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Abstract

"Homies" are a series of over two hundred 1¾ inch figurines created by a California artist, with the images also available on clothing, in comics, in videogames, on stickers and on the internet. The artist claims that his creations represent the whole range of people one finds in "the barrio." As the images circulate, however, different audiences interpret them differently—some decrying their glorification of gangsters, for instance, with others lauding the portrayal of less commonly represented social types. This paper traces the uptake of Homies images in one suburban American town, a town with no previous history of Mexican settlement that has become home to thousands of Mexican immigrants over the past 15 years. In this location, Homies images are taken up in various identity projects as Anglos use them to make sense of the rapidly growing immigrant community and as Mexican youth use them to identify themselves. The role that Homies play in social identification cannot be understood by examining discrete events of media "reception," however. Analysts must also take into account ongoing local struggles over identity through which the mass mediated images come to have meaning and in which these images sometimes play central roles. The recontextualization of these mass mediated images among different groups in town sometimes results in the homogenization of identities—with the signs used to construe Mexican youth in unflattering ways drawn from nationally circulating stereotypes—while at other times the images are taken up in less familiar identity projects.

Introduction

In a well-publicized move in 1999, the Los Angeles Police Department attempted to have "Homies," a series of 1¾ inch figurines, banned from stores—arguing that they glamorize gang life and encourage young people to be gang members. National newspaper stories carried quotes from law enforcement officials who described "unmistakable signs of gang life" in the figurines: a black tear on one character's face that "represents the loss of a fellow gang member 'in the line of duty'" and "white T-shirts and baggy pants with a shirt or jacket buttoned only at the top button, which…is typical gang attire" (Larrubia 1999). An L.A. detective was quoted as saying:

"I saw the ramifications and the impact of these toys on small children. I was fighting against gang crime in the area, and [Homies] were counterproductive....It was a bad influence for the youth because of the underlying atmosphere of gangs…in the figurines" (Gowen 2002). One district attorney said that the figurines and their style of dress could even be used as a means of identifying gang members in court: "We're thinking of putting them up in court and saying, 'If you're dressed like these guys, you're violating probation'" (Larrubia 1999).

The Homies were created by David Gonzales, a California artist, and since their introduction in 1998 the collection has grown from a handful to over two hundred and has sold well over 100 million replicas (Piasecki 2008). The figurines are sold in gumball machines, in grocery and specialty stores, by internet resellers and on the Homies website (www.homies.tv). The characters appear in comic strips, on posters, stickers and clothing, in drawings in *Lowrider Arte* magazine, in a *Homie Rollerz* video game and in YouTube videos. Both youth and adults collect the figurines, and stories about them have appeared in publications like *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal* and popular culture magazines like *Vibe, Spin,* and *Rolling Stone* (Brune 2002; Gowen 2002; Larrubia 1999; Napolitano 2003; Sook 2004). Gonzales describes each character on the Homies website, and some do indeed resemble popular stereotypes of gangsters. "Pelon," for example, is described as a "hustler" who sells stolen merchandise and as a "cholo" (Homieshop 2011), a label sometimes associated with Latino gang culture (Smith 2006). Gonzales himself says that gangs "exist. Just like they exist in the regular Hispanic community, they exist in the Homie world" (Becerra 2007a). But Gonzales intends the Homies to represent the wide range of people that one finds in "the barrio," not primarily gangsters and criminals. As described on the website, most of the Homies have nothing to do with gangs. There are wealthy Homies: "Hollywood," for instance, is "a

businessman and has a very substantial income. He is constantly on the phone or being beeped and paged." There are well-educated Homies: "Schoolboy" is going to college; he dropped out in ninth grade but then returned to school, and "through hard work and regular attendance" he got good grades, was offered financial aid and is matriculating at a university. El Profe has a Master's degree in education, "cares very deeply for the young Homies" and turns down job offers at prestigious universities because he feels he is needed at Homie High. There are hard-working Homies: Paletero sells ice cream, walking "many miles each day in the hot sun…working to help pay to bring his grandkids over from Mexico;" after his family's ranch in Mexico was destroyed by drought, he chose to leave for the U.S. to "work his ass off [and] send for his family" to keep them from starving to death. And there are religious Homies: Abuelita and El Padrecito pray and care for everyone in the community. There are also cuter, younger Homies, the "Mijos," who target younger consumers and appear in books published by Scholastic.

Whatever Gonzales' intentions may be, however, once Homies images move into wider circulation they are interpreted in various ways. Individuals incorporate them into their own identity projects, and groups enlist them in their struggles to identify themselves and each other—sometimes in predictable and sometimes in unexpected ways. Over the past decade Homies have moved into many places, including the suburban Mid-Atlantic American town of Marshall, a town with no previous history of Mexican settlement that has become home to thousands of Mexican immigrants over the past 15 years. Some Mexican students at Marshall High School carry binders with Homies on them. Homies characters appear on students' clothes and in their artwork. The students display and comment on Gonzales' drawings among themselves, saying that Homies are *"chido"* (cool) and that when people come to the U.S. "*ven*

como se visten [los Homies] y les gustan y entonces empiezan a vestirse así y ya todos empiezan a cambiar" (they see how [the Homies] dress and they like it and so they start to dress like that and suddenly everyone starts changing). Sometimes the Homies are construed as cholos, but at other times they are taken to represent various everyday kinds of Latino people: "*son como nosotros, son Latinos"* (they are like us, they're Latinos). Homies are taken up variously as these Mexican students work to identify themselves as individuals and as a group. Homies have also come to the attention of Anglos in Marshall, including some teachers who tend to interpret them in much the same way as L.A. police officers. What the Homies actually communicate about Mexican youth depends upon how they are taken up in everyday life, and in Marshall various models of personhood are used to understand the Homies and tacitly to identify Latino youth that these figures are often taken to characterize.

