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Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Original citation:

Herrera, Elsa and Jones, Gareth A. and Thomas de Benitez, Sarah (2009) Bodies on the line: identity markers among Mexican street youth. [Children's geographies](#), 17 (1). pp. 67-81. ISSN 1473-3285

DOI: [10.1080/14733280802630932](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280802630932)

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2010

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Bodies on the Line: Identity markers among Mexican street youth¹

Elsa Herrera, Gareth A. Jones & Sarah Thomas de Benítez

Abstract

This paper presents material from extended interviews and observations with 25 street youth in Mexico, revealing how their attempts to control and understand their lives relies on a control of and identification with their bodies. Using Goffman's ideas of stigma and performance, and Butler's performativity, the paper illustrates that even if these young peoples' bodies fall short of mainstream ideas for youthful bodies, they have developed some strategies that allow some control over their bodies. These bodily performances differ according to audience. This intention is by no means fully achieved. Their bodily actions sets out a series of identity markers but street life implies all sort of events, from painful childhoods to vicious leisure pursuits, and restricts the ability to affect material conditions. Moreover, care needs to be taken in interpreting these signs as the participants' own understandings and practices are neither easily categorised nor consistent.

Introduction

For three years, from 2005, we have been meeting with two groups of young people that work and occasionally sleep on the streets of the Mexican city of Puebla.² These meetings form part of a project to explore how 'street youth' construct identities around daily lives, to consider the stability of these identities and how identity 'memberships' extend beyond distinctive categories such as age, ethnicity and gender to ties such as consumption, national identity and being 'in the city'. Our work is based on the argument that participants' sense of identities is highly fluid and unstable, that given the complex context they are moving in it is difficult to articulate a single sense of 'self' and, contrary to the views held of them by government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the media, are possibly unable to make up their minds who they are in a well defined static way. As such, talking about and observing their practices have offered us a series of devices through which to interpret their social identities.

¹ Research for this paper was conducted as part of the project "Being in Public: the multiple childhoods of Mexican 'street' children" with ESRC grant RES 148-25-0050. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the Latin American Studies Association conference, Montreal, and the International Conference of Critical Geography, Mumbai. We wish to thank participants at those meetings for their questions, Kathrin and Rachel and referees for their helpful comments.

² We adopt the term youth to describe our key participants who were mostly aged from 12 to 29, the definition of youth adopted by the Mexican government. In fact, we had contact with people much older, into their fifties, and infants, but whose accounts do not contribute to this paper.

Representations of street youth in Mexico, as elsewhere, hold to their exclusion and ascribe a social deviance, which is partly ‘confirmed’ through ideas and images of bodily harm, disruptive behaviours and dangerous bodies (Bar-on 1997; Beazley 2002; Panter-Brick 2002). In this sense, street youth appeal to Goffman’s astute observations on the notion of stigma as “...the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (1990: 9). Such stigma can be derived from marking people out as different through one or a combination of three signs: abominations of the body; blemishes of character and distinctions of race, nation or religion. So marked, Goffman argued, society would transpose a series of “social facts” that would “be attached, entangled, like candy floss, becoming then the sticky substance to which still other biographical facts can be attached” (1990: 74 [1963]). Whether it was their intention or not, social deviance would be attributed to “prostitutes, drug addicts, delinquents, criminals, jazz musicians, bohemians, gypsies, carnival workers, hobos, winos, show people, full time gamblers, beach dwellers, homosexuals, and the urban unrepentant poor ...[as] engaged in some kind of collective denial of the social order...[showing] open disrespect of their betters; they lack piety; they represent failures in the motivational schemes of society” (1990: 170-171). Not only might street youth be ascribed with many of the labels listed by Goffman, but as their dress, odour, colour and shape, as well as their interaction with society through consumption or work would suggest, they accumulate on their bodies the marks of their difference.³

The suggestion of a relationship between bodies, social acceptance and identities became an intriguing aspect to our field research. How did participants reconcile their difference and apparent social deviance, or their conformity, in and through their bodies? Street youths lack the resources with which to ‘buy into’ consumerist forms of subjectivity – through body-firming through gym regimes, dental work, to plastic surgery, professionally conducted transgender operations and transplants places their bodies as ‘natural’ organisms in a world of growing modification. But is marking their bodies one of the few ways in which they are able to express their connectivity (or difference) from mainstream or other youth subcultures?

³ There is an abundant imagery of street life as aberrant and non-normative in Mexico, most notably the 2001 film *De la Calle* (Dir. Gerardo Tort) which won a number of national and international awards, and lower budget films such as *Perro Callejero* and *Ratas de la Ciudad*.

In particular, we became interested in how they used and were aware of their bodies, in settings that were 'public' and how their bodies are produced and represented through links with the material environment (Budgeon 2003; Prout 2000). In this endeavour we follow a series of writers arguing that life is experienced as embodied individuals, perceiving the body not as an exclusively biological unit, but as a manifestation of social and historic relations (Lowe 1986), and going further to suggest that body movements, styles and markings form experience and hold significance for what they contribute to subjectivity (Farnell 1999). As Butler has contended subjectivity is structured through repeated acts that set out the idea of an essentialised identity, but these acts do not always conform according to time and context, and making for an ambivalent relationship between the body and identities (Butler 1999). Thus, the idea that subjectivity is fully regulated is illusory and there is scope for agency in the contestation of identities and to the idea of identities. If, then, we understand identities as embodied in processes of speech, social relations and practices that affect bodies as Butler (1993) contends, then we might consider the production of bodies as a process whereby meaning is worked out and exhibited.

