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# 'This is your face on meth': The punitive spectacle of 'white trash' in the rural war on drugs

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## Abstract

This article engages the dynamic role of the crime image and more specifically the mug shot, in a contemporary anti-methamphetamine media campaign known as 'Faces of Meth'. Understood here as a pedagogical policing program, Faces of Meth attempts to deter methamphetamine use through graphic 'before meth' and 'after meth' images of the faces of white meth users. Our objective is not to evaluate the actual effectiveness of these fear appeals. Rather we discuss how the photographs are largely structured by and embedded within already existing cultural anxieties about the figure of 'white trash', reflecting both the dominance and precariousness of white social position.

## Keywords

Abjection, methamphetamine, spectacle, whiteness, white trash

Sometimes described as 'America's most dangerous drug' (Jefferson, 2005) methamphetamine (meth) has haunted the public's imagination for decades (see Jenkins, 1994), circulating in both popular culture and official discourses of the relentless war on drugs. Like other drugs, a language of contagion and catastrophic visions of 'plagues' and 'epidemics' circumscribe the current meth panic. Forecasting such an epidemic, the *PBS*

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\*This work is a collaboration, authors appear in alphabetical order.

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documentary series *Frontline* recently launched ‘an investigation into how and why meth use spiraled out of control and became the fastest-growing drug abuse problem in America’. The film aptly titled ‘The meth epidemic’ opens with harrowing reports from users claiming ‘meth destroys communities’ and small-town police warning the drug ‘takes everything good in your life’. Regardless of theatrical discourse, describing meth use as an epidemic is an overstatement at best (Weisheit and White, 2009: 10). In fact, at the time of this writing, the Government’s own estimates were just half of the prior year’s, dropping to around 350,000 regular users or about one-tenth of 1 percent of the US population (SAMHSA, 2011). By comparison, nearly 30 times as many abuse prescription narcotics and only PCP, LSD and heroin are used less (SAMHSA, 2011).

Regardless of the gap between ‘the real’ and ‘the represented’, or between ‘substance’ and ‘semblance’, methamphetamine, as the anecdotes above attest, remains a vibrant social imaginary of criminal transgression intimately entwined with rural America (Tunnell and Donnermeyer, 2007). Writing on the supposed ‘meth epidemic’ and its intractable rurality, journalist Scott Anderson’s (2012) *Shadow People: How Meth-Driven Crime Is Eating at the Heart of Rural America*, elaborates the imaginary:

Grover Graham saw shadow people. The term refers to hallucinogenic figures glimpsed by methamphetamine addicts after days without sleep. But in reality it’s the addicts themselves who are living in a shadow, growing in numbers, becoming an alarming subculture on the periphery of rural America, engaging in crimes that are having devastating impact on places where traditional life is valued most ... Meth touches the fields of Iowa and Nebraska and the lives of men hauling chisel plows through slow erupting soil, until the sun fires clouds like shining wheat, until high school gymnasiums fill with screaming parents, until pickup trucks sail under water towers basked in the gorgeous light of a dying afternoon ... Meth touches countless shades of the rural dream. Those who live on the original outlands and search for inspiration in the country’s past feel its Kaiser blade through felonies, through ongoing acts that continue to eviscerate their communities, cutting them apart, one piece at a time.

(Anderson, 2012: 13)

Instead of meth-induced hallucinations, Anderson’s ghostly ‘shadow people’ are a nascent criminal class, plaguing lands where ‘traditional life’ is supposedly ‘valued most’. Haunting the ‘countless shades of the rural dream’, these spectral scapegoats obfuscate long-standing anxieties over withering populations, uneven economic development and grim poverty.

Like spectral ‘shadow people’ the punitive imagination of meth as criminal transgression, particularly in the United States, appears as images of zombie-like corporeal ruin—scarred sunken faces, blisters, and broken rotting teeth or ‘meth mouth’ (see Murakawa, 2011). A widespread cultural imaginary, the ‘meth zombie’ is found in films like *The Salton Sea* and *Spun*, where characters go days without sleep and relentlessly tear away decaying flesh chasing illusory ‘meth bugs’ (Linnemann, 2010). Strike up a conversation about the drug and talk inevitably turns to damaged bodies, rotting teeth, and mutilated flesh—and all too often in our experiences, accounts of ‘meth heads’ as ‘white trash’. See Figure 1.

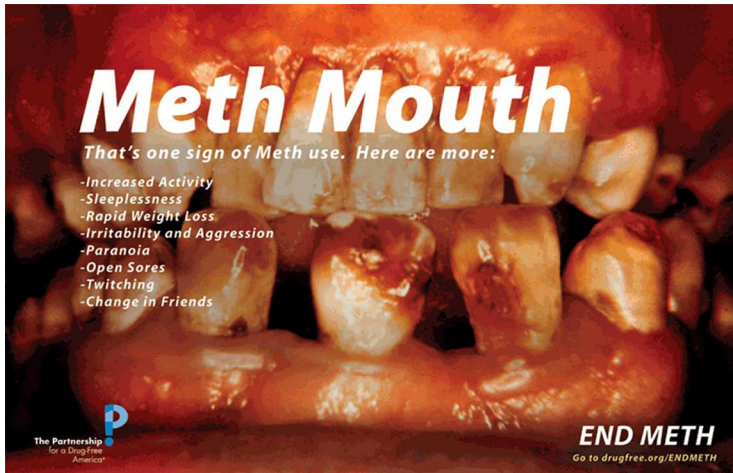


Figure 1. 'Meth mouth'