We argue that the law enforcement personnel quoted in the first paragraph have too simple a model of media images, their meaning and their influence. Because some Homies resemble youth who are imagined to engage in antisocial behavior, those law enforcement personnel presuppose that the images have a fixed meaning that includes these antisocial identities and behaviors. They also believe that this fixed meaning encourages young consumers themselves to adopt these undesirable identities and behaviors. If we examine how images of Homies are actually taken up in social life, however, a more complex picture emerges. A mass mediated image like a Homies figurine can index various potentially relevant types of people and events, and any image comes to have more definite meaning only as it is construed in practice (Silverstein 1992). Furthermore, this construal does not merely involve discrete events of "reception." As Agha argues in his contribution to this volume, "mass media" is best conceived not as a set of objects and processes that by themselves have causal influences on events and

behaviors, or that are taken up in media-centered events of reception, but instead as signs, objects and processes which play important but partial roles in broader semiotic practices. Media representations are important links in the trajectories across which signs and models move, but these trajectories include many events that do not focally involve mass media. Homies images circulate into Marshall through websites, magazines, merchandisers of figurines and publishers of posters, but those images then move onto a student's binder and get discussed in school, in events that are regimented not only by mass media. The meanings of Homies images depend on how they are taken up in ongoing projects of self- and other-identification, projects that include but are not limited to mass mediated aspects.

In this paper we study these processes ethnographically, exploring how mass mediated images of Homies are taken up in one New Latino Diaspora town. Like many similar towns across the U.S., Marshall has experienced rapid Mexican immigration over the past ten to fifteen years (Wortham, Mortimer and Allard 2009; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). Both longstanding residents and newcomers struggle to make sense of each other at this time of rapid demographic change, and Mexican identity is somewhat fluid because Latinos are new to the region. Homies provide a palette of identities, and they are sometimes taken to index Mexican youth in this town. But these identities only have force as they are taken up in ongoing processes of identity contestation in the local context. This chapter traces the movement of Homies and the models of personhood used to make sense of them as they enter Marshall. We show how the recontextualization of these mass-mediated images among different groups in this town sometimes results in the homogenization of identities—with the signs used to construe a wide swath of Mexican youth in ways that are familiar from stereotypes common throughout the country—while at other times the images are interpreted in idiosyncratic ways or taken up in

unusual identity projects. An adequate account of these mass mediated images' roles in social life must follow the images across time and across groups as they are taken up in various projects of social identification.

Signs and models of identity

We know what people are like because they exhibit signs of identity or others attribute signs of identity to them. Such signs can be denotationally explicit, characterizing a person or group through straightforward reference and predication. More often, however, signs of identity are indexes—they point to certain characteristics of a group by drawing on images of people that speakers and hearers recognize. A Mexican immigrant adolescent may display a gang sign, making a gesture with his hand, and others may recognize that this type of sign is associated with gang members and conclude that the adolescent is a gangster. Another young person may wear low-slung baggy jeans and a "beater" (a white tank top with wide arm-holes), and others may recognize this as the dress of a cholo. Or a Mexican immigrant adolescent may adopt some lexis and phonology from African American Vernacular English and others may recognize this as the speech of a tough young person. Such signs of identity only have meaning as they are construed by shared "models of personhood," characterizations of the dispositions, moral strengths and weaknesses, typical behaviors and life prospects of a person or group (Agha 2007; Goffman 1974; Silverstein 1976). Such models circulate in discourse throughout a community, and people rely on them, in part, to make sense of themselves and others. Signs of identity and models of personhood depend on each other: signs have meaning only when they are construed using models, and models have no existence apart from signs that index them (Silverstein 1992).

As described in Silverstein and Urban (1996), signs of identity and models of personhood are often taken up in new contexts, and these recontextualizations sometimes change the meanings of signs and the shape of relevant models. Agha (2007; Agha and Wortham 2005) shows how such recontextualization involves "chains" (or "trajectories;" Dreier 2008; Wortham 2006) and cannot be adequately understood merely as discrete events of interpretation. In order to understand how signs of identity and associated models of personhood characterize people, groups and relations, we must do more than describe discrete or characteristic types of events (Wortham 2005). We must also study how they are recontextualized over time, because they gather force or change trajectory as their construal shifts or solidifies across events, as uses of relevant signs and models come to presuppose each other across event boundaries. A discrete recontextualization may or may not take hold across events, such that individuals or groups come to be routinely identified in characteristic ways. We must look across trajectories of events to see how uses become presupposed and might come to have enduring social effects.

