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Studying the Gang Through Critical Ethnography

by

David C. Brotherton

Instead of reading textual accounts of slavery, Douglas recommended a riskier hermeneutics of experience, relocation, copresence, humility and vulnerability: *listening to and being touched by the protest of performances of enslaved people.* He understood knowledge is *located*, not transcendent...: that it must be *engaged*, not abstracted...: and that it is forged from *solidarity with*, not separation from... (Conquergood 2002:149)

Conquergood's quote (above) easily relates to much of the extensive mainstream criminological literature published on street gangs over the past century, most of it coming from social science departments in the United States. Although the earlier period of gang studies, from the 1920s to the 1970s, saw ethnography as the favored methodological approach, thereafter, with the turn towards positivism in the social sciences and the rise of "administrative criminology" in the United Kingdom and the United States (Feeley and Simon 1992), gang studies became increasingly subject to the quantitative gaze. Significant funding from the US federal government followed a procession of moral panics about a variety of gang-related folk devils. Such moral crusades paved the way for the characteristics of contemporary coercive social control in the United States, from mass incarceration to specialized gang police units, gang prisons, gang data bases, ubiquitous urban surveillance, and retroactive deportation laws. As many have pointed out in their criticisms of the gang literature (Brotherton 2015; Fraser 2015, 2017; Hagedorn 2008; Hallsworth 2013), large gaps have appeared in gang studies with so many researchers accepting the pathological, ahistorical, adaptational, non-transformative, and non-contradictory nature of the gang as a *domain assumption* (Gouldner 1978).

Added to the paucity of critical lenses through which the gang has been viewed criminologically is the increasing influence of the US criminal justice system on the global gang discourse. Such a lens has increased in importance as many nation states have followed the example of US repressive gang policies in thinking about crime and deviance, essentially mirroring its adoption of neo-liberalism (Harvey 2007, Young 1999, 2011) in thinking about the political economy. In such an approach it is assumed that a coercive social control system is required to discipline and warehouse those “problem populations” excluded by the concentration of wealth and power (see Robinson 2014). Thus, across the globe, we observe the spread of highly punitive and criminalizing policies in the various crusades against the Other, resulting in extreme levels of social harm and little curtailment of the targeted behavior—an outcome confidently predicted by adherents of deviance amplification theory (Taylor, Walton and Young 1977). Thus, the gang as one of society’s chief enemies, has a ubiquitous presence, becoming a key “floating” signifier in policing and regulating public and private spaces, all of which relate to protecting, reproducing, and reinforcing race/ethnic and class structures in the service of wealth and capital accumulation. It is my contention that a critical ethnographic approach to studies of the gang can be part of the resistance to this dynamic or at least thwart orthodox criminology’s complicity in the process.

I. THE CHICAGO SCHOOL LEGACY OF GANG ETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

While ethnography has long been used in gang studies it has too often left dominant power structures unrecognized and therefore unanalyzed. The Chicago School work on gangs, for all its pioneering ethnographic excavations and insights—many of which

served to counter the prevailing and popular conception of the dangerous classes and their socially threatening cultural deficits and subcultural practices (Pearson 1987)—has left us with highly contradictory influences. On the one hand, a powerful tradition of humanistic social science that puts a premium on empirical data collection, theory building, and social engagement, and on the other hand a refusal to plumb the structured lives and grids of researched spaces and subjects, leaving the fault lines of capitalist production and exchange relations within a “raced” social ecology somehow outside the orbit of the scientific gaze.

One of the most frustrating yet impressive of these treatments was Thrasher’s 1927 study of Chicago gangs which continues to have an unrivalled and iconic status among gang researchers. Indeed, compared to so much social scientific investigation of the gang, especially after the 1970’s, Thrasher’s work reminds us of the scholarly potential and analytical power of these non-pathological early traditions of sociology and criminology with regards to the gang problem. Nonetheless, a number of researchers in more recent years have noted some major issues in this work, underlining the above opening comments, particularly in the treatment of race and space (Hagedorn 2008), corporate capitalism (Snodgrass 1997), and social theory that specifically ignores “the color line” (Morris 2017).¹ Indeed, in Morris’ trenchant critique of the Chicago School tradition, he demonstrates how none of these elisions among early Chicago scholars were coincidental but reflected the ideological and racial conflict between Chicago’s most eminent scholar, Robert Park, and his apparent nemesis, William E.B. Du Bois. Morris argues that buried deep within the Chicago School approach was a commitment to the ideas of evolutionary social Darwinism, complete with its acceptance of biological essentialism and the natural law of racial hierarchies. Such an assertion, highlighting the

pervasiveness of a white supremacist outlook among the founders of American sociology and criminology, should make us think critically about the domain assumptions contained in the expanding social scientific oeuvre on gangs, particularly as the gang has been employed so effectively as the “everyman’s Other” in the globalized policies of punitiveness and the contemporary political campaigns of authoritarian populists across the globe.

II. CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

How can critical ethnography make a difference? If traditional, modernist ethnography is about empirically studying the “folkways” of a community, painstakingly describing its everyday rhythms, its complex systems of social interactions, its relationship with the broader society, and the different meaning systems that cultures and subcultures develop, then critical ethnography problematizes each of these notions, situating them within the asymmetrical power relations of a globalized capitalism within which we are all situated. A critical practice of ethnography, therefore, is tied to excavating “the political underpinnings of all modes of representation, including the scientific” (Conquergood 2013: 81). Instead of asking “what is?” it asks “what could be?” (Thomas 1993:4), as was the distinguishing feature of critical theory itself. Ipso facto it must be in constant tension with all forms of empiricism and positivism.

Consequently, critical ethnography does not take at face value the meanings of an action, speech term, or observation, but is always aware of the ironies within these spheres of “meaning-making” that speak to the contradictions, symbolic, and hidden meanings within the data. This distinction in methodological praxis and epistemological approach emerged within the general crisis of representation in the social sciences which,

in large measure, occurred with the decline of imperial and colonial domination after World War Two (Marcus and Fischer 1986). This critical turn had a radicalizing impact on the legitimacy and assumed authority of social science research, which until then had primarily accepted unproblematically a research practice and epistemology of the enlightenment based on the privileged nature of the text and assumed role of the author. While this post-colonial (and often postmodern) critique has held a great deal of currency in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, it has had less impact on criminology (particularly its US variant) and has been particularly resisted by a criminology commo

A: The New Wave of Critical Gang Studies

Fraser (2015) has argued that a new wave of gang studies emerged after the new millennium that has begun to take us out of what he terms the “dark ages” of gang studies during the post-1970s era that coincided with the political and economic policies of neo-liberalism (Harvey 2007, Wacquant 2009) Fraser notes that gang research during this epoch became obsessed with “gang data sets” and what Young (2011) referred to as the penchant for “scientific othering” with empiricism, positivism, and rational choice theory dominating much of the criminological discourse in academic journals, particularly in the United States. Nonetheless, another current also emerged among gang scholars, one that did not yield to the binary notions of deviance and/or criminal transgression, as “expert” crime talk became replete with the lexicons of “risk assessment” and actuarial reasoning. Thus, a geographically and disciplinary-wide and varied scholarly body of work on gangs has evolved (Hazen and Rodgers 2014), challenging the US-centric view of the late modern street.²

This fresh and innovative development in the literature provides the foundations for a new genre of gang inquiry and a new generation of gang researchers. This work essentially takes the best of the early gang studies that were largely formed within the boundaries of sociology and criminology and inflects it with the sensibilities of scholarship drawing on both the humanities and the social sciences, militating precisely against disciplinary parameters, socio-geographic hegemony, and canonical constraints.

Just a few examples include the socio-linguistic research of Mendoza-Denton (2008) among female Northern Californian gang members, the performative and semiotic work of Conquergood (1997, 1993, 1992) in Chicago, Brotherton and Barrios' (2004) sociological revelation of street politics among New York City gangs, Black's (2009) Millsian study of Puerto Rican gangs in Connecticut, Zilberg's (2011) critical anthropological excavations in a "post-conflict" El Salvador, Campbell's (1984) pathbreaking feminist ethnographic account of gang females in New York City, Miller's (2001) reinterpretation of feminist criminology in Columbus, Ohio and St. Louis, Missouri, Duran (2015, 2018), the ex-gang member turned sociologist's comparative gang studies in Utah and Colorado, Panfil's (2017) research in Columbus Ohio which is a foray against the heteronormativity of gang studies, O'Neill's (2015) examination of the gang via the church's repressive complicity in Guatemala, Moore and Garcia's (1978) pioneering study of Chicano gangs, colonialism and the prison in Los Angeles, Bucarius's (2014) work on the drug trade among young male Turkish gangs in Frankfurt, Germany, Stephenson's revelations of Russian street gangs in a post-Soviet dystopia (2015), and Palmas's (2017) Bourdieuan interpretation of the state's response to gangs in Barcelona. Outside of social science there is De Cesare's (2014) photographic depictions of gang life in her documentation of street life in Central America, while Rodriguez

