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Working Paper no.6

MAKING DANGER A CALLING:
ANTHROPOLOGY, VIOLENCE AND THE
DILEMMAS OF PARTICIPANT
OBSERVATION

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September 2001

Crisis States Programme
Working papers series no.1

Development
DESTIN
Studies Institute

Crisis States Programme

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Introduction

In a recent essay reviewing the state of the art of the anthropology of violence, the Norwegian anthropologist Christian Krohn-Hansen makes the claim that "during the last ten to fifteen years, anthropology has registered an increased interest in violence" and that as a result, "if there is *anything* that seems to typify the current moment in anthropology …it is [this] significant interest in violence".[1] A search through the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences database, using the combined keywords "anthropology" and "violence", would seem to confirm this, yielding over *five times* as many articles for the period 1991-2000 as compared to the preceding forty years.[2] Whether this makes the anthropology of violence the "typification" of the "current moment" within the discipline, as Krohn-Hansen would have it, is perhaps open to debate, but what definitely is not is that the anthropology of violence is growing in importance as a disciplinary sub-genre. At the same time, however, it is also arguably a sub-genre which suffers from critical methodological weaknesses.

Even the most cursory review of the relevant literature underscores the fact that the number of anthropologists who have directly participated within violent groups or with violent individuals is small compared to the number of researchers who have investigated violence from the perspective of those who suffer it. Thus, in contrast to the generally holistic character of most anthropological investigations, the vast majority of anthropological studies of violence tend to display a critical bias towards the victims or subjects of violence, to the detriment of its practitioners. Furthermore, those few studies which *do* include the perpetrators of violence within their scope do so largely through interviews and other non-participatory methodologies, frequently retrospectively, and outside the actual context of violence.[3]

As I hope to show you today, my own fieldwork experience researching an urban Nicaraguan *pandilla*, or criminal youth gang, which was conducted in the context of a social anthropology PhD obtained last year from the University of Cambridge, leads me to question such approaches, which I believe weaken the ability of anthropological research to grapple with many of the complex issues surrounding the phenomenon of violence. The preoccupation displayed by most studies of violence with the victims of violence leads to an

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[1] C. Krohn-Hansen, 'The anthropology and ethnography of political violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 34:2 (1997), p.233, my emphasis.

[2] See http://www.bids.ac.uk. The database returned a total of 52 "hits" for the period 1991-2000, as compared to 7 for 1981-1990 and 3 for 1971-1980, while searches for 1961-1970 and 1951-1960 returned no "hits".

[3] See, for example, E. V. Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996; A. Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991; C. K. Mahmoud, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996; A. C. G. M. Robben, 'The politics of truth and emotion among victims and perpetrators of violence', in C. Nordstrom & A. C. G. M. Robben (eds), *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995; or J. Sluka, 'Participant observation in violent social contexts', *Human Organization*, 49 (1990), pp.114-126.

under-theorisation of the motivations and experiences behind the perpetration of violence, for example. Such a bias is obviously limiting. As with the anthropological study of other social phenomena, it is necessary to consider all sides of the equation if we are to achieve a fuller understanding of violent practices and the different perspectives they evoke.

What is needed to do so involves attaining what Max Weber called "*verstehen*",[4] or interpretative understanding, which requires intimacy with the subjects of the study and their activities. To do so requires participant observation - that "great invention of modern anthropology", to use Keith Hart's expression[5] - and ultimately, according to Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom, "at some level, to be able to discuss violence, one must go to where violence occurs, [and] research it as it takes place."[6] The basic question that I would like to consider here, then, is the extent to which it is legitimate or even necessary for anthropologists to engage in violence and with the violent in the context of researching the phenomenon, or in other, perhaps more dramatic, words – those of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche – to what extent should anthropologists "mak[e] danger [a] calling"?[7]

Anthropology and the Study of Violence

The one-sidedness that ethnographic studies of violence typically tend to display towards the victims or subjects of violence is no doubt partly due to the fact that when anthropologists have been directly exposed to violence, it has generally been as victims, rather than victimizers. But also important - and up to a point, perhaps causally related - is that anthropologists have more often than not investigated violence with an agenda, looking to find positions from which "to speak and write against [it]",[8] and as Antonius Robben points out, such an endeavour is for obvious reasons easier to do when writing from the perspective of the victims (even if, as he also argues, the discourses of *both* victims and perpetrators of violence are intrinsically always attempts to "seduce", and thus "convert", the anthropologist[9]).

