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Ethnographic activism and critical criminology

David C. Brotherton

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it. (Marx, 1888)

1 Introduction

In this article, I discuss the concept of ethnographic activism and its relationship to the theory and practice of critical criminology.¹ As Karl Marx famously advocated, nearly 150 years ago for social change to take place, intellectuals need to go beyond their abstract theorizing and use their insights to help publics and constituencies take actions to make societal transformation a reality. Of course, this runs counter to much orthodox social science that prizes the objectivity of qualitative investigators as ‘neutral observers’ or quantitative analysts for their adoption of positivism’s scientific principles, all of which seemingly ensures the rigour of their findings. In contrast and in concurrence with the foundational perspectives of critical criminology (Young, 2011), I argue that all acts of social science have an ideological component as we seek to understand an objective world based on its economic, political and social power asymmetries reflected in the disciplinary regimes of thought and action (Foucault, 1977). In this reading of the research act, the social scientist cannot be above the fray but has to adopt a level of partisanship while being cognizant of one’s own domain assumptions (Gouldner, 1970). In ethnography, we do this through developing a reflexive, decolonizing methodology (Brotherton, 2015) and a commitment to theory as essential to the framing of our research while also pushing back against the dark impulses of empiricism. For theory not only helps to show the limitations of the world but also its possibilities (Burawoy, 2005).

By employing this approach to critical criminology, I have developed a form of partisan, counter-hegemonic social science (Burawoy, 2005) for almost three decades – a model of inquiry I call *ethnographic activism*,² whose methods and

1 By critical criminology I am simply referring to an approach to crime and its control that starts from the assumption that the social, political, economic and cultural foundational relations of society are asymmetrical and that the ideologies that make these relations our “taken for granted” world (Schutz, 1962). This ideology is also reflected in the theories and practices of what passes for orthodox criminology.

2 This is not to deny other forms of critical ethnographic praxis such as participant action research in its various modalities (see, e.g., Fine and Torre (2021) in psychology or Baum, MacDougal, and Smith (2006) regarding public health). For sure, these are also social scientific approaches that emphasize a commitment to social justice through multiple methods of research and knowledge production. However, I am solely concerned here with the practice of ethnography with an emphasis on its use in the area of criminology.

theoretical goals are an intentional praxis of social change and counter-hegemony. In a previous work, I describe the concept as follows:

our obligation [is] to recognize that borders bleed ... the task of the ethnographer is to record and enter this zone of complex meaning-making, transgression and liminality, to share layered social actions, to reciprocate, to experience and to co-perform with the researched population through worked out processes of social solidarity, mutual respect and recognition..[ethnographic activism is] a praxis [that] might be seen as the ethnographer's political statement ... a way to demonstrate the right of all of us to have a voice in this contested space we call society – a space that is at once home to the researched but also a watched terrain, a surveilled habitat constantly being policed, Othered and exoticized ... In short, a space made to feel off limits and beyond our scope of 'verstehen'. (Brotherton, 2015: 85).

Such a model of criminological inquiry is especially pertinent in studies involving 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach' populations. These are subjects who are often part of subaltern populations where the terrains of field work, from the lived environments of the subjects to the apparatuses of social control, display all the hallmarks of social harm emerging from the structured, ecological conditions and inequalities that our socially ordered society reproduces.

Below, I describe and explain such activism using three ongoing research projects as demonstration cases. I discuss the cases along three axes: knowledge production, decolonial methodology and critical theory development. In all these cases, we see their emergence not just arising from the heads of social scientists but organically as the private troubles of social actors are translated by the investigator into public issues (Mills, 1959). In the conclusion, I summarize this work and discuss some of the social impacts of this form of criminological research.

2 Three cases of ethnographic activism

The three cases I draw on to illustrate the ethnographic activist approach in its relationship to critical criminology are described below. Following these, I analyse their relevance to ethnographic activism along the three axes cited above.

2.1 Case 1: *The Street Organization Project: New York City*

In the mid-1990s, I moved from San Francisco where I was studying street gangs in the middle of the crack epidemic to New York City. At the time such groups were seen to criminologically arise as the subcultural responses of multiple-marginalized youth (Vigil, 1988), often of colour, to the ecological constraints of their structured and oppressive environment. The focus in my work shifted dramatically from a somewhat typical gang project of the day, funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (Waldorf, 1991), to a study of street politicization involving one of the largest street gangs in the United States, the Almighty Latin King and Queen

Nation, which we redefined as a street organization.³ The focus of this work was initially to ethnographically document and theorize the informal educational processes of youth in such hybrid organizations of the street funded by the Spencer Foundation,⁴ over three years, 1996-1999 (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004). However, much larger questions posed by the project expanded to include: (i) the politicized reactions of the state and its agents to a criminalized street gang; (ii) the ideology and organizational makeup of the group seen as a social movement and (iii) the relationship of the group to the community resistance against the zero tolerance policies of the Giuliani administration.