When we study trajectories of events across which signs of identity reappear, we see these signs becoming embedded in ongoing projects of social identification and contestation. As groups position themselves with respect to each other, and as individuals project a socially visible self, they draw on relevant signs of identity and models of personhood. In order to understand the emerging meaning of these signs, we must study the projects of social identification in which they participate. It takes detailed ethnographic work to examine how signs of identity are embedded within such projects, as the signs and related models move across social space and time. In this chapter and elsewhere (Wortham 2006) we argue that local context can be crucial to understanding how signs of identity come to have meaning. Widely circulating signs and models are often inflected in distinctive ways in local contexts, such that an

understanding of institutions and broad cultural regularities does not suffice. We must explore how widely circulating signs, models and practices take on sometimes-distinctive forms in local contexts like a school or a town, and how both widely circulating and local models appear in particular events of identification and mutually presupposing trajectories of events.

Homies function as signs of identity. A student who displays an image of a Homie on his school binder invites others to construe the image as indicating something about his or her identity. And because Homies are identifiably Latino they can become signs of identity for Latino youth as a group, even though most do not have any personal association with the Homies. A peer or a teacher can construe Homies as having "gangster" characteristics, for example, then infer that local Latino youth also possess these characteristics. One teacher at Marshall High School associated the changes he observed in certain students with what he called a "Chicano identity" embodied in Homies and Mijos, as recorded in the following fieldnote.

> Some of the kids, he says, are developing a more Chicano identity. I ask what he means by this. Like Jorge, he says.... I ask, what about him seems "Chicano?" What does "Chicano" mean? Mr. Santos goes to his computer and goes to a website for a line of bobble-head doll characters called Mijos.com. He shows me one that looks kind of like Jorge. "You know, the long t-shirt and baggy jeans," he says.

This teacher used the typical dress of Homies' younger siblings as a sign to identify a Mexican immigrant student, assuming that the urban-looking long shirt and baggy jeans would communicate to the researcher what he meant by a "Chicano identity"—despite the fact that the student being identified may never have heard of Homies or Mijos. In order to understand more fully what the teacher meant, we need to know more about the projects of social identification that Anglos and Mexicans, teachers and students have been pursuing in Marshall.

The New Latino Diaspora

Longstanding patterns of Mexican presence in the U.S. have changed dramatically in the past fifteen years. Large numbers of Mexican immigrants have settled in the Midwest, the South and the Northeast—often in rural and suburban areas where Mexican-origin people have not lived before. Marshall, for example, a suburb of about 30,000 in the Mid Atlantic, has gone from about 100 Mexican-origin residents in 1990 to 1,500 in 2000 to about 8,000 in 2010. Murillo (2002) and Villenas (2002) call these areas the "New Latino Diaspora." In these towns, in places as geographically diverse as Iowa, Georgia and Pennsylvania, negative stereotypes about immigrant groups are normally less entrenched than they are in areas of longstanding Latino settlement (Millard, et al. 2004; Wortham, et al. 2002). These new destinations lack "the virulence of anti-immigrant sentiments and historical baggage of intense interethnic and interracial conflicts found in older destinations" (Gouveia, et al. 2005:45). Immigrants in the New Latino Diaspora face both more ignorance and more opportunity. Host communities know less about Mexican cultures but also have fewer entrenched prejudices against Mexican newcomers. These communities are very early in the historical process of imagining immigrants' identities and trajectories, and thus immigrants sometimes have more flexibility in defining themselves.

New Latino Diaspora towns construe newcomers in negative, positive and hybrid ways. Some emphasize immigrants' foreignness and cast them as racial others (Gouveia, et al. 2005; Millard, et al. 2004; Murillo 2002; Rich and Miranda 2005). Many residents fear immigrants, but they also hope that immigrants may bring improvements (Grey and Woodrick 2005). New Latino Diaspora towns thus offer flexibility for individuals and communities as they formulate sometimes-unexpected responses to Mexican immigration (Gouveia, et al. 2005; Hamann 2003; Wortham, Murillo & Hamann, 2002; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). We need to know

more about emergent identities attributed to and adopted by Mexicans in such places, because of the importance of this new group of immigrants to the future of the country. Study of such places can also illustrate the flexibility with which media images are taken up in sites of rapid change.

Once a mostly white suburban town, Marshall has become more ethnically and racially diverse over the past half century. A small African American community has lived in Marshall for over a century, but many more migrated from nearby cities in the 1960s and 1970s. Immigrants also form an important part of Marshall's history. An Irish immigration during the 1800's preceded an Italian immigration that lasted through the 1950's. Smaller groups of Puerto Rican, South Asian, and Caribbean newcomers have settled as well. But the distribution of racial groups has undergone radical changes since 1990. Many white residents have left for adjacent suburbs, while the Mexican community has grown dramatically. The 2007 American Community Survey estimates the population as now about 40% white, 40% African American, and 20% Latino. Marshall is also significantly poorer than surrounding suburbs. About 17% of residents live below the poverty level, and it faces high rates of crime and low educational achievement. African Americans and Latinos live in the poorest neighborhoods in town and have less education than other groups. Marshall also has a longstanding Italian community. With some exceptions, Italian Americans are more sympathetic to Mexican immigrants than other residents because they remember their own immigrant roots, because most belong to the Catholic church, and because they perceive Mexicans to have a similar language and similar emphasis on family.

