The Mediated Body as the Site for Contested Agencies: MS-13 as a Case Study

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I. Introduction

Using photojournalistic representations of the Mara Salvatrucha ("MS-13" or "MS") street gang as a case study, this paper seeks to reveal rhetorics of the visual, their functions as well as their implications. First, I explore what we are seeing or not seeing in these images and their surrounding discourses. I then make an argument for how participants in visual culture are (consequently) invited to read them. Lastly, I examine how such framing affects those depicted as well as those doing the reading. Put succinctly, this paper aims to investigate how members of MS-13 are visually and discursively constructed in and through contemporary photojournalistic accounts. I focus on the relationship between the viewer and the viewed as influenced by its mediation for the purpose of developing a rhetorical critique. To that end, this analysis reveals dominant ideologies regarding crime and deviance by tracing their visual and textual 'manifestations'. The potential for photography and photojournalism to subordinate and objectify is certainly realized in these accounts. However, by conceptualizing the

photograph as a site of power relations—a place where power is contested amongst the various actors who interact here rather than strictly imposed upon any one of them—I argue that possibilities for agency exist at this location, as well. I contend that these photojournalistic accounts are more than a place where existing power structures expose and enforce themselves but are, instead, a location where agencies are simultaneously generated, resisted, asserted, and denied by those implicated in the representations, including photographic subjects, those who portray them (media), and those who read them (viewers).

Power is an exceedingly complex phenomenon; even the best efforts to identify and/or describe it are inevitably wanting. With that said, one cannot meaningfully discuss how power is contested without explaining (or at least attempting to explain) what "power" is. Chris Weedon, for instance, draws on Foucault to describe power as "a relation…a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents."[i] Power is a relation or a dynamic. As Weedon explains it, power is characterized by the on-going struggle for it, a veritable control 'give-and-take' amongst subjects (for instance, MS-13 gang members) and discourses (for instance, photographs and photojournalistic accounts that represent them). Power is defined by the exertion of agencies it presupposes; agency, in this case, is the effort put forth by subjects

(however (un)consciously) to affect the dynamic of control. Another crucial point Weedon makes is that subjects are constructed by and created through discourses, who act as their agents; Weedon goes on to say that "[p]ower is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects."[ii] Words and images make subjects what they are or appear to be, as it were. This is partially true; however, rather than assuming that these often dangerously hegemonic photographs of MS-13 members operate on their own accord, I contend that we as photographic subjects and those who read them (viewers) hold the power to invest such discourses with meanings of our own. My hope is that this argument develops into a productive rhetorical device for tipping the balance of power in ways that are less conducive to conditions of perceived difference and less socially divisive.

MS-13 is a Hispanic street gang whose links to violent crime and notoriety for its often extensively tattooed members has generated significant discourse among United States media over the last five years. A four-page spread in Newsweek magazine in 2005, for instance, declared MS "The Most Dangerous Gang in America." A year later, National Geographic upped the ante by dubbing them the "World's Most Dangerous Gang," detailing the faction in an hour-long documentary. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Operation Community Shield launched in 2005 as a law

enforcement effort aimed at international street gangs including MS-13.[iii] In 2004, the FBI created the MS-13 National Gang Taskforce, the first such gang task force dedicated to a single group.[iv] The media and government—with distinct vigor—have taken explicit steps to frame MS-13 as a legitimate threat to the American public.[v] Photojournalism is but one genre of media with the potential to engender such social constructions, however (un)wittingly. I am interested in photojournalistic images and texts that represent MS-13 in particular because there is so much at stake for these photographic subjects as well as their viewers: portrayed members of MS-13 easily become a synecdoche for the criminal and racial Other, while the nature of photography and photojournalism can deprive viewers of their interpretive agency by imposing 'truths' and assumed knowledge. There is much to be lost on both ends of mediated accounts. But there is also much to be gained. I intend to argue that despite the many opportunities for agency that may be diminished through photography and photojournalism there are concurrently potential agencies to be acquired—new locations for autonomous action on behalf of photographic subjects and their viewers.

This paper is organized along the above themes. I first substantiate my move to consider a photograph as a site where power is negotiated amongst the actors whose often divergent interests meet here; through the work of Foucault, Susan Sontag, and others I articulate why and how there is power

in the act of looking (and looking back), both generally as well as through the lens of photography. Next I discuss the nature of photography and photojournalism to hash out what affect the attributes of these particular mediums might have upon the reading of MS-13 images. Here I argue that the potential for agency at the site of a photograph is rooted in an image's inherent ambiguity. Simultaneously, however, a photograph's assumed ability to communicate knowledge, as well as structural issues associated with the photojournalistic process (cropping, captioning, and so forth), may be read in a manner that effectively diminishes these potential agencies. Lastly, I search for potential locales of domination and agency for subjects and viewers via specific photojournalistic accounts; I explore if and how the hegemonic narrative can be subverted by one or both parties. I borrow from ethnographer Mindy Fenske's work on performance of the body as a way to envision the potential of the agency for photographic subjects as well as their viewers. While photojournalistic images and discourses which represent a violent Hispanic street gang may seem destined to demonize, my hope is that by encouraging participants in visual culture to understand these mediated accounts as a site of power relations, we can produce a close reading which empowers those on both sides of the exchange.

II. Conceptualizing the photograph as a site of power relations

This section is intended to substantiate that a photograph is indeed a place where power and agency are struggled for amongst the actors whose gazes meet there. To do so, I draw on a range of cultural theorists, the first of whom explicates the power of looking as it relates to social control generally, then theorists who recognize the power of the gaze in the context of photography particularly. I next briefly discuss two contemporary cultural theorists whose work illustrates the power of photography and photojournalism to reflect as well as shape public discourses and ideologies as further evidence that we participants in visual culture should imagine these images as contested terrain. These various gazes may, after all, have contradictory interests[vi]— in some instances, even palpable tension.

