008). *Cholo* style was a tool in this performed identity, and because it projected the image of a Latino challenging the mainstream cultural values, it held an importance far deeper than belonging to a specific neighborhood or clique. Many youths expressed feeling uncomfortable in clothes they claimed were for white people and could never imagine giving up their chosen style—unless they found a viable, well-paying job. In that case, performing mainstream respectability for a white, middle-class audience was understood as the price to be paid for a regular, sustainable paycheck. Otherwise, the youths were adamant in their attachment to *cholo* style regardless of the associated risks. As eighteen-year-old Santos said, “I’m not gonna change my style just for a stupid ass cop that thinks I’m gonna, you know, get into something.”

In addition to attached messages of resistance to mainstream

values and marginalization, *cholo* style was simply a practical approach to life in poverty conditions. In a focus group, a pair of boys reminded us that most of the clothing—white T-shirts, baggy jeans, NFL wear—became popular *cholo* fashions because they were readily available for poor urban youth:

JUAN: Why does it matter what we’re wearing in the first place?

The cops are always giving us shit, like we’re wearing a uniform, they say that we’re wearing a uniform ‘cause we’re wearing Dickies! Well they’re cheap. What little we have, we’re gonna go buy a fuckin’ . . .

JASON: . . . go buy some Dockers and what not.

Unlike the mainstream fashions, presumably more acceptable to authority figures, white T-shirts and Dickies pants were inexpensive and durable, and a shaved head required only clippers and a razor that could be reused several times, as opposed to a monthly fifteen-to twenty-dollar barbershop haircut.

Because the boys’ appearance contradicted the dominant image of Riverland as a profitable, carefree resort town, these youths were harassed by police and kept away from any public events expected to draw large crowds and considerable commercial revenue. Many were picked up before holiday or city celebrations and detained for the duration without charges or with bogus charges; others reported being arrested on sight should they try to attend such public events. For example, about two weeks prior to the town’s famous yearly parade days, many boys informed me they might not be around for interviews or observations because, as Tito explained:

They start violating us [arrest for violating terms of probation] around this time. They find stupid excuses for arresting us like a few days before the parade days, dog. They just take us in and we’re stuck there for the weekend. Monday we have court and get released. After all the partying is over.

Riverland depended on a docile servant community (of color), available to cater to the whims of this privileged population, but by adopting *cholo* styles that magnified their visibility in the public sphere, marginalized youth challenged this power and authority—and paid the consequences. Nonetheless, the feeling of dignity and affirmation often outweighed the punitive consequences meted out by the state. In this sense, punishment is not always a deterrent to crime, especially if that crime is committed for purposes related to feelings of redemption or dignity enhancement (see Braithwaite 1989).

Frames as a Source of Empowerment

Devalued in mainstream society along race and class hierarchies, Latino youths created street cultures to promote their own self-worth (Rodríguez 2005). In creating their own culture, these youths established their own styles and identities in which to find value instead of adopting cultural norms that constantly reminded them they did not belong. Within this street-oriented, working-class Latino culture, they crafted for themselves a spot in the center, not at the margins. Although the youth culture was resistance, it was not necessarily oppositional. In other words, young people may have rejected their rejecters, but they simultaneously hankered to gain acceptance in the mainstream, to hold well-paying, steady jobs, and to further their education. Even as these youths were adept at working within the cultural frame of *cholo* and the street life it stylized, their proficiency within this frame would not help them accomplish social mobility—and they knew it. This illustrates how young people are cognizant and rational about the frames at their disposal. While they choose street-life-oriented cultural frames, they are aware of others, like a college-going student or the employed, reformed O.G. (original gangster).

They may have had other choices, but these choices had limited resources in the everyday, real world of South Riverland. On any given day, if a young person chose to make a change for the better, to

dream about educational and occupational success, the help available to make this dream come true was scarce in the neighborhood and from authority figures. For example, many youths defaulted to street life only after suffering rejection from multiple institutions—family, schools, police, and the labor market. Thus, negative interactions with authority figures weakened the cultural frames of success in school and work and strengthened those of the gang and street life. Institutions play a powerful role in determining which cultural frames young people gravitate toward and are able to utilize.