However, as Cynthia Keppley Mahmood asserts in her study of Khalistani Sikh militants,[10] studying the violent is just as crucial to understanding the full complexities of violence in order to denounce the phenomenon. Dismissing the frequently invoked argument that writing about the perpetrators of violence provides them with an "aesthetic alibi", romanticizing who they are and what they do, or else fostering a relativistic amorality, Mahmood contends that "until it becomes fully normal for scholars to study violence by talking with and being with people who engage in it, the dark myth of [the] evil and irrational [violent] will continue to

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[4] M. Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1949.

[5] K. Hart, 'African enterprise and the informal economy: An autobiographical note', mimeo, n.d. [subsequently translated and published as "Entreprise africaine et l'economie informelle", in S. Ellis and Y. Faure (eds), *Entreprise et Entrepreneurs Africains*, Paris: Karthala, 1994], p.1.

[6] Robben, A. C. G. M. and C. Nordstrom, 'The anthropology and ethnography of violence and sociopolitical conflict', in Nordstrom & Robben (1995), p.4. See also P. Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.14.

[7] F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, translated and with a new introduction by R. J. Hollingdale, London: Penguin,1969 [1883-1885], p.48.

[8] C. Nordstrom & J. Martin, 'The culture of conflict: Field reality and theory', in C. Nordstrom & J. Martin (eds), *The Paths to Domination, Resistance, and Terror*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992, p.3. See also Robben & Nordstrom (1995), pp.11-12; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, pp.21-26; and Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A study in terror and healing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.3.

[9] Cf. Robben (1995), p.84.

[10] Mahmood (1996).

overwhelm more pragmatic attempts to lucidly grapple with the problem of conflict".[11] But while Mahmood's position makes a good deal of sense, it has to be said that the few studies which have included the perpetrators of violence within their scope - including Mahmood's - have largely done so through interviews and other non-participatory methodologies, as well as frequently retrospectively,[12] thus, I would argue, losing much of the benefit of the anthropological method of participant observation.

The reasons for this state of affairs are various. On the one hand, this is no doubt partly due to the obvious risks intrinsic to associating with violence.[13] As Raymond Lee puts it, "there seems little doubt that the dangers inherent in some research settings have deterred researchers from entering them".[14] Similarly, Jeffrey Sluka talks of how anthropologists "select themselves out" of potentially dangerous fieldwork situations.[15] At the same time, however, it is not as if anthropologists have not found themselves in dangerous circumstances in the course of fieldwork, or have not witnessed or been subjected to violence themselves; anecdotes concerning close-shave encounters are more than frequent in anthropology departments around the world, for example. What is perhaps more accurate is to describe the relationship of the majority of anthropologists to violence as generally being one we might term "passive". I use the term "passive" not to describe a lack of action or involvement in violence, but rather to highlight the fact that the anthropologist almost never involves him- or herself in the praxis of violence. We might imagine the anthropologist as the victim of violence, but not as the perpetrator. In a related manner, the widespread use of the metaphor of "pornography"[16] to describe the nature of the ethnography of violence can be said to hint at a detached conceptualization of the relationship between the anthropologist and the violent actor(s), the former implicitly being projected as the *voyeur* of the latter's smut, thereby indicating an absence of genuine involvement or action.

What the metaphor of "pornography" also underlines is the deep moral bias which imbues much of anthropological research on violence, which in many ways is just as powerful - if not even more powerful - a disincentive to anthropologists' involvement in violence as the personal risk factor. Certainly, as Mark Fleisher makes clear about himself in an article describing the nature of his investigation of the Fremont Hustlers, a Kansas City gang, there can be a not inconsiderable reluctance on the part of anthropologists to associate or integrate themselves closely with aggressive, and what many might consider immoral, lifestyles.[17] Even those (very few) anthropologists who have attempted to forge active participatory links between themselves and the violent have generally tended to do so in a manner removed from the violent practices themselves, implicitly for moral reasons. For example, in the context of his investigation into Basque political terror, Joseba Zulaika, who actually attempted to join

[11] Mahmood (1996), p.272.

[12] See also Daniel (1996); Feldman (1991); C. Nordstrom, 'War on the front lines', in Nordstrom & Robben (1995); Robben (1995); and J. A. Sluka, *Hearts and minds, water and fish: Popular support for the IRA and INLA in a Northern Irish ghetto*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1989.

[13] See N. Howell, *Surviving Fieldwork: A Report of the Advisory Panel on Health and Safety in Fieldwork*, Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1990; R. M. Lee, *Dangerous Fieldwork*, Qualitative Research Methods Series no. 34, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995; and Nordstrom and Robben (1995).

[14] Lee (1995), p.6.

[15] Sluka (1990), p.124.

[16] See, for example, Bourgois (1995), pp.15-18; Daniel (1996), p.4; and Mahmoud (1996), p.272.