To unpack the popular 'white trash meth head' trope, we engage the dynamic role of the crime image and more specifically the mug shot in a contemporary United States anti-methamphetamine campaign, viewing it as a key site where this particular cultural aesthetic is articulated and circulated. In 2004, the Multnomah County (Oregon) Sheriff Department launched a 'drug education program'—trademarked as 'Faces of Meth' (FOM). According to the project's website, deputy Brian King developed the program from mug shots of individuals with a history of meth use that he had booked into the county jail. The 'Faces of Meth' campaign aims to deter potential users, particularly young children and teenagers, with graphic images of the corporeal decay supposedly caused by the drug. The tactic, understood here as a *pedagogical policing project*, is facilitated by an officer's 'realistic presentation' of meth-wrecked bodies. The point is said to simply 'be honest with kids' by showing them normal 'before meth' and shocking 'after meth' images of user's faces (Faces of Meth, 2005). Though very critical of 'fear appeals' and interminable warnings of 'meth epidemics', our aim here is not to evaluate the actual deterrent effects of the program. And though we take issue with this particular anti-drug program, we in no way dismiss the agonies of drug use and arrest as trivial. Rather, we argue the Faces of Meth campaign powerfully demonstrates how images and visuality are key features of contemporary punishment.

Recently, Keith Hayward (2010: 3) and collaborators called for a critical visual criminology—an orientation that takes images seriously and strives for an analysis capable of 'encompassing meaning, affect, situation, symbolic power and efficiency, and the spectacle in the same frame'. Following this call, we confront these 'faces of meth' in order to excavate various cultural and political dynamics at work between the image and disparate social imaginaries of penal spectacle and spectatorship. Consequently, the 'faces' should not be understood simply as representations of the social effects of drug use, but rather as a social practice or social force that is dynamic,

material and performative (see Carney, 2010). Further, because of meth's profound racialization and contrived rurality we view the project as an instance where efforts to 'govern through crime' do not focus *solely* on racial minorities and the inner city poor (Simon, 2007: 20). Thus, Faces of Meth should not be seen as a simple 'fear appeal' public service announcement, but a project that polices moral boundaries and fabricates social order (see Neocleous, 2000) through the specter of a 'white trash' Other who threatens the supposed purity of hegemonic whiteness and white social position (see Webster, 2008).

By first focusing on the project's core premise 'See what will happen if you use meth?' we illustrate how the logics of pedagogical policing manifest in the visual. Next, we describe how this logic unavoidably leads to and is in fact inseparable from the enduring problematic, 'Why would someone do that to themselves?' Confronting this problematic, we illustrate how Faces of Meth and similar programs, further embed the individual rational conception of drug use within dominant criminal justice discourses, reaffirming the disparate racialized and classed contours of penal spectacle and abject Others.

### Faces of Meth: 'let the evidence speak for itself'

In 2004, deputy Brian King began collecting the mug shots of people he booked into the county jail with a history of meth use. King believed the images were so powerful that they could instruct citizens, especially school-aged children, why they should not and must not use methamphetamine. As the FOM exhibit in Figure 2 shows, two 'mug shots' arranged in simple causal order, deliver powerful visual evidence of meth's devastating effects.

Despite problems inherent to 'shock tactics' and the punitive display of abject bodies, which we focus on here, there are a number of other problems apparent with the project's presentations. First, durations between mug shots are not uniform and range from as little



Joseph

Figure 2. Joseph, a 'face of meth'

as three months to just over two years, suggesting images were cherry picked for dramatic effect. Selecting the most shocking images exaggerates meth's effects with the implication that all users eventually appear as these 'faces' do. As certain as these images represent the material suffering of some users, other cases exist among them that contradict the 'zombie' trope. Second, it is highly unlikely that the people selected by FOM use meth exclusively, making it a questionable strategy at best to name these images the 'faces of meth' or the 'face' of any other drug for that matter. Finally, and perhaps most importantly the images are deeply racialized, each featuring what appears to be a white body. Though virtually impossible to determine if the people included in the program would consider themselves white, when linked to a drug often described as 'white man's crack' and 'redneck coke' the program helps reaffirm meth's cultural boundaries along clean, yet crude racial lines. Indeed, as noted policy expert Marc Mauer notes, 'you don't see any pictures of young black men and women described as the face of meth' (Stern, 2006). Though we take issue with popular depictions of meth users as 'white', we recognize that because the drug has long been linked to poor whites in rural areas, the program asks spectators to participate in and thus reaffirm this racialization. To be sure, the program does nothing to contest disparate imaginaries of methamphetamine as a 'white trash' trait. Routinization of worst cases, its hasty assumptions about drug use and uniquely racialized frame call into question the project's claim to objective realism, however well intentioned.

On its surface, FOM is another manifestation of recent crime control programs, like 'boot camps' and 'scared straight' jail tours, built on 'shaming', 'shock', and 'scare' tactics (see Kohm, 2009). This characterization is best demonstrated by deputy King's public presentation, which according to the project's website begins something like this:

I thank the men and women who, through their stories and photos, can share their experience with methamphetamine so you never have to try it yourself to know what it can do. I have seen and interviewed each of these people in jail. I hope that in seeing this you will make choices to not use methamphetamine and that I will never see you come inside my jail.

