II.

INTERFACE AND CHOICE:

TYPES AND IMPLICATIONS OF METADATA

1. Metadata and Agency

After exploring the conceptual implications of infrastructure and having introduced metadata as the material actualizing it, I shall explain how such different types of metadata function, which will lead to a better understanding of interface. More importantly, I will focus on the peculiarities of each type of metadata and their differences, which are very important also in showing the existing asymmetries.

Most notably, the first two types introduced – structural and textural metadata – differ from the latter two – body metadata and metadata of locality – in their relationship to interface, that is the level of agency they provide and the ways they can be chosen. Body and locality metadata are then defined in the second part of this chapter as metadata beyond choice, second-class labels through which the limits of the choices enabled by interface are shown.

1.1. Structural Metadata: The Nerd

Nowadays, the word "nerd" has come to embody anything inside of a heterogeneous constellation of different figures: from the subculturally-appealing hipster wearing fashionable glasses with heavy frames to the cute and inoffensive geek who would give his right arm for a Star Wars figurine, or more generally a sort of attributive quality meaning the obsession with a particular interest and the compulsive urge to talk about it in specific terms even with people who might not be familiar with it at all. In American comedies like *Grandma's Boy*[1], for example, the video game company where the movie is set is populated by various versions of the kind, corresponding to different ages and walks of life: from the enterprising college kid to the grown-up stoner, from the teen genius dressing like Neo, the mystical leather coat-wearing hacker from the *Matrix*[2], to the New Age-inspired entrepreneur.

Despite the manifold facets the Nerd has been conjugated in by pop culture, I am here more interested in the core blueprint of this figure, that is the straight-As student who might sacrifice some of the carefree social life that is typical of college times for a successful career in the science or IT fields, as shown by the aforementioned examples.

The Nerd has emerged as somewhat of a key figure in popular culture in the past couple of decades. From a scholarly apt underdog oppressed by the college jock, he has become the hero of the dotcom era. This figure's popularity has been increasingly growing to the point that *American Pie Presents Beta House*[3] portrays a group of glass-wearing, straight-A overachiever fraternity ruling over a campus where the jocks and the average frat boys are risking extinction. A long time has passed since those days when Nerds had to get their revenge: they now own the place. And it is not just in sporadic pop culture tributes that we can trace the rise of this figure, but most importantly in publications like Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In this influential and controversial book the author defines his loosely aggregated "creative class" around different types of professionals, including both the bohemian and gay-friendly art crowd, who populates gentrifying urban areas and lives

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1   *Grandma's Boy*. dir. Nicholaus Goossen. Wilshire 1, 2006. Film.

2   *The Matrix*. Dir. Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski. Groucho II Film Partnership, 1999. Film.

3   *American Pie Presents Beta House*. dir. Andrew Waller. Neo Art & Logic,2007.

the city at ground level - something Jane Jacobs, a big influence on Florida's own work, has argued for since the 60s - and the more suburban tech intelligentsia, made of smart kids coming straight out of universities to enter the information technology business at high levels. Both Google and Facebook, two of the most monolithic internet enterprises active today - and in the case of Google, also the occasional reason for diplomatic chills, such as the Clinton-China controversy[4] - have started in universities, and Florida himself points out the importance of universities in the recruitment for innovative and competitive start-ups.

Given its importance as the first step for a successful career in the so called Third Wave economy theorized by Alvin Toffler (much like Florida's Creative Economy) is more and more evident, academic education becomes more and more specific and targeted. This process has been famously conceptualized in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, his highly influential report on knowledge from the late 70s.

Atomization of knowledge in more and more specialized languages leads, as Lyotard pointed out, to a similar disintegration of the university institution, now more related to one's own professional route rather than to infusing a common background. Studying will provide tools and structures rather than notions and contents; knowledge will not be transmitted *una tantum*, but will be able to update itself[5].

This is very important: while the Nerd is schooled in competitive institutions, his knowledge is still, to a significant extent, self-taught. Be it with electronic engineering or computer programming, his task in life is to create interfaces and enable networks, to make information flow as smooth as possible. This creative side of the Nerd is what makes Florida feature this figure in his Creative Class, and also the reason why this figure has become an icon of personal enterprise. From *Revenge of the Nerds*[6] to the *Harold and Kumar*[7] movie series, the Nerd is someone who breaks into the world with his sole will and perseverance and against all social odds, a truly self-made man celebrating, on one hand, values we might

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4 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8472683.stm (last checked August 13, 2010)

5 http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

6 *Revenge of the Nerds*. dir. Jeff Kanew. Interscope Communication, 1984. Film.

7 *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle*. Dir. Danny Leiner. Endgame Entertainment, 2004. Film.; *Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay*. Dir. Jon Hurwitz, Hayden Schlossberg. New Line Cinema, 2008. Film.

cautiously call postmodern like diversity (proper nerds are often represented as immigrants of Southern or Eastern Asian descent, just like in the example of the Harold and Kumar movies), and, on the other, more modern virtues like perseverance and truth. The Nerd can go from hacker to entrepreneur, and since, as Alexander Galloway points out in *Protocol,* all hackers are either terrorists or libertarians, his twofold nature of subversive and ambitious is what makes him perfectly fit for today's reckless market.

The Nerd's libertarian implications are not in any contradiction with his being rooted in institutional knowledge. According to Lyotard "[t]he ideology of communicational 'transparency', which goes hand in hand with the commercialisation of knowledge, will begin to perceive the State as a factor of opacity and 'noise'[8]."

The typically libertarian wariness of the state is one of the factors underlying debates around what has been also defined as the "Californian Ideology", that is a blind and US-inspired faith in technology and the market. Amongst the inspiring literature to the followers of this trend are Wired magazine and theoretical publications like *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age*, by Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Third Wave theorist Alvin Toffler[9]. In the aforementioned text, the authors salute the coming of a new era, where the new technologies of electronic communication media will allow people to be free to live and work from anywhere, also opening new frontiers to individual entrepreneurship. They also support neo-liberal views such as Newt Gingrich's, advocating free market in order to generate free communications.

On the other hand, against their convictions are - quite obviously - Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, the coiners of the term and authors of a very critical text titled quite simply *The Californian Ideology*[10]. In their text they defend the role of the State in allowing network infrastructures to be built in the first place, and make the example of a ground-breaking and

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8   http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

9   Dyson, Esther, et al., *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age*, Washington, DC: Progress & Freedom Foundation, 1994.

10 Babrook, Richard, Andy Cameron, *The Californian Ideology,* 1995. Retrieved at http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-californianideology-main.html

state-run internet service in France, Minitel, which could have been the inspiration for a European "virtual class" advocating no less than a "rebirth of the modern"[11].

This last term makes the philosophical grounding of this debate quite explicit, and it is not surprising that Slavoj Žižek, maybe the contemporary philosopher with the most famous nostalgia for modern dialectics, is another strong critic of the Californian Ideology. In his book *Violence*, he identifies it with the "liberal communists of Porto Davos[12]", meaning people like Bill Gates, who on one hand strangle the world with their monopoly and exploitative politics and on the other sport good intentions with charity and New Age-inspired illusions of harmony and unity.