2.2 Case 2: *The social bulimia of deportation in the Dominican Republic*

In 2001, I gave a presentation in Santo Domingo on the subject of ‘pandillas y subculturas’ (gangs and subcultures) amongst Dominican youth in New York City, based on the above-mentioned research on the Latin Kings and Queens. Following the presentation, I waited for questions from the criminal justice-related audience with a dozen or more attendees raising their hands to ask a variation on a theme, ‘why are you sending them all back here?’ I revealed my ignorance, saying I had no idea. Thus began a seven-year transnational ethnographic inquiry into the forced repatriation of tens of thousands Dominican non-citizens from the United States (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011). Although the research received little funding, it was a pioneering achievement on multiple levels: (i) it was the first criminological study of a post-deportation population and their strategies to contend with high levels of stigma and socio-economic exclusion; (ii) it was the first such study to capture the life cycle of subjects from emigration, to incarceration, to deportation to emigration and (iii) it was the first study to work within the theoretical frame of social bulimia as proposed by the critical criminologist Jock Young (1999).⁵

2.3 Case 3: *The Credible Messenger Project: What does it mean to be transformative?*

This project started as a primarily qualitative, funded evaluation of a penal reform intervention at the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services in Washington, D.C. during the period 2017-2022. Unlike the other two projects, much of the field work took place in an institution and we were studying not just the transformation of individuals as part of a community but of an institution. The idea of credible

3 We defined the street organization as: “a group formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced” (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004: 23).

4 The Spencer Foundation describes its motivation as: “We believe education research is integral to improving education, making education systems more equitable, and increasing opportunities to learn across the lifespan” (<https://www.spencer.org/about-us>).

5 Young defined social bulimia as follows: “...none of this is to suggest that considerable forces of exclusion do not occur but the process is not that of a society of simple exclusion which I originally posited. Rather it is one where both inclusion and exclusion occur concurrently – a bulimic society where massive cultural inclusion is accompanied by systematic structural exclusion. It is a society which has both strong centrifugal and centripetal currents: it absorbs and it rejects” (Young, 2007: 32).

messengers was based on the original work of prison reformer Eddie Ellis (see Brotherton, 2023) and involved the recruitment of older members drawn from the same communities as youth ‘committed’ to the juvenile justice system who had themselves been involved with criminal justice. These would-be credible messengers were to function as transformative mentors to these youth and use their experience and familiarity with the communities, the life circumstances of the youth and their families to develop mutually trusting relationships that could help them towards rehabilitation and a positive life course. The social scientific goals of the project included: (i) a description of the social processes of this intervention; (ii) its transformative impacts on all the social actors involved, i.e., the mentors, the mentees and related families; (iii) the layered effects on the institution itself (Brotherton, Kessler, Kontos, Martinez, & Muhammad, forthcoming) and (iv) a theory of individual and collective change and its relationship to lowered levels of recidivism.

In each of these projects, ethnographic activism was on display. This could be seen in the rejection of (i) methodologies based on a colonizing approach to research subjects privileging the pseudo-scientific notions of neutrality and objectivity; (ii) an epistemology rooted in empiricism and the absence of reflexivity and (iii) relations between the researcher and the researched in which co-creativity and social change processes are not seen as intrinsic to social science. Each of these areas is discussed in the following.

(1) Knowledge production

A key question posed by critical ethnography asks whose knowledge is it that we produce in our research (Thomas, 1993)? A second question might also be how is this knowledge to be used? In all the cases outlined above, this rejection of extractivist research was uppermost through knowledge acquisition, interpretation and utilization.⁶ Fundamentally, we saw knowledge production not as a thing-in-itself, i.e., as more findings to fill the gaps in the literature, but as the result of a shared intervention with the research subjects or partners/interlocutors that shed light on their structured circumstances and their struggles to develop forms of agency that could increase control over their lives. As we described our approach in the first case:

our orientation begins from the premise that all social and cultural phenomena emerge out of tensions between the agents and interests of those who seek to control everyday life and those who have little option but to resist this relationship of domination. (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004: 4)

Knowledge was, therefore, produced out of this interaction and dialectical interpenetration between researchers and the researched engaged in a joint quest to understand an unequal and punitive world as it is lived, mediated and experienced

