

## “POST CODE WAR”: Representations of Locality and Landscapes of Danger, Belonging and Understanding

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50,000 teens are in gangs and a zero tolerance policy needed, says Ian Duncan Smith report. Up to 50,000 teenagers in the UK are involved in gangs, a think-tank will warn this week in a call for a US-style zero tolerance policy towards ringleaders.  
—“50,000 Teens Are In Gangs”

A teenager who dreamed of becoming a preacher was shot in the head in what residents last night described as an increasingly vicious “postcode war” between rival gangs.  
—Matthew Taylor, “Boy, 16, Shot Dead in Gang Gun Battle”

A 14-year-old schoolboy was killed and his friend critically injured after being ambushed by rivals in London’s spiralling “postcode” gang war.  
—David Brown, “Boy, 14, Is Latest Victim of Gang Violence”

Jamal Tingling, a youth participant at the 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning (CAL) in London, collected the above quotations from newspaper articles for preliminary research during the “Facing Our Maps” project. The program offered a group of eighteen young people from south London the opportunity to evaluate the threat of peer youth violence and territorial conflicts popularly referred to as “Post Code Wars.”<sup>1</sup> The epigraphs were used to elicit debate amongst the participants as a way of accessing how the problem of youth violence, especially in Afro-Caribbean neighbourhoods, is defined in the media and within the larger public debate. In these news stories the world of young people is characterised as one of an endemic territorialism and violence that is spiralling out of control. 198 CAL colleagues and I decided to develop and deliver projects to provide young people with the opportunity to produce their own representations of their social worlds and their place within them. Through ethnographic account, I argue that the content of these youth representations complicates the dominant picture and understanding of “post-code war.” My argument is that a careful interpretation of what the young people represent as visual creations offers a nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of their experiences of risk, danger, and urban belonging.

The advantage of analysing visual practice here is that it is not merely reliant on asking participants to “tell their stories.” Instead, it allows them to portray or render their realities through their own visual representations (Rathzel 241). The process of image creation becomes useful in

unravelling the complexities as well as the variations between groups of young people. As Daiute and Fine observe, “it is still rare to read a scholarly texts written from the perspectives of youth” (1). The visual representations of youth discussed here enable us to access the perspectives of youth while in no way suggesting that they correspond simplistically to a stable reality beyond their art works. Rather, their maps, portraits, and other art works represent and illustrate how young people articulate their experiences, concerns, dreams, and fears, especially in their attempt to transform the restrictive geographies contained in dominant representations. Such geographies or potential danger spots must be continually mapped and negotiated. The young people’s art works open up a space for a qualitative sociological analysis of individual experiences, one that interrogates the variety of imagined landscapes inhabited by them and remains attentive to the patterns within the representations of the shared physical environment of urban neighbourhoods.

### “Reppin” the Endz: Post-Code Pride and the Claiming of Place

The common belief is that the nihilistic behaviour of inner city youth, generally perceived as “minority” groups and “gang-” affiliated, impacts on the movement and public perceptions of all youth who live within the urban landscape. The 8 February 2009 issue of *The Telegraph* suggested that because “50,000 teens are in gangs,” the United Kingdom is now in need of a “US style zero tolerance policy towards the ringleaders.” Targeting the ring leaders will not address the root of a problem that is historically driven, because gangs and gang affiliation are embedded within the local subculture. The point I am making is that some of my respondents from Brixton refuse to go to Peckham and vice versa, partially because they have heard over the years that Brixton and Peckham youth do not mix. What is of interest to us here is that this tension appears to have no specific point of departure. Therefore what it means to represent (“rep”) an area and the mechanisms employed to defend their “endz” (the areas in which youth live), becomes their key focus. However, for many of these young people the history behind forms of territorialism remains unknown. Forms of behaviour are based on cultural retentions transferred from generation to generation and, although consciously and unconsciously passed on, the history of territorialism is often unknown and taken for granted by the young people themselves. According to one of my respondents, Brent, his peers initiated area rivalry in order to prevent them from being “violated” by others:

- Brent: We brought dis ting [area rivalry] to road.  
Sireita: What do you mean?  
Brent: GAS [Grind and Stack] are the original ... we first rep the endz.  
Sireita: So no one else represented it before you?  
Brent: No we stopped dem from violating ... taking “berties” [liberties] me and the rest of my Gs.

Sireita: Doesn't the idea of the "G" [gangster] come from ... the US?  
Brent: NO! the GAS gang started in Myattsfield and is now in Canada, it's not the US but they copied us. Canada is closer to America; they could have chose any state here but they chose London.

Brent contests the idea of borrowing from the United States and seems to have little historical knowledge of the usage of "G" as derived from "G men" (government officials), or special agents who actually hunted bandits and gangsters "becoming symbols of national regeneration" (Potter *et al.* 2). What is also of interest is the idea that GAS are the first to claim, defend and represent a space in South London in this way. What becomes evident is that the GAS gang is connected to other places and in this way is extended internationally. This then confuses the idea of "reppin" (representing an area) in the UK by way of the associations with the postcodes the youth live in. This international representation of the UK South London GAS gang begins to negate the concept of the "gang" as being borrowed from the US, changing the way the UK "gang" has been constructed previously, namely as a result of US influence (Midgley). Consequently, youth in the UK like Brent declare spaces as theirs, but it is the rejection of the idea that this is not unique to them which presents another set of concerns. These concerns are based on a history of the ongoing conflict between areas like Peckham and Brixton, known respectively as African and Caribbean-dominated communities. In this case the conflict has lasted over forty years. In an effort to make sense of the problem, journalist Lorraine King speaks to members of the local community:

Mr X Said: To be honest, the beef [argument] goes back so many years that people can't even remember what it was over. It just passes down from the older ones to the younger members of the gang. The Ghetto Boys are falling apart bit by bit. They've got no strength no more. Their top leaders are gone—half of them are on crack, the rest in jail or dead. (King)

What currently exists among young people is a claiming of place that creates a divide between areas as a result of representing or "reppin" an area. Such acts of representation create tensions within and among groups of young people from different communities. The original reasons for the ongoing feuds have become blurred, as Brixton and Peckham are not the only boroughs that have "beef" with each other; Peckham is said to have a history of disputes with "New Cross, the Old Kent Road and Stockwell" (Lawrence). As a result, territorialism has become one of the underlining navigational issues for urban youth.