(1994, 2011) plumbs lessons of his own life course in and out of the gang to empower both marginalized youth and the currently incarcerated. All these contributions provide different, revelatory, nuanced, and innovative treatments of the gang precisely by embracing the fluid, contradictory, and often transnational cultural worlds of difference, resistance, and ambiguity. For, despite their variation in contexts and themes, they all refuse to succumb to the rituals of specious categorization, empiricist reasoning, and ungrounded theorization, all of which are the hallmarks of a conventional social science of the gang.

B: Practicing the Critical Ethnography of the Gang

As important as this critique of much mainstream crime research is, and in particular its ethnographic variant, many questions remain for those aiming to attain a more engaged, reflexive, and political orientation to the praxis of gang ethnography. For example, how do we resist becoming the “zoo keepers” (Young 1969) of the deviants? How do we avoid adopting the gaze of the colonizer and/or the middle-class paternalist for all our good intentions? Or how do we prevent ourselves from going “native” as we immerse ourselves in the subterranean worlds of the Other? These are some of the perennial ethical and social scientific issues with which we are confronted regardless of our honorable motives and righteous opposition to a gang social science so often constructed and conceived from privileged positions of gendered, racial, and class power.

In the following I discuss six methodological areas that are at the core of much of the critical ethnographic research I have been engaged in for the last two decades, hoping to answer some of the questions posed above while avoiding participation in another “social scientific safari” in pursuit of the gang.³

1. The Fallacy of the Neutral Observer

The critical approach recognizes that the world is intrinsically unfair and that material, ideological, and cultural structures are heavily stacked against the subjects/participants. Therefore, when the subjects act or speak they do so from a peripheral position that makes attempts to hear and understand them difficult. No matter how one tries to objectively experience and portray the setting or engage subjects through interviews we always have an impact on the environment and vice versa (see Maher 1997). One cannot divorce our presence from our thinking and feeling, or what Galeano calls our engagement in “senti-pensante” - feeling/thinking. Rather than seeing ourselves as examples of the Cartesian binary, Galeano explains:

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.
(Eduardo Galeano 1998, p. 32)

Thus, ethnographic researchers are always part of the scene. Whether observing or more actively participating, we are always in a processual relationship with the subjects, negotiating positions, stances, and strategies. The ethnographer, therefore, is embodied and embedded in data that interacts with and through us. As such, we are part of the research act’s instrumentation, resulting in “findings” that are a matter of interpretation. Furthermore, we are usually not simply looking on, since we have requested permission

(in most cases) to enter a field site, but rather we are rupturing (regardless of our intentions) the normal patterns of life as we go about our task of collecting the utterances, commentaries, and insights of our selected social actors.

Obviously, the researcher tries to be hyper-observant but bodies of knowledge, codes of action, rituals, symbols, and practices are not self-evident, coming neatly packaged with labels. So many meanings are frequently missed due to mis- and non-recognition or privileging different dimensions of the activity and perceived reality. The only remedy for this is time spent in the field building trust relationships, human bonds, and emotional attachments. This is our process of immersion into the community and/or subgroup and is imperative if we are to become sufficiently acquainted with the terrain. Such an ethnographic process of co-presence necessitates a certain proximity to the subjects that makes it difficult to control and maintain boundaries, partly due to its contingent nature but also because the relationship frequently evolves to become intimate and familiar, with reciprocity part of the relationship's foundation. These characteristics of critical ethnographic inquiry are typically experienced in the methodological modes of action research, participant observation, and "edge work," and fundamentally contradict the presumed and prescribed separation of the researcher from the researched. To get close to the naturalist meanings of the subjects (e.g. to have the possibility of the subjugated knowledges of the group and its members revealed to us), the researcher has to be fully engaged across time and space and committed to the subject(s) yet open to different possibilities, contradictions, and ambivalences of the encounter, in the making of everyday life (Schutz 1932).

Of course, this is a risky, precarious endeavor and the pinnacle of power or location from whence the researcher normally descends, speaks, or observes is at stake.