(Faces of Meth, 2005)

As one aspect of its crafted image, the program's website offers numerous testimonies that speak to the affective shock and grotesque 'reality' of the photographic 'evidence'. For example, the two quotations below attributed to high school students articulate the repulsion engendered.

One thing that I learned was how disgusting meth, and all other illegal drugs can make your mouth and teeth, and how they hurt your body, inside and out. I really liked how you brought examples of real life cases about people who have destroyed their lives and the lives of others. I think that having this sort of thing really makes people see it and go 'ewwww, how nasty' and taking them away from the thought of even thinking about trying it.

(Faces of Meth, 2005)

Showing us ... that video of those people that are major meth heads will make us kids not want to try that drug because, just looking at those people's appearances is not how anyone would want to look like, or how they act either.

(Faces of Meth, 2005)

By mentioning that they personally know someone who has abused meth, the testimonies illustrate the entwinement of 'image' and 'experience' while still privileging the pedagogical force of the images themselves. That is, these particular testimonies make the claim that FOM images are more powerful than their own experiences with friends and family stricken by addiction. For instance, one student offered, 'I know people who have been on meth and those mugshots hit hard. I am never going to do Meth. It is a pressure I have been faced with but now I am even more educated' (Faces of Meth, 2005). Another student offered an even more personal reflection stating, 'It's crazy how much those people reminded me of my dad and I just found out he was an addict ... It controlled his life and ruined our family. I never want to be like him and thanks to you now I never will' (Faces of Meth, 2005). Further demonstrating the tangle of the 'the real' and 'represented', a teacher remarked the 'presentation brought the problem of drugs back to a level that was comprehensible and realistic' consecrating FOM as authentic and honest (Faces of Meth, 2005). Legitimized by a massive coalition of educators and law enforcement personnel, FOM's logics are seemingly beyond reproach. Indeed, as one spectator remarked, the program simply allows 'the evidence [to] speak for itself' (Faces of Meth, 2005).

The project's social effects are not limited to the geographical scope of Multnomah County, Oregon. In 2004, the popular jailhouse photographs were featured in 'Unnecessary Epidemic'—an award winning five-part series on meth published by the *Oregonian*, a Portland newspaper. A short time later, the project launched a website where the public can freely download the images and purchase intervention materials for personal use. Within contemporary visual economies (see Poole, 1997) images are increasingly malleable and mutable, and like those here, traverse boundaries of all kinds. Made and remade, interpreted and reinterpreted 'uploaded and downloaded Flickr-ed, Facebook-ed and PhotoShop-ed' these powerful images of human suffering are borderless and boundless (Hayward, 2010: 1). Demonstrating the sheer popularity of the images, if not their mass circulation, one YouTube montage provocatively titled 'Drugs make you ugly' has been viewed eight million times and prompted more than 29,000 viewer comments!

To fashion a critical reading of these images,<sup>1</sup> we situate the Faces of Meth campaign within a broader conceptual terrain that increasingly defines everyday life in penal terms—described by Michelle Brown (2009) as a *culture of punishment*. For Brown (2009), projects like FOM allow citizens distanced from the material experiences of crime and punishment to participate in punitive spectacles and engage in moral judgment from afar. For example, take Maricopa County, Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio's program, 'Jail Cam', that broadcasted real-time footage of the 'inside' of local jails. Creating gritty 'reality' television from the everyday banalities of jail life, 'Jail Cam' also recasts the pains of imprisonment into a commodity intended for anonymous spectators outside jail

walls (see Lynch, 2004). This is precisely what is at work with *Faces of Meth*; whose tidy causality ‘See what will happen if you use meth?’ is not concerned with those already mired in addiction, but instead targets the affective and voyeuristic sensibilities of the general public.

Viewing FOM as a site of punitive consumption does not assume a top-down relationship however—spectators are not simply passive consumers—but are active agents complicit in the triptych of transgression, punishment and the visual (Young, 2010). Without regard for personal biography or lived experience, FOM transforms the pain and humiliation of drug use and imprisonment into titillating commodities and markets a penalty of crude instruction. As one anonymous YouTube comment illustrates, ‘lol [laugh out loud] im prolly [*sic*] a dick for saying this but I find it all very entertaining how stupid some people are’, FOM is part of a punitive normative order—a culture of punishment—where confinement, human suffering and public humiliation conjures the laughter and amusement of penal spectators.

The campaign and its circulating images gain their cultural and political force by playing off of and exploiting several intertwined bourgeois anxieties, namely binaries of cleanliness and filth, attractiveness and ugliness, productive and unproductive labor—inclusion and exclusion. Outlining the shape of a particular criminal Other, FOM provides photographic evidence testifying to the not always seen yet ever-present specter that rejects juridical and moral convention (Valier, 2002). More to the point, the ‘faces’ are structured by and embedded within long-standing cultural-economic anxieties about the figure of ‘white trash’ and the dominance and precariousness of white social position (see Webster, 2008). As a lens through which social positions are judged and negotiated, FOM is thus integral to the maintenance of social order through the fabricated insecurities of capitalist society (see Neocleous, 2000).