Moreover, we learn that "Reppin the Endz" (representing a sense of place) and territorialism are neither new phenomena nor specific to Afro-Caribbean youth in London. What we see from these young people is no different from Britain's earlier gangs, gangs such as the Victorian Scuttlers, who "jealously guarded the territorial seclusion of their local beer house" (Davies 289). The Scuttlers were arguably one of Britain's

earliest youth gangs, having emerged over 140 years ago. Interestingly, the distinctive style of the plaid scarf that the scuttlers wore, named the “Burberry,” is a favoured item worn by youth today. There were also the Teddy Boys of the 1950s, the Mods and Rockers of the 1960s, and the skinhead subculture, which adopted “patriotism and defence of local territory leading to the attacks on those they perceived as different.”<sup>2</sup>

While the acts of territorialism on the part of youth in London echo the sentiments of Brent and the respondent above, it is important to note that there are specific histories that are omitted from the media discourse that characterise today’s young people. First, there is a long history of youth territorializing the spaces they live in and, secondly, young people have continued to defend and claim their space without knowing the origins of the problems and the stories of yesterday.

Young people do not recognise the embedded histories that are being played out in their day-to-day lives. As a result, contemporary youth who are struggling to find their place in the landscape of Britain often find themselves marginalised, confined to boundaries that ironically result in a shrunken territory. The shrinkage is because the discomfort that young people experience travelling freely across London ends up confining them to the communities in which they live, contributing to forms of “self exclusion” (Silvestri *et al.* 23). They aim to develop their own sense of security and identity, one that allows them to define their own precepts of “inclusion” and exclusion, a form of “neighbourhood nationalism” (Back 47) where loyalty is tied to their territory, resulting in an uncanny “postcode pride.” I describe it as such because the pride I refer to has a dimension that differs from both Charles Cooley’s and Hans Joachim Schubert’s, and Thomas Scheff’s and Suzanne M. Retzinger’s macro application of pride and shame. The principles used to explain this view involve a consideration of “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgement of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley and Schubert 184). This does not apply in a general sense to how some young people who actively territorialise feel or respond to the wider public. What I mean here is that the pride and respect that exists within the youth sphere have a different set of morals. The area or post code is honoured by those who live there at the same time that it is harnessed as a means of building a “reputation” where respect is often earned through intimidation and fear.

Although it has been suggested that street gangs are an “adolescent phenomenon” in all communities and that a “transcultural phenomenon” is present with different manifestations in a diverse range of countries (Covey 3), in London “reppin the endz” is the street parlance that has become a mantra sung by a number of youth and which the media characterizes as a “threat” (Thompson 45). To many young people, place is not only the place they “inhabit but a place they may be called upon to defend” (Hallsworth 11) as their “turf”; the association with place is their foremost means of identifying self and other. Through the idea of “turf,” youth make “an effort to organise hierarchies as a way of gaining some

control” (Massey 126). Gaining control is one aspect of territorializing space and requires the manipulation and organisation of persons, implemented through the restructuring of family hierarchy, friends, and peers via “elders”/ “shotters” who give instructions to the “youngers”/ “tinies”/ “soldiers,” followed by “wanabees,” “associates,” and “fantasy” members who may not be active members but choose to align themselves with the group (Pitts 71). But the process of gaining respect further complicates the lives of young people as boundaries of “respect” are crossed and their lives become threatened and threatening.

What becomes noticeable in this effort to “repp” (represent) and gain respect is the young people’s construction of fearful identities that form and enable the rendering of complicated stories. Massey emphasises this point when she states that “strategies of spatial organisation are deeply bound up with the social production of identities” (127). In other words, while this idea of control, representing, respecting, and acquiring power is being played out, there is the simultaneous production of identities that are often reduced to violent perpetrators of “gang crime.” When young people aim to protect those in their communities, they also run the risk of “victimising others who are not involved” (Silvestri *et al.* 45). Humphries asserts that street gang culture

offered working class youth the opportunity to conquer its feelings of hunger, failure and insignificance and to assert a proud and rebellious identity through which its members could feel masters of their own destiny. (179)

Humphries raises the interesting point that the emergence of the “gang” cannot be separated from the social conditions that these young people find themselves confronted with on a daily basis; therefore any critical analysis has to take environmental factors into consideration. The dangers of overlooking this point are seen in *One Blood*, in which John Heale states that 2007 was the year that the “notion of violent youth street gangs really entered the public consciousness in the UK” ( 7). Heale neither offers a context for the problem with UK youth violence nor presents a discussion about the social or historical conditions in which young people have come of age. However, I argue that the notion of youth violence re-entered “public consciousness” this time with a specific focus on ethnic youth and “gangs” in London and that among these youth there are alternative views that begin to illustrate how they found themselves in these positions.

What is evident is the naming of groups or “gangs” in relation to place through the reformation of the post code, from a mere sequence of alphanumeric characters that serve to specify lived spaces and locations that primarily aid the distribution of mail to an alternative mode of communication, where the new codes that have been created represent and symbolise the difficult and changing state of youth that challenges them to gain power and control. These symbolic codes are now tattooed like a family name on the body and spirit of some urban youth. In some cases

these names reflect the actual postcode that young people have assigned themselves to, as in the case of E9 Balance (East London E9), where the post code is not embedded in the name (alternative labels are created that become subsets derived from the areas of its origin, such as the “Gypset crew” of Gipsy Hill in South East London). In some instances acronyms such as Poverty Driven Children or Peel Dem Crew (PDC) become associated with an area in much the same way as the post code; as one participant expressed, “when you hear PDC everyone knows they repp Briky [represent Brixton].”

Spiegel notes that “the symbolic names are more important and enduring for gang function and tradition . . . inscribed . . . along with gang names on the walls . . . as a threat to other gangs” (98). However, it is important to note that these codes and names echo a moral ethos that tells the public how some young people imagine and narrate themselves and what they believe. With these names resembling mission statements, there are clear objectives outlined through the naming of these and other groups like Don’t Say Nothing (DSN) of Croydon, Shine My Nine (SMN) of Thornton Heath’, Spare No One (SN1) of Peckham’, and South Man Syndicate (SMS) of Stockwell and Brixton.