That, however, is the price of doing research that does not promote what Conquergood called “epistemic violence,” both to the researched subjects and/or the community. For example, how do we access “them” when “they” are so cut off from our own life-worlds? How do we trust what “they” tell us since most of us do not naturally, organically live in their life-worlds? How do we gain their confidence and relate to their “insider” knowledges when they have little reason to trust outsiders who boast both the “expert” knowledge and the status that reinforces lines of social hierarchy and cultural value? And how do we overcome or even recognize our own biases, given the power of hegemonic discourses in which these subjects are often judged to be inferior, pathological, remorseless, and incorrigible.

Therefore, we must remain mindful that we come from somewhere and are always positioned and situated. However, at the same time that there is a point of departure from which we speak, feel, observe, and interact through our experiences of race/ethnicity, gender, class and age, these identities and signifiers are not a fixed, impenetrable location in the social and economic borderlands. Rather it is our obligation to recognize that borders bleed (Trinh Ma 1991), and the task of the ethnographer is to record, experience, and enter this zone of complex meaning-making, transgression, and liminality, to share layered social actions and to co-perform with the researched population through mostly worked out processes of solidarity, mutual respect, and recognition.⁴ Such a praxis might be seen as the ethnographer’s political statement, a form of ethnographic activism and 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, and “a space on the

side of the road” (Stewart 1996). In short, a space often made to feel off limits and beyond our scope of “verstehen” (see Ferrell 1997).

2. Collaboration

...unless community participants are actively involved in both research and its uses...both the research and its ultimate uses tend to be highly suspect. While this can be termed politicization, the alternative is not very pleasant either. Unless the community is involved, so-called objective research will almost inevitably be politicized beyond the researcher’s control. (Moore 1978:10)

The issue of a commitment to the practice of collaborative research is briefly elaborated in the quote above from Joan Moore. Fundamentally, this is the formation of a relationship with the subjects/participants that is transparent, mutually respectful, built on trust, and with benefits that both parties can understand in intrinsic ways. Why is this important for a critical research method? First, we need to be accountable for what we say about communities that have much less formal social and cultural power than we do. Second, because we cannot get close to these communities and subcultures without their consent and cultural guidance. Third, we need the help of the researched in designing the study, in coming up with questions that only they would know to ask, while addressing issues appropriately in a language that is understandable and will provoke a response. Fourth, we need to think of constructive ways to redistribute the knowledge back into the community so that the community can use and claim this knowledge about itself for itself (see Moore’s quote above). Fifth, we need to think of research as mutually empowering, of being able to offer opportunities on both sides of the line, and to provide a means by

which marginalized communities can think differently about themselves in order to gain more resources as well as to counter the criminalizing gaze to which it has long been subjected. Sixth, we need to be aware of what such communities can teach us about ourselves.⁵ Finally, we need to be open to collaboration outside of the community and be prepared to consult with a range of researchers who can bring different levels of expertise to the data.

3. Holistic Data

I would argue that rather than see all human meaning as modeled on one type of code, we need to see social life as containing many different kinds of meaningfulness, incarnate in different practices and forms, layered and overlapping, connecting up in complex ways. (Willis 2000, p. 22)

If one of the basic tenets of critical ethnography is to humanize the research subjects it is incumbent upon us to collect data that more fully explores the environmental contexts in which the groups and subjects make their lives, as well as what constitutes the subjects' multiple identities, practices, and social obligations/relationships. This basic reconceptualization of these "deviant" social actors as subcultural participants struggling for cultural meanings within massively unequal social, economic, and cultural power relations, compels us to develop an "ethnographic imagination" similar to the one advocated by Willis (above). It is an imagination that goes far beyond the research parameters normally conceived in most gang projects.

Consequently, in conceiving of the contradictory agency of gang members on the streets, in institutions such as schools, prisons, and work places, in their respective

families, across and between local and national borders, etc., we inevitably discover that their life-worlds are constantly in flux and not at all the assemblage of properties and characteristics we had previously conceived, or the cardboard cut-out aggregate of behaviors privileged in most orthodox gang treatments.

Thus, considering the vast variations between gangs across space and time, how do we begin to understand or even compare their internal and external meaning systems? How do these systems relate to different societal reactions across various contexts? Such questions can only be answered by collecting and analysing multiple forms of data, much of which we do not know exist before the research begins.