### **Criminological aesthetics, photographic physiognomy, and the abjection of ‘white trash’**

Though FOM is incapable of representing an objective ‘reality’ of meth use apart from particular cultural and political contexts of transgression, criminalization and punishment, at its core remains an unwavering faith in the camera and photograph to report the objective ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ of drug use. Perhaps more importantly, beyond assumptions of photographic positivism, FOM is legitimized by the ‘mug shot’, one of the most historically recognized representational means of making visible the criminal body. As Finn (2009) notes, the nascent fields of criminology and criminal justice developed in tandem with photographic portraiture. Entwined with fingerprinting, photographic identification soon became a much-used tool for law enforcement and a scientific proxy for legal ‘proof’ (Hutchings, 2001: 127). Given this, we argue the program’s ‘faces’ must be understood as cultural and political constructions addressing spectators through claims of objective knowledge, state legitimacy and truth. Commenting on a series of his own photographs titled ‘Portraits of Black Americans 1987–1990’ famed photographer Baldwin Lee (2012) had this to say about the objective visuality of the mug shot:



In form each of my new pictures was virtually identical to a mug shot: a head surrounded by a tight frame. The camera's proximity to the subjects had the effect of cropping away not just their surroundings, but also the context in which they existed. Only after the fact did I see that this cropping eliminated social, political, and cultural issues that had been integral to the content of my earlier pictures. These headshots focused on their subjects' psychological and emotional character instead. Making them was different from work I had done previously. Freed from the task of asserting or defending political and social viewpoint, I found that taking pictures was less difficult.

Important here is Lee's assertion that framing subjects in mug shot fashion draws out the 'psychological and emotional character' of the photographed, albeit at the expense of cultural and political economic context. This is certainly the case with FOM, as its 'shock' is dependent on stark images of human suffering. But as structured by a certain 'frame', the FOM images also work toward making invisible the structural and spatial context in which the state photographed subjects are located and situated—Lee's 'cropping away not just their surroundings, but also the context in which they existed'. Here we find helpful Judith Butler's (2009) discussion of framing, when she suggests that to frame is also to 'set up' a person, as in the 'framing' of someone for a crime they did not commit. FOM mug shots might then be best understood as a state project framing meth users out of context and only in aesthetically individualizing and dehumanizing ways. While FOM clearly draws out a visceral sense of 'psychological and emotional character', all mug shots are inherently political state projects awash in cultural tensions that cannot be 'cropped away'. Therefore, it is both the emotionality of pain and suffering and the political force of the mug shot animating these 'faces of meth'.

Acting as a positivistic archive of faces of meth users and exploiting the cultural force of the mug shot, we see Faces of Meth as at least partly a modern physiognomic project. An early advent of criminological positivism, physiognomy attempts to 'read the outside for the inside' using the human face as proxy for intellect, social standing and moral character (Emerling, 2012: 137). Like the physiognomy of old that equated facial beauty with virtue, FOM displays the 'ugliness' supposedly brought on by meth use, as vice. Reading the outside for the inside, FOM's images harness potent and punitive energies. As Valier (2004: 251) writes, 'the power to punish is the power of the image ... acts of showing, of looking, of seeing and feeling' are fundamental to punitive power. Without text or caption, FOM fashions a criminological aesthetic around a binary logic of representation, where oppositional terms (clean/unclean, rational/irrational) fit within a system of value making one visible and the other invisible (Young, 1996: 1).

Presenting a caricature as common, the program anchors a popular reference point for what meth 'does' and what a meth user 'is' (see Valier and Lippens, 2004). Indeed, as columnist Jack Shafer (2005) writes, 'If you were to reduce the current moral panic to a single image, it would be a photo of a meth user whose gums are pus-streaked and whose rotting teeth—what teeth he still has—are blackened and broken.' Imagined and reduced to a crude foundation, FOM delivers the literal 'face' of a certain type of crime and criminal, exercising the power to not simply represent but order social life—dangerous images indeed.

Reducing complexities of sociality and lived experiences to simple 'before' and 'after' terms—the very premise of FOM—unavoidably conjures movement and transformation, a crossing of boundaries and borders (Valier, 2004). In this way, the project also evokes Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of 'abjection' which she described as not simply unhealthy or unclean, but that which troubles identity, systems, and order, 'that which not respect borders, positions or rules' (1982: 4). For Kristeva (1982: 4), 'any crime' is abject because it exposes the fragility of law and conjures the figures of immorality that transgress established borders between the acceptable and unacceptable, the normal and abnormal—pure and polluted.

It is also important to consider that the causal arrangement 'before' and 'after' not only signifies the transformation of bodies into abjection, but more importantly by beginning with a mug shot, the project documents the further transformation of already abject criminal bodies into monstrosity. Visions of spectral 'shadow people' and abjection revealed by the bloody and distraught decay of user's bodies, invests the 'faces' with a monstrous Gothicism, distinguishing 'meth zombies' from other 'dangerous individuals'. Apart from catastrophic visions of contemporary moral panics, where folk devils retreat from view as quickly as they appear, dangers of the Gothic seem to inhabit the shadows of the everyday, existing as an invisible yet ever-present specter lurking in our midst (Valier, 2002: 326). As we will describe later, 'before' and 'after' images documenting the journey into abjection, draw unavoidable connections to the Gothic degenerationism of Lombrosian criminal anthropology (see Rafter and Ystehede, 2010). Like the 'morally insane' and 'born criminals' of old, Gothic visions of a truly monstrous enemy fabricate and mobilize the fear, terror and insecurity characteristic of contemporary capitalist relations (see Neocleous, 2005) and late-modern penal spectatorship.