Manuel Castells writes about a synergy between the state and corporations, through the very knowledge institutions Lyotard writes about:

"[T]he rise of the technocracy within the state displaces the traditional integrative functions of the politically determined bureaucracy, establishing a tight linkage between the high levels of the state and the corporate world through the intermediary of the scientific establishment[13]."

According to Castells, be it corporations or the state the main driver in network enabling, the flow of capital and information seems to be essential. But more than corporations as individual actors, Franco "Bifo" Berardi argues, there is an interconnection of communication and capital itself that is impossible to ignore:

"The capitalist paradigm is imprinted on the collective intelligence, inside the techno-social interfaces, in the semiotic framework of social communications. [...] Capital is a proliferating process of semiotization, informing techno-social interfaces and producing neural pathways and frames of social interaction[14]."

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11 Ibidem.

12 Žižek, Slavoj, *Violence*, London: Picador, 2008.

13 Castells, Manuel, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-regional Process,* Cambridge, Massachussetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991. p. 31

14 http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/hrc/theory/californianideo/response/t.4.2.6%5B1%5D.html (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

Flow has to be controlled. Social relations are built through technology, and as both the Hacker Manifesto ("create relations without representation[15]") and Facebook demonstrate, the role of reclaiming interface is increasingly crucial.

Thanks to the Internet, we now own more knowledge than we can possibly absorb, and so the Web is more and more about interfaces, about the way we are served this cognitive over-abundance and the ways we can filter it. Interfaces become the aesthetics of the latest postmodernity, or maybe they testify for an emerging post-postmodernity mashing not only aesthetics, but recombining functionalities as well as looks.When all information is common, to filter, choose and even discard are acts of elegance, semiotic gestures more significant than information itself. And so the explosion of maps, indexes, graphs and charts all over the internet might be the World Wide Web's most relevant content right now. Like influential theorist of the postmodern Fredric Jameson said: "The political form of postmodernism, is there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale[16]". This sentence can easily remind us of both the creative and bottom-up explosion of infoviz and Google's libertarian exploitation of user-related and user-generated analytics.

Let us take the example of Facebook. The platform itself does not provide anything more than the possibility to exchange personal or non-personal information, messages, and photos with friends – or non-friends. Its RSS feed-based structure, though, brings the network to another level of interconnection, for which the adjective "rhizomatic" would be a euphemism. The users insert their data, their preferences, create applications they can share, and are of course exposed to a large amount of advertising. Freedom of expression and capitalism: it is no surprise fervent libertarians like Peter Thiel[17] are among Facebook's biggest investors.

Google is also famously relying on user-generated statistics as their personal data-gold, and its success lies in the powerful algorithms it uses (of which PageRank is the most notorious

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15   McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto [version 5.1: transitional version]*. Retrieved at
      http://web.mit.edu/cms/Events/mit2/Abstracts/mckenzie**wark**.pdf
16   Jameson,Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2008. p. 54

17   http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/jan/14/facebook (last checked August 13, 2010)

example), that are able to filter and organize that information. The Mountain View giant's lust for data and metadata is also one of the reasons for the acquisition of the commercially modest YouTube. The company allegedly[18] incorporated the popular video-sharing site to obtain the substantial amount of metadata with which each video was loaded, since they could not allow such precious material to be fed only to the site's own search engine, and in the future possibly negated for commercial reasons to their own algorithms.

As an algorithm designer and an interface creator, the Nerd is thus a central figure in the contemporary metadata-obsessed world. But what constitutes the Nerd's very own metadata?

As I have previously mentioned, important attributes of the Nerd - or, worded differently, his specific "nerdisms" - are the areas of technical expertise in which he is trained, either by schooling or self-taught hacker know-how. Given the Nerd's specific interface designing role - the characters in the aforementioned *Grandma's Boy* can make videogames - the specific programming language he knows can be considered metadata to his curriculum and his professional persona. Other important attributes that define the Nerd in his environment are his academic achievements, that, together with his practical expertise, create a sort of tag-cloud around him - which is what actually plugs him in the market and the world.

Those labels and attributes, which the Nerd earns in the sleepless nights of his best years, are invisible on his physical persona and mostly concern his virtual access to high-paying jobs and decision-making roles, making him close to what I have previously defined as interface, if not to infrastructure. For this reason I have named this type of metadata "structural".

Structural metadata is metadata that provides a direct interaction and a certain level of active agency inside on infrastructure, through interface. The Nerd is closer to infrastructure because he works in technologic innovation, which is today one of the main fields of investment for governments, often for military reasons[19]. As Alexander Galloway points out, the Internet and the U.S. highway system were designed for the same reasons: granting efficient communications in case of war[20].

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18 http://battellemedia.com/archives/2009/02/twitter_youtube (last checked August 13, 2010)
19 Castells, Manuel, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-regional Process,* Cambridge, Massachussetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991. p. 249

20 Galloway, Alexander R. *Protocol*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2004. p. 38

The Nerd's qualities allow him to interact both as a direct actor in the design of the electronic and digital interfaces that channel modern communication, thus enabling information flow across the infrastructure, and as an indirect one in the shaping of Third Wave economics, as a corporate golden child and savvy investor. Let us not forget the Nerd fits perfectly in Richard Florida's "super creative core" of creative professionals, which is (or, according to him, should be) influential in terms of the spatial reconfiguration of contemporary cities.

Structural metadata is tightly intertwined with the functioning of interface as a means of data filtering. It affects the flow of data - meaning both imaginary symbols, pop culture, information, and finally people, traveling across globally-defined routes to the urban meccas hyped up by the media. It helps actualize virtual infrastructure into interface, the underlying design logic enabling choice in informational and institutional environments (research and development departments, universities).

Structural metadata *per se* does not shape infrastructure as an economic or social power, because it still is metadata to be channeled and it has to respect certain standards that it does not create itself, but it does provide a more active interaction with it, enabling a more conscious and potentially effective choice. But the importance of structural metadata and its definition will become clearer in contrast to the other types I will describe in the following paragraphs.

1.2. Textural Metadata: The Hipster

If the Nerd is a relatively invisible grey eminence programming social networks and turning towns like Mountain View in Meccas, the Hipster has a completely different lifestyle, and a different relationship with interface and infrastructure. Nevertheless, he is important in their functioning.

Just like the XML node is perfect to be aggregated in RSS feeds, or the containers I described in the previous chapter are the ideal unit for contemporary architectural needs, the Hipster is perfectly fit for the highly internationalized and gentrified feel of globalized metropolises. Eclectic and sophisticated in his cultural interests, the hipster embodies both the irony and the taste for found materials of what has been widely theorized in postmodernism theories. Clashing subcultures ranging from heavy-metal to hip hop and electro music are all equally celebrated by hipster bibles such as Vice magazine[21], and a sophisticated understanding of the layers of underground and pop cultural history make thrift stores and vintage important elements of the hipster aesthetic. Magazines like Found[22] and Vice's own obsession with documentaries in extreme areas show a fascination with experience, preferably other people's. The Hipster travels around the world and is indeed a curious person, but all these aspects hide another side of this international ideology of youth culture, which is the reason why this figure is so popular and hated at the same time. We should not forget, for example, that Vice magazine is yet another cultural production machine owned by the giant Viacom, already covering MTV and other major entertainment industries under its corporate umbrella[23].