In taking these ideas onto the streets as it were, we are especially attracted to Frost's observation that "doing looks" is part of a repertoire of actions that create meaning, and offer possibilities for recognition (Frost 2003). Some 'looks' are more permanent than others, notably tattoos and scars, which can be revealed along with particular forms of dress, speech, or posture, as part of the formation of social relations (Entwistle 2001; Frost 2003). The appearances are used in order to establish subject positions, transmit discreet meanings to others and the chance to engage with how others read us through complimenting particular behaviours. Thus, the Stigma identified by Goffman can be contested discursively and in action, the repeated but selective uses of looks can challenge stigmatisation even within the confines of social exclusion. Hence, the youths' bodies may be marked by being on the street in ways over which they have little control, as in the effects of road traffic accidents, but which observers regard as synonymous with the intentional deviance of the participants [akin to Goffman's 'social facts']. Differently, in hanging around, taking drugs and 'acting up' their performance may be in line with the expectations held for them; a 're-citation' in Butler's terms (1993). But, the young people

also use their bodies, mark their bodies or hide their bodies in certain ways sometimes to accentuate their identification as a street youth, at other times to obscure this identification. Working through being ‘identified as’ and ‘being’ a street child or youth entails a performativity, a doing rather than a pre-determined label (Butler 1993).

1. Getting to the street.

The original intention of our field research was modest, to produce in-depth primary material on how street [youth] construct identities in worlds that most of us would perceive to be threatening and traumatic. We were interested in how children and youth see themselves, relate these ideas to how others see them and consider the forms by which identity ascriptions are contested. While it is widely accepted that concepts of childhood and ‘youth’ are socially constructed, young people on the street are especially transgressive subjects challenging normative ideas of childhood, sexuality, language and more. Yet, and intriguingly, many agencies and academics find it straightforward to neatly categorise these young people as ‘street children’ or to signify unruliness and danger to define them as ‘youth’. While many programmes urge the inclusion or empowerment of street children it is rare to read about their creativity or ingenuity, their attitudes toward consumption, music, dress or use of media, or first hand how they understand drug use and work. Demoted to the notion ‘lifestyle’ these themes appear trivial to many in the context of survival; understanding identities through the body has hardly featured in studies.⁴

In our fieldwork we resolved to having an open-mind about what young people might want to talk to us about. Between 2005 and through 2008 we spent time with two principal groups, observing their actions and conversations, and recording thoughts in field diaries, joining them in activities and conducting occasional semi-structured interviews.⁵ The first group spent most of the day at a traffic intersection adjacent to a large market and interacted frequently with traders, pedestrians, as well as people who sit near them in a small area of shade known as Las Jardineras (the gardens), either briefly as they await a bus

⁴ Beazley (2002) and Hecht (1998) are notable exceptions. For a discussion of the absence of concern for the body and bodily movement even in anthropology see Farnell (1999).

⁵ This field approach might be summarised as ‘street ethnography’ (see Gigengack and Gelder 2000).

or to drink, sleep or take drugs. Members of this group work as windscreen washers, clowns and occasionally run errands. The other group occupies a series of squares and gardens on a wide central reservation to a major boulevard (El Bule). They work mostly as jugglers and sometimes as fire-breathers, and there is much less pedestrian contact and only itinerant traders selling chewing gum, phone cards or newspapers.

From the earliest encounters with the group the relation between identities and the body was apparent. We had arranged to meet with an outreach worker of a local NGO who had known the first group for many years and who had offered to introduce us. As we approached it was possible to see about six people gathered together looking at a large framed picture.⁶ Everyone was in animated conversation but quickly stopped to politely acknowledge our presence. Hands were shaken, careful pronouncements of 'welcome' extended and a few sarcastic comments exchanged. The person who had previously been holding court, Moises, introduced himself with a shy grin but encouraged us to sit and started up a conversation. How far had we come? How long would we stay? Did we know America? While presenting himself as the worldly wise traveller savant, one could not but help noticing he had only one leg. As we chatted, after a few minutes, Moises became bored and secretively sucked at a PVC soaked rag (*mona*). His eyes would glaze, speech would slur and for a few moments any awareness of what was happening would be lost.

We would see Moises frequently in the coming months though he would often disappear for extended periods. He is an enigmatic character. His own accounts of life and his body are often ambiguous and sometimes uncertain. He told us he was born in a city different from the one his friends knew about, though there was some disagreement here too. He also claimed to have lost his leg quite recently in a train related accident while going to a city in southern Mexico, while other versions recount the loss as the result of a traffic accident in Puebla. There was an on-going claim that he was about to receive a prosthetic limb from an NGO but no such limb has ever materialised, even though he spent time in drug rehabilitation which was allegedly part of the bargain. Despite a lack of precision in his narrative it was clear that

⁶ The picture was of La Santa Muerte, the death saint, that is popular among the group, as well as associated with drug addicts, criminals, prostitutes and HIV carriers, but actually has much wider appeal as a 'crisis religion' stemming from the economic crises of the last 20 years (see Jones et al. 2007).

physical disability was not a constraint on Moises' mobility or life.⁷ He would come and go from the Jardineras and work as a clown on the city's buses. He claimed to have travelled across the country and to have lived in Los Angeles, California, and he had certainly spent some time in different institutions. Yet his positioning as 'able' in so many ways would not be most peoples' interpretation, seeing instead a vulnerable young man with a gaunt face and short attention span, probably from drug use.