Though he does not address the medium of photography directly, Michel Foucault's work detailing the rise of modern regimes of surveillance as a means of social control has been essential in explicating the intrinsic power of the gaze. Consider his analysis of panopticism. Bentham's 17th-century architectural design (known as the "Panopticon") utilized in institutions that demand surveillance capabilities (settings such as sanitariums, hospitals, prisons, schools) calls for a central control tower to serve as the observation point for the entire institution.[vii] All the individual rooms of the institution and the bodies contained within them are visible from this perspective so that the viewed may be appropriately supervised. If we think of photography

in these terms, as a situation where viewers are positioned to impose a surveillant gaze upon the photographic subject, it follows that photography can advance "a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify… It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them."[viii] Looking, and by extension the photograph, creates the possibility to evaluate and order its subjects. Visibility is in essence control. In the case of a photograph, however, where the subject of a gaze and its viewer are separated by time and space, the potential to contest the gaze is narrowed.

The surveillant gaze is capable of more than mere classification; it can also discipline. Since from the perspective of the Panopticon's individual rooms only the shadow of the central tower is visible, those who fall under the view of the omnipotent institution know that they may be watched at any given moment though can never confirm exactly when this is the case. The threat of being watched generates a submission to an omnipresent yet unverifiable gaze—subjects know someone may be watching and behave accordingly. The surveillant gaze impacts the behavior of those being watched, whether in prison or in the context of photography. What this means for members of MS-13 is that there is an implicit gaze of surveillance placed upon them on behalf of those watching; members of visual culture, law enforcement officials included, are classifying and evaluating. It also

means that MS-13 members may be compelled to respond to (or ignore) this gaze in a way that complicates, threatens, or defies it. Members of MS-13, as photographic subjects, can exert their own bid for control through the frame; their portrayal provides this opportunity for agency. Even while incarcerated or under arrest, members of MS-13 often defy the hegemonic reading of their bodies through a display of their marked flesh, hand gestures, and so forth (as we shall soon see). These acts, conceived as a threat to the majority and/or an expression of fidelity to their marginalized group, constitute a power assertion. MS-13 members' opposition to or indifference toward the gaze, regardless of whether or not mediators and viewers acknowledge it, is itself a challenge for control; here we see the manifest tension amongst various gazes that meet at the site of a photograph. Where the surveillant gaze seeks to identify and classify, those gazed upon may resist.

Following Foucault's trajectory by acknowledging the ability of "[photographs to] redefine reality as an exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance providing possibilities for control,"[ix] Susan Sontag provides several historical examples in which photographs are utilized as such. In the 1850s, shortly after the inception of photography, Paris police introduced the concept of the mug shot; collecting the photographic likenesses of social deviants (criminals) placed them under the permanent

gaze of the state to facilitate their surveillance and has become common practice amongst all modern police departments.[x] Near the same time, early criminologist Cesare Lombroso began using photographs alongside cranial, facial, and bodily measurements to classify criminals into condensed 'types' in order to simplify their identification.[xi] Also in 1850 Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz commissioned J. T. Zealy to develop photographic likenesses of the faces and bodies of African-born slaves for similarly 'scientific' purposes (see Images 1 and 2).[xii] Photographed nude from the waist up with their eyes fixed on the camera, the images were used as evidence to supplement Agassiz's existing anthropometric evidence that blacks and whites did not originate from a common ancestor, implying the validity of racial inequality and slavery.[xiii]

I provide these examples to illustrate that the potential of photography to be read in ways that aid in the judgment of those it "differentiates" and orders has always been present and undoubtedly persists today in a number of capacities (e.g. ideals of beauty, femininity).[xiv] Photography can clearly serve as a site for the subordination of peoples and aid in the perpetuation of dangerous ideologies but it can also open up the possibility of resistance for its (semi) autonomous subjects. Certainly the hegemonic reading in each of these cases was and is not the only possible interpretation of these photographs; a closer reading of this last example, the Zealy

daguerreotypes, reveals that there is indeed more to the story. Perhaps photography also holds the potential to grant agency for subjects and viewers simultaneously, in a way that is mutually empowering.

For members of MS-13 as photographic subjects, their engagement with the viewer (rather than defiance of or indifference to the viewer) can also destabilize the hegemonic reading. For example, in Reading American Photographs (1989), Alan Trachtenberg makes a compelling case that the return gaze of the slaves as depicted in the Zealy daguerreotypes—that their eyes meet those of the photographer and viewer—creates agency for both the slaves and the viewers. By giving viewers the opportunity to sense the shared humanity between the slaves and themselves, both are empowered to think past Agassiz's (or other similarly) debilitating frame(s). Because the eyes of the slaves meet ours, the indecency and moral repugnance of the situation becomes less avoidable. The power imposed upon the slaves' bodies in this particular social and historical context is so "absolute", as they were literally enslaved as well as posed without even clothing to cover their bodies, that these slaves were stripped of any claims to a "social persona."[xv] But it is exactly these overwhelming conditions of domination that set the stage for its subversion through the slaves' looking: "their gaze, [as reflected] in our eyes, frees them," to quote Trachtenberg.[xvi] The subjects of these photographs and its subsequent viewers, upon the meeting of their

eyes, may collaboratively undermine the reading its commissioner and dominant ideologies of that time had constructed. The dynamic holds, I argue, for contemporary photographic representations of MS-13 gang members, though it requires expanding upon the behaviors that may effectively confront the gaze to include tattoos, hand gestures, and the like.