[17] M. S. Fleisher, 'Ethnographers, Pimps, and the Company Store', in J. Ferrell & M. S. Hamm (eds), *Ethnography at the Edge: Crime, Deviance, and Field Research*, Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1998.

ETA, the Basque separatist organisation, in order to study the activists,[18] portrays "the anthropologist as terrorist" for entering into a dialogue with - and thus giving a public forum to - ETA activists rather than eventual direct participation on his part.[19]

Drawing the line between the moral and the immoral is never easy, and certainly, anthropology has more than contributed to destroying the myth of universal ethical and moral standards (*pace* Emmanuel Levinas[20]). Moreover, as David Riches has remarked,[21] few societies are without norms, formal and informal, stipulating how violence should be organised, or moral codes justifying or condemning its use. Ideologies of legitimate violence exist to support the defence of nation-states, social groups, and individual citizens. State institutions such as armies, police and the justice system deploy violence, although as both Max Weber and Michel Foucault have argued,[22] this violence is rarely recognised as such. Vigilante groups, neighbourhood gangs, and village collectives have all invoked community beliefs or values to explain the use of violence against those perceived to threaten the collectivity. Individuals threatened by the use of violence, and who have turned to violence themselves in self-defence, have justified their actions in terms of ethics, the rights of the individual, or various other models of reasonable behaviour. What matters is not simply the violence as an act, but the reasoning and justification that place it within a moral framework.

Some of those who have actively worked within contexts of violence - such as Carolyn Nordstrom on the front lines of war-torn Mozambique, for example[23] - choose to dissociate themselves from them and the violent individuals they interact with. But such a strategy can only work if the role adopted within the field context is a marginal one, as was in reality Nordstrom's, who only ever visited the front line, and even then from a distance. For the anthropologist who truly immerses him- or herself into a given context of violence through participant observation with the intention of studying the perpetrators of the violence will very likely become closely associated with the perpetrators of this violence, even if he or she doesn't approve of the violence. They will become friends and confidents, and will generally end up appearing as perfectly normal, pleasant people, in spite of their violence.[24] Even maintaining a disapproval of violence is not always easy; it calls for levels of judgement which can easily crumble as the anthropologist becomes more and more associated with a violent group or violent individuals, and can very quickly be called upon to begin to commit acts of violence him- or herself, as a part of the evolving make-up of the relationship (this arguably also includes the covering-up for violence - whether through omission or an active conspiracy of silence - as a form of complicit violence). Sometimes, also, the anthropologist does not have a choice, but is forced into a certain course of action as a result of the social context in which he or she finds himself, as I hope the following section will make clear.

Encountering Nicaragua

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[18]   Joseba Zulaika, *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament,* Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1988, p.xxvii; and 'The Anthropologist as Terrorist', in Nordstrom & Robben (1995), pp.207-8.
[19]   Zulaika (1995).
[20]   Cf. E. Levinas, who argues that "morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it" (*Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987, p.100).
[21]   David Riches (ed.), *The Anthropology of Violence*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p.9.
[22]   Respectively, M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich, 2 volumes, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978; and M. Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, translated by A. Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977.
[23]   Cf. Nordstrom (1995).
[24]   Cf. N. Fielding, 'Observational research on the national front', in M. Bulmer (ed.), *Social Research Ethics*, London: Macmillan, 1982, for a further discussion of this point.

I traveled to Nicaragua on 10 July 1996, and it is then that my "Nicaraguan journey"[25] truly began. Although I had spent the previous ten months preparing for the fieldwork upon which my thesis is based, the circumstances I encountered "in the field" differed so much from the picture garnered from my prior readings that these might as well have been about another country altogether, and in the days following my arrival in Nicaragua I more or less felt as if I was beginning a totally new thesis. My pre-fieldwork thesis project - based on these said readings - had been entitled somewhat idealistically *Songs of Life and Hope: Everyday Livelihood Strategies in the* Barrios *of Contemporary Urban Nicaragua*, and had proposed to investigate the means through which individuals and communities creatively organize themselves socially and culturally in order to cope with economic crisis and insecurity (which was widely reported to be characteristic of Nicaragua at the time).

In particular, I had hoped to study the solidarity networks and spontaneous cooperation which I assumed would constitute the basis of such "survival strategies", considering the profound influence the renowned leftist *Sandinista* revolution of the 1980s was reported to have had in Nicaragua, my own left-wing political leanings and consequent beliefs about the inherent "sociality" of Man,[26] as well as much of the anthropological, sociological, and economic literature on the organization of life in conditions of poverty.[27] It quickly became apparent, however, that examples of such communal forms of social organization were few and far between in the context of contemporary urban Nicaragua. What I encountered instead were social conditions characterized by disintegration, fragmentation, apathy, disillusion, and - especially - violence, which forced me to radically re-think my intended research.