Sánchez-Jankowski (1991) theorizes that teenagers join street gangs as a youthful, temporary rebellion against the marginal economic futures that await them in adulthood. However, John Hagedorn (1988) argues that in the postindustrial economy, this temporary rebellion finds more permanence as working-class youths encounter greater difficulty finding stable employment. Based on these ideas, the South Riverland youths' adoption of highly visible *cholo* styles could indicate resistance to the mainstream expectation that they become servants of privileged whites. Conscious of the few opportunities to find legitimate career paths, Latino youth adopted appearances they knew would block them from the low-level service positions they were expected to fill. They tapped into racist fears of their inherent criminality to create a public impression that would counter the image of the submissive, stigmatized servant. In a racialized, hyperexploited service economy, these youths deliberately put themselves out of service to retain their dignity. They changed the meaning of race by pushing back against a system that had constructed their "Mexican" parents as a cheap labor force. Instead, they now participated in the construction of "Mexican" as rebellious and resistant, even if this meant encountering the wrath of the punitive state. In this sense, the cultural frames that young people were able to choose and utilize became part of a racial formation process (see Bonilla-Silva 2006 and Omi and Winant 1994).

Luis, a seventeen-year-old gang-associated youth who wore forty-eight-inch pants on his thirty-four-inch waist, described the effect of his appearance: "I feel like when I dress like this, and like the way

I look and everything, it gives me like power. Like I feel like, more like in control and all that." One of his friends suggested the feeling was based on being able to scare people. Luis replied, "Yeah, like I could! . . . I don't think like 'Oh, people look at me bad,' I think of people like they're scared." By marking himself as a person the mainstream public should fear, Luis forced people to respect him as a threat, and thus he could claim power. In this sense, these youths preferred to be feared rather than to be stigmatized, marginalized, and exploited as servants to a privileged white class.

Cholo style, despite its relatively minimalist fashions, demands attention and contests social invisibility because it taps persistent racist assumptions of the inherent danger Latinos pose to public safety. The hype of the gang threat magnifies public fears of youth of color and makes street styles all the more noticeable. Regardless of actual migration status or country of origin, stereotypes of violent Mexicans are wielded against all Latinos in the United States, challenging their citizenship rights and keeping migrants deportable, and thus, economically exploitable (DeGenova 2002; Ngai 2014; Chavez 2008; Newton 2008). Perceptions of Mexican illegality extend this vulnerability to the Latino community at large (Barrera 1979; Acuña 2004; Newton 2008; Ngai 2014), although much can be mediated through various forms of status and cultural capital. Facing daily reminders of their marginality and relative inability to combat the structures working against them, the South Riverland boys played on mainstream racist fears to retain some power in the public sphere. *Cholo* or thug cultural frames remained vigorous in the lives of these marginalized young people precisely because they offered practical, problem-solving solutions to the dilemmas of everyday life: Where do I belong? How do I deal with my emotions? How do I nourish myself? Whose got my back?

The Strength of Weak Frames

Cholo performance is rarely absolute, but occurs across a continuum of implementation, depending on personal needs and desires. Police

evaluate the intensity of a youth's *cholo* style and assign the individual a corresponding degree of criminality (Miller 1995). With that knowledge, youths recognize they will encounter greater levels of criminalization and violence with more intense displays of *cholo* identity.

Chuy, a seventeen-year-old gang-associated youth, explained why he stopped shaving his head after wearing it in this style for four years: "[A bald head] causes too much attraction. So . . . let it grow out a little bit you know?" However, to Chuy, growing his hair meant adopting a fade style, about a quarter inch in length, and he still wore baggy pants and plaid Pendleton shirts. He did not abandon his performance, but modified its intensity after his shaved head caused too many problems. Despite this, people still saw him as a threat. Taking steps to be less intensely *cholo* did not necessarily translate into decriminalization of these youths in the view of the institutions they frequented. Criminal labels are like radioactive waste: They actively linger indefinitely into the future. The artifacts these labels leave behind include gang databases, criminal records, gang injunctions, gang enhancements, and corresponding exclusion from schools and the labor market.