Documenting transformation of abject bodies from pure to polluted, clean to unclean, the campaign focuses the power of the image and the power to punish on marginalized, subordinate, and stained 'white trash'. Symbols of pure irrationality and abjection, FOM locates meth users outside community, outside law, outside reason, outside bourgeois conventionality. Against the contrived fearsomeness of the 'young black male' and racialized anxieties over 'street crime', whiteness is a largely invisible and meaningless reference category (Muhammad, 2010). At present, 'white crime' (crimes whites commit) conjures fanciful notions of pallid serial killers, troubled teen school shooters and predatory financial swindlers. This is not to say that these mythical narratives or its relative invisibility renders whiteness or crimes constructed as 'white' unimportant. In fact, some point to the unremitting interest in meth as at least partially responsible for a noticeable 'whitening' of US prison populations (Mauer, 2009). Indeed, as drug policy analyst Mark Kleiman argues, 'If you talk to rural deputy sheriffs about meth users and urban cops about crack heads, you're going to hear exactly the same thing: These are bad scary people' (Stern, 2006). Oddly then, through meth 'white crimes' are perhaps gaining visibility in relation to crack cocaine, a drug inexorably linked to inner cities and people of color. Former Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating provides a clear example of this kind of reasoning: 'It's a white trash drug—methamphetamines largely are consumed by the lower socio-economic element of white people and I think we need to shame it. Just

like crack cocaine was a black-trash drug and is a black trash drug' (Senate Communications Division, 1999).

Viewing meth as the 'white trash' referent to crack cocaine helps imagine bodies and 'faces' along an aesthetic and physiognomic continuum of whiteness. As such, these 'faces' marked by decaying *white* flesh, provide penal spectators very specific photographic evidence of the criminality lurking in their 'community'—threatening its stability. Just as constructed anxieties surrounding 'black' criminality renders whiteness largely invisible, notions of 'white trash' criminality advanced by projects like Faces of Meth reaffirm and obscure the boundaries of white privilege. A powerful form of fear-induced name-calling expressed by middle and upper class whites, 'white trash' objectifies and stigmatizes whites living in poverty and lacking proper decorum—carving a raced and classed hierarchy from relative homogeneity (Hartigan, 2005; Wray, 2006). Indeed the very notion of 'white trash' owes its origin at least in part to early eugenics and sociobiological 'family studies' undertaken to trace the origins of alcoholism, laziness, poverty and a host of other maladies (Rafter, 1988). And while the figure of 'white trash' within the contemporary culture of punishment is contested and evolving, it is forever haunted by its eugenic origins.

In 1993, not long after the newly formed Office of National Drug Control Policy forecast meth as the 'drug plague of the 1990s' (Bishop, 1989) Charles Murray penned a controversial essay warning of 'The coming white underclass'. Shortly thereafter, Murray and collaborator Richard Herrnstein, published the fiercely contested, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1996 [1994]), a book scorned as 'the work of disreputable race theorists and eccentric eugenicists' (Rosen and Lane, 1995: 58). Yet while advancing a position that many decried as openly racist, Murray also described 'the black story' as 'old news' and warned of rising levels of 'white illegitimacy' and a loathsome 'white trash' underclass. He writes:

Instead, whites have had 'white trash' concentrated in a few streets on the outskirts of town, sometimes a Skid Row of unattached white men in the large cities. But these scatterings have seldom been large enough to make up a neighborhood ... Look for certain schools in white neighborhoods to get a reputation as being unteachable, with large numbers of disruptive students and indifferent parents. Talk to the police; listen for stories about white neighborhoods where the incidence of domestic disputes and casual violence has been shooting up. Look for white neighborhoods with high concentrations of drug activity and large numbers of men who have dropped out of the labor force. Some readers will recall reading the occasional news story about such places already.

(Murray, 1993)

Warning of 'unteachable' schools in 'white neighborhoods' wrought by 'domestic disputes', 'causal violence', and 'drug activity' Murray provides a binary logic separating bourgeois whites from his burgeoning 'white trash' underclass. Today, Murray's impassioned attack on marginalized whites continues under the supposed race neutral critique of disintegrating values, and the breakdown of marriage, religion, and community. In his recent book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, he chides,

‘America is coming apart at the seams—not the seams of race or ethnicity, but of class’ (Murray, 2012: 12) as if to suggest ‘White America’ is devoid of racial and political meanings.

As we have argued, there are obvious homologies between politically saturated visions of a ‘white trash underclass’ and the crafted images of the Faces of Meth program. Similarly, in the case of ‘chavs’<sup>2</sup> in the UK, Hayward and Yar (2006) argue the animosity directed toward this particular youth group, more aptly reflects social censure of ‘flawed consumers’, not for a lack of consumption but for ‘excessive participation in forms of market-oriented consumption which are deemed *aesthetically* impoverished’ (Hayward and Yar, 2006: 14, emphasis in original). Stylistically marking repugnant consumerism and unproductive labor, ‘chav style’ is thus a site where social position is judged and negotiated.

It follows then, that FOM’s popularity and related hostility toward ‘trash’ is largely due to the appearance of a similar rejection or at least departure from the desired and respected space of middle and upper class whiteness and bourgeois sensibilities. Indeed, as Jock Young (2007: 42) tells us, it is not by

accident that the stereotype of the underclass with its idleness, dependency, hedonism and institutionalized irresponsibility, with its drug use, teenage pregnancies and fecklessness, represents all the traits which the respectable citizen has to suppress in order to maintain his or her lifestyle.