Once the researcher taps into this deep reservoir of both collective and individual practices and bodies of knowledge, which can take the forms of art, counter-memory, oral history, poetry, prison/street narratives, physical gestures, physical encounters, the particularities of language, clothing, figurative representations, etc., a complexly layered life-world emerges, which has been accessed not just through the usual practices of observation and formal interview exchanges, but through the subject's inner eye. These myriad practices, some of which are ritualized and rehearsed while others are more extemporaneous, are not all necessarily understood at the time. Their significance, as cultural forms, may not be immediately apparent. Nonetheless, they all belong to the congealed, multi-level, historical experience of the group that we are attempting to capture.

It should be evident that limiting our research to prescribed, readily acceptable and available data severely reduces our ability to appreciate the wide-ranging realms of self-expression and creativity of these subcultures, or what Willis (2000:24) calls their "objective possibilities." It also closes us off from the array of situations and

environments in which the group performs, as both the new and old identities (both individual and collective) change and develop. These are critical questions and issues that only a holistic approach to the group can enable us to contemplate, answer, and address.

4. (Re)presenting the Under-represented

But de Certeau's aphorism, "what the map cuts up, the story cuts across," also points to transgressive travel between two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract—"the map"; the other one practical, embodied, and popular—"the story." This promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research.

Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice. This embrace of different ways of knowing is radical because it cuts to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy. (Conqergood 2002, p. 141)

How do we resist reproducing the dominant culture's pathological, exoticizing, and negatively-deviant categorizations of such groups and its limitless web of assumptions that normalizes "our difference" from "them?" This is an important and complicated question that de Certeau is alluding to in the quote above. Based on my experience our success in this endeavor depends on: (i) the degree to which we are committed to a humanistic study of the group; (ii) our willingness to represent the group through various mediums and art forms; (iii) our practices of *reflexivity*; (iv) our writing and (v) the importance we place on theory.

- (i) Humanizing the Subjects:

By now it should be clear that my approach is to show the subjects (both individuals and groups) in all their multi-dimensional aspects and contradictoriness, being careful to situate them in deeply social, cultural, and historical contexts. To do this means to let the subjects speak as candidly, authentically, and truthfully as possible and to draw on as many voices as possible. This process is always attuned to the problem of concealment but also to the likelihood of revelation and the various forms that “penetrations” take as subjects make “lived assessments of their possibilities” (Willis 2000:34) within their imaginaries.

In so doing we show the different positionalities of members and their associates. If done with strong powers of observation, noting both patterns and changes, latent and manifest functions, the vocabularies of motives that describe action, and the array of outcomes be they intentional or not, this will contribute to a humanizing research that does not have to privilege the text over the people.

(ii) Multiple Data requires Multiple Analyses:

Just as we are committed to holistic data sets then we must be prepared for multiple types of analysis. Of course, fine-tuned, rigorous descriptive analysis is needed, but we must constantly think about the types of data collected and their need for specialized treatments, even if it means recruiting other analysts. Thus, we must refuse to be methodological prisoners of the data, but rather use a radical inductive approach that does not recoil from crossing disciplinary boundaries but at the same is careful not to be dilettantish, borrowing analytical techniques that are not well understood or sufficiently processed.

Stewart (1996) makes this clear in describing and interpreting her socio-cultural life in anthropological field site set in the “hollers” of Appalachia, which she calls

evocatively “a space on the side of the road.” In it she takes a page from Agee and Evans (1941) and says we, as ethnographers, roam across texts, different genres that include “romantic, realist, historical, fantastic, sociological (and) surreal” (Stewart 1996:210). In the daily life of gang-worlds it is impossible not to be overwhelmed by the poetic contingencies (Stewart 1992) that gang members produce, desire and cultivate, inhabiting spaces so laden in symbolic meanings and historical significance. Clothing styles, graffiti, manifestoes and “bibles,” codes of conduct, prison letters, self-styled poetry (see Rodriguez 1992, Ward 2012), rap lyrics, rap performances, dances, foods, divisions of labor, speeches, monologues, photographs, theatrical plays, self-recorded events, arranged interviews, informal conversations, police data, media narratives and accounts, the list of collectable materials are endless in order to achieve the research act (Denzin 1970). Simply to admit to the fact that there is no “final textual solution” (Stewart 1996: 210) in our efforts at representation and interpretation opens us up to the possibilities of these other types of data that we must learn to appreciate and analytically take into account. For without this ethnographic sensibility the magnificent all-sidedness of life and human endeavor quickly gets reduced to the bourgeois tropes of social order and the bodies that somehow cohere in what Galeano called the upside down world (Galeano 1998).