The groups mentioned above yield an alternative form of empowerment that presents itself in the claiming of place and the re-symbolising of locality, both of which involve the re-drawing of local maps and the construction of informal boundaries that are not to be crossed or disrespected. The warnings are no longer limited to the medium of the wall or public object, but are evident in virtual spaces such as Facebook. The respective landscapes are re-presented with video footage on Bebo and YouTube.<sup>3</sup> This conceptualising of claimed youth space as a re-symbolising of locality, and the formation of postcode pride, details the complexity of “interacting social relations.” Doreen Massey reminds us of the importance of recognising “that within that open complexity both individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialise, to claim spaces, to include and exclude others from particular areas” (126).

The frameworks through which these ideas of “reppin” are explored and practiced are not confined to tight social networks around young people who associate themselves with “gangs.” There is a category of youth that does not fit the descriptions of youth characterised in the media; their voices run the risk of becoming hidden, silenced or misunderstood. The language and symbolism of youth geography needs to be taken beyond the scope of a mere media report, and consideration needs to be given to the spaces where young people find different meanings to their lives and the places where they live. The following section introduces the concepts of the postcode and how young people understand and manage this through personal artwork that provides individual descriptions of places, or zones of danger and safety.

## Facing Our Maps: Presenting Descriptions of Place

Descriptions of experienced reality were mediated by previous representations.  
—James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens* (59)

The tensions that emerge through the production of new identities by young people mean that they have come to navigate city spaces using their mental maps of dangerous and safe zones. Young people's visual, textual, and verbal "descriptions of experienced reality" unveil additional layers that build the complex position of "self-immobilization" and the risky situation that youth consciously and unconsciously find themselves in within the urban arena. Collectively, the projects engage young people in a reflective process through a focus on creating a visual object. This enables us to witness how their life experiences, combined with skills gained through the arts, can render a visual sociology of changing youth identities. The narratives discussed in this section feature the day-to-day activities of the young people. Their participation primarily enables them to articulate some of what is happening in their lives and on their streets in a way that makes sense to them.

The project's aim is to enable young people to explore and describe their individual territory through photographic illustration and land marking. It was important for young people to express their ideas of who they are and the issues they face by exploring their lived and conceptual spaces while developing life skills of confidence, critical thinking, and creative literacy. The project brought young people currently attending the 198 CAL to identify key areas in their roaming space, centred around the places they have visited, explored, or where they have experienced something memorable. Despite these experiences bearing both positive and negative marks in their storytelling, they were able to share some of what they were experiencing without feeling afraid or threatened.

Although previous projects have relied upon mapping as a visual research method to inform how youth make sense of their landscapes regarding alcoholism (Klingemann 147), drug misuse (Thomas 23), and youth culture (Goodnow, Lohman, and Marfleet 55), this project builds upon these previous works. Visual methods are employed as a means to analyse how art production aids young people to actively take part in reflecting on their individual social positions. This permits youth to better understand "patterns of inclusion and social exclusion" (Delgado 165). The mapping of racial danger, risk, and identity delivered and presented by Les Back is a relevant project that raises questions about the ways young people perceive and navigate their spaces due to the effects and impact of territorial and racial tensions that in many cases become reduced to criminal activity among young people.

Young participants offered a colour-specific dimension to the representing of space and territory. The following extract features four young people, three males and one female, who reflect on the existence of

territorially imposed colour boundaries. This group explores the multiple ways territorialism exists in their own lives. In contrast to the media portrayals of youth and the dialogue that occurred among young people who were “reppin their endz,” the perceptions of youth who are at risk of marginalisation attending the 198 CAL vary significantly. Andy, sitting opposite Chioma in the 198 CAL studio, noticed a piece of orange material tied to the handle of her bag and asked:

- Andy: What colour borough do you live in Chioma?  
Chioma: emmm never really thought about it.  
Andy: I ment ‘Endz.’  
Chioma: I guess Orange. Lambeth is Orange isn’t it?  
Andy: Is that why you have that orange bandana tied to your bag ... reppin your endz are you?  
Chioma: What ... What are you talking about?  
Jermaine: There is no orange borough cuz [cousin], blue and green but no orange fam [family].  
Andy: [Laughing he adds] They are multicoloured.  
Chioma: So what’s with the colour code thingy? Trying to copy the US bloods and crips, so called gangsters with their bandana colours that say who is who.  
Samuel: Yea and some of them use the colours that might be in the boroughs logo. How dumb is that? I thought gangsters were against the system.  
Chioma: Are they really gangsters though? It’s rubbish, they’re fake.  
Jermaine: Brixton’s GAS [Grind and Stack] gang wear purple, OC—green and Otrey—red [does the hand sign of the word “Blood” which Chioma takes a photograph of]

The dialogue unravels the linguistic play that negotiates how boundaries are made and illustrates the way in which this group understands and recognises the colours and names that are used to create symbolic divisions within their living spaces. What is essential is that the characteristics of gang labels are not merely accepted here, because the young people interrogate and challenge the notion of the borough and gang rivalries. The question Andy posed to Chioma demonstrates his awareness of colour-coded modes of territorializing among youth attending the 198 CAL. His exchange of the term “borough” for “endz” points to the problem that some young people like Chioma have in readily identifying and recognising how gangs are structured. Jermaine puts forward a correction, which emphasises that in some boroughs the youth generally assign themselves to a single colour; however, we learn that there are other boroughs that operate differently, where rival gangs use various colours.

The issue of contradictory associations raised by Samuel questions the identification of “gangs” as being paradoxical. Colours are borrowed from local authorities, as in the case of blue borough for Lewisham and green borough for Greenwich.<sup>4</sup> Here Samuel brings forward the ironic use of symbols borrowed from the local councils’ corporate identity, which has been used to mark the identity of youth groups publicly. What lies beneath these modes of representation is the tacit influence and parody of



local authorities who unknowingly perpetuate these forms of urban segregation.