The works of two contemporary cultural critics, Wendy Kozol and Shawn Michelle Smith, provide further evidence of the inter-dependency between subjects, viewers, and mediators in generating conceptions of social reality. In Life's America (1994), Kozol articulates how the photographs and surrounding discourses of Life magazine became a location for the definition and redefinition of those looking at them; viewer, publisher, and photographic subject work together, however (in)advertently. While assumedly reflecting America's Cold War social and cultural norms, the pages of Life magazine actually aided in constructing what the aspiring American family during this historical moment should look like (white, middle-class, and heterosexual) and what it should desire (consumerism, the "American Dream"). This is a consensual give-and-take relationship rather than an imposition; photojournalism may simultaneously create, perpetuate, and revise social reality for members of visual culture, but only with their help. Smith echoes these ideas by asserting that "visual culture not only reflects but also shapes."[xvii] In American Archives (1999), Smith explains

that photographic practices of the 19th-century effectively wrote specific race, class, and gender identities onto the bodies it portrayed. The role of the mediator in establishing the relationship between the photographic subject and viewer cannot be understated, for it is often only through their lens that we learn to see one another.

III. Nature of photography/photojournalism

Photography and photojournalism have specific characteristics that contribute to the ways in which we assign meaning to such accounts. Since this medium is what explicitly mediates the exchange between viewers and viewed, we must consider in what way. We sighted humans learn to interpret photographs, as with any other signifier, by means of socialization and experience. As Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts, "Whatever new object we see, we perceive to be only a new version of our familiar experience, and we set about translating it at once into our parallel facts. We have thereby our vocabulary."[xviii] This generates two important and related points: first, a signifier such as a photograph has no inherent meaning aside from that which we assign to it; second, the way we assign meaning as such is based on our own interpretive propensities (i.e. life experiences) which develop through larger social constructs (i.e. race, class, and gender biases; the photographic and photojournalistic frame). Interpretation, however, is also telic; it happens for certain reasons and to meet certain ends. We each have

a cognitive agenda, however (un)conscious it may be, that influences the way we interpret images and discourses. Theoretically, photographs allow for as many interpretations as they do viewers since we each have a unique way of interpreting the world around us. However, we social beings have been trained in the technique of readings signs and in the practice of investing them with meaning;[xix] our interpretations are far from arbitrary.

The most significant characteristic of photography, as it relates to this analysis' quest to locate agencies, is its ambiguity; because photographs are open to vast interpretation they are sites for contested readings. Depending on the context, the same photograph—at its root, a collection of amorphous symbols and signs—can potentially communicate many different things to many different people. Each viewer holds within themselves an interpretive power, the autonomy to impose meaning upon a photograph, hence a form of agency. Similarly, each photographic subject holds the potential to represent themselves in a certain way, to encourage a particular reading. The exertion of agency on behalf of one party invariably affects potential for the agencies of others, albeit in ways that are far from linear. However, there are many barriers which affect the complete exercise of either of these agencies; photographers photograph and publishers publish only a limited number and variety of people and events. They frame these subjects in certain ways, whether through convention or preference. The photograph as

a site, then, may restrict and in some cases expand both the interpretive agency of the viewer and the communicative power of the subject. The ambiguity of photography is, simultaneously, the basis of its agency-granting potential as well as its agency-depriving potential.

A second characteristic of photography that has a profound impact upon its interpretation is its assumed informational capacities. Photographs have certainly been used to tell a lot about their subjects, regardless of the medium's ability to do so. From Lombroso's method for identifying social deviants (criminals) to a justification for racial inequality, photographs are often understood to portray a certain amount of knowledge about their subjects: what they look like, how they behave, and so on. We sighted humans construct our social reality through looking. Gazing upon or collecting photographs offers the false impression that "we can hold the whole world in our heads," that if we can see something captured on film we can somehow know it.[xx] As Sontag asserts, "to photograph…means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power."[xxi] Photographs provide knowledge, and knowledge is power. The assumed information one gains of their subject allows photographers and viewers of photographs to accumulate agency in this way. But the amount of knowledge that a photograph is capable of communicating is limited. Yes, we can 'know' to a fair degree of certainty

that someone stood near the ocean or visited their family for the holidays, but only so much of the world fits in the lens of a camera and only so much of an event can be captured in one brief moment. There are infinitely more moments that a camera cannot capture. While a photograph may provide context and narrative where none existed, e.g. illustrate to some extent what the ocean or a family holiday 'looked' like, it is an inherently incomplete narrative. Photographs can perhaps communicate something to a viewer, but never everything. What type of "truth" a photograph is capable of portraying is similarly limited. Certainly an x-ray can tell the "truth" about whether or not a bone is broken, for instance, but it cannot tell much of a person's life.[xxii] There are ways in which photographs give meaning to facts, but many other ways in which photographs fall short of doing so.[xxiii] We participants in visual culture must be cognizant of photography's informational incapacities and be particularly careful in attributions of meaning. This is particularly true in the context of photojournalistic accounts of MS-13 members, whose bodies are visually and discursively framed as deviant. When photographs are used as evidence of visual difference, implications of innate difference, and in some cases deficiency, often follow. In a culture that so privileges the epistemological significance of the visual (i.e. seeing is believing), too often what we see sometimes becomes "truth", a knowledge around which one bases judgment without taking photography's (in)capabilities into careful account.