6 Conquergood (2002: 146) posits that bourgeois academic knowledge is based on knowing that and knowing about but knowledge from below is more embodied and grounded in “active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: knowing how and knowing who?”

though systems of meaning-making in all their contradictoriness. Since the subjects in our research came from the most marginalized spaces in society with little formal power in ways valued by mainstream society, e.g., educational credentials and respectable occupational statuses, it was crucial to learn to appreciate the contexts of daily life and to resist the domain assumptions within a Western epistemology that so successfully orders our ways of knowing, seeing and interpreting (Dos Santos, 2014; Haraway, 1991)⁷ – cutting us off precisely from what we should want to know.⁸

In this sensitizing and negotiated way, we came to understand how levels of power to organize, co-create and resist were generated deep within embedded community settings that usually pass unrecognized in bourgeois interrogations, not least because they are viewed as pathological and thus unworthy of contemplation (see Brotherton, 2015; Conquergood, 1997). Nonetheless, it is precisely out of these milieux that forms of subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980) gestate and evolve, becoming prized forms of community and street erudition (Fraser, 2017), passed down through generations across both civil and incarcerated societies.⁹

But what of the knowledge produced? This was constantly shared with the group's members and, in particular, the leadership with the intention of helping them see their own accomplishments from another perspective and arming them in their legal and symbolic struggles with authority. An example of this process is the group's appropriation of the term 'street organization', developed in opposition to the hegemonic and toxic label of 'gang'. Thus, in press conferences which the group frequently called, they would reverse the race and class privilege of the occasion and lecture those present on the reasons the group should not be considered 'a gang'. For, they asserted, the proof of this social 'fact' had now been discovered not by the group but by bona fide criminologists belonging to the largest criminal justice college in the United States!

Nonetheless, is it not dangerous and irresponsible to divulge such thinking and practices of a subculture so demonized and targeted by the surveillance state and its apologists? With the agreement of the group's leaders, some of this subject matter was indeed published and analysed even though it was generally considered 'off-limits' and only passed on to members as they progressed within its ranks. However, the leadership took a political decision, reasoning that if their inner world were better known, it would counter the moral panic that fuelled the gang phantasmagoria (Muñiz, 2022) that had so consumed the public's imagination

7 Rather, they came from the opposite ends of society, part of a class of outcasts (Wacquant, 2007) and semi-proletarians (Davis, 2018), from within strata that were permanently 'Othered', segregated and quarantined in conditions of poverty (Desmond, 2023) and discrimination.

8 This happens, for example, through the fetish of "data collection," as field research is often broken down into categories of work specialization that reduces our abilities to immerse ourselves in the richness of communities for fear it does not fit within the contours of the project.

9 These came in the form of written manifestoes, prayers, rules and rituals that organized the group affairs and informed their training, education and cultural systems.

especially during the trial of its infamous founder, Luis Felipe.¹⁰ Meanwhile, this gang-initiated knowledge helped us comprehend the organization on a more profound level, showing us their efforts at history-making, envisioning new forms of language and communication and their everyday practices of sociality and artistic and cultural development (see also Quicker & Batani-Khalfani, 2022; Weide, 2022).

As such, we gained a broader appreciation of the group's ritualized activities and penchant for spectacle, street theatre and performance that grew out of the variegated levels of resistance that constituted their everyday individual and collective life worlds. In these worlds, in many ways, they were making their future society in the bowels of the old, one in which solidarity and the provision of basic needs were the norm not the exception. Conquergood (1997) referred to them as "bonded communitarians", able to unite the outcasts across the borders of race and ethnicity. In social movement terms, they might be seen as social actors engaged in their own forms of historicity (Pleyers, 2012), displaying within their subcultural practices, messages and meanings of hope and transcendence against the odds (Grekul, forthcoming).

In accordance with the goals of ethnographic activism, we presented this knowledge to the world in ways that were accessible to different publics and, where possible, created spaces of public dialogue across the social divide. For it was crucial to go beyond the scriptcentric modes of dissemination or what De Certeau calls the formally written and coded world emblematic of Western imperialism (De Certeau, 1988). Thus, in 1997 and 2001, in New York City, we organized the only conferences on the topic of gangs where the members of these groups were present (Flynn & Brotherton, 2008; Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 2003).¹¹

While the tabloid media and the institution's security agents, primed by the New York Police Department, predicted mayhem and violence, the event only produced truces between conflicting groups and ongoing collaborations aimed at violence prevention and social inclusion. Nonetheless, sharing such knowledge at this level was seen by some as dangerous (Hayward, Ferrell, & Young, 2010), for working social scientifically to engage and energize subaltern constituencies destabilized and transgressed the boundaries of containment and order maintenance for which there could only be zero tolerance.