For example, responding to a FOM YouTube video, an anonymous spectator commented, ‘it appears that doing meth turns you into mullet-headed trailer trash’. The notion meth ‘turns you into’ white trash—marked by facial sores and lesions—is important because it reveals an invisible, yet privileged category of whiteness, one that is pure and uncontaminated. Importantly then, the abject horrors built into the imaginary of methamphetamine, is not simply about crossing juridical boundaries, but also defiling and polluting one’s own body, a white body in particular and giving up the esteemed value of white privilege and bourgeois sensibilities in general.

While we do not necessarily view FOM as a tectonic shift in the cultural practices of punishment or crime governance, we do consider the program as an expansion of the broader archive of anti-drug discourses of the war on drugs. In particular, FOM bears important similarities with another governmental (in the Foucauldian and conventional bureaucratic sense) product of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (PDFA) that made cultural icons of an egg yolk scorching in a frying pan and adjoining catch phrase, ‘This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?’ The striking ‘brain on drugs’ cautionary, forever linked to the egg, remains immediately recognizable—offering compelling implications for the haunting faces of meth. As governmental rationality, FOM also trusts in the power of image to instruct, educate and deter. Through the crude instructions undergirding the frying egg and pained ‘faces of meth’, the State acts as the normalizing force that defines the boundaries between the legitimate and illegitimate, normal and deviant, self and Other.

Yet between the two projects, the images and what they symbolize differ markedly. Where the PDFA campaign metaphorically presents an uncracked egg as the ‘normal’ brain and a cracked egg as the ‘abnormal’ drug-laced brain, FOM uses the flesh of the

human face for affect and effect. Movement from the figurative (egg) and biologically internal (brain), to the literal (face) and biological external surfaces (flesh), further exposes FOM's physiognomic foundations and tempting connections to the figure of atavism and stigmata and other related positivistic pseudoscience such as craniology and phrenology. For late-modern penal spectators, might the representations of somatic disfigurements sought out and featured by FOM identify meth users as atavistic throwbacks, much like the phrenologists and criminal anthropologists of the 18th and 19th centuries?

Reflecting the Lombrosian fixation on physical abnormalities, FOM shows penal spectators what meth users look like once marked with the stigmata of meth crimes (Rafter, 2009). Though stunning, these stigmata do not simply identify a Lombrosian criminal man but quietly bear something more sinister. As Valier (2002: 327) writes, the horror 'is located precisely at the boundary between psyche and flesh, and reveals emotional expressions to be embodied practices'. As we can see, especially in comparison to the 'brain on drugs' ads, FOM crosses boundaries from psyche (egg) to flesh (face) and from 'fantasy' to the 'real' (Valier, 2004). With that, we suggest these foundational images of meth use—these 'faces of meth'—should be seen as a movement away from the figurative to an embodied emotionality of the gothic horrors of criminal transgression, derived from and intimately entwined with classed driven conceptions of white identities.

Without a doubt, meth's 'reality' is characterized by a departure and disfiguration of racially constructed somatic norms, harnessing the police power of legitimate pronouncement and cultural narrative (see Loader, 1997; Wilson, 2000) so that on the street, lesions, rotting teeth, even a thin frame evokes the specter of 'white trash' criminality. Here dispossessed 'faces' reveal the boundaries between the heavens of rational thought and the depths of irrationality. On one hand, the images appeal to the spectator's capacity for reason to weigh the pains and pleasures of methamphetamine use—'do not do meth or you will look like this'. On the other, the faces beg 'why would someone do this to themselves?' This calculus of rational individualism arouses a vindictive cognitive dissonance aimed toward those seeming to shirk everyday drudgeries shouldered by 'respectable citizens' and provides psycho-centric frames or diagnostic logics defining self and the monstrous Other. As online responses to a FOM YouTube clip again illustrate, these are not simply criminals, but something more disgusting: 'All of them are straight fuckin scumbags of earth & are a waste of air and space!!!!' As other comments suggest, 'Haha, what a bunch of losers!' and 'i don't feel sorry for anyone who loses their life or goes to prison for doing meth or any kind of drug like that. it does nothing for a person but make them slums [*sic*] of the earth.' FOM supports a worldview where drug users are not only underserving, but are socially disposable and ungrievable (see Butler, 2004).

This sort of punitive display comes at the expense of any consideration of social, economic and political context, emphasizing only the assumed crimes of users. As another anonymous comment, 'haha there [*sic*] own fucking fault' further reveals, these images reinforce a view of drug users as products of unhindered free will and rational choice. In this sense, these images govern by fabricating and reinforcing the conventional understandings of drug use that, we contend, cannot be severed from the

disparate contexts—uneven economic development, wage labor, unemployment, cultural geography—which they emerge and circulate in. Here, ‘the real’ and the represented are intimately intertwined, refashioning the forms of life and affective sensibilities of late modern penal subjects.

Though FOM clearly displays the cultural logics of binary representation (clean/unclean, rational/irrational) we want to reiterate the ‘faces’ reflect a spectrality of these things. For Žižek (1999), the specter is born from encounters with freedom. In this regard, faces of meth might represent anxious fears and contradictory desires generated by those who seem to pursue the freedoms and hedonistic pleasures of illicit drug use and escape the crushing weight of bourgeois conventionality. Recalling Young’s (2007) similar assertion, it can be argued that much of the collective impulse to view and punish these ‘faces’ springs from the longing for the ‘sacred suspension of ordinary rules’ and a secret admiration of the transgressive—the enduring human fascination with forbidden people, places and things (Žižek, 2005: 8).