We present data collected at the local high school, although we also draw on our ongoing six-year ethnographic study of the broader community. A research team of three faculty, eight

doctoral and two undergraduate students has spent hundreds of hours in participant observation and interviews with local residents in schools, social service agencies, churches, coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, government agencies and on the streets. We have conducted dozens of recorded interviews with community members, educators and students, and oral history interviews with residents from different ethnic groups. We have also videotaped classes and collected documents including school worksheets, newspaper articles, essays written by students, copies of the ESL newsletter and minutes of city council meetings. In return for the welcome that we have received, we have volunteered in the community, translated at parent conferences and college nights, tutored at the local Latino advocacy organization and assisted teachers during classes. For this paper we focus on identifications of Homies from national and regional mass media, construals of Homies and Mexican Americans in conversations, classes, and interviews in Marshall, and analysis of one videotaped discussion with students about the figurines.

Construals of Homies in the national media

David Gonzales began drawing Homies several decades ago. Mass media—makers of plastic figurines, book publishers, clothing manufacturers and creators of internet content—began replicating and circulating these images around 1998. Once these media-circulated images became popular, more national mass media like newspapers and web-based commentators began to run stories about them. These mass media commentaries used various models of personhood to construe the Homies. A small set of models recur in the representations of Homies that are available in these various media. Articles in national and regional newspapers often focus on what some call the "debate" surrounding the Homies: do they represent and glorify gangsters, perpetuate stereotypes of Latinos, or represent authentic images of regular people from barrio life?

Some sources quoted in these articles, most notably members of the Los Angeles Police Department, construe the Homies as gang members. A story in the *New York Times* quotes one leader in the Mexican-American art community, in contrast, as saying that the Homies' tattoos, baggy pants and knit caps signal "little hoodlums" and circulate "painful stereotypes" (Napolitano 2003). A leader in the Latino business community, quoted by an article in the *Washington Post*, describes those stereotypes as "the few images that mainstream America knows about the U.S. Latino community…from TV: gangs, maids, second-class citizens" (Gowen 2002). Not all who who construe the Homies as gang-related see them as negative, however. Some see Homies as a means of empowerment because they encourage youth to embrace and sometimes subvert racial and ethnic stereotypes, while others predict that their archetypal nature could be inspiring for Latino children who do not see themselves reflected in mainstream toys (Gowen 2002; Napolitano 2003). A more recent article attributes Gonzales' financial, artistic and popular success, in part, to the L.A. police and prosecutors' well-publicized construal of the Homies as gang members: after the officials' protests, "naturally, they then sold better than ever" (Becerra 2007a). Since then Gonzales has created additional characters intended to be quite different from gangsters: Paletero (the ice-cream man), El Padrecito (the priest) and Officer Placa (a policeman) among them. Even so, stories about Homies published nearly a decade after the outcry by the L.A. police describe the controversy and continue to circulate these officials' assertions that the figurines primarily represent gangsters (Becerra 2007a; Becerra 2007b; Piasecki 2008).

A number of national and regional media stories interpret the Homies as art that reflects "authentic barrio life," images of a range of everyday people in Latino communities. This is David Gonzales' position: "Most of them are based on people I met. A lot of them are my

friends" (Larrubia, 1999). He even likens himself to Norman Rockwell, "He painted his world. The people he saw were farmers, little country kids at the pop shop. I'm painting the world I saw, this part of Americana....No one can deny these characters exist in Latino communities" (Piasecki 2008). One Mexican American community leader describes the Homies as "art imitating life" (Larrubia, 1999), and journalists cite Latino youth describing Homies as authentic images of what people are like in their neighborhoods (Napolitano 2003; Parvaz 2003) and academics identifying Homies as "Everyman and Everywoman" in Latino communities (Napolitano, 2003). Some construe the Homies as authentic representations of a negative reality—e.g., "a legitimate portrayal of disaffected Mexican American youth who feel neglected and rejected by the dominant culture" (Larrubia, 1999)—while others evaluate that reality as positive, tying Homies to affirming accounts of "pachuco" and barrio culture of past decades (Marez 2006).

Local models of personhood for Mexicans in Marshall

These widely circulating media construals of Homies are one resource Marshall residents use to make sense of the Homies themselves, and of Latino youth whom the Homies are sometimes taken to represent. But as signs and models of Homie-like identities move into Marshall they are recontextualized in local discourses and local conflicts.

Over the past 15 years, residents have made sense of Mexican immigrants in various ways. Some associate Mexicans with increasing crime and violence, like this taxi driver:

> He tells me about gangs in Marshall. He says people don't think these things go on, but he knows because he's a taxi driver. There are the Crips and the Bloods from L.A., the Pagans, even Hell's Angels. A few years ago they assassinated the head of Hell's Angels. There was some big show down in Marshall. He says, "People say it's the blacks but this town is becoming all Mexican." There are about 20 Mexican stores. Town is full of Mexicans. I ask if they contribute to the crime he says, "Ye::s" kind of slowly. Mexicans contribute to crime. They don't have as many shootings but they beat their wives.