In the second case, knowledge was produced through the deported subjects' complex narratives of displacement (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011) and survival. As they recounted drawn-out histories of migration, incarceration and detention, they talked of the fragmented family and social relations that had left them traumatized, anomic and in a permanent state of alterity. This knowledge and

10 Luis Felipe, aka King Blood, in 1997, was sentenced to 150 years imprisonment the first 45 of which would be served in isolation. He was found guilty of ordering multiple homicides from his prison cell. It was one of the most severe sentences of any person accused in U.S. Federal Court since World War Two.

11 Several thousand persons including scores of gang members descended on John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 2001 with Mayor Giuliani responding by threatening sanctions against the institution. The college's President retorted that he was only taking seriously the college's stated mission to educate the city's lower classes while defending the first amendment.

experience they desired to communicate to publics they felt had treated them with inexplicable vindictiveness and inhumanity (Brotherton & Tosh, 2018). “What had they done to deserve this state of abjection, this bare life?”, they asked (Willen, 2019). If only the larger society knew what had been done in their name, then change must surely come, they insisted. With this hope and intention, they agreed to have their memories, identities and accounts revealed to a broader audience to show the degree to which they had been dehumanized, socially erased and subjected to systemic acts of injustice and the denial of democracy’s most basic principles (De Genova & Peutz, 2010).

But a social space and mechanism had to be found to make the ethnographic activism more visible and urgent as with the former case. With the numbers involved in these acts of forced repatriation following a similar pattern to mass incarceration, the expulsion process in its speed and proliferation had little precedent in recent times. Deportable aliens, their families and communities were suffering; social harm was being done on an industrial scale while the taboos that surrounded the emergence of this class of persons were turning them into a caste. Meanwhile, the damning discourses of the ‘Other’ in public and corporate media of both sending and receiving countries showed no indication of slowing. In 2003, therefore, the first conference on deportation in the Caribbean and Latin American countries was held in Santo Domingo, followed by a similar event in New York City a year later (Brotherton & Kretsedemas, 2008, 2018). Once again, the shared concerns and experiences of these subjects broke through the conspiracy of silence as witnesses came forward to testify, analysts provided social and historical links to past and present and advocates declared their intention to make this abridgement of human rights into a new social movement. And, as in the first case, the damned turned up in droves to claim their place at the table.

In the third case, it is the production of another kind of knowledge that was central to the project. Transformative mentoring is based on the possession and transmission of insider knowledge that is used to create a bond between mentors and mentees and was viewed as a fundamental aspect of how ‘committed’ youth might be empowered and enabled. In recent evaluations of programmes employing this approach, the ontological process was seen as highly effective in steering youth away from recidivism. Thus, the goals of ethnographic activism were to critically interpret this praxis of transformative mentorship as part of a broader process of individual, collective and institutional change-making.

To achieve this goal, we designed a project to: (i) assess the relationship between the mentor and the mentee both in the institutional and community contexts; (ii) conceive the mentee as a possessor of possibility not just deficits and (iii) return the research knowledge back to the institution in the form of a feed-back loop¹² that could increase the reflexivity of the programme’s implementers. Thus, in collaborating with the interventionists, we supported their activist aims of transformation, producing knowledge explicitly for social change purposes while arguing for a more radical interpretation of the credible messenger concept. In the

12 This is, in contrast, to most evaluations that report on observed and tallied outcomes of a programme or other kinds of intervention.

words of the director of the initiative, “credible messengers must be more than just a program ... it has to be a social movement” (Brotherton et al., forthcoming). This more critical interpretation of the project contrasted with the dominance of anti-violence interventions using the credible messenger concept, denying that crime be understood through its ‘root causes’. In so doing, such programmes ideologically reduced its change-making potential with no pretence to affect power asymmetries by addressing the links between structural and inter-personal violence (Salmi, 1993). Such interventions, we argued, were based on the assumption that ‘broken’ or ‘high-risk’ communities were the result of their own shortcomings, functioning as neo-liberal responses to the now depoliticized problem of violence. Furthermore, they served to channel the energies and passions of youth into non-threatening pursuits and even careers as part of the non-profit industrial complex. All this was a far cry from one of the principal originators of the credible messenger concept who called for that ‘warrior spirit’ of justice-involved youth to be engaged and be the foundation of a new consciousness in the struggle against structural injustice (Brotherton, 2023).