For Moises, as with most of the participants, daily life involved confronting struggles related to the ways their bodies are experienced and controlled. Their corporeal experience is in sharp contrast to how contemporary bodies are thought of, highly plastic spaces of freedom onto which individual desires and creativity can be projected (Armstrong 1983; Frost 2003). Their bodies also appear contrary media representations in Mexico of young male bodies as muscular, powerful, virile, energetic and able to appropriate and enjoy the latest mores of commodity consumption (Huerta 2002; Zarza and Navarrete 2006).⁸ The 'advertised' male is explicitly whiter and taller than the majority of *mestizo* Mexicans, implicitly better off, educated and an actual or potential family man. By contrast Moises's body *seemingly* manifests the absence of self-control, from the slips into unconsciousness driven by the use of inhalants to a leg lost in a street adventure, and few of the normative forms of health, dress, or hygiene.⁹ The display of imperfect or non-normative bodies provide legitimacy to the social 'discipline' through the state and NGOs, or vigilante groups (Foucault 1992).¹⁰ For young men such as Moises, his difference and defiled body raise the stakes even further. A melancholic slant to his conversations does suggest damage, both physical and psychological, but for all that Moises is both capable of interpreting his situation and resisting categorisation. In 2006 he had attempted to sue the state government for abuse while in a

⁷ Ambiguities in the narratives of street youth are not unusual. Some have events to hide and many, such as Moises, have histories of abuse including beatings in childhood and assaults in juvenile detention.

⁸ Women are present in both groups and perform a number of important and explicitly gendered roles, recontrolling drug consumption and baby care, and the emotional support of some group members (see Jones et al 2007). But for the purposes of this article we focus mainly on the males.

⁹ Moises would often retain elements of his clown make-up long after working on the buses was finished for the day. Around the Jardineras too was ample evidence to anyone passing of the detritus of drug use, illness (vomit), hygiene (excrement, flies, dogs) and violence (blood).

¹⁰ Many of our research participants had spent considerable periods of time in government shelters (Casa de la Familia) or the Juvenile Detention and Rehabilitation Centre (CORSMIEP, known as the Tutelar). Some had considerable 'institutional careers' but had ended back on the streets, being categorised in the NGO jargon as "permanentes", those beyond rehabilitation.

rehabilitation centre and sought the assistance of the Commission for Human Rights. Thus, in thinking about street youth we wish to stress the (possibly enhanced) importance of bodies to the construction of identities through modification and subtle realisation.

2. Working on the Street.

For most of the youth we met, being on the street was primarily a source of income, spending much of the day from as early as 6am cleaning windscreens, working as clowns or jugglers. These activities require some training and considerable control of the body: smooth specific movements, ability to cope with traffic, skill to deal with the tools and props and, as in the case of some of the jugglers and acrobats, physical strength and balance. When two members of the Jardineras group, Alvaro and Alfonso, suggested Gareth join them to wash car windscreens they were at pains to point out the importance of being courteous, never continuing to wash a screen when the driver had waived them away, of not swearing in front of drivers and acting the fool. Great care is also taken in not damaging wiper blades, wing mirrors or denting bodywork, although Alvaro noted that sitting on a bonnet when not strictly necessary was one way to threaten a rude driver with the possibility that damage might happen even if he is careful that it does not.

Although the washers, street clowns and jugglers might be described as scruffy by someone on their way to work in an office, all of the participants attach great importance to their appearance, realising that it is vital to their relationship with drivers, the police and passing girls/women. At the Jardineras the windscreen cleaners don yellow t-shirts that signify their membership of the 28 de Octubre street trader organisation, making for a rather surreal scene when moving around the dense traffic in groups. But when the working day is over, the youth stretch up to rucksacks hanging from branches of trees to transform themselves. Boys rinse their hands and their faces, comb their hair, change their T-shirts and, especially in the case of windscreen washers, reveal a second pair of trousers in much better condition than those used for work. As might be expected of most (young) people, this bodily transformation can be even more dramatic if the opportunity for meeting a sexual partner presents itself. Once, Ramon, a 21-year-old windscreen cleaner, left early from the

intersection, saying he had to get ready for a date with a girl. After a couple of hours, Ramon returned having had a haircut, a shower, and sporting a new pair of trousers and shoes. He only stayed a few minutes, long enough to show off, before he dashed to catch the bus to his friend's house.

Working on the streets means that certain strategies of bodily presentation also have to be adopted in order to keep control of the work space and to improve income. Most strategies are intended to reduce the difference between street youth and the public, since they are aware that this would be unhelpful and might get them into trouble. As Manuel, a 23 years old juggler pointed out:

Look, you can see how people are at a glance. I mean, you can not cheat anybody. If you see somebody using drugs, or even through their appearance, how they are around looking stoned. And, for example, we always come [to the street] clean, never dirty, then you can notice, if people come by and see you clean everyday and conscious in your five senses, you can realize. Then you go and see other guys almost falling down and with their hand in here [covering his nose and mouth to mimic inhalant use]. You always know where drug addicts are. Do you understand? That is the reason why many people who pass by here everyday give us [money].

Manuel is aware of the existence of the stigma surrounding street work. The windscreen cleaners are commonly considered as dirty drug users by mainstream society, therefore it is important to display a performance that unsettles this perception. Among the participants there is a strong sense of a correct use and conduct of the body while at work. Talking to Rodrigo, a windscreen cleaner aged 26, he commented on having to keep self control even when drivers or the police are aggressive. He notes how the circumstances surrounding the body change with age, including attitudes to dirt:

One changes because one grows up. You change because of the way you grow up, you start to make some changes in your life. You start to see life very differently. After 20, 25, 23 years you see life with more responsibility because no one gives you anything [now] like when you were a little boy. Because when you are younger

people notice you are dirty and everything, and they say “Well, poor boy, let’s give him something”. But when we are older the people notice we are dirty and [their attitude is] “You lazy man, go and get a job!”...Yeah, well, I imagine that people have told me that because they are not in a good mood, they must be angry about something that happened to them at home, or anything. But [if we] think about this properly, I do not assault them, I am not taking anything from them. If they want to give some money, well, they give it to me, if they do not want to give money they simply don’t. I wash windscreens. I have met people who just because I clean the windscreen of their car insult me and curse my mother. Instead of facing them and yelling: AH! I prefer to just turn around and think to myself “Thanks, at least you make me think about my mother, because, certainly, I do not see her very often”. But, well, there are also generous people who give you 20 pesos or 50 pesos. They say “Come on”. Just like I was telling you, they realize that somehow one is trying to gain an honest living, not through crime.