For Katherine Biber (2006: 136), the specter ‘returns from the place in which we repressed it, haunting us with something we recall before’. Accordingly, we might also see the emaciated, stained faces of meth using ‘shadow people’ as a spectral haunting of ignored, dismissed marginalized whites and a reminder of the frail and precarious social and economic position of whiteness. In this sense, the FOM images mark within the social imaginary the subtle presence of ‘ghostly matters’, namely, the classed, raced, and gendered underpinnings of state violence and capitalist accumulation (Gordon, 2008). Similarly, noting the force of social insecurity in racial formations, Colin Webster (2008) writes that in times of pronounced social discord and material competition fissures in the cultural construction of whiteness emerge or become more apparent. It is here, he says ‘in extremis’ that the hegemonic force of white ethnicity pushes back to reaffirm its particular ‘shape, profile and presence’ (Webster, 2008: 308).

Ultimately then, FOM and methamphetamine more generally, can be understood as being structured by and embedded within already existing class and racial anxieties about the specter of ‘white trash’ polluting and defiling a hegemonic whiteness—that is most often the unspoken standard to judge all others. Accordingly, as we argue, these ‘white trash’ ‘faces of meth’ reveal a unique vantage of penal spectatorship and perhaps an emergent way of seeing dishonored whites—a scopic regime of white criminality.

## **The power to punish and the power to police**

As we have noted throughout, these carefully selected ‘faces’ are not simply representations of an external ‘reality’ of the ‘world’ of methamphetamine, but must be understood as something much more dynamic and forceful. That is, they are active, constitutive elements in the cultural and political dynamics of methamphetamine—the cathartic energy—the very *verstehen* of criminal transgression (see Ferrell, 1997). Therefore, as Phil Carney (2010: 30) reminds us, it matters less what a producer intended an image to mean, symbolize, or represent, and more what the image does in the real. He argues:

Not reducible to a representation, the photograph is part of the very stuff of our social life: it presents more than it represents, produces more than it reproduces and performs more than it

signifies. In this way, the photographic spectacle cannot be reduced to code, symbol, illustration, wallpaper, scenographic backdrop, distraction, illusion, hallucination or simulation. It is not primarily a semiotic spectacle. It is not a static picture, but a dynamic power. As a social force, the photograph performs in a field where the material realities of cultural practices in the field of power and desire are at stake.

(Carney, 2010: 31)

Carney's point is not simply what a particular 'reality' is that lays somewhere outside of an image, but that reality and representation blur to the point where reality is image and image is reality (see Brown, 2006; Young, 1996). This dynamic force of the image is particularly apparent in mug shots because they perform the capture of a suspect and articulate the State's power to punish simultaneously. The mug shot is no mere instrument of identification then, but a social force with the capacity to affix stigma, shame and criminality on the body of the accused (Carney, 2010: 23) and the broader identity that the individual is thought to represent (Carney, 2010: 23).

By eliciting punitive voyeurism and troubling contemporary cultural, political, and economic anxieties, penal spectatorship elicits human action and is thus at its core a project of governance (Dean, 2010: 250). In this case, *Faces of Meth* attempts to elaborate the ills of meth use in such a way that it not only deters use, but disrupts the illicit methamphetamine trade as well. In the broadest sense then, *Faces of Meth* fits within and contributes to a mode of governance organized around crime and victimization, that Jonathan Simon (2007) famously calls 'governing through crime'. Perhaps more explicitly, we view the project as a site where public discourses and fascinations with meth crimes and the precariousness of white social position forcefully performed by the display of abject white bodies, permit state and non-state agents to *govern through meth* (see Linnemann, 2012). Just as *Faces of Meth* fits within the longstanding constellation of anti-drug discourses, the war on drugs itself is part of a much broader and malevolent politics of security (see Neocleous, 2011). That is, the shock and fear generated by projects like *Faces of Meth* are characteristic of social anxieties and the perpetual disturbance of all social conditions undergirding the securitization of everyday life in liberal, capitalist geographies. Perhaps because of this, the pain of meth use lives on as an object of voyeuristic consumption.

Following the success of FOM, its creators expanded the program to include before and after mug shots of heroin and cocaine users, renaming the project 'From Drugs to Mugs'. Employing elite Hollywood talent the hotly discussed 'The Meth Project' takes fear appeals to their predictable ends with graphic ads depicting teen meth users as pimps and prostitutes who prey on family, friends, and strangers.<sup>3</sup> An artistic elaboration of *Faces of Meth*, each ad features bloody portrayals of meth use and an alarming warning like, '15 bucks for sex isn't normal. But on meth it is.' As the billboard shows (Figure 3), law enforcement agencies and community programs continue to exploit FOM's liquidity, this time fashioning it into a perverse take on the popular 'make-over' trope.

Further capitalizing on lurid imaginaries of meth-fueled corporeal decay a California-based design company partnered with law enforcement to develop 'Face2Face', a computer aided pedagogical policing program. Excitedly advertising a new system now



**Figure 3.** Anti-meth billboard in Washington state

with 'Meth Mouth! (Sale Price: \$2,995)' the company claims the computer generated simulations 'showing the shocking visual changes meth causes' are a necessary and powerful tool in the fight against the 'methamphetamine epidemic'. Face2Face, The Meth Project, and a raft of other anti-meth products powerfully demonstrate how the insecurities fostered by the specter of meth are easily fabricated, commodified, and consumed (Neocleous, 2007).

