

An exhibition of photographs from *East Side Stories: Gang Life in East L.A. and Juvenile*

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS ...

Raised in violence, I enacted my own upon the world and upon myself. What saved me was the camera—its ability to gaze upon, to focus, to investigate, to reclaim, to resist, to re-envision. I see my photographs as reflections of these experiences: generations of violence, adolescents in prison, and families of the incarcerated.

FROM JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ ...

My interest in California began with street gangs in the early 1990s. Nearly two decades later, I continue photographing in California. My aim is to get to the core of violence in America, not just the physical violence against one another, but the quiet violence of letting families fall apart, the violence of unemployment, the violence of our educational system and the violence of segregation and isolation.

My work surges from both a profoundly personal and also a political place. A searing memory: returning home from my elementary school to find my stepfather nodding off, with a needle in his arm. A memory that I would relive in my own body—as a young adult I too became a “user.” I see my photographs as reflections of these experiences: generations of violence, adolescents in prison, and families of the incarcerated.

A major turning point in my life came after the publication of my first cover story for *National Geographic* in 1990, “Growing up in East Harlem.” I remember standing in the public library on 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, listening to several kids look through the pages of the magazine, and seeing their excitement at realizing that the photographer was a Latino. I stood there surrounded by the community depicted on those pages; seeing such elation from these children that their community had been represented in this international publication, that is one of the proudest moments in my life. My memory of that moment continues to fuel my commitment to photographing Latinos in the United States and the issues that concern them today.

Early in my career as a photojournalist I was based out of Sweden. This allowed me to travel around the world on assignments for Scandinavian publications like *Dagens Nyheter*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *International Herald Tribune*, as well as *National Geographic*. Living in Scandinavia, I began to look at the United States with a different perspective. The rap music coming out of the streets of Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 1990s really sparked my interest to take a deeper look at the youth culture that had developed there.

In 1992 I began photographing gangs in Los Angeles, leading to my book, *East Side Stories: Gang Life in East L.A.*, published by Powerhouse Books in 1998. At that time, it was one of the first photography books to take a long-term, deep look inside gang life in Los Angeles. This subject matter was very attractive to mainstream media. I was adamant that this book be more than just photographs. I fought hard to include texts that explained the history of Los Angeles and its complexities of gang culture. I wanted to give context to the lives depicted in this book and take a leading role in guiding young readers from such communities to re-envision their futures. I made sure that students were included in tours of my Los Angeles Gangs exhibition at the International Center of Photography. I became a spokesman for this subject matter in interviews with CNN, PBS, NPR, BBC, and Univision. I then realized the impact of this project and began to lecture about these topics at schools and universities around the country.

I continued looking into the lives of at risk youth with my book, *Juvenile*, which takes readers inside the lives of juvenile offenders as they begin their journey through the criminal justice system in Northern California. Both these books have been used in university curriculums around criminal justice, within classes of sociology and English departments, and have helped educate probation officers, counselors, families and their children that are entering the juvenile justice system.

Recently I collaborated with radio producer, Benjamin Chesterton, to produce a multimedia piece for the

Joseph Rodriguez
Homegrown

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
August 27 through October 12, 2012

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BBC World Service, titled "The Other Side of Sweden." The piece looked at Muslim immigrant youth living in Sweden, using a combination of still images, video, and recorded interviews.

My work has been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones*, *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, *Stern*, *Der Spiegel*, *GEO*, *Fokus Magazine*, and many others. I've published six photographic book essays, including *East Side Stories: Gang Life in East L.A. and Juvenile*. My photographs have been exhibited in major galleries and museums in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.; as well as internationally in Stockholm, Cardiff, Havana, Helsinki, Copenhagen, and many more. In spite of this success I still feel a lack of attention given by our traditional media outlets to those going through the criminal justice system, and I want to continue learning and collaborating to explore ways to give this part of our population of today a greater voice through the new media of tomorrow.

-JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ
NEW YORK
AUGUST, 2012

The Heart of the Matter: Humanistic Realism through the Lens of Joseph Rodriguez

Sharon Kantorowski Davis, Ph. D.
Professor of Sociology
University of La Verne

The photography of Joseph Rodriguez captures the essence and the spirit of a community. It does so with a keen and critical eye. The lens is probing and unapologetic, yet it is sensitive and intimate. It is a portrait of what we call in my world, the discipline of Sociology, a subculture and a community.