(2) A Critical and Decolonial Methodology

This ... approach ... seeks to uncover the processes by which seemingly normative relationships are contingent upon structured inequalities and reproduced by rituals, rules and a range of symbolic systems. Our approach ... is an holistic one, collecting and analyzing multiple types of data and maintaining an openness to modes of analysis that cut across disciplinary turfs.... we have chosen a collaborative mode of inquiry ... By this we mean the establishment of a mutually respectful and trusting relationship with a community or a collective of individuals which: (i) will lead to empirical data that humanizes the subjects, (ii) can potentially contribute to social reform and social justice, and (iii) can create the conditions for a dialogical relationship between the investigator(s) and the respondents. (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004: 4)

In the first project outlined above, we described our methodology, seeking to distinguish ourselves from so many ethnographic projects that failed to problematize the process of ‘data collection’, analysis and flows of knowledge. We wanted to make clear from the outset that our negotiated entry into these worlds was as partisans in the struggles against inequality, exploitation, oppression/repression and that from our perspective, research was a political act (Smith, 2021). We made it plain that reproducing the “imperial traffic in knowledge” (Connell, 2018), maintaining the stream of ‘data’ from the periphery to the metropole was not our agenda, for we saw these sub-populations and their social conditions deriving explicitly from the history of colonialism both internally and externally with the bourgeois academy complicit in the silencing of indigenous voices (Agozino, 2003). Criminology, in particular, with its overwhelming reliance on positivistic data that are routinely analysed unreflexively only serves to reify the crimes of the powerful while criminalizing those with the least societal leverage.

Such practices are the norm in scholarly departments across the United States with researchers richly rewarded by foundations and government agencies for providing findings that do little to shine a light on the processes of injustice built into the country's social structures. Reformist tinkering is the most one can hope for from such work and stands in opposition to the growing calls for abolition of both prisons and the police in the wake of George Floyd's murder – a spectacular incident that signalled to many just how routine such racialized behaviour was amongst those who are supposed to guarantee the public's safety.

Thus, we strived to maintain this ethnographic stance in all three cases, learning lessons from each one and setting out the basic principles that I have outlined elsewhere (see Brotherton, 2015), including¹³: (i) the fallacy of the neutral observer; (ii) researching from somewhere; (iii) research as an act of collaboration and co-creation; (iv) data holism and (v) the development of critical theory. Taking each of these tenets as fundamental to the ethnographic activist, I discuss them below giving examples of how they were manifested in the research praxis.

(i) The fallacy of the neutral observer

As already mentioned in Case 1, we came under direct attack from New Yorks City's mayor for daring to include gang members in an academic conference, demonstrating the impossibility for social scientists to remain above the fray in such a politically charged environment. Since gangs emerged from the colonizing conditions of everyday life and the histories of repression and segregation at the hands of White supremacy (Vigil, 1988), it seemed natural that the city's reactionary administration and its police force would be at war with these organizations and, in particular, with the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation whose rhetoric of self-determination and political empowerment so agitated the city's power elite. It was a given that any research which represented such groups in a humanistic light would not only be condemned by the establishment but also see that its practitioners were targeted.¹⁴

However, it was in the second case that the impossibility of neutrality was made apparent. For, as part of excavating the terrain of colonized subjects, I agreed to provide 'expert testimony' in immigration hearings where deportable aliens were facing removal (Brotherton, 2018). In what I considered a type of action research (since I was engaged in a self-conscious act of being a change agent through the research), I also saw it as a form of 'edge work' (Lyng, 1990), i.e., putting myself in a situation likely to face risks and levels of discomfort without necessarily an exit strategy or a material reason for my involvement.

This scenario became doubly apparent in 2012 when I was subjected to a lengthy investigation by lawyers of Homeland Security as part of the Department of

13 Also echoed in the decolonial ethnographic work of researchers such as Smith (2021), Tuck (2009) and Fine (2016).

14 Just one example of this harassment and attempts to stymie the research was the prevention of interviews with inmates at Rikers Island, the world's biggest penal colony. Thus, in 1998, I was labelled a 'security threat' by the then corrections commissioner Bernard Kerik and banned from entering the city-based institution.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement's attempt to remove me from the list of authorized experts. In effect, the state used its inter-agency power to investigate my travel records to prove that I had not been in countries where I claimed my ethnographic studies were taking place. In other words, my work was really fiction, and I was nothing more than an impostor. This crude abuse of state power was another form of silencing, sending a message to me and to the legal organizations with whom I collaborated that this criminological intervention would not be tolerated – just as Giuliani would not accept the right of gang members to attend a conference about themselves.