Another intriguing observation was the reoccurrence of the contested idea of the US street culture being an influence on the UK. Chioma, in an attempt to dismiss the idea of gang members or “gangsters,” presents the idea of the UK gangsters as a mere fabrication of US gang culture. She questions the authenticity of these groups and describes the phenomena as “pure rubbish.” Here Chioma implies that the contradiction in the gangs’ dependency on the respective local identification and brand confirms for her that these groups should not be taken seriously. I am reminded of Lez Henry’s *New Nation* article, which brings our attention to what he calls the “dustbin mentality” embraced by youth. This is described as such because young people in some boroughs construct their identities based on the colour of London council “wheelie bins” (see Figure 1). Henry not only provokes us to consider the idea of personal values but also leads us to question whether or not young people are conscious of claiming spaces in this way. Henry also indicates an indictment on vandalism. The “dustbin mentality” presents another dimension to the ways in which youth attempt to reconstruct their space, in this case through the creation of colour-coded boundaries. This is achieved through the appropriation of existing colours and objects that have been formally assigned to the area that the young people live in and claim. The gang names or “tags” inscribed on the bins (tagging) present an additional layer in the re-representing of space that tells us objects used formally by the local authority to signify an area, such as coloured lamp posts and dustbins, are being used to subvert the control and power of the council. The tagging acts as a reclaiming of place and space by groups of young people and assists in their re-signifying process.

However, Jermaine, reflecting on the news clipping presented at the very start of the chapter, states that “some of these groups are not ‘real’ gangs, as they have not committed any serious crime.” His observation points to the ways in which young people themselves are attempting to unpack the “problematic” definition of “gangs” (Alexander 6; Garot 4). As highlighted by Jermaine, although groups often set-trip (rival break away), forming new groups as in the case of the 031, or 0-Tray and OC (Organised Crime)—said to have emerged from PDC (Poverty Driven Children)—one gang may have multiple identities. Jermaine provides the example of PDC, a Brixton gang in which the elders are now using the abbreviation for their music enterprise. PDC is also used to represent several other groups: Poverty Driven Children, Peel Dem Crew, Prevent Dem Coming, Please Don’t Cry, Pray Days Change, and Public Demand Cartel. What is interesting is that these names, like those discussed earlier, have been formed to carry messages and publicly provide information about the group and its members. They not only warn us of who members of groups claim to be and what they are about, but they also hold geographical referents that provide detail and insight into the experiences, dreams, hopes, ambitions, and fears of youth living in London. More so, the PDC title illustrates a constant change in state from the point of a

collective social recognition where youth acknowledge and declare a social position. The group has now moved away from their initial idea of being motivated as a result of being financially impoverished (“Poverty Driven”) to a new social identity that hopes for “Progression on a Daily Cash Flow.”



**Figure 1**, Tag in Southwark Council (green borough)

These multiple identities become a part of a live performance, and for young people who see it as important and necessary to disseminate information about themselves, we witness the representing and constant remaking and re-branding of self. However, as we will see in the following section, this re-branding is not restricted to youth who are actively involved in the configuring of the crews, groups, or gangs. The initial discussions during the Facing Our Maps project have thus seen young people engage in debates where they are making sense of what it means to represent the areas in which they live, through the re-symbolizing of place and the re-branding of self. As they decode their own experiences, their voices make known how *Reppin the Endz* take place. From these discussions, I argue for the importance of thinking through the idea of “reppin” from the young person’s perspective as a significant practice that aids us in understanding how youth spaces are rendered. What has become evident is that the notion of “reppin” is presented through a symbolic process (see Figure 2). Here I have identified three distinct forms of representation.

One mode of representing is through *personal representation*. It is from here that the decision to be a part of the process begins and the signifiers live within the stylistic adorning of symbolic, coloured, and wearable items that act as embodied inscriptions of territorializing. An extension of the personal is the alignment of self with specific groups, where individuals collectively share and represent a group name. A second element is *spatial dominance* as it relates to the areas in which youth live and defend. At this point spaces are claimed through the use of names that are reinforced by the association of names with place. The third element I have identified is the *public object* where existing articles implemented for the benefit of the general public become automatic signifiers that are reused to mark youth territory. All of these elements are used to “repp the endz” (to create boundaries) and reinforce awareness of the group’s territory and presence. However, symbolic representation often creates or spins a “web” of tension among young people living in various spaces. I will now take a closer look at the work produced by one participant based on the area in which he lives and navigates. Through reflexivity we see how he begins to reckon with the process of symbolic representation and the tensions that emerge from the web, as seen in Figures 2 and 3 below.