Though easily commodified, this is not to say that the program and its underlying logic are immune to critique or parody. In one such instance, the actor Steve Buscemi was added to a FOM exhibit of a young woman along with The Meth Project's warning, 'Looking like Steve Buscemi isn't normal, but on meth it is.' Following the 'meth makeover' theme, another pair of images featuring a young woman was recast and circulated as 'Got Hotter' or 'Meth: Not bad for everyone'. Here the implication is the second image documents a degree of socially desirable weight loss making the young woman more attractive. While both cases seem to openly mock the program's 'see what happens if you do meth' mantra, they also demonstrate how meth's supposed devastations remain a powerful lens to view and judge others. In other words, we might read these parodies as not necessarily challenging but rather reinforcing and further perpetuating the dehumanizing imaginary of methamphetamine.

Indeed, evidenced by the program's popularity and wide circulation 'faces of meth' are clearly dynamic and performative, recasting everyday actors as penal spectators who negotiate and ascribe value to the lives of others. As if the complexity of sociality and lived experience is reducible to straightforward costs and benefits analysis, the project unavoidably returns to the troubling problematic, 'Why would someone do that to themselves?' and reinforces the individual rationality of criminal transgression in at least two ways. First, 'before' and 'after' arrangements situate crime's etiology invariably within



the individual, wholly dependent on the personality, rational decision making, IQ, or 'born criminality' of the user. Second, if 'choice' is indeed the sole 'cause' of bloody disfigurement and meth-induced criminality, 'faces of meth' document existence of the irrational—the not always seen yet ever present specter that rejects juridical and moral convention. Even discourses that might frame this in nuanced sociological terms, such as those bound up in class-based notions of 'white trash' often fall back on a certain adherence to and normalization of the figure of the rational individual through a cultural tautology claiming meth 'turns you into mullet headed trailer trash' and that the drug is inherent to culture—simply something white trash 'do'.

If anything, we have argued that the FOM campaign—as a project fusing police power with the power of the image—is productive of punitive ways of seeing and knowing whereby the figure of purity, or hegemonic whiteness, is visibly defaced into 'white trash'. In this sense, FOM must be seen as not only a cultural but also an inherently political project. Certainly the preferred reading (see Hall et al., 1980) of these images can be painful and disturbing, having capacity to shock and disrupt the comforting pace and routine of everyday life. Given this, we ask how these 'faces' might force spectators to confront issues they would rather avoid (Sontag, 2002: 7). In *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility*, Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore (2009) argue for an 'ocular ethic' that refuses to 'assign political value to some bodies at the expense of others, one that treats "human subjects" in the fullness of their lived, embodied experiences' (2009: 14). Instead of a simple object of punitive voyeurism, we wonder if the 'faces' might be reimaged, reframed and refashioned into a counter-narrative to the dominant 'individual rational' logic of drug use and better attend to the sufferings of inequality and the complexities of personal biography and lived experience.

Reading these images differently, the very arrangement of 'before' and 'after' poses a subtle challenge to the so-called rehabilitative successes of an ever-expanding retributive and punitive criminal justice system. By displaying abject carceral subjects getting 'worse' and not 'better' we might see the images as tangible evidence of the brutal indifference toward the most socially vulnerable. As the 'face' of a 'drug epidemic', the program also gives a very human face to the many failures of the war on drugs. From this vantage, 'Faces of Meth' becomes a viable and visible site to challenge the dominant governmental and criminal justice discourses claiming an interest in reducing crime. In other words, rather than simply focusing on the poor choices and individual pathologies of a few pained drug users fleshed out by crude causal logic, we hope these basic contradictions might ignite and refocus discussions on the structural inequalities of uneven economic development and power of the State that have literally produced these 'faces of meth' in terms of both materiality and representation. Ultimately we would suggest that these images speak less to the specific effects of methamphetamine and more to the ways in which the systematic violences of the current social system are policed through both the physical 'capture' of a body in a jail cell and the subsequent display and circulation of the photographic 'capture'.

Thus, we find in 'Faces of Meth' the opportunity to refashion contemporary penal spectatorship in terms of an ocular ethic that might more justly visualize the lived experiences of those deemed abject and unproductive. For within crime's image lies not only

the power to punish, but the possibility, dare we say 'choice', to see and imagine all that has been 'cropped away' by the classed and racialized scopic regime of police power.

## Notes

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their contributions to this article and Justin Smith for organizing the critical white studies in criminology panel at the 2011 ASC meetings and inviting us to participate.

1. This article grew from broader projects concerning methamphetamine conducted by the authors independent of each other. Over the course of several combined years of fieldwork, particularly by the first author, that included interviews with meth users and law enforcement personnel, analysis of governmental reports and media accounts, the authors developed intimate knowledge of methamphetamine within the specific context of the rural Midwestern USA. The Faces of Meth program and comments of the various spectators included here are thus characteristic of broader theoretical insights drawn from these projects.
2. Chav is pejorative for English youth who follow American hip hop fashion and prefer branded athletic clothing, baseball hats and ostentatious jewelry, famously satirized by Sasha Baron Cohen's character 'Ali G'.
3. Please view all products at [www.themethproject.org](http://www.themethproject.org).

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