Also, the very clothing style hipsters sport in cities all over the world, despite being a patchwork of cultural references, often exemplifies a pretty solid structural and "modernist" dogma: tight pants, Converse All Stars shoes or rocker boots, leather jackets, vintage or

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21 http://www.viceland.com – particularly famous is the DOs and DON'Ts column about fashion: http://www.viceland.com/int/dos.php

22 http://www.foundmagazine.com/

23 A curious anecdote is the Tom Cruise controversy regarding the *Trapped in the Closet* episode of South Park, which was apparently censored by Comedy Central on its second airing because the actor threatened Viacom, who owned both the network and the company producing *Mission:Impossible 3*, that he would not promote the movie if they didn't take action against the cartoon who had mocked him.

ironic t-shirts, and Ray-Ban glasses. While there are many other possible configurations possible[24], it is important to point out the coexistence of a sustaining shell-structure with the personal creation of a pastiche-style. While pants and t-shirts might be more varied in color and brand, sunglasses and shoes are usually more recognizable and "frame" the look together, transmitting alone the immediate impression of a "Hipster" much more effectively than other, potentially more visible, pieces of clothing.

According to Fredric Jameson, "pastiche is compatible with addiction and the new consumer's appetite for a world transformed in sheer images of itself, pseudo-events, and spectacles[25]", and this seems to be confirmed by the voyeuristic convergence of alt-porn[26] photography by artists like Richard Kern or Terry Richardson and war documentaries in the same hipster magazines[27]. If in pure Debordian fashion "the image has become the final form of commodity reification", hipsters are probably its most eager buyers.

Understanding the marketing potential of the creative crowd of urban style-surfers, brands have been producing "rare" or unusual versions of their staple models, to embrace their customers' craving for individuality: All Stars' legendary Chucks have been conjugated in all possible colors and flavors, and Ray Ban has also started a series of unique sunglasses models called Never Hide, sporting rare prints on the old basic Wayfarer structure[28]. The Hipster's relative tendency to safe clothing formulas is also quite obvious in the American Apparel collection. The brand is possibly the most hipster-friendly clothing company out there, selling plain clothes for a disproportionate amount of money (showing a rather modern and ideological obsession with quality standards, despite the postmodern appreciation for subcultural aesthetics, like 80s dance music). The excuse for the high prices are the company's work ethics and their refusal to rely on sweatshops, even though, despite

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24 http://digital.pastemagazine.com/publication/?i=26727&29&p=29 (last viewed on August 16, 2010)
25 Jameson,Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2008. p. 18

26 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alt_porn (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

27 http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/01/18/vbs.liberia/index.html (last viewed on August 13, 2010)
    – It is curious to see how seemingly countercultural media like VBS get channeled by very institutional and even conservative ones like CNN. I will also discuss the Hipster's political ambiguity in the next pages.

28 Despite inviting you to "be an independent thinker"
    (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0BDW/is_33_41/ai_64835591/) the brand is still selling you a pair of glasses you've seen everywhere (http://www.ray-ban.com/netherland/neverhide/rare-prints)

their seemingly good intentions, the brand remains quite controversial for what concerns their advertising and depiction of women[29].

Apart from brand names, what I would like to emphasize is that the Hipster's clothing style is very often organized in relatively rigid "cells" or "slots", to be filled with equivalent references to different areas of pop culture. A good and quite literal example of this is the famous "D.A.N.C.E." video by Justice[30], in which the characters are wearing plain shirts with changing animated graphics on them. The more recent "I'm in da House" video with Steve Aoki[31], where the musician's glasses are changing color and texture, also exemplifies my claim. Both videos feature colorful and animated staple accessories embedded in a sober and tasteful black and white aesthetic, thus highlighting the recursive process of the actualization of infrastrcture into interface, as inscribed on the Hipster's very body.

Some of the staple hipster features can also ascend to the status of meta-accessories: glasses become pendant jewels[32], mustaches become tattoos[33]. Thus, the constitutive elements of the Hipster look become true simulacra to the highest degree, losing the last bit of functionality in favor of an echoing irony, and creating the perfect postmodern pastiche, which Fredric Jameson defined as "parody without satire"[34].

While irony is a substantial property of the Hipster, sarcasm is not, and while the antagonist enthusiasm historically driving underground scenes against a dominant culture is missing, what is left is the celebration of taste and interests. Like Matteo Pasquinelli wonders, where is the underground in contemporary cities?[35] If hippies used to like things that were "far out", nowadays youth is more interested in "inside jokes".

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29 http://www.nowpublic.com/culture/american-apparel-accused-promoting-rape (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

30 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49esza4eiK4 (last viewed on August 15, 2010)
31 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWQupGYVK4w (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

32 http://www.etsy.com/listing/32460696/ray-ban-style-vintage-aviator-sunglasses (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

33 http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_NfORAAPiohY/SGsqe2AjqJI/AAAAAAAABWg/_z66ZoasZyI/s400/mustache %2Btattoos.jpg (last viewed on August 15, 2010)

34 Jameson,Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2008. p.17

35 Pasquinelli, Matteo, "Beyond the Ruins of the Creative City: Berlin's Factory of Culture and the Sabotage of Rent", in: KUNSTrePUBLIK (ed.), *Skulpturenpark Berlin_Zentrum*, Berlin: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010. p.3

Unlike the Nerd, the defining metadata for the Hipster is textural rather than structural. Textural metadata is surface metadata, meaning that its inscription is not embedded in a person's individual and invisible skills, like professional and academical connections or achievements, but is instead a projected cosmos of imaginary symbols expressing cultural affiliations and interests. This type of metadata can include any cultural reference, manifesting itself also through creative hobbies, activities, and more in general entertainment and lifestyle choices. Structural metadata is related to work and skills, textural deals more with leisure and appeal.

Like in 3D modeling, texture is projected, but it being superficial is not meant as a diminutive. Rather, it works to describe its relationship with interface. Textural metadata does not directly interact with infrastructure, because it is more dependent on the content channeled by the latter rather than its structure. This is the main and deepest contrast with structural metadata: textural metadata deals more directly to interface than infrastructure. In other words, it is tastefully choosing what is on the menu, not necessarily questioning its design, or wanting to take part in it. The Nerd is able to design a social network or a marketing platform, but the Hipster can make the most out of it through cultural savviness. The relevance of photography and DJ culture in magazines and blogs – two disciplines arguably more taste-based than others – also exemplifies the importance of taste in hipster environments.

If postmodern culture has exploded in every social aspect and is no longer autonomous[36] and this is, according to Jameson, indivisible from the nature of global capitalism[37], then the fact that aesthetic production has become integrated in commodity production in general[38] becomes quite evident. The philosopher describes the consequences of this process in sharp detail:

"[M]odernist style thereby become postmodernist codes. And the stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons (but also into the badges of affirmation of

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36 Ibid. p. 48

37 Ibid. p. 3

38 Ibid. p. 4

ethnic, gender, face, religious, and class-factional adhesion) is also a political phenomenon, the problem of micropolitics sufficiently demonstrates[39]."