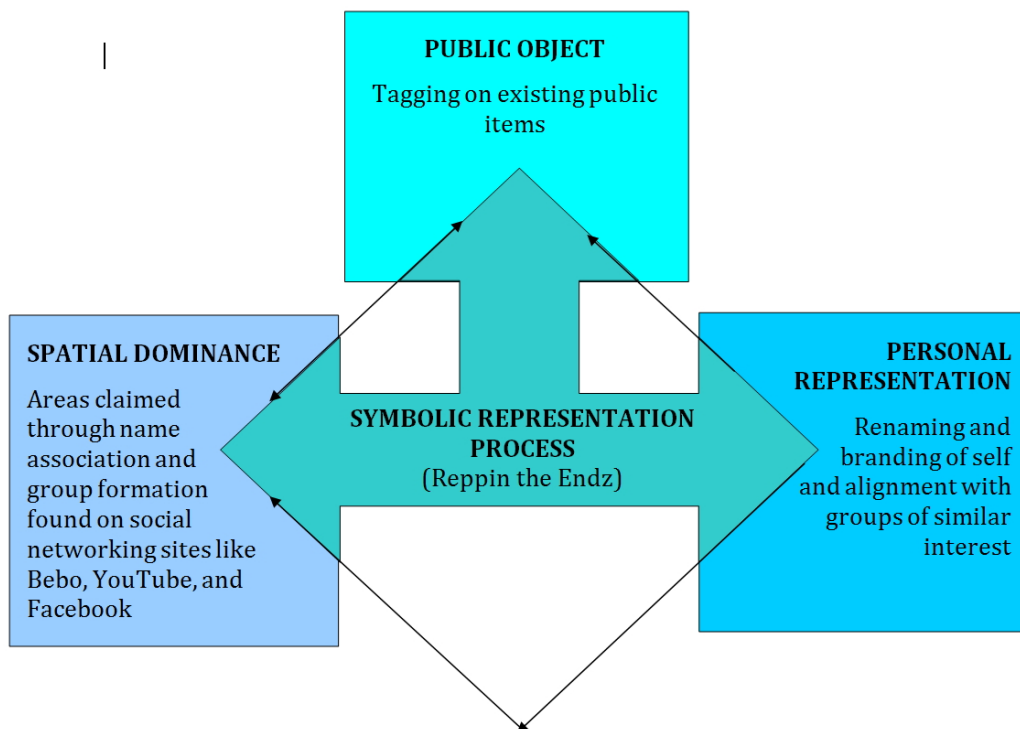
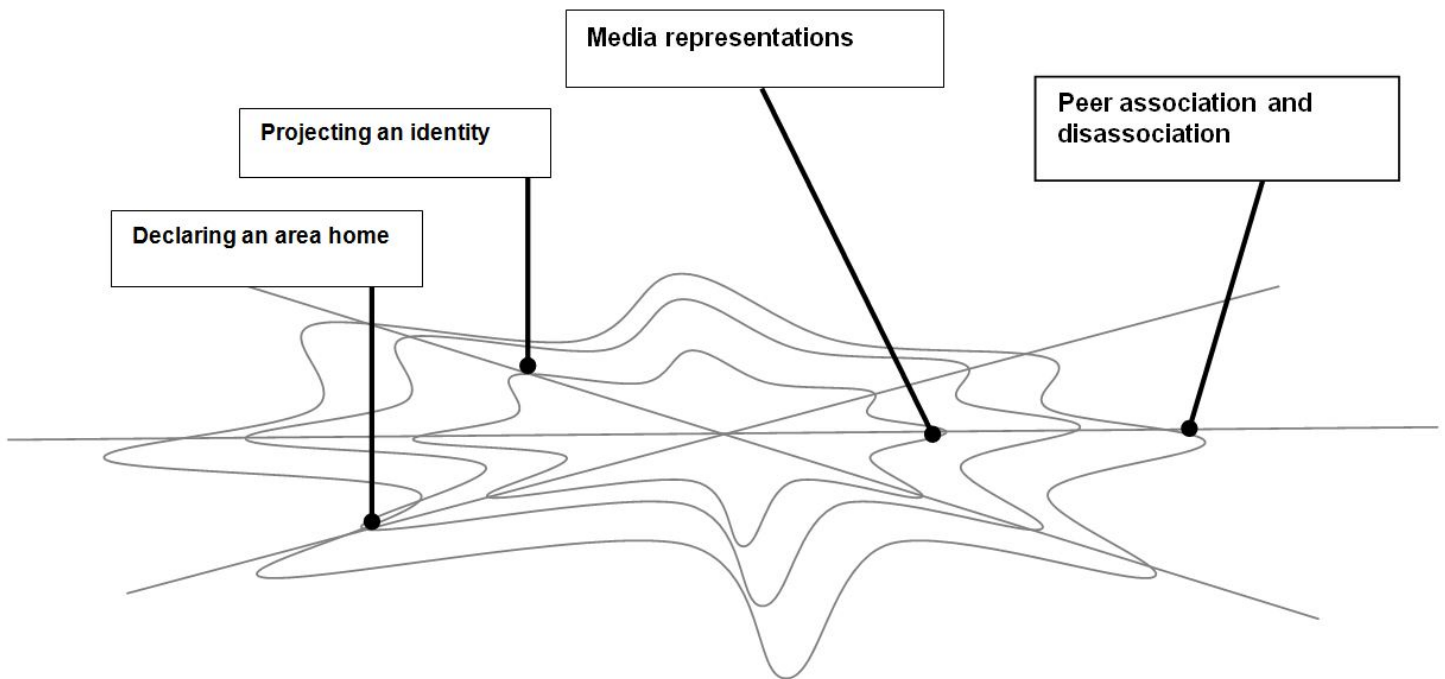


Figure 2, Symbolic Representation Process

## Facing Our Maps: The Reasoning and Reckoning of Place



**Figure 3,** Tensions found in youth spaces.

Samuel Obidisa lives in an estate on Hermans Street in Lambeth, and he presents visuals he created during the project that illustrate how he makes sense of the space he navigates. The work opens a space to discuss how Samuel's concept of the "gang" contests the simplistic assumptions of young people as "problem youth" (Marsh and Melville 73; Jamieson *et al.* 127; Shaw 91). The blanket definitions used to describe and characterise young people arguably overlook what happens in certain aspects of their lives.

Samuel, seeking an alternative to the "gang" lifestyle he witnessed in his area, was referred to the 198 CAL via the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO). As he had not committed a criminal offence, what is important here is that Samuel went to NACRO of his own free will, utilising the resources found in his community. That is why in the images he produced he juxtaposes his choice of road maps and portraits of himself to tell contrasting stories about his life. These images cannot be treated as individual or separate narratives, because there is an important interplay of experiences referenced in one image (Figure 4) that inform what is represented in the other image (Figure 5).