Rodrigo’s narrative shows that, for him, social interaction is related to his body: relations with others is not about compassion (which links to childhood), but a sense of empathy (linked to work). A challenge to these relations is responded to by Rodrigo turning away. As such he and others, aware of the stereotypes surrounding their condition, try present their bodies in ways that reduce or soften the stigma associated with street youth and present a performance of ‘legitimate’ work.

The clown performance also demands certain kind of behavior to deal with differences. It was pointed out that to ‘act the clown’ properly, and successfully in terms of income, relies not only in the appearance of the body which often requires a significant investment in terms of time and planning – they buy and put on make up collectively and carefully, acquire clothing and practice their speeches - but also in the suppression or hiding of specific actions. Elsa’s field notebook records:

When I went with Lucio and Fabio to buy some cookies and soda (which Lucio suggested) they started up a conversation about working as street clowns. They said

that clowning can be a very good work only if it is undertaken seriously, just as they claim to. “There are these clowns who get onto the buses using drugs, people just dismiss them”. They explained also that they take good care about their make up and prefer not to use plastic noses [A boy had just passed by wearing clown make-up and a large plastic nose]. Apparently one has to be suspicious about big noses, because some street clowns use them to hide pieces of toilet paper soaked in industrial solvent. This practice, Lucio and Fabio alleged, damages the clown image and ruins the opportunities for work.

Among the participants there is a clear representation of what fits or not in public settings. Especially when talking about work they seem to be very aware of the kind of presentation and conduct of the body that must be adopted in order to give legitimacy to their presence.

This reflection is not limited to street performances. The street youth expressed concern about the social consequences of marking their bodies in other and more permanent ways. A number, for example, possess tattoos, most frequently located on the chest, back and shoulders. Very few have tattoos on the more exposed parts of their body which they explained would have adverse affects on gaining a job. Mateo expressed it this way:

Mateo: You go and try to find a job and people tell you [if you have tattoos] that you have been in jail. They look at you the wrong way. Do you understand? Because for regular jobs they ask you not to have tattoos or piercings, I mean, you have to be fine, like a person,

Elsa: Have you ever gone to look for a job and they have asked you this?

Mateo: Yes, before I worked here, before I washed windscreens, I used to work in a supermarket, and that is what they asked me: Not to have tattoos or piercings...[also to] shave, have well cut nails.

While participants in general try to present their bodies in ways that create some sense of social belonging and therefore reduce their alienation, not all have done so.¹¹ Carlos, a windscreen cleaner, was a notable exception with several tattoos on his face. Amidst the initials of former loves, including a ‘V’ on his cheek for his first partner Viviana (the ‘V’ was overlaid with another letter that nobody could identify) and an ‘M’ for Mayra his second partner and also a one-time street sleeper (nicknamed ‘the panther’, Mayra has a ‘C’ on her cheek), was a teardrop. While the mutual facial tattooing might be interpreted as a sign of social/sexual bonding and afforded Carlos the nickname of Lágrimas (tear), or an indication of gang membership (many of his friends were gang members), it also suggests the extent of Carlos’s alienation from social norms, even as expressed among the street groups (Jones et al 2007).¹² Although Carlos’s case is unusual, it illustrates the tension felt by the participants for distinguishing carefully between what ‘looks’ and acts contribute to the image of being a worker and what reinforce the image of being “from the street”.¹³ For most participants, however, keeping up this distinction at a practical level is almost impossible, as their lives are linked to other practices that conflict with social norms, and which involve and are marked through bodily practices. Street youths’ attempt to control their representation is therefore discontinuous and partial.

3. Using Drugs.

One of the most common ‘facts’ that attach themselves to the stigma of street youth is drug consumption which, as noted already, rests uneasily with work as well as mainstream expectations of health and social conformity (Maclean 2007). Among our groups drug use is a regular practice that, contrary to outsider perception, is claimed to afford some opportunities for control over their bodies or practices that they discuss as affording control. Thus, although drugs offer the chance to be ‘out of it’, and for many will involve

¹¹ The use of tattoo in Mexican counterculture is widespread with punk, ‘Dark’ and Goths using elaborate and often highly displayed symbols, see Castillo Berthier (2002). Only a few of our participants’ tattoos hold affinities with the counter-culture interpretations that speak to group memberships and intimate self-identification that may have (combinations of) spiritual, sexual or political dimensions (Fisher 2002).

¹² In tattoo iconography tears sometimes symbolize the death of a family member or close friend while in detention, and are often related to gang membership in Central America and the US (Phillips 2001; Rocha 2003; Zilberg 2007).

¹³ Jacobson and Luzzatto (2004) show how similar attitudes to permanent tattoos are expressed by young Israelis some of whom will be eligible for military service.

psychotic episodes or involvement in unprovoked violence, the participants manage their consumption. They are extremely aware that the discourse of 'street youth' associates drug use with vagrancy and criminal behavior, and so develop a series of strategies that present addictions as a health issue and not a matter of juvenile or criminal justice. Consequently routines are performed that enable drugs to be taken in public space.

The effective deployment of these routines requires considerable control of the body, a quality which, in contradiction, drugs often takes away. Although most will use drugs at some point of their day, some participants such as Jorge, a 17 years old who works as a clown and is a heavy user, claim not to do so:

To be honest, at the beginning [when he began work as a street clown] I used to get drugged in the street, wearing clown make up. I did not care. But, then, well you realize that because of that, people dismiss you. Now I prefer to finish work and if I want to do it [get drugged] on the street, but I have to finish work.