The social and political effects of image commodification seem to be dramatic, as the "waning of affect frees from the problems of the ego, but it is also the end of the 'personal' style[40]." Feelings become "intensities[41]" (something that also reminds us of the capitalist schizo described by Deleuze and Guattari) and the absence of any great collective project or older national language makes easy to give in to irony and its easy connotations – defined by Roland Barthes as the "purveying of imaginary and stereotypical idealities[42]."

The use of typically postmodern ironical stereotypes can become ambiguous, as Vice co-founder and DOs and DONTs author Gavin McInnes was saluted as a new American conservative spokesman after a prank article on a conservative website[43]. His magazine was also listed amongst the symptoms of a media scene getting rid of liberal bias by conservative author Brian C. Anderson in his book *South Park Conservatives*[44].

Despite the risks of meta-bigotry[45], the hipster "movement", largely present on the internet, has been a big Barack Obama supporter and enthusiast, to the point of making his election a reason to ponder about the end of irony[46] and, ultimately, also the end of a subculture already marketed and sold[47].

Given the exquisitely contemporary volatility of hipster fashion and its deep differences from countercultural movements such as that of hippies, the presence of the so-called

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39 Ibid. p. 17

40 Ibid. p. 15

41 Ibid. p. 16
42 Ibid. p. 19

43 http://www.amconmag.com/article/2003/aug/11/00019/ (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

44 Anderson, Brian C. S*outh Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias*.Washington, DC: Regnery Press, 2005.

45 http://www.slate.com/id/2130006 (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

46 http://streetbonersandtvcarnage.com/blog/obama-victory-renders-hipster-movement-obsolete/ (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

47 http://www.nowtoronto.com/lifestyle/story.cfm?content=166405 (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

"movement" on the commercial map is in fact a symptom of its affirmation as a youth culture ideology in the most pervasive and global sense.

The very clever Blognigger, also the author of the "end or irony" manifesto of the hipster movement cited above, also proves to be aware of the urban and cultural segregation dividing gentrifying neighborhoods. He does so by commenting on an infamous sign next to the door of a Williamsburg club. The sign reserves "the right to be selective" and lists a series of typically hip-hop-related clothing items as a reason to be denied the access to the venue. Reading about the outrage deriving from the note and the accuses of racism towards the club owners, Blognigger explains in a blog post[48] that the bar does not want to keep African-Americans out, but – being an hipster bar – it is making a difference based on what I have termed textural metadata.

This type of choices is what makes the Hipster both an interface-integrated urban figure and an interesting institution of consumption. By using infrastructural channels, like the internet and low-cost flights, he makes his style and brands global – resembling a human billboard – and by creatively interacting with them he actively helps produce international urban aesthetics. Such aesthetics are channeled by both alternative media like the Internet, as a global urban imagery, and by the infrastructures of globalization, used by hipster-tailored brands. The availability to the Hipster of both "underground" and "mainstream" channels is also visible in the gentrification processes they inspire – after all, gentrification can be seen as an in-progress deterritorialization-reterritorialization phenomenon.

After examining his main characteristics, it is clear the ambiguity of the Hipster ultimately lies in the way he embeds a flat and ironic postmodernity in the infrastructural ideology of interface.

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48 http://streetbonersandtvcarnage.com/blog/williamsburg-bar-no-blacks-allowed/

2. Expendable Selves: Metadata Beyond Choice

As I have explained in the past chapters, the logic of metadata can be used by individuals as a tool to code their personal identities in order to provide themselves with some sort of agency in the context of interface, while being expendable enough to be channeled by infrastructure. Textural and structural metadata, for example, tend to be cultivated as a free choice, seconding individual interests and professional skills.

There are also, nonetheless, types of metadata that are not equally marketable or exchangeable. Such metadata "beyond choice", as I call it, is still coded and interpreted as information by infrastructure and interface, but does not directly provide any agency and, in fact, often plays against the "tagged" person. Two typologies of this kind are metadata of scale and body metadata.

2.1. Body Metadata: The Comedian

Body metadata is any physically-embedded attribute that can project a particular stereotypical quality to a subject. Given that metadata consists of imaginary symbols floating in our collective imagery through media, it is important to say that such attributes need to have somewhat of a shared bias attached to them. Examples of body metadata can be obesity, extraordinary height, or, more significantly, ethnic features. The first two examples carry more immediate stereotypes concerning modes of social interaction, while the last one includes much more complex cultural information. For this reason, in my exploration of the specificities of this type of metadata, I will privilege the ethnic as an object of discussion. In order to do so, I will introduce another figure: the Comedian.

The reason for choosing the Comedian as an example of body metadata is simple. As any actor or actress makes his or her own physical appearance part of their art, the comedian uses his bodily features to plug into a stereotypical imagery in order to get laughter. Not all comedians use body stereotypes as a main subject for their comedy routines, even though Canadian Jeremy Hotz is for example quite focused on his big nose, while Rodney Dangerfield might refer to his prominent belly in more than a joke.

A more interesting type of body metadata-inspired comedy has been emerging primarily in the United States, due to their characteristic melting pot quality. The convergence of the traditional immigration substrate, so typical of American society, with a development of media plurality and the increasing popularity of politically incorrectness – both in entertainment and in political discourse – has given way to a strong stereotypization of ethnic varieties in the media. Comedy has of course been one of the main channels.

Analyzing the way American comedians use ethnic stereotypes is crucial in understanding more about the twofold nature of metadata, especially in times of expressions like "race card". On one hand, a comedian can cash in on codified images of his own race/community, but on the other, his complicity in an approximated depiction of members of his own ethnic group can become an excuse for racism.

The most clear-cut example of this is Dave Chappelle's famous decision to walk away from a 50-million dollar contract – which would have secured Comedy Central the third season of his extremely popular Chappelle's Show – and run to Africa for a while, away from everyone [49]. Chappelle, while probably suffering from his share of celebrity paranoia, felt the highly racial sketches he was doing in his show were not being perceived the way he meant them. As he declared to Oprah Winfrey in an interview, after he came back from his voluntary exile, he was "doing sketches that were funny, but socially irresponsible[50]." Dave would talk about slavery, crack, racism, exposing all the stereotypes surrounding African-American culture. The problem, though, was that some people – namely, non-African American people – might not have perceived the irony or the social satire as such, but rather found an excuse for a confirmation of those stereotypes. Like other comedians - for example Sarah Silverman and Stephen Colbert, whose stage personas are highly conservative and are therefore referred to in some cases as "meta-bigots[51]"- Chappelle has been the victim of the ambiguous, double-sided effect of metadata: since the imagery from which symbols are drawn is shared, people

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49 http://www.oprah.com/showinfo/Why-Comedian-Dave-Chappelle-Walked-Away-from-50-Million (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

50 As of August 13, 2010, the whole interview is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0D6P_Aj9ro

51 http://www.slate.com/id/2130006 (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

with different convictions see the same symbol differently, meaning that context rules on content.

The case of an African-American visiting his ancestors' Motherland to make some things clear about race in the US is no news in American stand-up comedy history. None other than Richard Pryor had famously given up the word "nigger" after visiting the continent, as he explained in one of his shows[52]. Other comedians, like civil rights and nutritionist activist Dick Gregory, have instead stated banning the N word (as a New York City councilor proposed a few years ago[53]) would be like trying to erase history[54]. Whatever the implications of such ban, the word is still very present on the mouths of black comedians, with more or less consciousness behind its use.