Admittedly, it is a generally accepted tenet of anthropological endeavour that pre-fieldwork projects will often undergo significant changes as a result of ethnographic experience. Adapting to reality, discarding inappropriate pre-conceptions, and taking on board new research questions are not only frequent occurrences, but in fact "standard procedure" during fieldwork.[28] However, as Frank Pieke points out in his reflections on the implications of the 1989 Chinese "People's Movement" which broke out five months into his doctoral fieldwork on state economic reform policies in China,[29] such adaptation involves more than just the

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[25] Cf. Salman Rushdie, *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey*, New York, NY: Penguin, 1987.

[26] On this issue, see in particular Karl Marx (*Selected Writings*, edited by D. McLellan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp.56-57, 90-96 114-123, 134, 153-155 & 496-506), for whom Man was a "social being", imbued with "natural goodness" and a "communal nature" Mark (1977), p. 91, 153 & 115.

[27] Cf. D. Rodgers, 'Songs of Life and Hope: Everyday Livelihood Strategies in the *Barrios* of Contemporary Urban Nicaragua', PhD fieldwork clearance report, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, 1996, for a comprehensive review. Prominent examples of the literature exemplifying such a viewpoint include (amongst others): M. Argüello, *Los Más Pobres en Lucha*, Heredia, Costa Rica: EUNA, 1981; F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973; M. González de la Rocha, *The Resources of Poverty: Women and Survival in a Mexican City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994; P. Lloyd, *Slums of Hope?: Shanty Towns of the Third World*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979); P. Lloyd, *The Young Towns of Lima*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; L. A. Lomnitz, *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown*, New York, NY: Academic Press, 1977; C. O. N. Moser, 'Surviving in the suburbs', special issue on "Women and the Informal Sector", *IDS Bulletin*, 12:3 (1981), pp 19-29; J. E. Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976; B. Roberts, *Organizing Strangers: Poor Families in Guatemala City*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1973; and M. Sinclair (ed.), *The New Politics of Survival: Grassroots Movements in Central America*, New York, NY: EPICA/ Monthly Review Press, 1995, for example.

[28] Cf. V. Crapanzano, 'Hermes' dilemma: The masking of subversion in ethnographic description', in J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986, p.51.

[29] Cf. F. N. Pieke, 'Witnessing the 1989 Chinese People's Movement', in Nordstrom & Robben (1995).

anthropologist's efforts to sensitize him or herself to unexpected circumstances. Social reality can also actively force itself onto the researcher, sometimes in extremely brutal and traumatic manners, especially when the social phenomena involved are related to violence, as Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom have remarked.[30]

And so it was with my encountering the social reality of contemporary urban Nicaragua. The disintegration, apathy, and despair which characterize Nicaraguan society today are so pervasive that it is hardly an exaggeration to say that they are almost tangible, such that even the casual visitor to the country cannot avoid sensing them. Deeply imbued with idealism as I was, my initial response to this "appalling face of a glimpsed truth",[31] closely - and rather traumatically - echoed Kurtz's reaction to his perceived vision of human nature in Joseph Conrad's famous novella *Heart of Darkness* - "The horror! The horror!"…[32] - and within days of my arrival I had somewhat cynically re-baptized my research project *Chants of Apathy and Nihilism: A Journey into the Nicaraguan Heart of Darkness*. But beyond this probably salutary shattering of my ultimately rather naive illusions, it was especially being actively confronted with violence in a way I had never encountered previously that constitutes the most direct manner in which the Nicaraguan social reality "forced" itself upon me. Within a week of my arrival, I was attacked at knife-point whilst walking in the street, and a month later, I was attacked again, this time at gun-point, and robbed and beaten up. Neither event was in any way enjoyable, and I am not ashamed to say that I very nearly left Nicaragua after each attack. That I ended up staying probably owed less to any form of personal courage and more to pig-headed stubbornness, but beyond such considerations, these experiences of violence - as well as the many later instances - are important because they very much set the tone of the next eleven months of my fieldwork enterprise.