Among both groups drug use calls for careful selection of timing and place. The jugglers at the Boulevard combine work with the consumption of pills. These have the advantage of quick ingestion and are easy to disguise, important in such a visible location, with passing police patrols and near to malls and middle/high class residential areas. To an onlooker pills appear not to affect the body, sometimes just a purple tongue in the short term, and spots or nasal excretion over the longer term. Rather, the pills offer a presentation of being alert, cheery and provide users the stamina for their long days of physical activity.

Nevertheless most of the participants take a higher risk by using marijuana, inhalants¹⁴ or alcohol, substances that compromise the body through the smell, demand a less discrete display and may involve collective organisation. Monas, rags dipped in solvent, will sometimes be disguised in sweet containers or cans, giving the impression to the uninitiated that they are eating or having a soft drink. In the Jardineras, longer sessions of mona use are always undertaken to the back where low walls offer some protection from a bystanders

¹⁴ Most use PVC, but thinners (tiner) and industrial solvents ('chemo' or 'activo') are also common.

gaze and large piles of rubbish permit instant discarding of any utensils should suspicions be aroused. Using marijuana or alcohol is usually a group practice, even if not all of them are going to smoke or drink, standing one in front each other, gives them the chance to monitor the space around and notice if the police or anyone else is getting close.¹⁵

Drug use, of course, offers the opportunity for altered bodily states, to feel pleasure and deal with pain, emotional or physical. According to Jorge:

Many times one has problems. Let's give an example: there are people who use drugs because their wives, their girlfriends, have left them. One starts on drugs, starts on drugs, and like he [his friend Hector] has just said: You feel good simply because of the way you feel it, because of the experience of the drug. You can forget. You can forget what was on your mind, what you were worried about. The more you like it, the more you use drugs.

The narrative with the repetition and stammering prose reflects as much as describes this altered consciousness. The suggestion of 'forgetting' is especially useful for young people who have experienced difficult childhoods and family mistreatment, the lack of supervision on the street allows drug use but the narratives are clear that consumption is not *because* of their street situations. In an extract from the field notebook, Rodrigo explains why got into drugs:

Well, look, me, in my family, because I had family. The truth is that my parents got separated when I was 14, 13 years old. When I still lived with them I started, I started to get into drugs. My father, I do not judge him, was a drug addict. My mother was a prostitute for a while.

Drug use can be understood as a way in which these young people try to gain control of their bodies by putting away, if just momentary, unpleasant pasts and empty presents. They are usually aware of the impact of this practice on their bodies. In their search for some

¹⁵ Crack (roca) is used rarely, not by many, and never on the street.

form of serenity or fun (indications in itself of their limited access to other forms of gratification), some consume large amounts of drugs and alcohol despite their obvious noxious effects. Drug consumption presents a paradox: the pursuit of pleasure through means harmful to physical health:

Jorge: Maybe that's why my mind is so messed up. From the PVC, I mean. Maybe that's really why, because at first I just smoked pot and didn't have these hallucinations. Maybe that's really why: the PVC is cooking my brain and now if I smoke pot I'll have hallucinations too.

Elsa: And why do you say your brain is messed up? You feel it?

Jorge: Because, like, well, you know, everyone always... For example, everyone I know that is addicted to PVC is in a bad way, that is, they're not quite right in the head. PVC scorches your neurons. Ten thousand neurons.

Elsa: Ten thousand neurons? And how do you know that?

Jorge: Because a doctor told me; it burns out ten thousand neurons each time.

Elsa: And you don't care?

Jorge: Not really, not anymore.

Elsa: Why not?

Jorge: Well, like, it's done already; it's a need. It's like your daily food.

Drug use represent two extreme positions on the regulation and performance of the body. On the one hand use resists mainstream discourses on healthy docile bodies and therefore demands the development of a set of strategies in order to keep some degree of privacy, so the body becomes a site of a certain self control. On the other, the effects of drugs on the bodies can be profound. In daily life drug use acts as an appetite suppressant, so that when Emilio, a thin 19 year old, is given a huge meat taco and despite frequent muttering about his hunger he handed it to Mina to share out so that he could continue inhaling PVC. Harder to observe are the hallucinations, mood swings, memory loss and links to suicidal ideation, all of which we have recorded on occasion. What is more tangible, is that the loss of control invokes the direct control of institutions which aim to suppress drug use as a mean to reduce street youth "deviance", which we explore more closely in section 5.

4. (Re)acting violently.

Like drug use, violence has ambivalent meanings in terms of the boys' understandings and the control of their bodies. Most of our participants have experienced physical violence since childhood and on the streets. Contrary to the discourses that build representations of street youth their encounters with violence are not specific to their being. Domestic violence is prevalent but largely unspoken of in Mexico, gangs and the police construct subjective ideas of the self through notions of violence (Castillo and Jones 2009; Knaul and Ramírez 2005). For street youth the marks of violence is as much evidence of events in the past being lived out in the present. And as Hecht from his research with street children in Brazil goes so far as to suggest this violence will impact on the future:

violence against and by street children is a part of the fabric of life in which these victims and perpetrators dangerously live, so much as that they interweave their fanciful dreams of somebody settling down and having a couple of children with the more frank admission that they have little expectation of growing up to be adults. Violence is an aspect of identity as tragically indelible as the scars that crisscross their bodies. (1998: 145)

The accounts of the scars inflicted by parental abuse are usually accompanied by evasive, sidelong glances and laconic descriptions; the older participants never venturing to talk about the subject. Fourteen-year-old Enrique recounts harrowing stories about his "shitty life": his father used to beat him with lead pipes and sticks, and even attacked him with a fretsaw, which is why he is staying at a government-run shelter. These kinds of marks and bodily harm reflect a state of defencelessness because they were acquired in childhood. Rene, 17, recalls his narrow escape from a vicious beating:

Once, when I was about seven, my father got mad at me. He grabbed me and threw me onto the table. He threw me so hard that the table broke. Then, because I knew that he would keep on beating me, I ran out of the house and into the street. My friends were there and I started juggling. I was doing all right until a car crushed my leg; it got caught between two cars. I was rolling around on the ground in pain, and the Domino's Pizza guys, who were my buddies, took me to the Red Cross, but first they really beat the shit out of the driver, since it was all his fault.