Reflexivity:

I have argued (see Brotherton 2015) that reflexivity is a sine qua non of this kind of research, but this is not easy, especially in writing up our accounts either in the present or in the past, or rather as we travel from the present to the past and back to the present. It is difficult to reveal the effects and impacts of research as it passes through us

and we become moved by the events or actions, but it is important to show this side of the study relationship, otherwise we have become supremely privileged and perhaps complacent. For our arguments may appear sound with the subjects making appearances to fit the frames but the “truths” on display will be suspect. I have encountered this on multiple occasions as events in the field defy our expectations and turn into their opposites, proving how indeterminate this enterprise can be, upsetting our prescribed ordering of things and people, processes, and plans, social arrangements, and imaginaries. Such “happenings” can dash our strategies, but they can also be key moments of self-reflection. It is precisely at such points when we are confronted with the unexpected that our observational and analytical abilities become most charged and sharpened and our real commitment to remain within this bracketed existence most tested.

(iii) (W)riting:

Where possible we try to write with energy, verve, and clarity. Rejecting the desiccated, neutral expositions of mainstream criminology/sociology we write against the dominant currents that police our disciplines, creating practices and products of the social scientific safari. Of course, this is easier said than done, but it is something to be aimed for rather than settling for the pedestrian prose that passes for most social scientific writing. One way to do this is to look to great writers and artists to learn how they wrote with imagination, experimentation, and style (e.g. Galeano 1998, Agee and Evans 1941, Mills 1959)

Further, we try to capture not simply the fixed and one-dimensional but the transcendental, the counter-intuitive, the soulful, the accidental, as well as the epiphenomena of the quotidian. Mindful that we live in a period when “all that is solid

melts into air,” this culture and political economy of extreme liquidity should influence our writing as we experiment with new and old vocabularies to capture figures moving through life, filled with hopes, disappointments, fears, and certainties. With my own students in the field I advise them to write ethnography bearing the following in mind:

- People suffer and enjoy life, so feel their pain and learn to appreciate how life is laughed at and enthusiastically created at the margins despite the obstacles.
- Do not elide unless you have to. It is safer to err on the side of caution and create “thick descriptions” as a habit, playing with the prose to evoke and reproduce the aura of the scene and the existentiality of the moment.
- Use your pen to create a canvas. It is a given that this messy web of interactions, histories, and stated and unstated vocabularies of motives is difficult to conceive on paper and will necessarily be a creative act.
- Use your pen to perform. For example, when describing graffiti think of the rush flowing through the veins of perpetrators, in a meeting imagine the front stage/back stage antics, as you listen to discourses and utterances remember the symbolic violence that often frames them and the resistances that might contradict the norms of social reproduction.
- When writing of injustice tell it like it is. Find your voice, your style, your angle, your scream.

5. Critical Theory Development

As critical ethnographers our obligation is to be open to counter-intuitive data, confounding experiences, a set of realities that sometimes conform to our theories and sometimes completely contradict them, but it is our constant stretch for theory that is crucial for the furtherance of the study. We should pay attention to Burawoy’s notion of

extended case study—the idea that theory needs to be developed further in the face of anomalous outcomes rather than simply rejected (see also Snow, Merrill and Anderson 2003). Sometimes there is little in the gang literature that relates to our experiences, so we turn to other perspectives to find out how to frame our experiences, thinking through our interpretations, challenging our previously held conceptions, and questioning the efficacy of our hermeneutic devices (Hagedorn 2008). For, as critical ethnographers, we are not necessarily wedded to a set of theories but rather to the subjects within a specific community (or communities). Therefore, we need to contemplate all manner of theoretical explanations for rational/irrational, hidden/opaque social and cultural processes. Consequently, theory drives the project and then the data drive the theory. As Willis (2000, p. 114) makes clear:

To repeat and clarify: the original elements of a “theoretical confession” (i.e., the stated theoretical questions and conundrums being pursued through the ethnographic project – author) are not tightly structured positions looking merely for exemplification (the hallmark of pointless field work, merely the flip side of empiricism). They are the nagging issues which drive a curiosity within an overall theoretical sensibility of a particular kind.