The subculture that is largely represented in this photographic exhibition is socioeconomically and ethnically determined. It is a working-class subculture. Some, such as Oscar Lewis, would call it a “culture of poverty”. At a macro-level, it speaks to the reality of social stratification in American society. There is relative economic poverty in the midst of affluence; there is hunger, want and need that has been unattended to and ignored by the larger society. The influence of that poverty is woven into the very fabric of the subcultural community and is inherited by future generations.

Subcultures and communities are not necessarily economically and/or ethnically based. All ethnicities have their subcultures and communities and, ironically, Caucasians represent the largest numbers of people living at the poverty level. Yet when we look at proportions and percentages of all ethnic groups, we find that ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the official statistics of poverty. In this exhibition of Joseph Rodriguez’ photography, the focus is primarily on the Latino experience. While images of other ethnic groups such as Blacks and Asians are included, they remain at the margins. This to me, as a sociologist, subtly suggests that geographic and cultural segregation continue to exist in American society. To put it in Marxian terms, a shared relative deprivation may exist, but consciousness of kind remains less developed.

Joseph Rodriguez’ forte, however, is the micro-level. At the micro-level, the priorities, values, beliefs, and traditions of subcultures are examined. Socio-economic status and ethnicity provide the parameters that shape the development and content of communities in which these individual lives are lived. Rodriguez explores the content of daily life without bias or personal judgment. He does not invoke moral values of “good” or “bad”, but captures and documents the experiences of the community and its subculture as they exist

The content of the subculture is complex and interrelated. From W.I. Thomas to Abraham Maslow, we are reminded that all human beings have a need to belong and to feel safe, secure, and personally validated. Subcultures and communities are created to address these needs. Rodriguez’ photographs provide intimate portraits of how these needs are met.

I had the opportunity to meet and speak with Joseph Rodriguez before the final photographs for this exhibition were selected. As a humanistic qualitative sociologist with a specialty in crime, juvenile delinquency, and social deviance, I was extremely interested in his subject matter and in his philosophy and approach to these subjects as an artist. I found that as an artist, he has great insight and sensitivity, and as an individual, he has experienced economic deprivation and the criminal justice system firsthand. He shared that he likes to get to know the subjects of his photographs; he spends time and talks with them. He establishes relationships and trust with them before he begins photographing them. Thus, he is able to capture images of them that are natural, relaxed, and unstaged. His portraits, *in situ*, draw us into their world and the experiences that they take for granted. He offers us a window through which we may view the everyday lives of a community with which some viewers may not be familiar.

The everyday lives of this community are culturally rich and varied. We glimpse the importance of family and the joy of celebrations. In his photographs of quinceañeros, baby showers, and large extended families, we begin to understand the centrality of family and the cycle of life. We see the teaching of subcultural values in the photograph of the baby being shown how to hold a gun by the father, while the baby mama smiles broadly in the background. We are witnessing the socialization process. This image, for me, is the most powerful and my favorite of all the photos; it shows us what has been inherited from the past, is in the present, and portends what may be in the future.

The backdrop of economic poverty insinuates its presence into the photographs. It is palpably present in the photograph of the boy peering into the empty refrigerator. It is also present, but less obvious, in photographs of teen girls in their *mascas* (face makeup and hairstyle) and gang, *Insane Juvenile Queens*. They are searching for community and creating meaning and a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves in a larger world that does not readily acknowledge and value their presence.

This is a subculture in which many children grow up fast; girls become mothers and boys become outlaws. Some parents become afraid of and for their own children, as we learn in the photographs. It includes violence and shootings as an everyday occurrence; these may be directed at a school bus filled with children, at the local ice cream street vendor, or at oneself. This is, to borrow a concept from Erving Goffman, a taken-for-granted world of police presence, court appearances, juvenile placements, and ankle bracelets. Having been in placement (or in jail or prison) is not uncommon and may, in fact, be worn as a badge of honor and used as a status symbol.

Joseph Rodriguez is careful to introduce us to this subculture, which may either be familiar to us or radically different than our own, but not alienate us to the humanity of the subject matter. In two separate photographs, we see the same man: first, at his blue-collar job as a truck dispatcher and second, at home, caring for his family. We are informed that he is well-respected in the community. There are also photographs that suggest the importance and value of religion in the subculture such as that of the youth praying. Most viewers will be familiar and comfortable with legitimate work, family values, and personal spirituality.