Other residents do not see the Mexicans as criminals but as victims, though some warn that Mexicans are not likely to put up with this for much longer. A local police lieutenant told us that many recent Mexican immigrants were victims of violent crime and that they were going to form gangs for protection. "I feel like it's coming…Marshall is like a little urban area…we're in the infantile stages [and I] think it will move quickly to crime, gang-oriented crime, the barrio gang crap." Local social service providers, business owners, clergy, and even the high school principal allege that gangs are on the horizon in Marshall although, when pressed, few claim that real gangs actually exist now. When residents express these fears they circulate a model of Mexicans as gang members, a model that also predisposes people in Marshall to understanding the Homies as gangsters—despite many aspects of the Homies' dress, action, and stories that do not fit with a gangster identity.

A gangster-related model of personhood also circulates among Mexican immigrant students themselves. "Cholos" or "pandilleros" are Mexican or Chicano gangsters. They are allegedly dangerous and violent, and they defend themselves against aggression and perceived slights. A number of signs can indicate that a person is a cholo or a gangster, most notably dress. Cholos dress in *pachuco* style or with baggy pants and oversized t-shirts. They have tattoos, often on their necks.

> First of all Samuel tells me about the *cholos*. These are Mexican gangsters. …I ask him what you need to do to be a cholo. He says, get dressed with big shirts, a headband, baggy pants, and tattoos. In the summer there are a lot of cholos but they go back to Mexico during colder months. Samuel says that he's been in many fights with…cholos. One group cut him with a knife. There was a big group of them, who came from a car and probably would've hurt him worse if the cops hadn't come.
>
> Samuel tells me that Valeria is married to a cholo—since he remembers I was interested in knowing about them—and he is part of the gang "Trece" [meaning '13']. Samuel shows me the hand signal which looks something like a 13. They chose the name 13 because M (as in Mexican) is the 13th letter of the alphabet. All of them, including her *marido* (husband), have tattoos. Usually the tattoos are on their necks. According to

> Samuel and Valeria, anyone with a visible tattoo is lately being taken to jail by the police and deported. I ask her if it's true that her husband is part of this gang and she agrees. She says without much expression that indeed he is a cholo. She says the police have threatened to take away her baby on account of her being "*complice*" (an accomplice) to this gang. This is a pretty dangerous gang and in California they have killed many people.

Cholos exhibit these signs of identity, and they are people to be feared. Some Mexicans in Marshall do dress this way, though our experience with them and with police lead us to believe that very few of these youth are full-fledged gangsters. Nonetheless, fear of Mexican gang violence is common in Marshall, especially among Anglos but also among some Mexicans.

Alternative construals of Mexican identity exist in Marshall. One Latino teacher identified some of his students as "developing a more Chicano identity," and Mexican students discussed the Chicano identity on other occasions. In some cases students equate "Chicano" with Mexican, but in many cases students describe Chicanos as Californians of Mexican descent. Chicanos are different from more recent Mexican immigrants because they are most often born in the American Southwest and sometimes trace their ancestors to Mexicans who have been in this country for centuries. As understood by the students, Chicanos are citizens of the U.S., as opposed to undocumented immigrants. They speak English fluently, and they often do not speak Spanish fluently. Circulating in discourse mostly among the Mexican students, the Chicano model is evaluated neither positively nor negatively, and often serves as a means of establishing Mexican students' identities by reference to who they are not.

Both whites and Mexicans liken Mexican immigrants to the Italians and other immigrant groups who are seen as assets to the community. In this respect Mexican immigrant residents are seen as model minorities: hard working, uncomplaining people whose work and faith are rejuvenating the town as they pursue the American Dream (Wortham, Mortimer and Allard 2009). As one Italian resident described them: "you put them to work and they work. They want to better themselves….It's just like the Italian people….the Italian people won't stoop that low to

get welfare, and the Mexican people are all like that too. They like to work; they like making money." Other residents described Mexican immigrants as "family-oriented," respectful, "hard working, decent people [who] bring life back to town." They "don't want crime" and they "want the best for their children." Mexican-owned businesses and their customers are often credited with revitalizing parts of downtown: they are "doing a lot as far as helping bring back a real vibrant part of the town [that had been decrepit since] its heyday in the 50s and 60s." One priest said his longtime parishioners "see [the Mexicans] as very pious Catholics…as hard-working people; they're thrilled about the large numbers, they've even said it reminds them of years gone by when their Mass would be that crowded, so it's nice to see that vitality in the community." Almost all Mexican residents we have spoken with describe themselves and their compatriots as striving to improve their lives through hard work: "*venimos aquí para trabajar y para tener un mejor futuro* (we came to work and to have a better future)". When residents express these sentiments they circulate a model of Mexicans as good neighbors and parents, business owners, church-goers, people who succeed through quiet diligence and hard work. Given the prevalence of this model in Marshall, and given the fact that Gonzales has tried to index similar models in many of the Homies, we might expect residents of Marshall to construe some Homies as model minorities. This almost never happens, however.