6. Whose Knowledge is it?

Thinking carefully about de Certeau’s comment above,⁶ prompts us to ask how we translate knowledge “about” into knowledge “for” and be true to one of our main principles to return our research back to its social source so that it becomes shared knowledge. But behind such good intentions what are the possibilities of such goals?

In my own experiences there are several good examples from our last two projects of this recuperation process and I am glad to report that the knowledge, analyses, and theories gained have been diffused in a manner that underscores the principle of reciprocity in critical research. Below I briefly describe three of these contestational processes that were direct results of these interventions.

(i) The concept of the street organization

We (Brotherton and Barrios 2004) came up with the concept of the "street organization" early in our research to supplant the pejorative term "the gang." By the 1990s, this latter term had lost most of its sociological meaning and was being used in both popular culture and criminology to describe an ill-defined deviant youth grouping of the lower class unproblematically linked to the dominant class' moral crusades against drugs, terrorism, the poor, immigrants, and so forth. Our replacement concept, complete with sharply contrasting ideal-typical properties, was adopted by various subcultures to counter the gang label (i.e., the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN), the Netas, La Familia, and Zulu Nation, among others). The ALKQN, in fact, used the term during their press conferences in the late 1990s to answer questions from journalists regarding why the group was no longer a gang. But the concept has gone much further and has entered the general discourse on these groups. For example, in various policy and intervention efforts to stem the intra-group violence in sites as diverse as Baltimore and Chicago in the United States, London, Barcelona, and Genoa in Europe, and Quito and Santo Domingo in Latin America, the concept of "street organization" often replaces "the gang." Increasingly, in more critical sociological and criminological accounts, researchers have invoked the street organization concept, but its use has also spread beyond academic discourses and can be found in a range of settings from mainstream

policy discussions on violence (e.g. “Cure violence” projects, designed to treat urban violence, particularly involving street gangs, as a public health problem often use the term while Minister Luis Farrakhan also invokes the concept in discussions on urban conflict). This rupture of the hegemonic process is important and helps break those loops of signification that sustain pathological categories of identification and essentializing properties of subaltern populations.

(ii) Dangerous truths as contraband

In 2004, I wrote that I hoped to see the published work on the Latin Kings and Queens of New York City used as a tool to show the levels of self-organization, resistance practices, and modes of symbolic representation reflected in alternative modes of political empowerment, normally dismissed as threatening or made invisible by the dominant culture's capacity to erase and diminish oppositional behavior. I did not expect the work to have such a reach with its presence now well established among a range of street subcultures, advocates for the poor, and prison inmates. In fact, not long after the book was published it was considered "contraband" by New York State as well as federal prison authorities and viewed as dangerous literature for the incarcerated population, despite it being a respected social scientific text.⁷ For such a scholarly intervention to be regarded as subversive to authorities in a total institution meant the work had joined those lists of other "dangerous truths" deemed too unsettling for structures with already extraordinary levels of power and control over both behavior and thought. Such a development points to the book's counter-hegemonic content, which is one of the best reviews one can receive.

(iii) Voices of the powerless strike back transnationally

In my most recent work on deportation (Brotherton and Barrios 2011), which included a number of testimonies about the influence of street organizations in deportees' lives, immigrants now in removal proceedings have been utilizing the study in their efforts to halt their repatriation and gain "relief" under the stipulations of the United Nations' Convention against Torture, co-signed by the United States in 1984. Some of the research in the book showed how previous membership in U.S.-based gangs can be used by state agents of the receiving country as a basis for stigmatization and victimization of those forcibly returned to their "homelands." The result has been that this published research is now widely used in US immigration proceedings while it has resonated strongly with Latin American immigration advocates and activists who see the research as confirming the extraordinary levels of criminalization and social exclusion their communities have withstood for so many years, particularly during the last two decades of government through fear (Simon 2007). In this dissemination process, we see a commitment to making the invisible visible and the capacity for these highly marginalized voices to become powerful, unsettling narratives placing the deportee in a deeply troubling global context. Thus, instead of these testimonies stopping at the academic boundaries they begin to circulate among a networked world of counter-memories and counter-signifiers that contribute to a movement resisting the mass exile of a social class deemed surplus to American needs caught in the racialized judicial flows and apparatuses of the "crimmigration" system (Stumpf 2006; Brotherton 2018).