Now classified effectively as an enemy of the state, for my supposed sympathies with the deportable 'Other', my right to educate the court, a long-accepted right even within the deportation regime, could no longer be allowed. It was not enough that detained immigrants had no constitutional right to legal representation, but now they were denied their only chance to avoid being returned to a life-threatening situation, guaranteed under the United Nation's Convention Against Torture guidelines, of which the United States was a signatory.

(ii) Researching from somewhere

The decolonizing literature is replete with critiques of the practices of research from above in low power communities where the right of science to extract at will from such communities is seen as 'for the good of society'. This form of impositional research is sometimes referred to as 'extraversion', i.e., where the scientific and cultural authority of a society is produced by outsiders (see Connell, 2018; Hountondji, 1997) and is the opposite of the ethnographic activist approach. Here the emphasis is always on forming partnerships and meaningful, dialogical relationships that create the bases for negotiating protocols to observe, record and document the private and public daily lives of those who generally have fewer means to speak back to power. Hence, the usual hierarchical order between the researcher and the researched is contested.

There were multiple instances in working with the street organizations that I became the subject of the investigation as individuals queried my positionality,¹⁵ class and racial background and my real versus stated intentions. Even though there was little evidence that I was transgressing agreed-upon principles of confidentiality and shared interpretations of data, accusations of 'being used' or 'for whose benefit' are the research, etc. could be heard, especially when the groups were under pressure from the surveillance/militarized state. In these periods when the partnership came under strain, it was crucial to 'be there' and 'be present', showing solidarity with the group and providing whatever legal and political

15 Positionality, of course, is seen as a constant problem in ethnographic research where often 'white' ethnic, middle-class researchers are doing studies with and, in non-white, lower class communities and populations. I would not claim to completely resolve this contradiction in the research act but a rigorous commitment to an interpretive reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) helps guard against the tendencies towards reification and both social constructions and domain assumptions linked to our identity formation. I have found that the deeper our embeddedness in the worlds under study and the greater our engagement in knowledge sharing with our research partners the closer we come to achieving that level of 'verstehen' (Ferrell, 1997) that we are aiming for.

support was necessary.¹⁶ These were moments when ‘being from somewhere’ mattered and the level of commitment and legitimacy of the researcher’s intentions were the criteria for allowing the investigation to continue.

(iii) Research collaboration and co-creation

All the research projects were based on well-defined collaborative agreements ensuring that written publications, photographic exhibits or video footage would be done ethically without jeopardizing the welfare of any individual or profiting from the exercise. This collaboration extended to the research instruments, including the interview questionnaires and the field observational guidelines with the engagement of group members in the analysis and interpretation of events. Hence, in both the first two projects, which included substantial amounts of photography, the making and choice of the images to present to the public were carefully considered, taking into account: the naturalness of the subjects and their settings, and the aesthetic aspect of the group which contrasted with their usual figurative representation in which their association with monstrosity was the norm (Carter, 2022).¹⁷

Fewer other projects have been given access to so many events, spaces and group-based materials, all of which reflect the levels of trust and respect achieved with these populations over time. These spaces of engagement were intimate, secret, tacit and often off-limits (e.g., prisons in the Dominican Republic) and yet somehow, we were invited repeatedly to observe, partake, interview, discuss, interact with a wide range of social actors who emerged in the course of the study and whose voices were deemed relevant by the group. Frequently, the decisions about whom to interview was that of the research participants who wanted ‘to get the story right’ to have some control over their own narratives. However, this does not mean that we engaged in forms of criminological naivete, simply taking the claims of our interlocutors and partners for granted without considering the possibilities of concealment or either intentional or unintentional misrepresentation. Rather, our proximity to the multi-level worlds of the subjects presented us precisely with the ability to check for the veracity of subjects’ claims. A hallmark of our research, therefore, was the amount of time given precisely to a critical analysis and interpretation of the twists and turns in our partners’ life courses as opposed to the penchant in orthodox criminology for empiricist accounts of a world devoid of irony, paradox and the contrapuntal.

This praxis of what might be called research scepticism, to a significant extent, prompted our research partners to always identify with the research or at least with its primary purpose. Thus, in time, the studies came to be considered ‘their story’, full of life’s ambiguities and certainties told through recollections (both formal and informal) that we were privileged to document. For any ethnographic

16 It is perhaps worth stating that my relationship to these communities and populations is not one of wishing to ‘save’ them from themselves. Quite the contrary, especially as I come from a community that was and is heavily stigmatized and ritually ‘Othered’ by the dominant social order.