Perhaps the one most concerned with the specific contexts in which it can be used is Chris Rock. One of the comedian's most famous routines deals with the distinction between "black people" and "niggers". According to him, the latter "have got to go.[55]" Rock's depiction of "niggers" is the depiction of the stereotype: loud, lazy, ignorant, gangster wannabes, incapable of spending money in a constructive way.

Instead of indulging in a collective rehabilitation of the nigger and the black person, superimposed as two sides of the same coin, Rock refuses the patronizing collective imagery of African-Americans and makes a semantic distinction.

If Rock's approach might be described as modern and emancipatory, there are other semantic distinctions that do not occur on the same level. Comedian Eddie Griffin makes a more postmodern difference between the words "nigger" and "nigga"[56]. If "nigger" is a top-down, master-imposed, derogatory term, "nigga" is an inclusive bonding term, setting the discussion bar on a colloquial and friendly level, in certain situations. The term has been widely popularized by hip hop, and the fact that some white youth use it inside of their

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52 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEVmAbxC14g (last viewed on August 13, 2010)
53 This is the website for his campaign: http://banthenword.org/
54 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigger#North_American (last viewed on August 13, 2010)
55 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzFTLKWvfE0 (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

56 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrshFnjajTI (last viewed on August 13, 2010) – Griffin also makes the same point when interviewed in the documentary *The N Word* (2004), directed by Todd Williams, a very interesting and recommended resource on the argument.

social circles testifies it has reterritorialized from ghetto lingo to a broader pop cultural sphere.

Apart from African-Americans, there are other ethnicities on the American comedy map. An interesting and emerging one is represented by Latino comics such as George Lopez and Carlos Mencia.

George Lopez is the third latino comedian in history to have a show on American television, and a proud representative of the Mexican community rooted in the Mission district of Los Angeles. What Richard Pryor used to do for black people, Lopez does for latinos: proud and realistic in his impressions, he deals with his community from the perspective of a close, familiar look, making fun of attitudes and behaviors without losing touch with his pride. Pointing out differences from white people is of course a significant part of his comedy, just like it was for Pryor.

Lopez says things like "What part of Mexico are you from? Los Angeles, bitch!" and makes jokes about Governor Schwarzenegger being for English-only in Californian schools while he cannot speak the language himself[57]. He also talks about immigration laws and consistently uses Spanish in his act.

Carlos Mencia is of Hondureno origin, and refers to himself as a "beaner" (a derogatory term for Central Americans) almost as often as he calls himself a Latino. He uses little Spanish in his act, but when he mentions bilingual standards in American schools it is as an example of a negative tendency towards lowering the bar in order to let the lazy and stupid in[58]. He's also pro-immigration, but more as a form of individual improvement, of chasing the American dream, than as a community achievement.

Mencia's main obsession is with total freedom of speech, by way of systematically offending every ethnic group through the most complete listing of every racial stereotype: black people listen to hip hop and have big penises, Asians all look alike and cannot drive, latinos are lazy and sell fruit. He is quite liberal with words like "nigger" and "chink", as he is with "beaner", proof of postmodern horizontality and a celebration of America as the greatest

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57 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExB3MNiHMzw (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

58 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxnxsqUjNwk (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

country in the world, where everybody should be allowed to make fun of everybody. It is to be noted that a further embracement of stereotype is represented by Mencia's stage name (Carlos) which replaces his real and less interesting name (Ned).

If Lopez is particularly attached to the latino community, Mencia is an outspoken American patriot. He praises the opportunities that the United States have given him in every show, and, since 9/11, he targets terrorists – or terrorist look-alikes - with more fervor than he does with any other ethnic minority. He has also performed in Iraq as a sign of support for American soldiers.

Carlos Mencia is probably the comedian who mostly makes the logic of metadata his own. While complaining about airport security, he says racial profiling is OK, but it has to be done everytime: Middle Eastern-looking people should be stopped, but not Latinos[59]. However, when he complains about being mistaken for a Mexican while in LA, for a Cuban in Miami, and for a Puerto Rican in New York[60], the comedian demonstrates to understand the variation of metadata according to context.

Along the same lines as the distinction I made earlier about the use of the N word by African-American comedians, we can also see here a very sharp difference between a more modern and community-oriented take on stereotypes, as in George Lopez's comedy, and a more postmodern, metadata-fed approach, such as Mencia's.

In particular, his example and that of Dave Chappelle should make us think about the social implications of metadata as both a symptom and a cause of social issues on an ethnic base. Both comedians benefit from their condition of "ethnic" comics, but at the same time their popularity and media exposure make them able to affect and confirm the symbols channeled by the infrastructure into pre-packaged formulas. If Chappelle sees this as "socially irresponsible", we cannot say the same about Mencia, who represents – with both its good and bad sides – the parceling power of metadata and the vacuous subversiveness of

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59 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sJIEvzYs_0 (last viewed on August 13, 2010) - In another version of the same sketch, included in his comedy album America Rules, Mencia also plays on the Latino stereotype: "Come on, my name is Carlos, I cut grass!"

60 http://www.jokes.com/funny/carlos+mencia/carlos-mencia--mexican-in-the-southwest (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

pure language. If Lenny Bruce abused the word "nigger", using it enough to make it lose its meaning[61], Mencia is instead endorsing stereotypes, even while leveling them in an anti-racist semantic liberation.

Given the peculiar status of the Unites States as a nation founded on diasporic principles, it is arguable the social implications of stereotype are also connected to a need for social identification, as the use of the term "nigga" suggests.

While in other parts of the world, often connected to a colonial history, nation-states consciously apply the mediations of culturalism to create cultural difference and support the idea of state[62], what is the backdrop on the country that, more than any other, has culturally colonized the rest of the world?

To all the Italian-Americans who cannot speak Italian, the constructed images of *The Sopranos*, Martin Scorsese's movies, or even TV shows like *Cake Boss* (a pastry-themed reality show infused with mob innuendo) constitute a far more substantial narration from the homeland than Silvio Berlusconi's latest trial. And Africa, a continent most of them have never visited, is far less reachable to African-Americans than the Black Panthers, or even hip hop, are. It is probably for these reasons that, where the ethnic cultural traditions are missing, the construction of identity based on stereotype becomes natural. As ethnic minorities grow up as true Americans, they develop projected avatars, assembled from mediated fragments of history, tradition, and pop culture.

Today we witness mobile and protean diasporic identities[63] (Asian-American-Japanese, Hispano-American-Bolivian, and so on), forms of structurally-determined metadata creating complex individuals, whose lives are deeply intertwined with the flows of globalized infrastructures.

According to Appadurai, modern ethnicity is culturalist, but transnational[64], which means the diasporic categories enabled by culturalism and globalization are a compromise between

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61 As his former wife Kitty Bruce explains in the beautiful documentary *Swear To Tell the Truth* (1998), directed by Robert B. Weide - http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?
res=9A05E4DC153DF932A15753C1A96E958260 (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

62 Ibid. 84

63 Ibid. 173

64 Ibid. 147

top-down, state-driven impulses and spontaneous – yet specifically channelled – migration flows. Culturalism helps understand another factor of ambiguity in metadata: globalized imaginary symbols co-exist with local categorical metadata, the former chosen in a relatively open interface and the latter imposed by a pre-existing, top-down state structure.