Some youths also recognized a need to balance this self-presentation with those more acceptable in mainstream society. They knew that drastic or permanent displays of *cholo* identity could bar them from the limited opportunities they might really need, despite their reluctance to take them. For instance, most of the youths had tattoos, but they tended to be on their chests, stomachs, backs, or upper arms where they could be more easily covered. Few had tattoos on their necks or faces, a more extreme display of gang association and refusal to conform to conventional standards, including employment in service positions. Even Luis, who valued the fear he could instill in strangers, recognized he could embody this performance only when he was not working at his job as a busboy in a high-end restaurant, deferring to wealthy patrons. Off the clock, he could adopt his more fearsome identity and regain the empowerment that he sacrificed on the job. The youths resisted their positioning in the

local labor market, but most could not afford to reject it entirely. They did not solely practice a culture of resistance or a resistance subculture; much of the time they also sought conventional avenues for becoming adults, because even weak cultural frames have a lot of strength.

The cultural frames that constituted messages, ideas, perceptions, interactions, and symbols nudging young people to stay legit, get and keep a job, go to school, and stay away from the gang remained weak in South Riverland because they were resource deprived. The job market was weak and wages low; role models were few; and schools and police misframed young people's cultures. If such resources were stronger, they could fortify young people's desires, aspirations, and actions to incorporate into the conventional world. Nevertheless, these weak frames still resonated strongly in the minds and thoughts of marginalized young people, and even the slightest opportunity, like a job lead or a positive connection with a teacher, propagated these weak frames, making them stronger within short spans of time, facilitating a process of model shifting.

Conventional frames are not only present in the lives of marginalized young people, but they can be fortified with the help of positive interactions with authority figures and with viable jobs or culturally relevant educational programs. Take, for example, Mark, the student at Punta Vista School who was labeled "angry" and who displayed a hypermasculine attitude on the streets, starting fights or threatening to beat or kill people every time I saw him. Fourteen months into my observations, Mark's persistent behavior landed him in juvenile hall for assault and then for violating probation. One day, he returned from being locked up for two weeks and asked if I knew about any available jobs. I asked what sort of work he wanted. "A sushi chef," he said. "I want to be a sushi chef. Cut up some fish and what not." I helped him write a resume with that objective, and a few weeks later Mark landed a job, not as a sushi chef, but as a dishwasher at a sushi restaurant. Over two months, he maintained that

job and was promoted to waiter. I went to eat at his restaurant to pay him a visit.

Mark has a gleaming smile and it doesn't feel fake like a customer service friendly smile but genuine. As he later explains to me, "I'm happy 'cause I got a job and I am happy you get to see me doing it." He looks relaxed, poised, and with a purpose. He wears loose-fitting black dress slacks, black dress shoes, a white dress shirt, and skinny black tie. He approaches the table with a huge smile, appearing proud and ready to impress. "Rios, sir, how can I help you?" sounding very official. He looks down at his notepad and stares back at me.

"Let me get a . . . what's good here, man?"

"You should try the volcano rolls. They are made with salmon, toasted sesame seeds, Ikura, and topped with shrimp tempura."

"Ikura! What's Ikura, man?" I ask.

"Oh, salmon eggs, it's salmon eggs, Rios . . . and don't forget to order some spicy edamame. It's got a great taste."

I order the volcano roll, edamame, and miso soup. Mark moves about tending to other tables. Despite only being on the job [as a waiter] for a few weeks, he is on it. He looks like a professional; no one would guess that just a few weeks ago he was out on the streets putting in work or at school being labeled an at-risk angry student. He does have a tattoo on his hand with three letters each about one inch tall, representing his gang "SST." I ask him what he tells his boss and customers about it. He replies, "I tell them it was a social club that I was part of when I was a kid and that I found a home there when I really needed one. . . . They tell me, 'Oh, like Boys and Girls Club?' I say yeah, just like that."