17 For an excellent discussion on visual criminology and the politics of representation, see Carrabine (2012).

project, this is high praise notwithstanding the standard objections of 'going native'.¹⁸

(iv) Data holism

In recording the daily life of a sub-community, it takes an immersion and an imagination that is boundless. It is the stories and self-representations of the subjects that are crucial to collect, the studies from below against the mapping from above which is designed to cut them up (De Certeau, 1984) into positivistic bits of abstracted, reified 'data' which will then be inserted into models of analysis for further abstraction and reification. In mainstream gang research, this is the norm. It is the perfect colonizing relationship on display at criminal justice and criminological conferences around the world where the colonized are presented as deviants by 'experts' with 'data' divorced from history, ideology, community context or any mention of political economy.

In opposition to this simulacrum of the scientific method, the ethnographic activist must be sensitive and dedicated to gathering a range of data with the emphasis on the phenomenon's multi-dimensionality, situatedness and the world as it is lived in subjectivities that lie deep within but not always ready to be articulated. Galleano summed up this challenge for the researcher who seeks to confront the Cartesian dualism so evident in mainstream research as follows:

Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together? From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces: it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Colombian Coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth. (Galleano, 2000: 32)

Thus, life-histories were our favoured method because they often got at the unstated and underlined the importance of radical listening to the self-understandings of subjects that often do not conform to the rational choice interpretative paradigms so rampant in the discipline. In addition, we drew on archival historical texts, cultural artefacts, demographic and economic analyses, field observations, photographs and videos that were all part of the story-telling process. As Carter writes in his remarkable gang study in Honduras:

Fieldwork, then, is an artful waiting. It cultivates a temporality of understanding in which bits of information, dialogue, and drawings, juxtaposed with news clippings, doodles, and dreams, amass into a new ecosystem of understanding

18 I should add that it was rarely possible to get our partners to do their own research despite multiple efforts. Nonetheless, we did achieve some success in this area. For example, Antonio Fernandez kept a diary via recorded reflections in 1999 before he was incarcerated and, in 2021, an article for the *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies* (Brotherton & Gude, 2021a) was written by a leader of an Ecuadorian street organization called 'Masters of the Street'.

premiered on the growing awareness of the threshold that constrains one's perspective. (Carter, 2022: 92)

The ethnographic activist must be attuned, therefore, to the questions, contradictions and counter-intuitive processes that continually arise from this collaborative engagement along with the gaps, the silences and the acts of concealment which are all part of the human condition. This orientation committed to the subject's all-sidedness is imperative when working with communities that produce so many cultural forms that are concealed from and devalued by the dominant society.

(3) Critical theory development

In Case 1, a radical rethinking of the gang through a social movement and cultural lens was proposed and has been taken up by a range of younger academics not tied to the social disorganization or rational choice paradigms so dominant in sociology and criminology (Barganier, 2011; Fraser, 2017; Martinez, 2016; Weide 2022, amongst others). There was no other way to explain the levels of cultural contestation, collective identity formation or political self-organization developed by the various street organizations that were subjects of study not only in New York but also in Europe (e.g., Spain and Italy – see also Feixa, Porzio & Recio, 2006; Palmas, 2014) and South America (e.g., Ecuador – see Brotherton & Gude, 2021b; Garcia, 2021; Rodriguez & Cerbino, 2021). As Hagedorn (2008) argued, these hegemonic theories were rooted in Chicago School concepts that reflected a bygone age of mass industrial society, restricted systems of communication and international migration flows that while still globalized had not reached patterns of human movement across space and time – a defining feature of today's late capitalist modernity. Moreover, in traditional gang studies, there was no real theorization of the state beyond notions of social control founded on a Durkheimian framework of value consensus. However, in today's neo-liberal reordering of the political economy and the influence of new carceral geographies (Gilmore, 2007), social ordering (Lopez-Aguado, 2018) and network societies (Castells, 1997), gangs have been reimagined within more complex structures and cosmologies of age, race, class, gender and sexuality, liminal trajectories of nationalism and transnationalism and a reconceptualization of borders, mobilities and solidarities. Consequently, we developed the notion of the street organization (see text earlier) and adopted theories drawn from social movements, cultural criminology and performance studies discourses to rethink the gang as a hybridized group phenomenon that emerges out of historical processes of exclusion, structural violence and both state abandonment and pathologization. However, these groups demonstrate both individual and collective agency reflected in praxes that range from resistance to accommodation. Perhaps, most importantly, their development is contingent on the political possibilities of the moment and in contrast to orthodox gang studies, they are receptive to interventions that combine meaningful strategies for empowerment, desistance and community integration (see Brotherton, 2007; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