While immigrants project their traditional narrations onto their homeland from the deterritorialized territories to which they have migrated, "hyphenated" Americans are projecting those tales the other way around, from a distant and mediated reality onto their native deterritorialized ground.

Even when the projected identities do not come from a pre-colonial or pre-immigration home, social segregation creates original ethnic types and registers (Spanglish, Ebonics) which can be used to tone the Latino or Black up or down, depending on context.

In an episode of the popular comedy series *30 Rock*, which is set behind the scenes of a *Saturday Night Live*-inspired comedy show, two faces of the African-American stereotype are discussing a sketch together. On one hand there is Toofer, a well-educated and emancipated black writer, on the other Tracy Jordan, a crazy slapstick comedian representing all the negative stereotypes of what Chris Rock would term a "nigger". At some point of their discussion, after the writer has proposed to insert a very obscure and probably high-brow cultural reference, Tracy Jordan asks Toofer: "Are you black?" Later in the show, after Toofer has complained to the chief-writer, because Tracy Jordan has called him "his nigga", the Harvard graduate finally agrees to reciprocate the salute, much to the horror of all those present. The implication that Toofer is so not-black that hearing the N word coming from him is perceived as a hate crime, suggests that the refusal of stereotype mean the negation of one's ethnicity.

The delicate issue of ethnic metadata is at the core of the controversy surrounding black intellectuals. Cornell West discusses the topic in an article, where he explains how they are either "successful" (patronized by the white institution and distant from the community) or "unsuccessful" (disdainful of the white intellectual world and encapsulated within the parochial discourses of African-American intellectual life)[65].

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65 The article is quoted in: Radhakrishnan, Rajagopalan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p. 62

On a political level, the election of Barack Obama, with his mixed-descent, was saluted as a sign of hope for racial integration. However, he was also perceived by many as "the whitest black man on the planet"[66], as ironically pointed out by the aforementioned Carlos Mencia.

In order to detach ethnicity from the metadata logic, the only way seems to be a strategical dosage of stereotype. Chris Rock, as I have explained earlier, has been carrying on this practice virtuously, but more comedians are working on this issue.

A quite promising example is *The Awkward Comedy Show*[67], a documentary featuring stand-ups by a few unconventionally-black comedians (including director Victor Varnado, a black albino). The project was originally entitled *The Awkward Kings of Comedy*, after the popular *The Original Kings of Comedy*[68] special, directed by Spike Lee and featuring stricly-black comedians like Steve Harvey and Bernie Mac. The title was probably changed for legal reasons, but the survival of "awkward" is still a challenge to the notion of "blackness" in comedy. The movie's tagline is "Comedy, Plus Blackness, to the Nerd Power", highlighting the rather noble purpose of reterritorializing ethnicity on a different point of view. On the Internet the movie has been reviewed positevely[69], while on April 9, 2010 it was aired on Comedy Central[70].

Regardless of the longevity of such an experiment in the tweaking of metadata, Varnado and company have successfully injected the "black nerd" on the interface map.

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66 *Carlos Mencia: Performance Enhanced*. perf. Carlos Mencia. Wut Is It, 2008. DVD.

67 *The Awkward Comedy Show*. dir. Victor Varnado. Supreme Robot Pictures, 2010. DVD.

68 *The Original Kings of Comedy*. dir. Spike Lee. perf. Steve Harvey, Bernie Mac, Cedric the Entertainer, D.L. Hughley. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 2000. DVD.

69 http://www.justpressplay.net/movie-reviews/929-dvd-reviews/6582-the-awkward-comedy-show.html (last viewed on August 16, 2010)

70 http://www.comedycentral.com/press/press_releases/2010/032210-awkward-comedy-show-wtp.jhtml (last viewed on August 16, 2010)

2.2. Metadata of Scale: The Gangster

Locality, when used as metadata, can be meant as a factor of "cool" across the world (such as living in Manhattan or Brooklyn), but it can also be a label bad enough to prevent somebody from getting a job (coming from an ill-famed neighborhood, for example).

Metadata of scale has two main characteristics. First, it denotes the belonging to a particular locality, to which certain imaginary qualities and properties are attached in the collective imaginary. Second, it keeps the boundaries of such a locality elastic, depending on the chosen scale of interpretation deriving from the specific interface that is dealing with it.

Again, I will make the example of New York. Without mentioning the linguistic ambiguity (state or city?), this label can be associated, in accordance to different imaginary lenses, to Manhattan, the five boroughs, the East Coast, or even the whole U.S., depending on the interpreter's inclinations towards *Sex and the City* or hip hop.

Metadata of scale can also be at the center of much harsher controversies, like the legal belonging of a disputed piece of land to a country or another – as exemplified by the elastic geographies of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, described by Eyal Weizman[71].

Despite the growing importance of locality as a factor in the construction of a social milieu, it should be kept in mind that a social milieu is still a set of local relations that is not only marked by a geographic value, but mostly by other types of connections. The milieus described by Castells and Florida in the literature I have cited earlier are built on the basis of common interests or professional ties (that is, textural and structural metadata). But a geographic proximity to an area characterized by a creative or social milieu is not sufficient to be part of that circuit (we can hardly imagine a Chinese restaurant owner being really a part of the hipster group that dines on his premises).

In some cases, metadata of scale can be stretched out to include diasporic communities, or imaginary networks resembling Appadurai's dispersed nations. For this reason, in this section I will discuss how metadata of scale constructs imaginary associations, at times resembling diasporic communities, but very different from those. The figure related to this type of metadata is the Gangster, the most layered and complex figure out of the ones I have analyzed.

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71 Weizman, Eyal, *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, London and New York: Verso, 2007. p. 3

On a global scale, the Gangster's use of textural metadata outlines an international aesthetic imaginary, drawing unlikely connections between rich and poor countries. On a smaller scale, the interstitial nature of gangs makes them bottom-up alternatives to accurate top-down classifications. Therefore, an area generally labeled as a "ghetto", with the social function of offering low-cost housing for low-salary workers and their families, fractalises into a more fine-grained folksonomy of Bloods, Crips, and so on. In a taxonomically-leveled and de-functionalized social wasteland, metadata becomes a tool for survival, used for "othering[72]" and identity-building at once.

In order to explain the complexity of both aspects, I will focus on anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's notions of diasporic communities and social imaginary, comparing them to other formulas of identity-sharing and metadata production, in particular the diffusion of gang imagery via the Internet and pop culture.

Metadata-based communities are often different from actual ones, not only because of their locational dispersion, but also because of the lack of a sustaining narration/utopia to emancipate them from their postmodern topology and categorical equivalence. In this particular sense, street gangs are an interesting and meaningful example: in spite of using strongly abstract and media-amplified symbols – signs, colors – they are rooted in reality, and the absence of a long-term project is an essential aspect of the gangster appeal. With some exceptions, the fact that gangs exist in conflict does not denote any utopian emancipation dialectic, which is instead a distinctive trait of Appadurai's diasporic nations.