Construals of Homies and Mexican immigrant youth identity in Marshall

Many Marshall educators imagine immigrant students in two separate and opposing types: the traditional Mexican who is more likely to be a good student, and the Mexican who, due to lack of cultural and family supports, has adopted the negative traits of what they call "hip hop culture," including styles of dress and ways of acting that the teachers see as incompatible with school success. Those who know about Homies interpret the figurines' dress as indexing

hip hop culture. Educators' fears about gangs emerge in a local context that is in some ways distinctive, with Mexicans more often construed as model minorities or as victims of crime than as perpetrators. The default assumption in Marshall is most often that a Mexican immigrant is hard working, not a gangster. But the intersection of models circulated by media and school can change this default construal, when Homies images are brought into school and imitated by Mexican youth. Teachers are deeply concerned about misbehavior and resistant attitudes that lead to classroom management problems and students dropping out. Associated models of "resistant" youth—especially minority male youth—predispose teachers to construe Homies as gangster-like. As Homies circulate into school and become available as potential signs of Latino identity, mass mediated and school-mediated models of personhood together reinforce a "gangster" construal of these signs, despite the sartorial and socioeconomic diversity represented by actual Homies figurines.

Images of Homies, with their styles of dress, poses, hairstyles, accessories and ways of talking, have become shortcuts for identifying Mexicans at Marshall High School. Some students identify people they know who dress like Homies as gangsters:

KM:	*Y conocen ustedes conocen (.) personas que que se vistan como ellos [los Homies] o que–*
Marcos:	*Sí*
KM:	*Que son como ellos en personalidad*
Javier:	*Los de las pandillas*
EA:	*Ah, ¿sí?*
Marcos:	*Sí*
Javier:	*Sí*
EA:	*¿Todo ellos? ¿Todos ellos son de pandillas?*
Students:	*Sí*
Javier:	*él ( ) dice que no pero ( ) él*
KM:	*¿quién, Vanessa?*
Vanessa:	*de ella*
	[laughter]
Javier:	*Lui:s*
KM:	*Ah Luis*

Javier: *Él Él*
Luis: *sta bes[x] Él [points to J, laughing]*
Javier: *ella también*
Girls: *[laughter]*
KM: *pero pero hay personas que son- que no son de pandillas ¿verdad?*
Students: *uh huh*
Javier: *Él Él se viste así*
Luis: *yo no me visto así*
Javier: *¿ah?*
KM: *¿no?*
Marcos: *(ya got it right there) [points to Luis' pants]*
Carla: *( )*
Javier: *El está vestido de pachuco [points to Luis] (bueno me gusta)*
Luis: *Ah hah bueno me visto muy de pachuco*

KM: And do you know (.) people that that dress like them [the Homies] or that-
Marcos: Yes
KM: That are like them in personality
Javier: Those [people] in gangs
EA: Ah, yes?
Marcos: Yes
Javier: Yes
EA: All of them? Are all of them in gangs?
Students: Yes
Javier: he ( ) says not but ( ) he
KM: who, Vanessa?
Vanessa: hers
[laughter]
KM: but but there are people who are- who are not from gangs right?
Students: uh huh
Javier: he he dresses like that
Luis: I don't dress like that
Javier: ah?
KM: no?
Marcos: (ya got it right there) [points to Luis' pants]
Carla: ( )
Javier: he is dressed like a pachuco [points to Luis] (well I like it)
Luis: Ah hah fine I dress just like a pachuco

The students here use the gangster model to make sense of Homies and of people who dress like them, even though there are various potentially relevant models of personhood. While identifying others as gangster-like, they position themselves by contrast. In this excerpt the

students identify all people who dress like Homies as gangsters, and then point out Luis as an example of someone who dresses like that but is not a gangster. At first Luis distances himself from this identification, but then accepts it when it is construed as "pachuco."

Other students identified themselves explicitly with the image of the Mexican gangster. Some only dressed the part, while others used gang-like hand signs, wore gang colors, used graffiti-style writing and narrated gang-like histories. A few students regularly dressed in the oversized t-shirts and baggy pants, gold chains, black gloves and stocking caps that teachers and students called "urban," "hip hop" and gang-like. On one occasion three students proudly shared their knowledge of key signs of gang identity with us.

> I notice that they are doodling in graffiti lettering on the boards. They write "South 13." I ask about it. They say that "*el dieciocho*" is a pandilla/gang from El Salvador. They make signs with their hands, showing me which signs go with 18 and which with 13. The gang is in L.A. and Mexicans can be in it even though it's from El Salvador. Southside 13 on the other hand is Mexican, but all Latinos can be in it. They wear red. For example, they say, if you go to [a nearby town with a large Mexican migrant community], all you see is red, red shirts. They're all 13 there. The colors for 18 are black, navy blue, and white. Juan Carlos and Bruno are wearing these colors (Juan Carlos in blue and white stripes, Bruno in a black t-shirt), while Victor is wearing red. Victor says he has a 13 tattoo and he offers to show me, patting his arm, but doesn't…They joke that they will teach me how to do the gang signs. I say, but that's bad if I do the sign and I'm not in it, right? Yes, they say, they'll cut your head off. But you can do it, I ask Jesus, and he doesn't answer. I add, if you're not in it? He responds, and if you're in it?