In these situations, the subjugated body can do little but to run away. Yet, display of the bodily marks acquired in childhood as a result of domestic violence are threatening to street youth, representing them as victims, a not very useful adscription in circumstances requiring a toughness and a legitimated discourse of self imposed destitution. Hence most of our research participants include bodily marks incurred since arrival on the street and which are more visible. Rodrigo has three cigarette burns on the back of his hand, near the thumb, to represent his membership of a *clica* for a gang of *cholos* called HEM (Hecho en México, Made in Mexico). The three dots stand for ‘money, drugs and women’ and indicate both a belonging and a tolerance for pain. Toughness is a requirement of HEM membership, starting with the initiation rite of a 29-second beating administered by several gang members. Rodrigo believes that the *clica*’s most important activities were “to apply themselves” - painting graffiti of the gang’s emblem throughout the city as a sign of its influence - and holding ‘parties’ (parties) featuring hip-hop music, heavy alcohol and drug consumption, and to provide support for other members with lead pipes, stones or occasionally firearms.

But, although Rodrigo and others have a preference for a *cholo* style of dress, baggy chinos or jeans, ironed shirts, clean trainers, with items such as belts or chains which can be used in fights, this identity is not for display in the ‘work state’ of the market or crossroads. The performance of the tough *banda* member image is directed at a different audience. Ramon, 21, had been in a gang in Mexico City which was involved in street crime:

Ramon: Yes, because when bandas come across each other and...If I see a banda trying to take some advantage in the wrong territory, we have to kick them out. Just like that, just hit them with anything, fists, knives, belts. I mean whatever you can reach with your hands, it does not matter - You have to defend yourself

Elsa: Have you been in those kind of fights?

Ramon: Yeah

Elsa: But, you used whatever you could get your hands on? You were not armed, were you?

Ramon: Whatever, well, I used to be armed, I had a revolver, a 38, a revolver.

Ramon displayed some of this physical toughness when on the streets but it was notable how he kept his involvement in banda in the settlements where he hung out separate from his relationships in the Jardineras.¹⁶ As happened on occasion, a banda member would draw up on a minibus or motorbike, and Ramon would break off from work and go over. Except with others known as to be in a gang such as Rodrigo, Ramon would never involve others in these conversations. Being a street youth and being a gang member were separate.

Although accounts of violent episodes that occurred in later life are more likely to be articulated as marks of heroism, skill or duty, closer contact with the participants leaves the impression that for most to represent their bodies as tough and strong is not easy. Ramon, along with Rodrigo, through reputation and action, represent the ‘harder’ side of street life since they have been involved with gangs and prison.¹⁷ Keeping to a performance of being ‘hard’ relies not only on the way Ramon articulates his past but also in the way he presents himself day to day. He frequently dresses in NBA or NFL labelled sportswear and often in such a way as to display bicep and quad muscles. Nevertheless, Ramon’s use of mona and marijuana presents his body as weak. On one occasion Ramon spent the entire morning just sleeping in the Jardineras after smoking marijuana, and much to the annoyance of others who regarded this as abdication of work. Another time he challenged Gareth to an arm-wrestle and was surprised to be repeatedly beaten much to everyone’s amusement (and unlikely in any other circumstance).

Violence is a fundamental way to gain respect and solve problems on the street – fights are common within the groups and in attacks on drunks or other drug users, and in defence of territory. However, the apparent toughness and uses of violence are treated with care. Though the line is often crossed, they know that violence will draw the attention of the police or, in the case of the Jardineras, the social movement that informally polices the area

¹⁶ As Entwistle (2001) highlights, dress is both a social and bodily experience, that in this case marks the boundary between the self-representation as ‘street involved’ or outside of a street life.

¹⁷ On youth gang identities see Castillo Berthier and Jones (2009). Most participants contested any ascription to being gang members or being like a gang, and it angered them when NGO workers were not so cautious.

and prohibits drug use, petty crime and fights. Alvaro, a 24 year old windscreen washer and clown, got involved in an incident which illustrates this process:

Doña Conchita told me that about eleven o'clock in the morning the police had taken her son Alvaro to the station. There had been a fight between Alvaro and some people from the market next to their work place, particularly with "The son of Damian, the guy from the laundry". Doña Conchita said that the two of them began a fight which Alvaro was clearly losing "He was already lying on the floor, he was being *ahorcado* (strangled) and tears were coming out from his eyes". Someone in Damian's family called the police and they bundled Alvaro into the patrol car. Lucio [Alvaro's younger brother aged 15) told me that the police "Do not get you into the patrol in a nice gentle way, they just grab you from here [from the waistline of the pants and from the shoulder] and then just throw you down, any way"

Alvaro was a likely victim of any beating, with a precocious personality but a heavy drug use that has left him thin. The fight described above whipped everyone into a heightened state of anxiety, uncertain what would happen to Alvaro in the police car or cell, and how this violent confrontation would play out in terms of relations with the market trader organization under whose sanction the street youth are allowed to remain. Despite expressions of bravado in which some threatened to get hoods (*encapucharse*) and attack the traders with baseball bats, the toughness was from frustration at their helplessness and quickly subsided once Alvaro returned some hours later.