Beyond attributes of the photograph itself that contribute to the creation and erosion of agencies, there are many structural concerns associated with the photojournalistic process that are particularly relevant. Certainly, we must acknowledge that aesthetic and newsworthiness concerns play a role in the images that are shot and consequently published. The American public's fascination with violence and crime demands a media poised to satiate this appetite, for instance. The homogenization of media producers is also worth noting in thinking about what types and forms of 'knowledge' we are never asked to consider by news sources. In thinking about what we do see in these photojournalistic representations, however, how we are encouraged to read them through the power of text is crucial. The ambiguity of a photograph, the characteristic I point to as most significant in generating the potential for agency on behalf of photographic subjects and viewers, can be simultaneously debilitating. Where interpretive autonomy and communicative effort exist, words nudge alongside in an attempt to preference particular readings. According to John Berger and Jean Mohr:

> "…as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion. In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it…Together the two then become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered."[xxiv]

The ambiguous photograph is given meaning not just by the autonomous viewer or the photographic subject, but at least in part by those writing and publishing the accounts—not all of those who mediate the encounter do so silently. The text which accompanies an image, however, certainly cannot encapsulate all that the image may communicate; the potential to undermine such framing efforts begins to gain traction.

Members of visual culture must pay careful attention to the way in which these photographs are situated since photojournalistic images of MS-13 members and adjoining discourses that attempt to impose meaning are disseminated as a type of consumable knowledge. Discourses can heavily guide the reading of these bodies in potentially objectifying and destructive ways. However, aesthetic and discursive framing only go so far; viewers may be pushed toward a certain reading, but such a reading can never be mandated and oftentimes may not succeed. The potential for counter- or alternate interpretation exists for every text, MS-13 photographs included.

IV. Photojournalistic accounts of MS-13

Before we can discuss the role these photographs and adjoining discourses play in establishing or denying the agencies of their subjects and viewers, I must address what they explicitly portray or fail to portray; this is, generally speaking, what we are very literally seeing and not seeing in photojournalistic accounts of MS-13 gang members. Put simply, what we are

seeing in these accounts is Hispanic men's incarcerated and tattooed bodies.[xxv] Portrayed members of MS are typically flanked by law enforcement officials or prison walls. In instances where confinement is more ambiguous, the text does the work; captions and adjoining discourse most often ensure readers that these men are incapacitated if the image alone fails to unequivocally depict this. Sentiments like those of BBC's Claire Marshall who pegged "tattoos [as] the trademark of the Maras" are echoed in both the images and discourses that represent MS-13.[xxvi] What Marshall means to articulate is that the MS-13 street gang has become strongly associated with (its members') extensively tattooed skin. Whether or not MS-13's members are indeed more heavily tattooed than those of other street gangs, the media effectively promulgates that they are, and these markings have become one of the gang's defining characteristics. Cara Buckley of the New York Times makes the explicit connection between MS-13's visual appearance, violence, and their subsequent infamy: "MS-13's notoriety has exploded in recent years…fanned by [accounts of their extreme violence] as well as menacing photos of its members, their faces and torsos inked with tattoos."[xxvii] It is more than violence that gets MS-13 face time with the media; it is a violence that is visibly marked. MS-13 members' tattoos allow the media and their subsequent viewers who are so-inclined to literally read deviance across the body, which makes for a compelling photograph and ripe opportunity for the surveillant gaze. Because MS-13 has

this corporeal appeal, an inscribed deviance, they are prime targets for such objectification—hence prime material for a case study regarding agency and the (marginalized) body.

The photojournalistic account I mentioned earlier that Newsweek magazine ran in 2005, a four-page spread titled “The Most Dangerous Gang in America,” provides a poignant example of such problematic visual and discursive framing (see Images 3 and 4). On the left-hand page of the opening spread is an extremely tight shot of an MS-13 gang member’s chest; this is a distinctive image in the context of the magazine, for nowhere else in this periodical is an image of such proximity found.[xxviii] The viewer’s presence is uniquely invasive; this body is an object for examination. The framing of this body is also such that the subject is unable to avoid the gaze upon it. According to Trachtenberg, the semi-nude enslaved African subjects of the Zealy daguerreotypes utilized their return gaze to contest the spectator’s objectification. Trachtenberg explains that the sympathetic activist in Zealy sought to give his subjects such an opportunity for resistance. The photojournalist capturing the MS-13 gang member’s torso (or the editor who chose to frame the image as such) intentionally refuses this man such a chance, as the absence of his face precludes the opportunity to return let alone challenge the gaze upon him. The subject can make no attempt to claim his “social persona.”[xxix] Viewers prod his exposed torso at

will without fear of reprisal or guilt. The man's body silently endures the ultimate form of objectification. We must read this exclusion as further perpetuating the ideology that his racially marked body does not deserve such a possibility. This body is indeed Other.

This man is by most standards heavily tattooed. If the skin of the subject does not appear markedly Hispanic to the viewer, the tattooed writing across his chest certainly does, hence it is read as such: "Mara Salavatrucha" wraps around his collarbone in script, while Old English letter "M" and "S" perch between his breasts as the numbers "1" and "3" follow directly below. Viewers can identify this man as a non-native English speaker, hence a cultural and national outsider. The skin serves as a two-fold corporeal marker of otherness: its now-obvious color and decoration become mechanisms for the trained gaze to recognize his body as a threat. Again, problematically, the ability to see stereotyped markers of deviance comes to be equated with its existence.

As the gaze shifts to the right-hand page, one word becomes undeniably salient: "GANG" in all capital blood-red letters. Having seen the man's tattooed chest on the left, viewers now read this body as definitively criminal: any suspicions about his inner character are confirmed by the text. Above the word "GANG" is "THE MOST DANGEROUS" and below it "IN AMERICA". While the relative size and color clearly differentiate this text

(“GANG”), interestingly enough the second largest font by comparison belongs to “IN AMERICA” communicating that of this six-word phrase, the latter three are the most important. The existence of a violent criminal faction on American soil is presented as a clear threat. The inset photograph below the text shows a young Hispanic male flanked and subdued by two uniformed police officers. This particular threat has been neutralized, but the relative size of this image in comparison to the man’s chest spilling off the adjoining pages communicates this as a less relevant part of the story. Perhaps one body is detained, but the larger threat is obviously far from under control. A familiar ideology of fear spawns.