These students are more comfortable identifying with Homies and Homie-like dress and behavior, even when it is construed as gang-like.

Such a positive orientation toward the Homies makes sense in some ways. Like the Mexican students in Marshall, the Homies are Latinos, and they confront many of the same problems—as members of a minority group and residents of a low-income neighborhood. Perhaps some youth adopt gang-like behavior as a form of resistance to the unwelcoming attitude many Americans show towards immigrants. Or perhaps it is simply teenage rebellion, or an

attempt to fit into popular culture. Some students claim that alignment with the gangster model helps Mexicans protect themselves from victimization, as illustrated in the following conversation with several young Mexican men.

S1: *No no no lo que pasa es que* okay *no a los chabos no porque a los (yambos/ llambos) saben defenderse y todo, me entiende, pero casi más siempre lo agarran los*
S2*:* *Los (tíos)*
S1: *Con lo, aha, (agreden casi a la mayoría) pero a los señores más grandes cuando recién recibe su cheque y todo eso como* an example*, este- uno de mis amigos que vive en mi casa la otra vez casi le cortan la oreja, ¿por qué? Porque le quería- lo querían asaltar y=*
S3: =That's not good, you know?
S1: *y luego* Okay*, ya sabemos que nosotros cuando nos ven por la calle, si va uno o dos nos van a agarrar, ¿me entiendes?* so *nosotros tenemos que andar trayendo algo como* knives, *gun o* something like that *para defendernos*, you know? It's not- it's not good *porque ellos luego* take guns and [everything so I mean
S3: [Oh man

S1: No no no what happens- not to the young guys no because the young guys know how to defend themselves and all, you understand, but almost more often they grab the
S2: The (older guys)
S1: With the, un huh, (they assault almost the majority) but the older guys when they've just received their check and all that for *an example* this- one of my friends who lives in my house the other day they almost cut off his ear. Why? Because they wanted to assault him and=
S3: =*That's not good, you know?*
S1: and then Okay, we already know that we when they see us on the street, if it's one or two of us they are going to grab us, you understand me? *So* we have to walk around carrying something like *knives, gun o something like that* to defend ourselves, you know? *It's not- it's not good* because then they *take guns and everything so I mean*
S3: *Oh man*

These students found that, in order to feel safe on the streets, it was necessary to travel in groups and to carry weapons for protection, as some gangsters do. It is possible that the students who dressed like Homies and adopted gangster-like identities did so in order to defend themselves by presenting a tough exterior.

While some students clearly adopted gang styles of dress and related signs of identity, most of the Mexican students in Marshall did not—dressing in unremarkable clothing and not acting like gangsters at all. Some openly distanced themselves from this type of person. Samuel, whose words describe cholos above, asserted that there were no real cholos at the school, and he described the violence he had suffered at the hands of real cholos elsewhere. Another student who did dress in an urban style with baggy pants positioned himself in opposition to the cholos, describing how he had been involved in many fights with them.

Many of these students who did not outwardly display affinities with the gangster image were nonetheless interested in the Homies and Mijos. Some admitted that, although they liked this style of dress for men living in the United States (reporting that in Mexico only actual gang members dress like this), the Homies might lead others to mistakenly think that all Mexicans were gangsters: "*si todos son así como de pandillas van a pensar que todos los que vienen [de Mexico] (son así)"* (if all of them [the Homies] are like that from gangs, [people] are going to think that all the people who come [from Mexico] are like that)."

While Homies were most often construed as gangsters, they were also often seen as everyday Latinos like the students themselves. One student who read Mijos books described the characters as *"Latinos, como nosotros*" (Latinos, like us). Other students also saw the Homies as images of Mexican or Chicano people like themselves:

KM: *¿Qué piensan de esos- de ellos? ¿Por qué les gustan?*
Marcos: *que es una manera de, como se dice…ah ha de eso ( ) o que es una manera de que como se visten así como los Chica:nos otra manera de como se se (visten) los Mexicanos (más o menos)*
KM: *otra manera de que*
Marcos: *expresarse*
Javier: *de carácter*
Marcos: *de carácter ah ha*

KM: What do you think of those- of them. Why do you like them

Marcos: that it's a way of how do you say… uh huh of that ( ) or that it's a way of how they dress like that like the Chica:nos another way of how (they dress) the Mexicans (more or less)
KM: another way of what
Marcos: of expressing oneself
Javier: of character
Marcos: of character uh huh

One teacher claimed that some students' style of dress and behavior resembled the Homies, and students identified particular peers as Homie-like in their dress—usually because they wore the oversized shirt and baggy pants. One student said Homies had been very popular where she had lived in California, and "people would wear t-shirts with a character he or she liked or resembled. Sometimes a character's name would become a person's nickname because they acted or resembled the character in some way." While observing a group discussion about the Homies, a teacher interjected that the characters were representative of the Mexican experience. Students at first dismissed his comment, but then agreed.