Mark represents one of the young people who have been criminalized in poor neighborhoods but have been able to draw upon their grit to avoid further incarceration—someone whose model shifting paid off. Some young people encounter opportunities and seize them to improve their social conditions. These opportunities, like employment,

reinforce those cultural frames that call on individuals to prove themselves through productive activities, earning a decent living, attending school, and striving for a professional career. These frames are not difficult to bring out among marginalized young people and can be readily deployed under the right conditions, including the youth's desire to change, positive interactions with authority figures, and employment and educational opportunities. But in reality, young people in South Riverland and many marginalized communities are continually policed and treated as suspects and risks. Once a label has been created and imposed, the system's ability to facilitate model shifting—or the ability to encounter and utilize multiple frames—is diminished. When schools and police label a problem as a “problem,” they tend to treat this problem with tunnel vision, targeting it with simplistic, in this case, punitive solutions that perpetuate negative interactions. As a result, these negative interactions spur youths to adopt frames that can lead to negative outcomes.

Amplified Criminalization and the Tragedy of Performance

Some youths who appropriate the fashions of specific subcultures can come to adopt the group's criminalized status as well. Identifying with criminalized street culture invites condemnation and underscores the alienation that perhaps these youths already feel. Scores of gang-associated youths adopt *cholo* styles, apparently because to be feared is better than to be invisible (Anderson 1999; Dance 2005). But as they adopt *cholo* identities, youths frequently become indistinguishable from criminal gang members in the eyes of authority figures, who, in turn, falsely inflate the threat of street groups and associate youth of color in specific contexts with violent street crime. In past anti-gang sweeps, police have detained teenagers for wearing red shoelaces or exchanging complex handshakes (Davis 1999), behavior that is now enough to be placed on California's gang database (Parenti 2000; Rios 2011).

Tito explained a scenario of police surveillance and harassment he experienced:

One time I was in front of [a liquor store] and the cops would say like you don't have to hang around with those losers. They are nobody. This guy was drinking a beer and they like got the beer and poured it out and said this is for your dead homies. That is very disrespectful. The cops would usually get off the car or if not just park somewhere and just watch us. I got kind of used to it already. But it does get on my nerves because we are just outside and they have to be looking at us all the time.

By mocking the youth's cultural symbolism, in this case a ritual of paying homage to dead loved ones by pouring a sip of one's drink on the ground, police created yet another layer of social distance. Humiliation, disrespect, and a deep sense of resentment followed these kinds of actions, creating a deeper bond between youths who collectively experienced this perceived injustice.

Much of the general public also has adopted this criminalization of youth of color, which affects interactions with other adults in the community. Ricardo shared this story of criminalization:

There was this lady that lives down the street. . . . Me and two other homies were walking by, and she's *gringa* [white]. Then I walked past her and she just dogs us. She's like “I'll go inside.” . . . One night the narcs [gang unit police officers] had went by and she told her husband, “Don't worry, the cops are here, they'll get him.”

Economic Context

Despite the stigma and risks, none of the boys were willing to switch to an appearance they knew authorities preferred, simply to comply with some social assumption. The only factor that could change their appearance was the promise of well-paying employment:

TITO: Set me up with an interview I'd be there, get a pair of tighter pants—shit homes, I'll get rid of my baggy clothes.

V.R.: You would change the way you dress for sixteen, twenty dollars an hour?

TITO: Hell yeah! Once they paid me I'd wear some more Levis, some Dockers. I'll even wear some tight pants!

This willingness to alter their appearance for economic opportunities indicated that the street styles were a malleable form of resistance against the marginal roles the local labor market typically offered them. If they could access better economic opportunities, they were willing to frame switch and learn new interaction skills and performances. Despite the marginalization they suffered, they didn't refuse to participate in mainstream society, but only in the subservient positions to which they were relegated. While a response to deep-seated race, class, and gender dynamics, their performance was pliable and shifted as cultural and material resources became available (or were denied). But because employment that they considered as dignified was typically unavailable, they adopted appearances they knew would block them from being hired for the marginal positions they did not want. Santos described this dilemma: "You can't just show up all bald-headed and be all 'homie, where's my application?' I'm growing my hair out to try to get a job. I tried it once but it didn't work so I just shaved my shit again."