On this occasion Alvaro's confinement was brief, but most participants' contacts with government and NGO institutions is longer term. This relationship is partly primed by the reading of street youth's bodily control, through drugs, violence or diet, and the imperative to impose a 'normalising' disciplining project. As we outline in the final section, however, confinement marks just one more site for the struggle over losing and (re) gaining control over the body, since the street youths' difference once produced is not something which can be easily changed.

5. Entering Confinement.

Even if the street constitutes a space in which the youth make decisions about the routines of work and leisure, they are aware that the so-called ‘freedom of the streets’ is conditioned by their bodily actions and how these are read by others. Many of the participants recount clashes with the police, sometimes brought on by street fights or substance abuse, and occasionally by link to crime.¹⁸ In the Jardineras especially, the police will search rucksacks, clothes and test the breath for the telltale odour of *mona*. A blast of solvent-smelling breath can provoke 18-hours in detention, in addition to considerable verbal and occasionally physical abuse. Sometimes, contact between street youth and the police end up with confiscation of belongings, an intimidating drive in the patrol car and extortion of money, but on other occasions these encounters end at the gates of an institution. If detained, and sent on to the Shelter (*Casa de la Familia*) or the Juvenile Detention Centre [see Footnote 10], or to the privately run Annexes (*Anexos*)¹⁹ street youth are supposed to settle into a range of activities, attend schooling or training, eat three times a day, help with housework and participate in recreation activities. Inside the institutions activities are set in highly defined timeframes. Emilio describes his stay at one facility, the constant ‘meetings’ to convert the boys from drug use and model perfect behaviours:

Emilio: I had to get there in time for the meeting. It starts at nine, sometimes at nine thirty. Then we go down to breakfast and then we do our chores. When we finish, the bell rings and we go up to the meeting —another meeting from ten o’clock to twelve, around noon. During that meeting, we don’t eat at all; we just hang on. Well, they give us stuff like fruit, but I don’t like it because sometimes it’s rotten. The ten o’clock meeting ends at noon. Then we go back to our chores. Then there’s the meeting from one to three o’clock, because from ten to noon we hardly eat at all. The one o’clock meeting ends at three, and then there’s another meeting in the afternoon from four to six.

Elsa: So then, when do you get to eat?

Emilio: At three o’clock. At four, we’re at another meeting, that ends at six and then there’s another one from seven to nine. On Mondays, it’s from ten to twelve.

Elsa: At night?

Emilio: That’s right. There are meetings that last into the night; sometimes they end around one thirty. We go to bed and then at six it’s time to get up again.

¹⁸ Rodrigo and Ramon went into prison because of their individual involvement in burglary.

¹⁹ Anexos are Alcoholics Anonymous rehab facilities, run by ex addicts. See Thomas de Benitez (2008).

Emilio is a heavy user of PVC so the regime of meetings, sleeping through the boredom to be awoken with buckets of cold water thrown over him, was the antithesis of the street where he can hang out at the market but (in his case) rarely do any work.

Yet, with the exception of prison, most of the participants recall the time spent in the institutions as easy-going for many reasons, some of which do not form part of the official objectives:

Rene was reminded of the time he spent in the Tutelar [Juvenile Centre]. He considers this time some kind of golden age: He remembers himself working in the field, how good he was at getting rid of the weeds, taking care of the lambs, and killing rabbits and chickens. He remembered he was a good basketball player, and the favourite of some of the staff, [that] he fell in love with a girl...“I really, really liked it [at the Tutelar]” he said

Despite Rene’s good memories, he is aware that getting into this kind of institution has to do with the conduct and appearance of his body, he was taken to the Tutelar because he was inhaling solvent on the street. Occasionally Rene has gone back to the Tutelar to visit some of the staff he has remained friendly with, an experience he described:

Rene told me he went yesterday to the Tutelar to visit Enedina, his God mother. She was not there but he talked to Rosi, the psychologist, and with Felicitas who taught him how to read and write during his stay ...Rene pointed out that before entering the Tutelar, he took off his “rock outfit” (black jacket and “Santa Muerte” T-shirt) because he thought that if he arrived looking like that he would not be allowed to leave. He thinks that in these clothes he looks aggressive, like a delinquent, so, he put the jacket inside his rucksack, and used a check shirt to cover the Santa Muerte T-shirt.

From his account, one can perceive Rene's concern about entering such a controlling space which requires his careful attention to presentation and conduct.

Spending time at an institution has many direct effects on the youths' bodies. A visible but not obvious consequence of being in an institution is the effect on skin colour. Participants are very conscious that their skin, more than just suntanned, is weather-beaten and parched because of the considerable time they spend outside. When Lucio, aged 15, returned to the streets after being in an Anexo everyone commented on his paleness. As part of this interchange, Mateo expressed his desire to find a job in an enclosed space, at least for a while "to get rid of the black colour" (on a separate occasion we witnessed Mateo appearing to be use sun block on his skin). Lucio then proceeded to enumerate all those who are "black from so much cleaning" and, in what was clearly an unintentional paradox, commented "My brother Jaki, el Chino, Mateo, they are all now black, really pitch-black" from being in the sun cleaning windscreens. Youths with brown-skin courtesy of their mestizo ethnicity are attuned to the darkening effects of prolonged exposure to the sun and to a social context that upholds lighter skin with beauty and wealth.

Weight changes can also result from staying in an institution, including as a consequence of not being able to take drugs (regarded positively by our participants) and the regular diets mean that is usual for participants to gain weight during their stay. The facial features of Alvaro for example shifted from a gaunt figure with sunken cheeks and eyes, a waxy skin complexion and spots, to a puffy face that seemed barely recognisable after three months in an Anexo. Having a skinny face is associated with heavy drug use while being fat (as they put it) – meaning healthy - is a sign of pride that marks a control of addiction. Most, however, do not maintain this appearance for long as drug use starts again. When talking to Dario, one of the older windscreen washers, he commented on Lucio and Alvaro's recent return to the street after their stay in an Anexo. Dario noted that the two were already into drugs "You are going to see them like this [He sucked his cheeks to give the impression of a skinny face] all sucked, sucked". According to him the boys now just come to the street to play video games and take drugs, joking that they "just went to the Anexo to have some food". The pride expressed at controlling their drug use during confinement and for some

weeks after release quickly subsides to become a source of ridicule for others and some depression for those involved.