In the end, we are left with a glimpse into a culturally rich and vital community with a subculture reflective of ethnic and socioeconomic status. This community's taken-for-granted reality is captured through the lens of Joseph Rodriguez. While this community may have impediments and challenges to achieving conventional measures of success, it exists and it is growing. Rodriguez' photographic images force us to acknowledge it.

Thank you, Joseph Rodriguez, for the humanity and artistry of your photographs. They teach us about ourselves, our subcultures, our communities, and our society. When words fail us, your images leave an imprint in our minds and on our souls.

The American Dream:
Reflections on *Homegrown* and the Photographs of Joseph Rodriguez

About five years ago, I went to my last three strikes hearing. In the thirty plus years I directed the University's Prison Education Program, I went to quite a few of these, always as a character witness for someone who had been a student in one of my prison classes. Lorenzo had been just such a student. He had two strikes when I knew him in prison, and since he had been released he accumulated one more, for swiping a car from someone he knew which he had planned on returning. Anyway, the guy pressed charges, Lorenzo was convicted, and now he had a third strike and was facing a minimum of twenty-five years in prison.

At the hearing, I again met Lorenzo's parents. They had an interesting story: They had met and fallen in love in North Carolina where they both were students in a dirt-floored, one room rural schoolhouse. After graduating, the father went off to Baltimore to work in a shipyard so that he could make enough money to enable them to get married. After working for three years, he went back to North Carolina, and they were married, but they were both Black, and neither one wanted to raise children in the rural racist backwoods of the South. So they put off having children until they could save enough money and move to the land of their dreams – California – where their children could grow up and be safe. In their case this dream city was Pomona, where he got a good job in a defense plant.

And somehow, and they had no idea why, things turned. Both of their two sons got into gangs, and three years prior the older had been killed in a gang shootout. Now they were in court, watching their last child face twenty-five years in prison. Which Lorenzo got. The judge was very sympathetic, but according to the sentencing matrix, he had no choice but to impose the mandated twenty-five year sentence. Lorenzo would get out of prison when his parents were seventy-five years old.

Why do these photographs make me think of that story? Maybe because what Joseph Rodriguez has captured is the sense of a real story playing out here. People living real lives, lives that most middle-class people can hardly imagine. The Insane Juvenile Queens. Chivo showing his daughter how to hold a gun while the mother, proud of her daughter, looks on. Prison students of mine described sleeping in the bathtub as kids because of the possibility of random gunfire going through their house at night. Young men up against a wall, arms and legs spread. Bodies on the street at night.

These photographs make me think of two things. The first is the juxtaposition of this exhibit, here, at this university. Most of the people in these photographs do not think of going to a university. "University" is not in their frame of reference. "University" is not a part of their future. There is no room for them in a university. They have no future.

So the second thing these photographs make me think of is a sense of resignation. These people have lived this life, are living it in these pictures, and will continue to live it with no way out. And it all has very little to do with classic individual choice. This country makes it very easy to fall into a life of poverty, all the more so in the current economy, and this country does not care very much for those who wind up falling. Gang life and the resultant criminality. Luis Rodriguez says that "it calls you back," but it is more than that. Michelle Alexander, in *The New Jim Crow*, says that the criminal justice system constitutes the new apartheid, segregating generations of Black and Hispanic young men, giving them criminal records for minor offences, taking away their rights, often permanently like the right to vote, "caught in a closed circuit of perpetual marginality" from which it is almost impossible to escape.

These are the pictures of the people on that margin.

David R. Werner, 2012

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Javier, a.k.a. "Street Life" (left) plays with his cousin, Li'l Ray. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



PeeWee and his son in San Francisco's Mission District



Chivo mows the lawn. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



Child with his aunts. East Los Angeles

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Teens show off their dance hip hop dance moves. South Central Los Angeles



Children play on a picket fence. Watts, Los Angeles



Halloween. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



Girls play the game of marriage. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

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Quinceañera Party. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



Paul, 8-years-old, after finishing his homework prays for his uncle Husky who was just killed by another gang. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



Baby shower for Scooby's girlfriend in Griffith Park. Most of his family attends. Los Angeles