Similarly, in the second case, with the subject of deportation now finally penetrating a heavily policed sociology of migration anchored to notions of assimilation and integration (especially in the United States), the new regimes of migrant social expulsion that emerged in so many nation states (De Genova & Peutz, 2010) had eventually to be addressed. My work was one of the few adopting the framework of Young's "social bulimia" (Young, 1999, 2011) to explain the centrifugal movement of people within and across borders that went beyond the mechanistic, empiricist "pushes and pulls" popular in orthodox migration research. There was also needed a theory of migrant agency and resistance to explain the extraordinary levels of resilience and resourcefulness of those from the periphery risking their lives and those of their families, then making the necessary sacrifices to settle and often still send money back 'home'. At the same time, what accounts for those other forms of agency, e.g., of the state and its agents dedicated to policing migrant bodies with ever expanding militarized budgets, dwarfing those of former systems of internal and external border management in a 'nation of immigrants'?

Finally, in the third case, where the theories of violence intervention and rehabilitation lurch between public health positivism and a mix of moral consensus and opportunity structures theory, there had to be a place for consciousness development and a rejection of Hobbesian paradigms that pepper so much U.S. criminal justice epistemes (e.g., Hirschi, 1969). Hence, I argue for notions of personal transformation based on community re-engagement, social reciprocity and conscientization (Freire, 1970) and forms of progressive social control to promote desistance that is both individual and collective. In this, I place importance on the reformulation of the self as part of a new urban habitus and ontology under the influence of mentors who can connect to both the bodies and souls of their mentees. As these transformative subjects discover their historicity (Touraine, 1988), they reimagine their place in the world, developing new identities to help them struggle against forms of lower-class fatalism and the rituals of social reproduction.

3 Conclusion

In the above, I have summarized some of the experiences of my ethnographic journeys over the past three decades and suggested how they relate to forms of activism in the pursuit of criminological knowledge. I argue that such research can play an important role in social change processes without compromising our commitments to say something meaningful about society and some of the biggest challenges we face on a day-to-day level. However, I also maintain that this knowledge must be used to change a world that is based on disparate levels of power between the haves and have-nots that are not sustainable. If we continue to pretend that we want a democratic society based on inclusiveness and justice for all rather than the conspicuous consumption and privilege for the few that has increasingly been the norm, certainly since my first foray into the field back in the early 1990s, then we have an obligation to act in line with Marx's dictum.

I also show that a critical, decolonizing methodology is essential. We cannot accept hegemonic notions of the neutral observer as the starting point in our research since it fails to take into account the positions from which we speak, the biases within positivistic reasoning that obviate contradiction, the reduction of human action to statistical data sets and the containment of research agendas within the boundaries of the dominant ideology. I argue that we need a social science that is both accessible and accountable to those with the least power and willing to contest those who are responsible for the epistemicide that devalues or annihilates indigenous knowledge and the participation of the colonized and the lower social classes in the research act.

I have been privileged to witness change taking place as a result of the research I have been involved in from social policies developed in Europe that stopped police treating street gang members as criminalized Others in Barcelona and Genoa to a national policy of gang legalization that was implemented over 10 years in Ecuador (Brotherton & Gude, 2021b, Diaz 2021). I have also seen hundreds of deportable aliens in the United States successfully mount a defence against their repatriation based on my findings of extreme stigmatization amongst deported populations in the Dominican Republic and a credible messenger movement that is increasingly looking to the dialectical relationship between the individual and the community to resolve problems of violence and crime. At no time can I claim that this was my intention for when I began my main consideration as a researcher was to be respectful to the communities in which I was working and to 'tell the truth', at least as I felt, saw and interpreted it within the economic, social, cultural, political and inter-personal power relations that were clearly present in the resistances and mediations that subjects exhibited. All this meant that I had to develop a criminological imagination to tell stories that eventually had a social impact.

What, you may ask, is the lesson of all this? While we have to appreciate the immense untapped power in those who live at the bottom rungs of society without underestimating the structural constraints that condition our life chances, it is imperative to remember that history is not yet written. The ethnographic activist in this regard is in a perfect position to reflect on this contradiction and to make the invisible visible. At the same time, the ethnographic activist also declares to those who will listen that there are no longer sidelines to sit on while these injustices are done in our name. In point of fact, there never were.

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