The salience of this man’s chest is inescapable as it literally bursts out of the page’s frame. When read in the context with the adjoining map and images on the following two pages, it becomes apparent why this failed attempt at bounding the image is significant. Across the top of the page, “MACHETES ON THE MEAN STREETS” is emblazoned with the following caption beneath: “…A look at who they’ve killed—and where they’re prowling now”. This caption warns of Mara Salvatrucha’s violence and impending attack. The middle of the two-page spread is filled with a map of the United States, each state colored with respect to the number of MS-13 gang members residing there. Captions across the map detail acts of violence committed in the gang’s name while accompanying numbers indicate the

death toll in each respective state. California, New York, and Virginia have the highest number of active “cliques”, followed closely by North Carolina and Tennessee. This fact generates much of the concern as street gangs have historically been associated with large urban areas, the likes of Chicago, New York, and Southern California. MS-13’s presence in less urbanized locales like Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee troubles public notions of where gang violence is acceptable and where it is not. This map implies the spread of an infectious plague of racialized violence, coming soon to prominently white middle-class city near you. Viewers can easily locate themselves or people they know near the threat, making it all the more imminent and real. The image to the left of the map again portrays an objectified, tattooed brown body. The incapacitated subject is instructed for documentary purposes to display his gang tattoo to the photographer. His marked body serves as a literal map for its own identification and classification. The violence perpetrated by this identifiable group of Others flanks the map to the top right. Read as a text, these two pages work in conjunction to reify fear of a faceless, brown-skinned, tattooed body as a threatening criminal and anti-citizen.

Certainly the predominantly white, middle-class American hegemonic reading I have described here—that most often preferenced by the photojournalistic process—does not begin to scratch the surface of the vast

array of interpretations these photographs and tattoos may evoke. Among people for whom tattooing or gang membership is the norm in their community, in some instances something to be aspired to, such images are likely to elicit their identification with the photographic subject as these attributes may be seen as desirable. Similarly, viewers may sense shared (or not necessarily shared) feelings of alienation, marginalization, or oppression; they may sympathize with the photographic subject. Such reactions occur in a far from homogenous and relatively unpredictable manner. In such cases, discursive and rhetorical framing is effectively and undermined outright; clearly readings such as these give agency to both the photographic subject and viewer in that the hegemonic framework fails, at least in part.

Provided the salient visual themes detailed above with respect the hegemonic reading—what we are seeing—I now turn to what these depictions omit. Certainly it is difficult to know what we are not visually and discursively exposed to in these accounts. However, there are certain historical circumstances from which this gang emerged which, despite discursive inattention, provide much-needed contextualization. It is entirely possible, as well, that many viewers recognize these omissions without being visually or discursively confronted by them.

The Salvadoran civil war, spanning from approximately 1980 to 1992, was steeped in a desire amongst citizens of El Salvador for revolution—a call

for change regarding what many saw as severe political and social repression including rigged elections, government-sponsored murder of clergy, and economic poverty.[xxx] The United States, having recently installed El Salvador's right-wing government, supplied the regime with $7 billion dollars over the course of the conflict (though some say the amount was much higher); U.S. military forces, many of whom were undocumented so as to avoid political scrutiny, were positioned throughout the country and helped train Salvadoran forces to wage the battle on the leftist and communist opposition.[xxxi] Under the guise of 'spreading democracy', U.S. foreign policy and taxpayers' dollars directly contributed to the further economic and social decimation of El Salvador. El Salvador lost tens of thousands of lives; millions more were left homeless or exiled.[xxxii] An estimated one million Salvadorans arrived in the United States as a direct result of this conflict.[xxxiii] Many landed in the barrios of East Los Angeles and, like most displaced peoples, Salvadoran immigrants banded together to cope with their disenfranchisement.[xxxiv] After the war ended, many who had fled to the United States returned home; some brought the ideals forged in East LA back with them. The continued social and political turmoil in post-civil war El Salvador did little to quash tensions; in fact, it perpetuated them.[xxxv] This is the historical context from which MS-13 emerged.

Such social and historical details are markedly absent from the contemporary photojournalistic discourses I encountered during my research for this project.[xxxvi] While some articles make note of the civil war as the impetus for Salvadorans' mass migration to the United States during this time, there is little to no recognition that a conflict in which the United States government was heavily involved played a role in MS-13's development, specifically its paramilitary structure, training, and tactics. Likewise, it should be noted that almost no personal narratives of MS-13 members are present. The one exception I encountered was that of a reformed gang member, one of MS-13's original founders in fact, who had renounced gang life. Upon being deported from the United States back to El Salvador, Ernesto Miranda started a family, enrolled in law courses, and founded an organization to help keep kids from joining gangs. National Public Radio ran a remembrance blurb when 38-year old Miranda was shot dead on his doorstep "just hours after turning down an invitation to celebrate the prison release of an MS-13 gang member".[xxxvii] His death, as the media depicted it, was innately tied to his disaffiliation. The media's attention to Miranda's "reform" efforts was contextualized within the frame of the gang's overwhelming violence and moral corruptness; positive action like that of Miranda's is inevitably juxtaposed to the negative reaction from his former MS-13 comrades.

What we quite literally see in these photojournalistic accounts brings the body to the forefront of the discussion—MS-13 members are represented via the corporeal, hence viewers operating within the hegemonic framework are likely to interpret them as such. It is here, across the bodies of MS-13 members, where I will locate additional opportunities for agency, both for those contained within the skin and those interpreting from without. Of course, this is a mediated communication since visual and discursive framing stands in between these two parties; is it possible for us, the viewer and the subject, to communicate through this? Can the hegemonic discursive frame, in instances where it remains intact, be destabilized? Through a close reading of several photojournalistic accounts, I hope to argue so.