Insane Juvenile Queens. South Central Los Angeles

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Evergreen Park, Boyle Heights. Los Angeles



Insane Juvenile Queens. One member said, " We are not a gang. We are like a family. We try and help each other with our problems. Society and family don't understand us." South Central Los Angeles



Chivo at home with his son Joshua and his sister. Boyle Heights. Los Angeles



The morning after a rival gang tried to shoot Chivo for the fourth time, he teaches his daughter how to hold a .32-caliber pistol. Her mother looks on. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

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Gypsy comes home from work (he is an electrician) to feed his sons dinner. His wife rests, as she is pregnant. Gypsy is a role model for many of his homeboys. East Los Angeles



José (left) has just been released from Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. He is at his grandparents' home with his brother, cousin and grandfather who is blind. San Jose



Gang members shot an ice cream vendor during an attempted armed robbery. Paramedics try to save him. East Los Angeles



Mike Estrada holds a photograph of his father who is in prison. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

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Michael Jackson and his father in their motel room. Michael wanders as far as he is permitted while being restricted to house arrest. San Jose



Michael's mother lectures him, trying to keep in contact with him. She wants to keep him on track so he doesn't get into any more trouble. His sister feeds her baby in the background. San Jose



Michael knows the refrigerator is barren but he looks for food anyway. San Jose



Michael is 17, is taking Ritalin for ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and is mildly retarded. He is under house arrest and wears an electronic monitoring device. He was arrested for possession of a knife in violation of probation. He shares the motel room with the rest of his family, 7 people in total. San Jose

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Chivo with his mother, Ema, sister and friend, Boxer, at the kitchen table. His mother tells him that he'd better get a job. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



Albert, the father of Igor, collects mattresses to pay for his heroin habit. East Los Angeles



José, 17-years-old, is doing homework. The judge has agreed to release José during the week for school. He will do his 60 days as "weekend time." From Monday morning until Friday afternoon he is with his grandparents and going to school. On Friday afternoon he must return to Santa Clara Juvenile Hall. San Jose



Boys and their grandfather at home. Their mother is under house arrest. Richmond

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Frankie gives Gyro a haircut, while Spanky plays with a toy gun. They are getting ready to look for a job. A year later, Gyro was killed. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



O.G.s (original gangsters). Watts, Los Angeles



Carlos and his homeboys from the 19th Street gang are put up against the wall as a policeman is looking for a murder suspect. San Francisco



San Jose Juvenile Court. A Grandmother comforts her grandson who is going into court for sentencing. San Jose

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A neatly-made bed is an expected sight at the B-8 maximum Security Unit, Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. San Jose



Sovanny, 17 years old, is in Juvenile Hall's B-8 unit, the maximum-security unit for violent and high-risk youth offenders. He threw a rock at a car and struck a man in the head, seriously injuring him. They aren't sure of his sentence because the young injured man may die. Sovanny feels sorry for his family because both of his brothers are also locked-up. San Jose



A 12-year-old boy looks out the window of his cell. Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. San Jose



Lance relaxes in his room at home. The court TV program involves real-life criminal cases. San Andreas

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Chivo at work as a truck dispatcher, East Los Angeles.



Gang awareness class, California Youth Authority.
Whittier



Kethan shopping for sneakers after his release from San Francisco Log Cabin Ranch School. San Francisco



Manuel Garcia teaches César from Marianna in computer class at Soledad Enrichment Action School.
East Los Angeles

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Carlos at work at Mel's Drive-In. San Francisco



Carlos (middle) with his fellow workers at the diner where he works. San Francisco



Evergreen gang members help push a car. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



19th Street homeboys in San Francisco's Mission district.

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Evergreen gang members, including Igor who is out in front, throw bottles at a rival gang. Boyle Heights, Los Angeles



Young man running on the streets of Boyle Heights. Los Angeles



Sovanny's parents escaped from Cambodia during the Viet Nam war. "In Cambodia you respect your elders. In the United States, the child is feared by their parents." San Jose



Sheriff's Gang Unit stops gang members in their car to check for guns. Carson

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Seeing the U.S. Supreme Court for the first time, Kethan travels to Washington, D.C. to participate in a national poetry slam. Kethan was recently released from Log Cabin Ranch School for juvenile offenders. San Mateo



Lance reciting one of his poems. San Andreas



Michael, under house arrest. San Jose