The anthropologist writes: "[T]hese new mythographies are charters to new social projects, and not just a counterpoint to the certainties of daily life[73]." But migration to a richer country is not the only inherent phenomenon to the rise of imagination as a social practice, and the examples that Appadurai makes are not all positive. There are diasporas of hope, terror, despair[74]. In support of his thesis that modernity hasn't seen a total victory of science over religion, as foretold by German scholars such as the Frankfurt school and Max Weber, he

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72 Rob White, "Weapons are for wimps: the social dynamics of ethnicity and violence in Australian gangs", in Frank van Gemert, Dana Peterson, Inger-Lise Lien, *Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity*, Willian Publishing, Portland, 2008. p. 143

73 Ibid. p. 6
74 Ibid. p. 6

mentions Khomeini and the infamous outrage surrounding Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in the muslim world. I could easily add Al Qaeda and the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy[75] as other instances of diasporic rage, but what is important here is the relationship between media and social imaginary.

Relying on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined community" (or, as he calls it himself, "community of sentiment[76]"), which can also be built by printed or electronic media, Appadurai explains that "global processes involving mobile texts and migrant audiences create implosive events that fold global pressures into small, already politicized arenas, producing locality in new, globalized ways[77]". Such locality can be generated through different feelings or actions (resistance, irony, selectivity), all rooted in collective imagination. Especially in the age of electronic media, diasporic public spheres make agency transnational, going beyond nation-states. The micronarratives of media in fact "domesticate the megarhetoric of delelopmental modernization, [...] allowing modernity to be rewritten more as a vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies[78]".

At this point, I would like to step back from Appadurai's analysis of modernity and collective emancipation via the manufacturing of common myths, approaching a different dynamic (or better, a dysfunction) of the imaginary. The examples made so far are all "imagined communities" or "communities of sentiment" to the extent that they project each individual as a member of the specific community, and, at the same time, the sum of all the members as a projected community. There is not only the profile of the individual members, each of whom has something in common with all the others, but there is also a collective profile of the community itself, an imaginary, sometimes fabricated, macro-entity which often has a particular spokesperson or underlying principles constituting its foundation. To use a rather extreme example, we might say the "Al Qaeda Project" has the destruction of the Western

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75 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

76 Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. p. 8

77 Ibid. p. 9

78 Ibid. 25

paradigm as an ideal, and such purpose can be considered a "vertical" parameter to measure how well their own "modernism" (cause) is going. Also, said purpose defines the group itself.

Imagined communities are often characterized by a "vertical" purpose, a directed aim. However, there are exceptions, communities that are indeed children of a globalized imaginary, but at the same time lack that verticality, the urgency to define the group as a primary need. Street gangs belong to this second type of communities.

As pointed out by one of the gangsters interviewed by Stacy Peralta in his documentary *Bloods and Crips: Made in America*[79], gangs began to gain power in Los Angeles after the Black Panther Party had disbanded. But while the emancipation of African-Americans was the primary goal for the party, the Crips and the Bloods soon began to kill each other for turf. Instead of a "vertical", "modern", emancipatory goal, gangs had a more "horizontal", "postmodern", perhaps "short-sighted" focus. A gang and its color may constitute a community, but a red or a blue bandana does not have any other claim than its self-evident difference from another equivalent piece of cloth. By defining their communal identity mainly on an arbitrary parameter such as a color, gangs like the Bloods and the Crips gave up the emancipatory plan that made the Black Panthers – as a USA-wide network - an imagined community with a direction.

Nevertheless, there are certain differences in how gangs have been popularized and integrated into different social contexts. A special case, I believe, should be made for the Latin Kings, who also exemplify interesting differences in terms of metadata of scale.

Born in Chicago and spread all over the United States, the Latin Kings are now also present in Europe, in cities like Barcelona and Genoa. Despite being described as one of the most ruthless gangs in mainstream documentaries aired on American television, which are rich in gruesome details, other sources of information paint a different portrait. According to *Black and Gold*[80], a film depicting the Latin Kings in both their connections to the streets and their aspirations to nationhood, the gang has had a rather ambivalent evolution. Bloodshed marks the gang's history, but since 1996, with the creation of the Almighty Latin King and Queen

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79 *Crips and Bloods: Made in America*. dir. Stacey Peralta. The Gang Documentary, 2008. Film.

80 *Black And Gold: The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation*. dir. Richard Rowley, Jacqui Soohen. Big Noise Film Collective, 1999. Film.

Nation, the Latin Kings no longer see themselves as a gang, but rather as a diasporic nation,with even a bible prescribing the protection of their latin ancestry[81].

As for the European versions of the Latin Kings, it is not yet clear if their name is a real franchise or more of a "label"[82]. In fact, according to scholars belonging to the Eurogang network[83], who have been studying the spreading of the Latin Kings in Barcelona, in the Spanish city the gang is only "in progress", since crime is not a marking characteristic of their group identity (which is the Eurogang definition of a street gang[84]). The media stereotype of the latino gangster in Spain has rather been fueled by the reactions to the murder of a boy[85]. Curiously enough, in Spain USA-inspired gangs like the LK have been instead registered as cultural associations[86] organizing various youth-oriented events (including hip hop concerts) and deriving from the American model of ethnic identity reclamation, mixed with the Latino concept of the pandilla, a social group with its own symbols and not necessarily a criminal organization[87]. In this case, metadata of scale – Barcelona Latin King or Chicago Latin King – makes some difference in terms of social status for members in their respective countries.

With or without a focused social and ethnic drive to better community life, the style, signs, and colors of American gangs – especially, and maybe not casually, those which have originated in LA, unlike the Latin Kings - have been channeled by the media (like films and hip hop music) and have fascinated youth worldwide[88]. Nowadays sets of Crips and Bloods are known to be present all over the world: in Holland the members are apparently of Surinamese origin[89] (given that Suriname is a former Dutch colony, Surinamese-Dutch Crips

81 Frank van Gemert, Dana Peterson, Inger-Lise Lien, *Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity*, Willian Publishing, Portland, 2008. p. 73

82 Ibid. 66

83 http://www.umsl.edu/~ccj/eurogang/euroganghome.htm

84 Ibid. 5

85 Ibid. 67

86 Ibid. 67

87 Frank van Gemert, Dana Peterson, Inger-Lise Lien, *Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity*, Willian Publishing, Portland, 2008. p. 73-74

88 Ibid. 21

89 http://www.streetgangs.com/billboard/viewtopic.php?f=281&t=121

are experiencing a double deterritorialization) and the Australian version of the same gangs are of Tongan-Australian and Samoan-Australian ethnicity[90], respectively.

The most unusual franchise, though, has to be the Trondheim Crips, who have adopted the Compton aesthetics despite being Norwegian kids who do not even engage in criminal activities. While not being a gang by the Eurogang definition, the Trondheim Crips represent something else. They are a social symptom of mass-mediated metadata – blue handkerchiefs, C signs – creating original phenomena that have little or nothing in common with the ones they were inspired by. While their textural metadata is shared and global, for example, metadata of scale can mark their relationship to crime and then their social status. As pointed out by the Eurogang researchers, "the internet has globalized gangs allowing them to become logos", and young street cultures like hip hop are giving way to internet phenomena that are at once "medium and message"[91]. On YouTube it is possible to encounter proof of this gang-inspired label production in the form of celebratory mash-ups of gangsta rap, photos, and symbols exemplifying gang lingos[92].