The first issue I wish to tackle is that of the structural considerations; how does the mediator most directly impact the exchange between subject and viewer? This specific case traces the recontextualization of one already decontexualized moment, evidencing the amorphous nature of photography and ability of the photojournalistic account to attempt to construct knowledge. A photograph taken by Josh Reynolds appearing in the AP Photo archives (see Image 5), when juxtaposed with the cropped use of the same image published six months later in a USA Today news article (see Image 6), provides a poignant illustration of the role editing and otherwise situating an image can play in locating possibilities for agencies. Titled “Immigration

Sweep", the original AP photograph from June of 2005 portrays the waist up of a man, hands behind his back, with the large letters "MS" tattooed on his abdominals. He is flanked by black-clad, uniformed police officers, one lifting the man's shirt to reveal his tattooed torso. The man is identified in the caption as "a Salvadoran man believed to be a member of the MS-13 gang" who was arrested in Massachusetts on a variety of criminal charges during "a federal effort to deport illegal aliens with criminal convictions."[xxxviii]

AP Photo archives is a database of images for use by news reporting agencies across the world; aside from the several-sentence caption, location where it was taken, photographer's name, and accredited agency, there is no contextualization of the image. The ambiguity of these photographs is undoubtedly intentional. Because of the variety of contexts for which this photograph will subsequently be utilized, a vague description suffices, leaving the image a relatively empty signifier to be plugged into discourse as needed. Accordingly, in January of 2006 (about six months later), USA Today used the same image in an article which appeared in their Nation section titled "MS-13 gang growing extremely dangerous, FBI says". The image in contrast to the original is heavily contextualized by discourse which briefly describes the origins of the organization but focuses primarily on the evolving sophistication of MS-13, from their paramilitary conflict tactics to their heavy involvement in over-the-counter medication trafficking. USA

Today's use exhibits more substantive discursive framing. The ambiguous nature of an image allows for such transient behavior, such de- and recontextualizations. About halfway through the article, a small insert feature called "MS-13 Facts" appears to the side of the article text in the left-hand margin. Several bullet points highlight the origins of the group, etymology of the group's name, number of members and their respective countries of origin, types of criminal activities in which they are involved, and how members distinguish themselves. The "how members distinguish themselves" section reads "Tattoos bearing the number 13, the letter M or the letters MS, the phrase 'Salvadoran Pride'". Interestingly, the AP Photo archive image has been cropped for its use by USA Today with this man's tattooed chest now more salient. Some of the background space has been eliminated, in effect focusing increased attention on the tattoo. Read alongside the "MS-13 Facts" feature detailing the types of tattoos that characterize this gang, the "MS" on this man's chest becomes "irrefutable" evidence of his association.[xxxix] The cropping, which places more emphasis on the tattoo, serves to reinforce the article's discursive message. Image and text tell a complimentary story, and "an open question appears to have been fully answered."[xl]

How does this affect the viewer and their opportunities for agency? Firstly, publishers and editors only see photographs which the photographer

was in a position to take (geographically, morally, practically), and satisfied the photographer's notions of what is newsworthy, aesthetically pleasing, and so on. Next, publishers and editors determine which images satisfy the agenda of particular news stories or news sources. Photojournalistic images that make it into print, hence to the viewer, have passed through a number of inspective funnels in effect diminishing the autonomy of viewers who find themselves relying on the media to decide what they need to see and how they will see it. The text imposed upon an image is equally politicizing. The caption that accompanies the original AP Photo identifies this man as an illegal immigrant, criminal, and MS-13 member located in a particular geographic location—but as is the nature of AP Photo archives images, that is all. USA Today's use of the image, however, is much more specific as it is tied to extensive discourse about the gang and its operations. USA Today's account further reduces the agency of the viewer who is increasingly encouraged to assume the role of the passive consumer and coached interpreter as opposed to subjective interpreter. By implication, the original AP Photo archives version allows the viewer more opportunity for interpretive agency since there is less discursive framing; however, due to the archives' relative inaccessibility to the general public, such potential is likely rarely realized. Only packaged and prescribed accounts make it to the layviewers' doorstep or web browser. These two varied situations of the

same image provide a poignant illustration of literal and discursive framing's relevance for the agency of the viewer.

Perhaps, noticeably, I have yet to mention the agency of the subject in all of this. "A Fearsome Gang and its Wannabes," an article published in "The Nation" section of the New York Times in August of 2007, will serve as the springboard for this discussion. The piece begins by noting that two weeks before this article was published, three college students had been shot dead "execution-style" in a Newark schoolyard. One of the suspects proclaimed affiliation to MS-13 on his MySpace page, though officials dismissed the link as fallacious, says the author. The schoolyard shootings serve as a pretext for the article, which goes on to detail the debate regarding the gang's prevalence and level of threat imposed in the United States. Brian Truchon, then-director of the FBI's MS-13 gang task force, was interviewed for the piece. He used the metaphor of a "virus" to describe the group and warned of MS's ability to move and communicate well across borders.[xli] Critics, including coordinator of the Washington Office on Latin America, Connie McGuire, and academic/street gang expert Alex Alonso, argued that MS-13's membership numbers are relatively low in comparison to other domestic gangs and that difficulty in distinguishing between those who are actually affiliated with the group versus "wannabes" makes such estimates tentative. McGuire and Alonso also find it more than coincidental that the immigration

debate is in full-force at the time of the FBI's MS-13 task force and related efforts emerge. The piece ends with a quote from Truchon: "Even if there is some hyperbole built in, it's a group that is dangerous and has to have someone looking at it. Are we adding to it? Maybe. But I don't think we have any other options." This account's discursive content situates the MS faction as a potentially pervasive and problematic phenomenon while eschewing their mediated construction as such a preventative measure. Truchon, who gets the final word, defends the surveillant gaze as necessary and worth the harm done to its subjects.