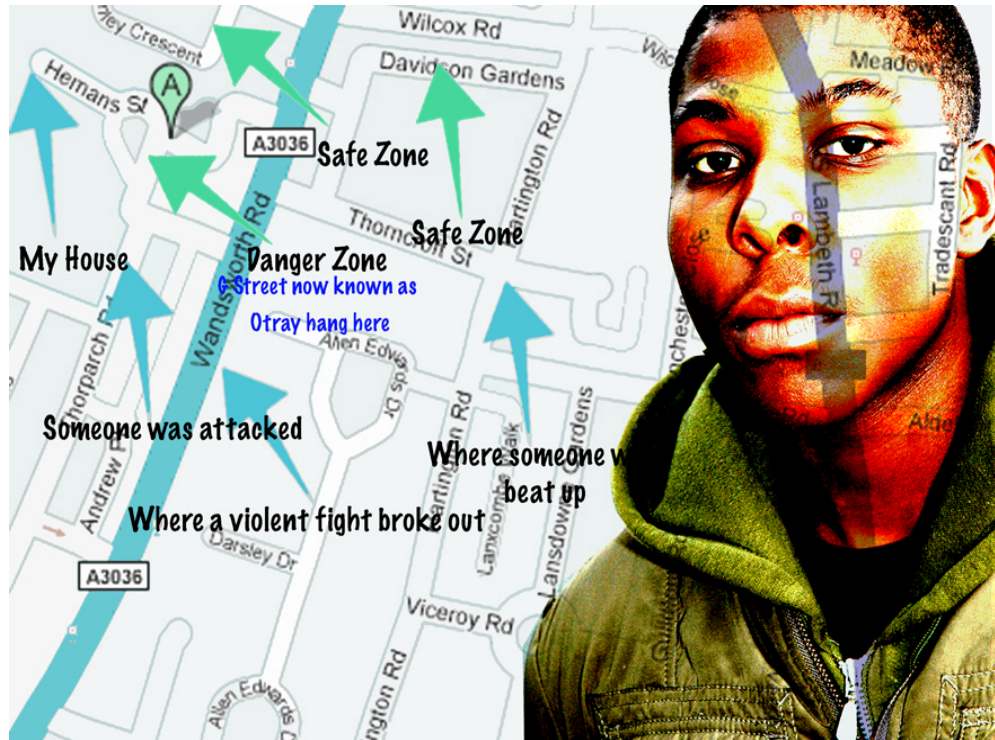


Figure 4, Samuel's Map

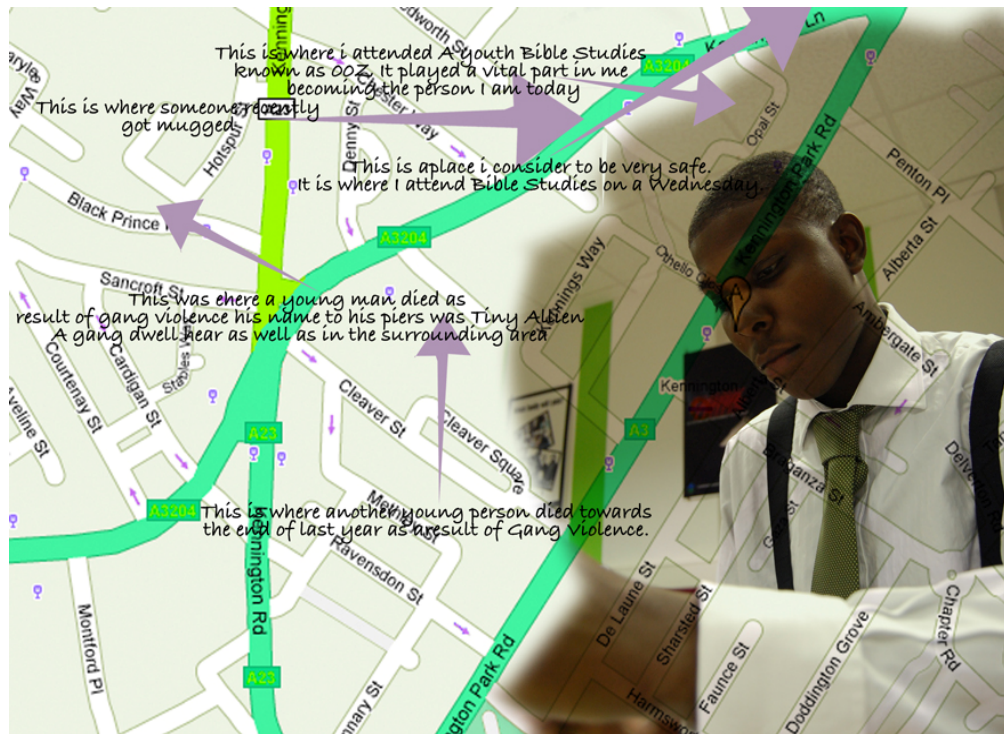


Figure 5, Samuel's Map

During the project's critique, he glances over to Figure 5, which illustrates his life in Kennington where he now attends church and bible study. He explains:

Here I just want to lead a normal life, with no madness and no hype. I want to make sure I create a strong relationship with God and become a good designer. That's why I use this profile [Pointing to the portrait in Figure 5] . . . you can see I am focused in this picture besides looking sharp, I am focused and that's what it's all about now—a new kinda focus—a normal citizen.

Where Samuel describes himself as a “normal citizen” in Figure 5, there is a disparity in the texture of his writing that tells something that is not apparent in Figure 4. It is more than a difference in his choice of font, used to describe happenings on his map. His choice of language is not as abrupt—there is more attention given to his presentation of events and more detail in the textual descriptions that create a different sense of purpose for both images. A change in thought process becomes highly visible as the images begin to pull out the significance and meaning of the individual elements that mark the personal experiences in the work. The work presents the opportunity to decode how these experiences are important to the construction of Samuel's images. They demonstrate a conscious effort to present oneself as a young person who recognizes the importance of citizenship and his ideas of what it means to lead a “normal” and “positive” life.

In concluding his critique, Samuel reflects on both images and draws upon the general similarities and differences within the compositions, stating:

Beside my portrait, I have used bold text here and mostly blue arrows [Figure 4], to give a rougher feel. The pink arrows and light text reflect my softer personality . . . of course the green used for the road is obvious . . . it means a better life . . . you know a green path.

In addition to the obvious representation of greener paths equating to a better life, there are significant dimensions to this work where the images elicit a visual and oral dialogue about young people that is rarely heard. Samuel's visual presentation of self both as a “serious” and invincible person in a dark green “hoodie” against his “focused” and “spiritual” persona is one of many dimensions of the construction of youth identities. When I asked him what he meant by “serious, back in the day,” he explained:

You had to look serious, so no one would take berties [liberties] . . . because I live in Kennington and would link friends on G Street. Some of them went to the same primary and secondary school as I did, but some people just assumed I was in to all that postcode rubbish . . . I was not into it but no one was taking berties with me.

The extract emphasizes a shift in an “identity performance” (Goffman 125), from a position where acting serious is believed to protect Samuel

from potential threats to a commitment to both his spiritual growth as a Christian and creative growth as a designer.

Throughout Samuel's work there is a heavy focus on the superimposed portrait. Locating himself is more significant than the happenings and activities documented in his work. Drawing upon style as a means to differentiate his state of mind, he frames his contrasting positions by making reference to the white shirt, green tie, braces, and the "focused" expression on his face in one piece of work. This is set against the green hoodie and "serious" expression in the other. Although this juxtaposition creates cultural signposts that question how Samuel comes to characterize these differences in personality through acceptable and non-acceptable dress codes, his option to do so is of interest. He reiterates the idea that the shirt and tie equate some sort of status, making him "look sharp", suggesting that once these are worn he would automatically become part of a world exclusive to his former "hoodie" life. What is significant about Samuel's intention to get rid of the "hoodie" is the idea that he is prepared to let go of a key symbol of youth and youth style. Although it may well have been "a coded response to changes affecting the community" where he lives, as suggested by Dick Hebdige (80) when he speaks of youths' "magical appropriation of humble objects" (18), in the case of the "hoodie" its "secret meanings" have gone beyond the idea of a mere signifier of "group life" as it has become a public symbol of violence, and the young people who wear it are no longer just the victims but are marked as the perpetrators (Burman 75).