While confinement can transform bodies briefly to give the appearance of similarity between street youth and mainstream notions of health, confinement leaves other marks on the bodies, particularly through self-harm. As Thomas (2008) has observed, self-inflicted pain is common in these institutions because the inmates find themselves with little space for decision-making, as already indicated by Emilio's attitude to meetings. The body becomes almost the only site onto which they can express some control.²⁰ In the youths' narratives self-harm features as an ambivalent sign as a marked body tough enough to endure pain and yet reflect emotional turmoil. At the state-run temporary shelter, some of the boys displayed self-inflicted scars. With some pride, Victor displayed a scar comprised of fine lines on his left shoulder; a swastika-shaped incision he had performed himself, "the Nazi symbol," he added. Alberto has several lines on his forearm and wrist, virtually imperceptible but which he claims spell out the name of his girlfriend, Hilda. For them, these practices are proof that their bodies can withstand pain physically and project feelings such as love or despair.

Spending time in prison often leaves permanent marks on the body, tattoos and scars are common examples. From his time in prison, Rodrigo has a tattooed bracelet on his shoulder as a memento. He explained that it is common practice for one inmate to tattoo another. Another windscreen washer, Edmundo also has tattoos acquired during his time in prison - on his forearm a heart crossed by a burning sword and on his arm a heart with the letters "J" and "A" from an earlier romance. On the other arm he has "Maria" the name of his mother and the name of the Virgin (of Guadalupe), and on his chest there is an incomplete image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that could not be finished because he was released sooner than expected. While both Edmundo's and Rodrigo's tattoos relate to prison, as with so many of the other bodily marks we must note the difference and inconsistency from straightforward interpretation. Rodrigo has spent considerably more time in prison than

²⁰ Boredom, depression and other psychological explanations can be understood as a result of the unfavorable environment surrounding the detainees rather than as a manifestation of individual psychopathology (see Thomas et al 2006).

Edmundo, but has only one discrete tattoo, while Edmundo has more, larger and visible images. Rodrigo's tattoos represent his immersion into prison life and he knows that these marks will go with him onto the street, subsequently he covers them up whenever possible, whereas Lorenzo's tattoos represent reminders of what he left outside of prison and are thus more acceptable for display on the streets.

Conclusion.

Although it is widely accepted that the body transcends its biological limits and is recognized as a social construction, the nature of this transcendence is keenly debated. For those, following Foucault, the power of discourse and practice is exerted to control the body. For Goffman, bodies are subject to the stigmas imposed upon them by others, either encouraging confirmation through performance or motivating presentations of the self that dispel notions of conformity. For Butler, the body exists first in discourse becoming a fixed notion through repetition, discursive and in practice, but also suggesting that discursive practices can be broken, revoked or challenged almost anytime, and anyplace. All three perspectives are useful to understanding the bodies of street youth, who are represented by the media, public policy and everyday speech in ways reminiscent of Goffman, having attached to them a series of other attributes as a result. To some extent the youth perform to these assigned roles or expectations, over and above the materiality of their poverty, drug addictions and violent behaviour. Although it would be stretching the point to claim that the youth somehow switch on and off the performative presentation they do build a social space in which some bodily actions can challenge stigma. In so doing they are active in the 'social' construction of street youth and self identities (Goffman 1971).

These performances underscore how street youth bodies can be considered events, resources to their identity constructions, rather than objects. In 'doing looks', from manners of dress, use of tattoos, acquisition of neck chains, sunglasses and deportment, from slouching, 'hanging' to physicality of fights it is difficult to think of these as 'docile bodies' habituated by regulations or subject positions. By the same token it is difficult, for us as researchers, to consider the body as the effect of discourse when one is witness to beatings, self-harm, the presentation of mental illness and suicide. Thinking of street youth as an

embodied experience is helpful, but how far can we consider the body as entirely worked out in discourse – a ‘constitutive outside’ as Butler has suggested (though not without critique, see Budgeon 2003)? Our ethnographic enquiry sought to do no more than understand how young people, usually silenced in discussions of identity construction, speak about their bodies and how they relate bodily practices to social relations. We have suggested that street youth are able to understand their lives through a control of and identification with their bodies. In some senses their actions speak louder than words – in hiding or publicising drug use, in resisting detainment or succumbing to beatings, to complaints of hunger but passing up offers of food. Speech can be limited, especially with drugs; many conversations are short expletives of articulation or a few words mumbled, the merest insight into ‘what it means to live in the body of a street youth’, much less the broader philosophical questions. Nevertheless, they do describe how street youth bodies do not fit neatly the discourses of what bodies should be - the ‘modern body’ - and of what street youth bodies should be. Their bodies change at an astonishing speed through drug use, poor diets on the street and weight gain off it, the sunburn from work and the lightening through confinement, from fighting that brings beatings and stabbing, to tattoos and self-harm, and illness. They never, however, refer to themselves as ‘street children’ or street youth’, except when in the presence of NGO workers or media, or in an attempt to deny these terms.²¹ Their discourses show glimpses of giving different meanings to actions, events and images that most people are content to take for granted.

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²¹ A Spanish camera crew made a documentary that included the Jardineras group, some of whom performed their roles to an expected ‘script’ while others sloped off disinterested or disappeared until the couple of days filming had finished.

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