Conclusion

In this essay I have noted some of the reasons for the rise of critical ethnography as an increasingly popular approach to the study of street gangs and what might be some of the

key themes and principles of its praxis. My arguments do not derive simply from a close reading of gang texts—although this activity clearly aids my orientation as I try to learn from ongoing contributions to the field while revisiting much of the work that makes up “the field”—but from my decades-long social scientific engagement in street gang worlds in both the Global North and South.

Based on these experiences, it is obvious to me that we are on the cusp of a veritable explosion of critical gang studies that is taking shape in multiple languages, across a host of disciplines, and in so many socio-geographic contexts it is impossible to keep up with the levels of inquiry and their resulting publications. This then is a fortunate moment to be a researcher working outside and against those academic disciplinary practices that have done more to typecast and stereotype, criminalize, and pathologize the street gang and its members than to edify and educate. As the world descends into more intense globalized asymmetries and the street gang becomes increasingly the symbol as well as the “evidence” of apocalyptic imaginaries, this work will become increasingly important. Large cracks have appeared in the orthodoxy’s methodological and ideological hold in both criminology and criminal justice’s treatment of the gang, reflecting the “thinness” (Young 2011) of conjecture and “objective” proofs offered in defense of repressive policies from “broken windows” (Bratton and Knobler 1998, Kelling and Sousa 2001) and “predictive policing” (Perry, McInnis, Price, Smith and Hollywood 2013) and “pulling levers” (Braga 2008).⁸ A critical ethnography of the gang is one way to ensure this counter-hegemonic thrust continues.

¹ Hagedorn’s critique is especially poignant, raising the question of how Thrasher, whose gang research was carried out between 1919-1927, could avoid any discussion of the 1919 Chicago race riots. These riots lasted for several days and resulted in 38 deaths (23

black and 15 white) and 500 injuries and were started by systematic attacks on the black community by white gangs. It would be like studying gangs after the Los Angeles uprising (“riots”) in the wake of the Rodney King policing beating and omitting any mention of this context.

² This new world of critical gang research will be brought into focus shortly with a scholarly project now underway in which a large selection of alternative perspectives on gangs and their related contexts is being assembled drawn from the Global South as well as Western and Eastern Europe and, of course, North America (Brotherton and Gude, forthcoming).

³ I am simply referring here to the tendency already described in much orthodox criminological approaches, be they qualitative or quantitative, that tend to pathologize and/or exoticize the gang as if the phenomenon were self-contained, essentialistic, somehow outside of society and intrinsically abnormal. Gangs and gang members are often given the characteristics of animals, referred to as packs with members who are wild and feral, needing to be domesticated by society’s socializing and/or coercive social control apparatuses. Such approaches belong to a colonizing gaze and methodology, hence the term “safari” referring to researchers who go in search of

⁴ It should not come as a surprise that those who carry out such research are frequently denounced by social control agents for their empathy with these marginalized populations. This usual takes the form of academic banishment, physical threats, and sometimes violence, institutional red-baiting, and claims of enabling the deviance/deviants to develop.

⁵ One way we did this was by employing the leader of the group as a consultant on the project as well as some of his most trusted aides.

⁶ In his work on the city de Certeau (1984) compared the official accounts of human action produced or rather commissioned by powerful organized bodies such as universities and governments that plan the city from above to the cultural knowledge and practices engaged in by those who live and do the city from below. De Certeau thought that culture, especially that which can be perceived in urban areas, consists of the “proliferation of inventions in limited spaces” (p. viii, de Certeau 1997, orig. 1980). In a critical ethnography of the gang we are constantly going behind the curtain of the official story and its various discourses (Scott 1992) to better understand the contexts and logics of different forms of “deviance” made into spectacles that justify panics, laws that criminalize and socially exclude, and state-sanctioned incursions into daily life in the name of order-maintenance.

⁷ Prison authorities rarely give a reason for why certain books are banned, the general rationale is that such action is necessary to ensure the safety and security of inmates and prison personnel.

⁸ Often referred to as “focused deterrence,” a popular anti-gang strategy based on Becarria’s 18th century enlightenment belief that the prevention of crime came from deterrence that was swift, certain and severe. Such thinking derives from the imaginary that human action is rational and that we are essentially all part of “homo economicus.” Of course, where art comes from or anything creative or cultural seems not to stymie the proponents of this discourse.

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