Samuel, who does not have a criminal conviction or an ASBO—an Anti Social Behavioural Order often wrongfully associated with young people's wearing of the hooded top (Burman 75)—has opted to put the image of the "hoodie" in the past as he is aware that it "interrupts the process of normalisation" (Hebdige 18). It is through a reflexive process that Samuel is able to render and make sense of key moments in his life. This assists in providing a social context for youth positions to be understood, as detailed in Samuel's narrative where he contends with the politics of public identity. As Cecil Wright, P. J. Standen, and Tina Patel argue,

[r]ecognizing these performances allows us to focus on the micro-world of young people as the core social context, which in turn allows them to reveal the less public spaces, networks and relationships that are significant to the negotiation and management of their public identity. (564)

### Making Sense of a Public Identity through Reflexivity

My position as a researcher has been guided by my sensibilities and situated knowledge of being an arts practitioner. As a result of witnessing how young people respond and interact with photography, design and digital imaging, I have come to recognize that such media have been

employed to encourage young people to articulate their views of the social worlds they live in. The use of visual research with young people participating in art and design programs is what Thompson refers to as “situating the discussions” of visual methods within the context of actual research projects in communities (110). However, there are instances where taking note of what lives within the images can erode the embedded discourses in them. According to Silverman, “ethnographers who gather observational data have sometimes been curiously reluctant to use their eyes as well as their ears” (241). This problem is not unique to researchers. Stakeholders and policy makers are presented with the challenge of listening to what lies beneath the outcomes of a funded arts program.

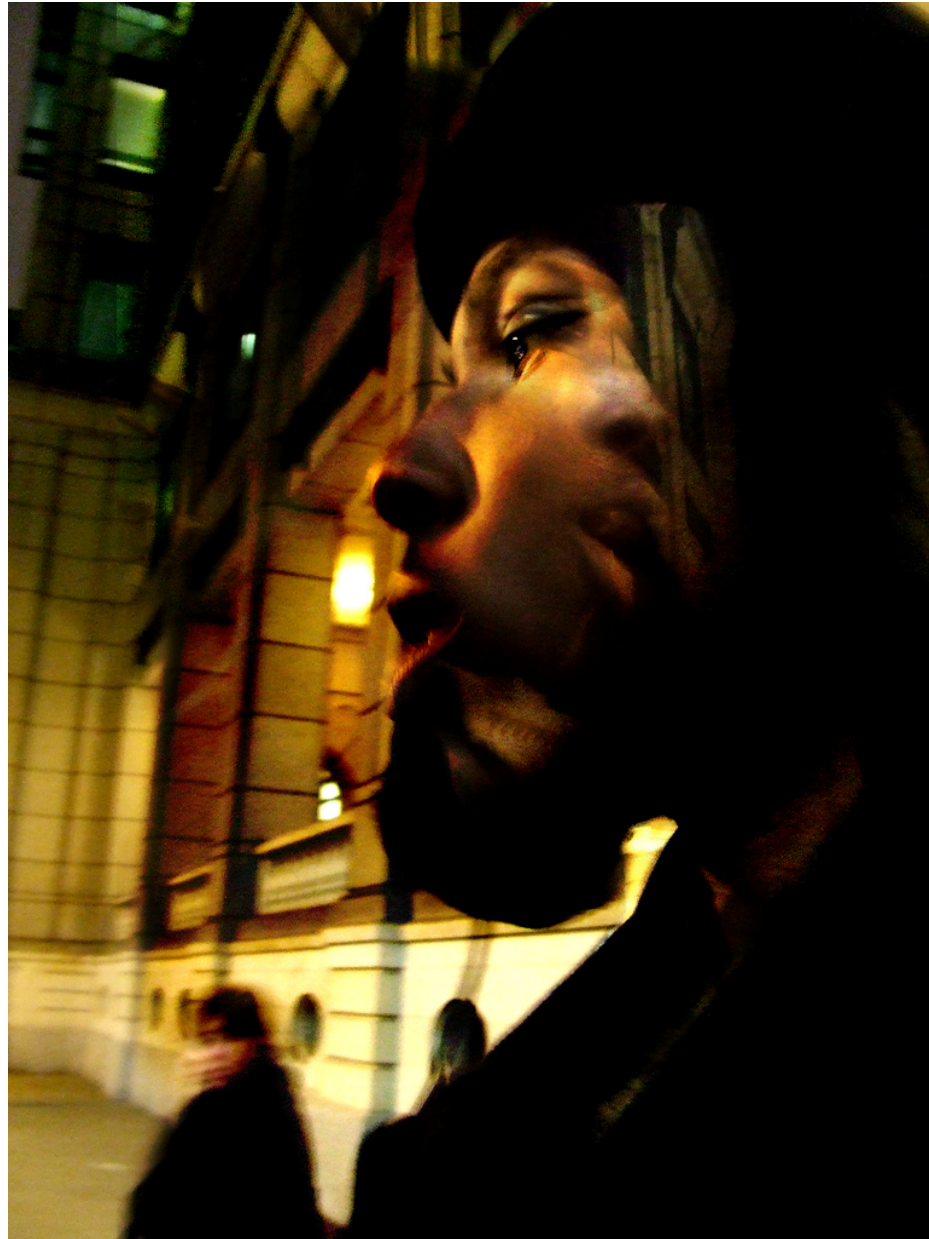
Given that there is a vast array of visual materials available for analysis, there is scope for listening to alternative narratives within visual material produced by participants/young people other than those who respond directly to the request of specific outcomes. Therefore, what has resulted beyond art projects discussed here is the production of knowledge through visual data collaborations with young people and arts practitioners. This is because, as Spencer suggests, “[r]esearch is often enhanced by the inclusion of visual material which gives a broader context allowing a more detailed understanding of everyday social life” (1). Key issues and questions in sociology “can be examined in a manner which adds intimate, particular and substantial detail to the exploration of social actions which may be habitual and commonplace . . . and easily overlooked” (Spencer 1).