Given this discursive framing, let us consider the adjoining image (see Image 7). The photograph portrays a tattoo-covered man who is identified in the caption by his name, then as "a member of Mara Salvatrucha" who "is in prison in El Salvador for murder". He stands before a cinderblock wall, shirt in hand, tattoos and by extension his body decidedly on display. His extensive tattooing and hand gesture—the index and pinky finger extended to signify an "M" or devil horns—proclaim his affiliation with MS-13. This hand gesture implies that the photograph was taken voluntarily rather than as a document of his affiliation (as seen in previous images), which generates some of his agency. The purposeful display of his body is equally significant; despite his incarceration as well as the discursive and visual framing, this man asserts his autonomous identity and ideology. Irrespective

of the photographer, editor, or viewer's interpretation, this body retains its own agency; his contestation for power exists whether or not it is acknowledged. The Other claims his humanity through the photographic frame, even against or indifferent to the will of those framing and interpreting from without. His body—his tattoos and hand gestures—also call out to viewers, both those sympathetic and unsympathetic to his situation. I therefore conceptualize such visual displays as a performative reaction to our gaze, as well, (not just an assertion of his own agency) and contend that they create the possibility for agency on behalf of the photographic subject and viewer alike. Because the materiality of the body cannot be completely denied neither can its agency; it can be framed as deviant, but it still exists outside of this.

V. Materiality/agency of the body

Mindy Fenske's ethnographic work at a tattoo convention, detailed in her book Tattoos in American Visual Culture (2007), led to a poignant observation which she later came to recognize as a possibility for the agency of a (tattooed) body and those viewing it. Put succinctly, she argues that performative framing mechanisms, particularly those of a tattoo competition, inevitably fail to contain the potential of the human body to destabilize such structures. The following is a summarization of Fenske's observations.

During a tattoo competition, live models displayed the works inscribed upon their bodies by stepping onstage so the audience and judges could evaluate the tattoos' artistic quality and aesthetic appeal. The bodies of the tattooees, as Fenske describes it, were treated as blank canvases that simply housed the works of art—it was as if the onlookers had forgotten these were actually human bodies and had learned within the frame of the competition to look beyond them. It was not until one woman broke the stoic norm that Fenske took note: "She stood passively, without expression, facing the crowd with her arms flexed in a pose featuring her biceps. She then slowly rotated her torso so that her back was to the audience before facing us again, now with a small, almost bashful, smile."[xlii] The woman then received an uproarious round of catcalls from the crowd. Fenske attributes this reaction in part to the woman's partially nude body being on display, but argues that it went beyond that since other women in the competition had not elicited the same reaction; the incommensurability between the "diminutive smile and the muscular bodybuilder pose"[xliii] incited the audience to recognize that the tattoo was attached to a person, a personality, rather than merely a canvas. The next man to take the stage built off this improvisation, shaking his belly at the audience and receiving similar attention. Fenske argues that by breaking the frame of the competition through performance, these (tattooed) bodies created a space for the unpredictable, for agency: this "illustrates not only the inability of the

contextual frame…to fully suppress the resistant potential of movement always present in the living human body, but also the way in which that frame can actually produce the conditions necessary for that movement's potential to be actualized."[xliv]

What about the body of this MS-13 member breaks the photographic frame? I contend that this man's tattoos and hand gesture—these messages within a decidedly packaged message—undermine the photographic frame by communicating beyond it. The photographic and photojournalistic process can control such potential of the human body to a degree, but never completely; the "incapacity of discourse to control the performance of the body's materiality" holds.[xlv] Similar to the Zealy daguerreotypes, this "potential for the body to act out" in fact depends upon conditions of "discursive control;"[xlvi] conditions of power that attempt to deny agency are those that engender potential for their destabilization. It is because the photojournalistic process so explicitly attempt to construct members of MS-13 as the criminal and racial Other that their bodies can potentially destabilize such notions. Photographs and photojournalistic accounts that portray the body, then, can never do so with absolute control. There is always potential for the body to contest what is read on to it or how it is framed (the body can claim its own agency), as well as the potential within the viewer to recognize that (readers can acknowledge, and in effect realize,

the agency of the subject). Again referring back to Trachtenberg's reading of the Zealy daguerreotypes, the viewers' gaze upon these bodies creates the potential for a dialogue among the viewer and the photographic subject, despite the mediation of the encounter. One must, however, be careful not to conceptualize of the photographic subject ("Other") and the viewer (not "Other") as dichotomous entities but rather as existing on the same continuum; naming another in relation to oneself is a slippery—and potentially dangerous—slope.

Fenske argues that tattoos are performative—that they 'do' something, have an effect upon both the owner and the viewer.[xlvii] The owner can use their tattoos as an assertion of their own agency, certainly; but the power of the body and its markings extends beyond this. As the directed gaze of the enslaved in the Zealy daguerreotypes has the potential to reach out to the viewer, so too do the tattoos of MS-13 gang members as depicted in these photojournalistic accounts. By creating the potential for communication though the photographic frame, it could be argued that MS-13 members' tattoos similarly implicate the viewer who may in turn be compelled to take a moral stance: should we recognize the shared humanity between ourselves and MS-13 members or not? Should we read their tattoos as a mere implication of embodied deviance? As evidence of society's potential to disenfranchise and marginalize peoples? As resistance to oppression or

victimization via race? As some conglomeration of these? Regardless of how one ultimately interprets, most importantly, the possibility to read against existing frameworks remains; this potential lingers on the bodies of those portrayed and in the minds of those who encounter such images.