Unstable living conditions and failing to find economic opportunities can quickly lead young people down a detrimental path. Flaco's story is a case in point. The last time I saw Flaco, I helped him develop his resume so he could seek a job to help his "lady" with her two kids. Later I learned his family had experienced two job losses in the economic downturn: Flaco's stepfather and older brother, who had been paying the mortgage on their four-bedroom house, both lost their jobs. The bank had foreclosed on their home, and the family moved to a studio apartment where Flaco, his sister, and brother slept on the floor next to their mother and stepfather's bed. Then Flaco's stepfather asked him to move out. Flaco could not

afford to live in Riverland, so he moved to South Los Angeles to live with relatives. A few days later, he committed suicide by hanging himself. Flaco's death illustrates how the lack of economic opportunities renders these young people vulnerable.

Expected to assume subservient roles within Riverland's social hierarchy and labor market, local Latinos were stigmatized from a young age. But by becoming *cholos*, these youths found a way to publicly resist this degrading marginality. *Cholo* performance provided a way to reject the social systems that had rejected them. Who can mark you, if you first mark yourself? This self-imposed deviation from a "normal" aesthetic provided *cholos* with control over their identities and empowerment within the public sphere. By playing to mainstream fears of nonwhite criminality, young Latinos dramatized their difference and, thereby, contested their social invisibility.

But the risks and challenges of adopting *cholo* styles are great. *Cholos* are commonly registered in gang databases that are used to assign enhancements and injunctions that mandate prison time. Repeated arrests and prolonged prison terms further limit already marginal employment opportunities (Pager 2007) and detrimentally affect inmates' families (Comfort 2008). Life on the streets and in correctional facilities enables drug and alcohol abuse, and few treatment options are available to these individuals. Many end up incarcerated, permanently injured, or dead, and almost all acquire negative credentials that permanently mark them as unemployable and irredeemable. In addition, *cholo* performance can have a dangerous impact on young women in the community, as young men develop a perilous masculinity that reinforces female subjugation. In this study, I found that these youngsters had immense cultural heterogeneity. Their ability to switch identities or model shift allowed them to take advantage of the few opportunities available to them. However, when these opportunities were lacking, their adaptation of harmful frames became pronounced.

Masculinity

A negative consequence of not having enough resources to reinforce favorable notions of masculinity—like a hard-work ethic, respect for women, and engaging in one's community—was the development of a perilous masculinity. Many youths displayed negative attitudes toward young women in their lives, regularly referring to them as “bitches,” and using phrases like “slap a bitch” to discuss reprimanding others—male or female—who did not respect them. To display resistance to the subordination they faced in society, these young Latinos adopted tough, violent, and defiant personae. They then projected this performance onto young women, as a patriarchal cultural frame became one available avenue to empowerment.

For most of the boys, two of the main milestones in achieving manhood were having sex and getting arrested. Youths who had frequent sex or had been arrested multiple times were afforded greater respect. Whether the young men committed crimes to acquire money, to gain status among peers, or to resist their marginalization, their personal vendettas almost always affected the young women around them. The young males' resistance to marginalization was often at the expense of the young women, since to many young men resistance meant claiming their manhood in more assertive ways. As they sought pride, dignity, and defiance of subservience, their identities became more masculinized, less self-consciously performed, and they were more demeaning and brutal toward young women. The more *cholos* resisted marginalization, the more any identity deemed “feminine” even in the narrowest of terms was vulnerable to their aggression.

This perilous masculinity did not develop in a vacuum within Latino street culture, but through interactions with educational, criminal justice, and community institutions that inculcated a defensive male performance (see Rios 2009). Domination is frequently inflicted through the axis of race, class, or gender, and, as these boys resisted one or two of these axes, they sometimes perpetuated oppression on the remaining one. Although these young

men did not see themselves as performing resistance, they tried to become what they performed. In doing so, they came to hate any differences that threatened their identity performance as stable, solid, and real. The following chapter examines in depth, through a cultural framing perspective, how masculinity operates in the lives of Riverland youths.