My own art practice, which seeks to interrogate sociological concerns through the use of visual material, is aligned with Marcus Banks’ idea of a “collapsing” between the “observers and the observed,” a phenomenon he suggests results in the emergence of the visual record or representation being a collaborative form of representation (44). Working with young people who generate their own representations enables a collaboration that has the potential to allow them to be actively involved in research and serve as more than mere participants in social research or arts projects. However, this reduces, as Thompson suggests, “the unequal power relationship” and promotes, in the case of my own work, young people as co-artists, co-producers, co-students, collaborators or “co-researchers rather than simply as participants in the research” (Thompson 81). As seen above through an example taken from the Mapping Dangerous Spaces project, and in the following section, there has been some reduction of unequal power through the use of photographic and manipulated images produced and analyzed by the participant and myself. The following presents the outcome of such collaborations and the process suggests possibilities for the documenting of arts project and future arts-practitioner-based research.



## Image Elicitation and Photo Manipulation as Collaboration

In order to communicate and confirm my own understanding of what participants have taught me about their views, which were based on the work they produced and key statements they had made, I constructed my own renditions. These were presented to the respective young people for discussion. For example, the image below, *Heterogeneous Self*, was generated from a series of photographs during conversation between Samuel and another young person while on this project.



**Figure 6**, *Heterogeneous Self*, manipulated photograph, Sireita Mullings, 2010.

The conversation, in addition to observations made during Samuel's participation in the project, revealed a dimension of Samuel that I found was not confined to the usual descriptions of a "hoodie," "gangster," or "thug." There was intense debate about the state of the economy, politics and its effects on the state of gun and knife crime and its impact on those from the margins. In an effort to capture the essence of the multiple identities I came to learn of, I shared and discussed the "Heterogeneous Self" image with him. He responded: "yea, you are kinda right about the many identities thing . . . but you have to change your identity every now and then depending on your situation." There is much to be discussed about identity performance; however, it is important to emphasize that the image was produced as a commentary that challenges problematic perceptions while simultaneously sharing those that have been learned. It is, as Wendy Ewarld states, a way to "create situations in which other perceptions surface with my own" (20). Collaboratively, Samuel has since created the image below titled "Contemplation with My Self" in response to "Heterogeneous Self."



**Figure 7**, *Contemplation with My Self*, manipulation by Samuel Alebioshu, photography by Sireita Mullings, 2012.

The point here is that through collaboration, reflexivity manifests during the practitioner's encounter with young people and vice versa. Yet during a discussion with a fellow practitioner, Barby Asante, it was suggested that the practitioner who leads the project produces work collectively with young people as a result of youth participation; this then makes the idea of "collaboration" one of "facilitation."

The idea of collaboration with young people then becomes obscure for some practitioners because of the power structure between artist and student artist, teacher and student. The collective engagement, transition, facilitation, and collaboration with young people here occur on three levels throughout this process of reflexivity. One is during the phase of teaching participants how to create visual representations of their worlds, using text and image elicitation, photography and design programs such as Photoshop. Another is the final artwork created by the young participants, as well as the production of visuals (documentary photography, artwork) and text by the practitioner/researcher as a result of the knowledge acquired from research participants. Both the young people and the arts practitioner's/researcher's artwork open up a space for a sociological analysis of individual experiences that enable an interrogation of the variety of real and imagined landscapes inhabited by young people and the practitioner. It is through collaboration and participation that both parties become attentive to the patterns within the representations of the shared physical environment of urban neighborhoods.

## Conclusion

What I am arguing here is that we are often not privy to the process of reasoning and reckoning that young people undergo and, as a result, their actions are easily misunderstood. When young people make efforts to symbolically represent themselves, a web of meaning is produced that holds various tensions. The images made from maps and portraits presented within this paper enable us to see how these tensions exist within the day-to-day living of youth in London. Both the maps and portraits are interconnected, and they assist in the reflection and navigation of time and place; therefore, the images hold multiple meanings. They provide an insight to what happened in specific spaces and perform a temporal mapping of change. The tensions experienced, as in Samuel's case, were not solely antagonistic but signified key moments for young people to unpack and make sense of their situations.

For Samuel, there was an irony in declaring the place he felt safe as home in order to avoid danger. This led him to think about the meaning of his associations and devise strategic methods to distance himself. Upon making sense of how the media represents his peers, it became important for him to explain how and why it is that he has chosen to present himself using two contrasting portraits. The point I am emphasising is the

complexity of young people's positions, seen through a shift in tensions that not only exist within a place, an area, street or estate but also within a person, creating a different kind of internal conflict, one ignited by external factors that impose on the process of how self is formed and represented.

Although street gangs are considered to be constructed from an urban explosion of youth who are considered impoverished and "least equipped to cope with the stresses of urban areas" (Covey 5), we learn that among these youth there are those who are seeking different pathways. The options to do so are not simply based on black-and-white decisions of wrong or right and good or bad choices. This is because the postcode phenomenon is one factor that haunts the lives of youth living in London, and it is their personal maps that allow us to see their position and how it is they are thinking through the problem on the street. Here young people negotiate and represent perceived threats of danger and safety using visuals that help us to understand how problems manifest and how it is they navigate these spaces.

The visual project enabled young people to unravel, interrogate, and provide their own descriptions of youth landscapes that go beyond the often negatively biased views found in media reports in which media perspectives of youth violence are reproduced and dominate the public arena. Yet there are those who contest these misrepresentations, such as the young people themselves, who provide counter narratives to support their claims. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that something else is happening. The process of self-presentation and impression management creates a series of tensions that reveal the double-sided nature of the concept of "reppin." The notion of "reppin" allows young people to claim space symbolically through a sense of local pride and ownership. However, this sense of place and pride produced through the representational process of "reppin the endz" can be confining because youth are caught in a web spun from this very practice. The result is that the area can be a place of self-pride and assertion as well as one of confinement. It is the convergence of these tensions that complicate the position of many youth, forcing us to move away from how symbolic representations create impact and are understood to scrutinise how the young people involved make sense of these processes. By doing so, the art works they create act as reflexive tools, in this case tools that encourage the rethinking of how geographies that appear restrictive are constantly being renegotiated.

## Notes

1. The term "Post Code" is used in the same way as the United States zip code, where numbers and letters are used to classify geographical locations.

2. See Brake and Shukra.

3. Virtual gang representations of London can be seen here:  
<http://londonstreetgangs.blogspot.co.uk/>

4. Ben was killed in “green borough.” The article details the colour-coded rivalry between youth in London:  
<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/jul/01/youthjustice.crime>

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