VI. Conclusion

Productive rhetoric is an engaged criticism concerned with the politics and implications of representation; it seeks to deconstruct social constructions and then offer potential correctives. In spirit of this pursuit, I have argued herein for a conceptualization of the photograph as a site of power relations. It is my hope that in recognizing that a variety of gazes meet here, some with perhaps different interests than the viewers' own, society will move toward a more democratic visual culture. Instead of resigning ourselves to our own impositions or those offered to us, we need to move toward a consideration of what is at stake for others here. By taking varied agencies into account, we no longer deny them—their potential is effectively realized.

The ambiguity of photography means it can be used in a variety of capacities, some productive and some not, some that suppress potential agencies and others that enhance them. There are inherent features of the medium that aid in its perpetuation of dangerous ideologies—photographs are necessarily decontextualized and incomplete narratives, they can only tell so much (or so little); but these same features are what allow for

potential subversion on behalf of the viewer and viewed. Perhaps the media could make an effort not to objectify and demonize its photographic subjects, but calling for censorship is not my intent and is in itself problematic. Instead, I have sought out ways in which viewers and photographic subjects might work together to subvert, deny, or otherwise undermine preferenced readings. While here I call specific attention to the potential of the bodies and tattoos of MS-13 gang members, my hope is that others will engage cultural problematics with respect to visual representation in such a way. In a context where so much is at stake, particularly for these photographic subjects whose humanity has become so effortless to deny, a critical interpretation goes much farther than a simplification.

[i] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory,* p. 113.

[ii] Id.

[iii] Retrieved March 2, 2008 from: http://www.ice.gov/pi/investigations/comshield/

[iv] Retrieved March 2, 2008 from: http://www.fbi.gov/page2/july05/ms071305.htm

[v] Some might contend that MS-13 and its members have generated what Stanley Cohen (1980) calls a 'moral panic.' Though a detailed discussion about whether or not and to what extent MS-13 (as a phenomenon) has progressed through these marked stages is beyond the scope of this paper, Cohen describes a moral panic as thus: "A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or…resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the moral panic is quite novel and other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce changes such as those in legal and social policy and even in the way society conceives itself" (9). Though I am hesitant to unequivocally characterize the MS-13 phenomenon as a moral panic, it does appear that certain elements of that process have been met. Certainly a more detailed analysis would be necessary to make more specific claims.

[vi] John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*.

[vii] Michel Foucault, Panopticism.

[viii] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 25.

[ix] Susan Sontag, *On Photography.*

[x] Id.

[xi] Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives*.

[xii] Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American photographs*, p. 53.

[xiii] Id.

[xiv] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

[xv] Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American photographs*, p. 54.

[xvi] Id, p. 60.

[xvii] Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives*, p. 5.

[xviii] *Art and Criticism*, 1859.

[xix] Knowledge transmitted through culture is, admittedly, incapable of translating and categorizing all experience; there are some experiences for which our frameworks are lacking. Despite their potential inadequacies, however, these frameworks exert substantial influence upon one's interpretations.

[xx] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 3.

[xxi] Id, p. 4.

[xxii] John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*.

[xxiii] Id.

[xxiv] Id, p. 91-92.

[xxv] This statement is based on months of thumbing through hundreds of such images. I used Google to run an image search for keywords "MS-13" and "Mara Salvatrucha", yielding thousands of results. I leafed through these results and followed links which appeared to be reputable news sources. I also searched the AP Photo archives, as well as searched various news sources individually via their online archives (*New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *World News and Report*, *Washington Post*, and several local newspapers in California). Only a small cross-section is used herein to illustrate my particular points.

[xxvi] As quoted in a March 20, 2004 article titled "Combating El Salvador's gangs" which appeared in the "Americas" section of the BBC's online edition. It can be accessed at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/americas/3553529.stm

[xxvii] As quoted in an August 19, 2007 article titled "A Fearsome Gang and Its Wannabes" which appeared in "The Nation" section of the *New York Times* online edition. It can be accessed at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/weekinreview/19buckley.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=a%20fearsome%20gang%20and%20its%20wannabes&st=cse&oref=slogin

[xxviii] In doing research, I paged through years nearly a decade's worth of *Newsweek* magazines and found nothing of such proximity.

[xxix] Id, p. 56.

[xxx] Bonner, Raymond, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. policy and El Salvador.*

[xxxi] Id.

[xxxii] Id.

[xxxiii] Id.

[xxxiv] Grascia, Andrew (2004). Gang Violence: Mara Salvatrucha – "Forever Salvador", *Journal of Gang Research*, (11)*2*, pp. 29-39.

[xxxv] Id.

[xxxvi] I should note here that I collected materials from English-language sources only. It is possible that Salvadoran coverage, or that of other Latin American countries, may have included more of a historical contextualization.

[xxxvii] The Remembrance, titled "Gang Leader Shot to Death on Road to Reform" ran on May 16, 2006. Retrieved July 15th, 2008 from: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5409128&sc=emaf

[xxxviii] This quote comes from the caption adjoining the following resource: Reynolds, Josh. 2005, July 15. Immigration Sweep [photographic image]. AP Photo archives. Retrieved July 15, 2008 from: http://accuweather.ap.org/cgi-bin/aplaunch.pl

[xxxix] John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, p. 91.

[xl] Id, p. 92.

[xli] The "virus" analogy was used in Newsweek's "America's Most Dangerous Gang" article, as well, among a variety of others.

[xlii] Mindy Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, p. 62

[xliii] Id.

[xliv] Id, p. 63.

[xlv] Id, p. 70.

[xlvi] Id, p. 70.

[xlvii] Id.

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