More than channeling a message, these videos seem to be meant to either put a particular set on the Internet map, representing the convergence of metadata of scale with the textural – or simply to prove one's street knowledge to the Internet audience. The most interesting examples are probably the curious "stacking" videos[93], where supposed or alleged gang members are shown flashing gang signs with their hands, with or without music. The speed or precision of their gestures, along with the accuracy of their outfit's color loyalty, seem to earn them either the respect or the derision of the other "YouTube gangsters", as seen in the video's comments[94]. While it is impossible to tell whether the people posting the videos are effectively involved in gangs, the aforementioned "map factor" is a potential means of notoriety for deterritorialized, LA-inspired young gangsters in countries like the Philippines[95].

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90 Ibid. 148

91 Ibid. 74

92 An example regarding the Latin Kings: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwcCP_wImpE&feature=related

93 A few examples here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHlHdqBMv3I

94 Here you can read a comment-faida between Mara Dieciocho and MS-13:
    http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTHAvSzMxHQ&feature=related

95 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq2JcBOk5FA

Although the Internet is a major factor in gang imaginary diffusion for young confused kids in rich countries, it should be kept in mind that real gang members are usually poor and might have limited computer access (or not be interested in YouTube). Another way gangs and their associated symbols spread is through the physical flow of people, namely immigration and deportations, most significantly from Central America.

In El Salvador, two LA-born gangs have been slaughtering each other ferociously for years now, all because of different signs and numbers tattooed on their bodies. Signs and numbers that have been decided many miles and checkpoints away: la Dieciocho derives from LA's 18th Street Gang, while MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) was also founded in the City of Angels, but its most characteristic sign, the devil's horns, was inspired by heavy metal music[96]. Needless to say, both gangs also sport explicit hip hop and gangsta rap references, such as the use of the word "homeboy"[97]. Apparently these gangs, now widespread in Salvador, were imported as a sort of franchise: some Salvadorians migrated to the States, wound up being gang members, were deported back to Salvador. Then they recruited more people to go back to the US, only to be deported again. This cycle of deportations has actually fueled the gang phenomenon in El Salvador, while it has not really improved the situation North of the border: the maras are spreading across the whole North American territory regardless of how many gangsters are sent back, and the process is making the drug trafficking network tighter[98]. In this case, while textural metadata can be inspired by a globalized American "gangsta" imagery and the very street names after which the gangs are named are simulacra, metadata of locality is used to create infrastructural connections with fellow gang expats. The Salvadorian examples are particularily moving, as they show how the fascination for a globalized imaginary of violence can become all-too-real, even beyond borders, and give way to a bloodshed comparable only to a civil war[99].

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96 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mara_Salvatrucha#Gang_markings_and_hand_signs

97 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homie

98 Here is the LA Times article: http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-gang30oct30,1,4477244,full.story and here is a very good documentary entirely available on YouTube that seems to confirm the ideas expressed. However, we should also keep in mind that, according to the Eurogang book, the thesis that deportations actually help the spreading of gangs is a popular but controversial one (p.18)

99 To learn more on those gangs you should watch the movie *Sin nombre* (2009), and deceased Christian Poveda's *La Vida Loca* (2008).

Another very fitting example of how metadata works as a leveling force of a shared global imaginary, overlapping local narrations and contingencies to globally recognized symbols, is probably related to the Aryan Brotherhood. In their case, the "vertical" purpose of emancipation – by Nazi terms, white power – has given in to the horizontal logic of metadata in a peculiar manner.

Composed of a relatively small percentage of inmates in comparison to the larger African-American or Latino gangs, the Aryan Brotherhood sports markedly Nazi-inspired symbols and is infamous for an extremely violent behavior. Curiously enough, not all of the members are the typical stereotype of a white supremacist. In an enlighting documentary available on YouTube[100], the interviewer has a talk with a few Aryan Brothers, a couple of which unveil a crucial aspect of gang imagery and metadata in general. The main contributor is a half American-Indian who has now given up the Brotherhood (and has, for this reason, a pending death sentence upon him), while another one is no less than Jewish, sporting a swastika tattoo on one arm and a six-pointed star on the other. Such equivalence, even more significant for being literally inscribed on a human body[101,] is the ultimate example of conflictual, antithetic symbols being leveled to parcels of the same surface, interchangeable facets of the same object. To see a Nazi-Jew, somebody wearing the sharpest Good versus Evil dialectic on themselves, is to witness the final victory of metadata over metaphysics and history, to have the last confirmation of the fading of the symbolic into the economic.

Unsurprisingly, the only white supremacist interviewed in the documentary about the Aryan Brotherhood was quite disappointed, because he thought the gang was about white people being better than others, and it turned out to be another way. What was it about then? Being a minority in a strongly ethnic environment like a prison, the members of the Aryan Brotherhood probably adopted the most terrible imagery conceivable as a means to induce fear. Just like the Devil's horns - the Mara Salvatrucha's hand sign - was chosen more because the founders liked death metal music than because they were satanists, the choice of metadata appears more casual than those of committing, categorical symbols.

But if context makes symbols different, why then choose the same ones all over the world? What do the Piru Bloods in LA and the Samoan Bloods in Australia have in common?

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100 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJqVutPSBz8&NR=1 (last viewed on August 13, 2010)

101 *Street Gang, Migration and Ethnicity*, p. 151: "the physical body is also the site of cultural construction"

Since Bloods and Crips and their relative colors are a successful "brand", thanks to American movies and gangsta rap music, their symbols are more likely to be picked up in countries like Norway or the Netherlands than those of Mara Salvatrucha, which does not have as much mainstream media coverage. On the globalized imagery map, not all spots are equally visible. Also, given the ambiguous nature of metadata and the local factors it coexists with, we should not forget the Trondheim Crips could pick any color they wanted, actual Compton Crips find themselves "crippin'" since their early teens, with not much choice. So if metadata does indeed depend on some kind of interface, such interface is not equally accessible and the choices it enables can be strongly bound.

As shown, Arjun Appadurai's notion of imagination as a social practice can be applied to very different phenomena, but it is important to distinguish between imagined communities with an identifying direction or utopia (be it constructive or disruptive) and the ones who share mainly an aesthetic code or at best an economic interests (it is very unlikely that there is any connection between the kids posting YouTube videos about Mara Salvatrucha and actual Salvadorian gangsters, or between LA Crips and the Dutch ones). If the first ones represent a method to claim agency through the interface of social imaginary, the second constitute a more ambiguous and politically segregated alternative.

Describing gangs as potential imagined nations, local associations, or the projected place for wannabe teenagers in rich countries, does little to explain how a globalized imaginary becomes effective in shaping identities worldwide. Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between the way an individual takes part in a diasporic nation, with its traditions and aspirations – be them more or less constructed or recent – and the fabrication of imaginary symbols to be inscribed on someone's persona. In the case of the communities described by Appadurai we are dealing with the first phenomenon, while when considering gang imaginary we deal with metadata logic.