Mr. Santos: *yo pienso que son* archetypes *de la vida cotidiana um de la clase obrera Mexicana en los Estados Unidos y algunos van a ser (.)* ((Marcos and girls laughing and shaking their heads)) *malos otros van a ser buenos pero solamente son*
Javier: *sí*
Mr. Santos: archetypes *sí*
Javier: *porque ella ella se ve mala pero es buena*
((girls laugh))
Javier: *es cierto, tiene razon (nuestro maestro)*
KM: *y Uds. ¿están eh de acuerdo con con lo que esta diciendo el Señor Santos?*
((2 sec. silence, Beatríz nods slightly, then students laugh))
Mr. Santos: *porque cada persona refleja algo de su experiencia*
Beatríz: *ah sí* ((nods, other students nod))
Mr. Santos: *aquí en los Estados Unidos*
Marcos: *sí*

Mr. Santos: I think that they are archetypes of the daily life um of the Mexican working class in the United States and some of them are going to be (.) ((Marcos and girls laughing and shaking their heads)) bad and others are going to be good but they are just
Javier: yes
Mr. Santos: archetypes yes

Javier: because she she looks bad but she is good
((girls laugh))
Javier: it's true, he's right (our teacher)
KM: and do you agree with with what Mr. Santos is saying?
((2 sec. silence, Beatríz nods slightly, then students laugh))
Mr. Santos: because every person reflects something of their experience
Beatríz: ah yes ((nods, other students nod))
Mr. Santos: here in the United States
Marcos: yes

Some students aligned with the Homies in their Mexicanness, construing them as authentic representations of people like them. Mr. Santos also understood them as everyday Latinos. Some identified them as Chicanos. Other students and teachers construed the Homies primarily as gangsters. Interestingly, despite the many signs of hard work, religiousness, educatedness and community spirit among Homies characters, no one identified the Homies as model minorities. The ways Homies dress seem to be the primary sign of their identity, and despite the variation in the figurines' actual dress most teachers and students focused on the white-t-shirt-baggy-pants stereotype as the primary sign of Homie identity. Whether they construe Homies as gangsters or not, however, as young Mexicans take stances in relation to the Homies characters they create senses of themselves as different types of individuals, and more often than not those selves are not like gangsters at all.

These data illustrate two important sorts of flexibility in Marshall, reflected in young Mexicans' construals of Homies and Homie-like behaviors. First, youth vary. Some eagerly adopt Homie-like behavior even when (and sometimes deliberately when) these are construed by educators as gangster-like. Others do not identify with or behave like the gangsters they take Homies to be and distance themselves from gangsters in general. Second, youth adopt competing models to construe the Homies. Some use the gangster model, while others see them as more authentic expressions of Mexican life in the US. Mexican youth everywhere have

options like this, of course. But in Marshall, far from the reach of the L.A. Police Department and the more monolithic accounts of Mexican identity that people like them can enforce, youth have more flexibility. In Marshall they can more easily experiment, at least among themselves and with sympathetic adults, trying out different models of personhood and affiliating with and against the Homies as they do so.

Conclusions

As Homies images move into Marshall, they index models of personhood that have been used to identify the Homies and people who are assumed to be like them—gangsters, victims of racist stereotypes and diverse barrio residents. Marshall residents are already familiar with some of these models used to construe Homies. Some residents are worried about Mexican youth joining gangs, for instance. But Marshall is not Los Angeles. The Marshall police have taken lessons in basic Spanish, so that they can communicate with and protect Mexican immigrants—instead of asking for training that allows them to act as immigration agents and arrest undocumented immigrants, as other police forces have done. Police do not believe that gangs are a problem among Mexican youth in Marshall, although they pledge to remain vigilant in case gangs start to penetrate the town. So, although Homies are sometimes construed as gang-like in Marshall, they are not as often taken as signs of local Mexicans' gangster-like tendencies. Another common national model of personhood also circulates in Marshall, among hosts and Mexican immigrants worried about racist stereotyping, in which Anglos dismiss Mexicans as dangerous, dirty, uneducated and the like. But this model does not dominate public discourse about Mexican immigrants in Marshall, and so Homies are not often seen as racist symbols there.

The mass mediated images of Homies are recontextualized in local context, in a town that is changing rapidly with the recent spike in immigration.

Marshall is more complex than we might expect, given all the one-dimensional accounts of immigration in America. Some residents recycle national media stereotypes of Mexicans as illegal, as breaking the law, as taking jobs and draining resources. Some use familiar stereotypes of hardworking immigrants sacrificing for their families and moving toward assimilation in the next generation. But many have more complex views, seeing Mexican immigrants as both hardworking and gullible, as industrious but not entrepreneurial, or as both similar to and different from African Americans. In this more fluid context, people have flexibility to construe both Homies and Mexicans in multiple ways. Because many teachers are concerned about misbehavior and resistant adolescents, models of resistant and disruptive youth circulate densely in the high school. There, Homies are often taken as signs that some Mexican students are becoming like resistant urban youth. The models anchored by school as an institution shape the construal of Homies in this case. But in other contexts—sometimes even in school, when with supportive teachers—Mexican youth feel free to offer divergent construals of Homies and themselves. Some identify with the figures, playing at gangsterhood or taking more complex views of the various types of Mexican Americans modeled by Gonzales. If we want to understand how mass mediated signs of identity figure into the lives of actual people, we must trace them into local and personal struggles like this and appreciate the often-complex models used to construe them.

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