Thus, I recount these events in order to clearly situate the genesis of the subject of my study. As Roger Lancaster has pointed out, all too often *ex post facto* ethnographic writing takes the form of "just-so stories", in which the situations described are presented as if they had been encountered "exactly as ...imagined" before fieldwork.[33] The very much haphazard and improvised nature of ethnographic fieldwork being what it is, few - if any - anthropologists ever truly find themselves in such circumstances I suspect, and adopting such a representational approach therefore creates a false sense of "objectivity" and "authority". Thus, there is no denying that my violent encounters with the Nicaraguan social reality profoundly modified my research project. As Allen Feldman has noted, violence is formative; it shapes people's perceptions of who they are and how they interact with their social and physical environment.[34] The anthropologist is no exception, and each experience of violence I underwent during my first month in Nicaragua - the first time I had ever been seriously subjected to direct violence - precipitated in me what Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom term "existential shock",[35] deeply affecting my relationship both with myself and with Nicaragua. As a result – although perhaps not surprisingly – the focus of my investigation rapidly shifted from its initial concern with the creative "survival strategies" of the urban poor to the question of the experience of violence in the socially disintegrating context of contemporary urban Nicaragua.

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[30] Cf. Robben and Nordstrom (1995), p.13.

[31] J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1990 [1902], p.65.

[32] Conrad (1990[1902]), p.64.

[33] Cf. R. N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992, pp. xvi-xvii.

[34] Cf. Feldman (1991).

[35] Robben and Nordstrom (1995), p.13.

To a certain extent, I suppose my research could therefore be accused of being highly subjective, more a reflection of my personal foibles than anything else. I prefer to look at it instead as a case of what Raymond Lee terms "involuntary fieldwork".[36] The notion of "involuntary" anthropology is distinct from the idea of "accidental anthropology" in that it implies the existence of an element of constraint. While it may be that "researchers often work in settings made dangerous by violent conflict, or in social situations where interpersonal violence and risk are common place", and that "in many cases it is the violence itself, or the social conditions and circumstances that produce it, that actively compel attention from the social scientist",[37] I did not go to Nicaragua with the intention of studying violence; rather, had I known beforehand that Nicaragua was so violent, I would almost certainly have chosen a different country in which to carry out fieldwork. But once I was in Nicaragua I found myself affected by violence in ways which I could not ignore and which very much forced me to structure both my personal and professional behaviours in relation to the phenomenon.

Although in theory it would have been possible for me to latch onto one of the rare manifestations of collective cooperation and solidarity that do continue to exist sporadically here and there amongst the urban poor in contemporary Nicaragua, and thus persisted with my original research project despite the unexpected Nicaraguan social reality – it certainly would not have been the first time an anthropological investigation would have dealt with the esoteric – the very fact of operating in the general Nicaraguan context of social disintegration and violence, and its consequent effects on my person simply made this impossible. As such, however, I would maintain that "involuntary" research in fact represents the quintessence of the "dialogical" nature of fieldwork, which as Frank Pieke argues involves the anthropologist in "a dialogue with the *entire social reality encountered*".[38] From this perspective, my research concern relating to the experience of violence was induced from such a "dialogue", and therefore plausibly represents perhaps not so much an arbitrary contingency but an inevitable response to the contemporary Nicaraguan social context.

Joining the Gang

The most notable feature of the contemporary Nicaraguan violence landscape are the ubiquitous *pandillas*, or criminal youth gangs, which roam the streets of urban neighbourhoods (*barrios*), robbing, beating, terrorizing, killing, and often transforming parts of the urban *polis* into quasi-war zones as they fight each other in a semi-ritualized manner with weapons ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47 assault rifles, fragmentation grenades, and mortars. The Police estimates that almost 60 percent of all crimes committed in Managua, the capital city, are attributable to *pandillas*,[39] and during the ten months of my stay in the low-income *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,[40] for example, several dozen inhabitants were injured[41] and at least two killed as a result of *pandilla* violence, from a population of approximately 3,000.[42] A further four members of the local neighbourhood

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[36] Cf. Lee (1995), pp.61-63.
[37] Lee (1995), p.1.
[38] Pieke (1995), p.76, my emphasis.
[39] Cf. D. Rodgers, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Violence,* Pandillas*, and Social Disintegration in Contemporary Urban Nicaragua*, PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1999.
[40] A pseudonym. All the names of individuals mentioned in this piece are also pseudonyms.
[41] I was able to personally confirm forty-three cases during the course of my fieldwork, but was told about dozens more, and it is certain that those affected by *pandilla* violence would have gone beyond my own social networks in the *barrio*.
[42] I also heard of three further casualties within the wider population, but was unable to confirm them other than through fourth or fifth hand contradictory accounts, and so I do not include them in my tally.

gang also died. The *pandilla* violence-related death rate for the *barrio* population therefore works out as having been equivalent to some 240 per 100,000 for the year of my stay in Nicaragua, which has to be considered extremely high (in comparison, the yearly homicide rate in Colombia, which is frequently described as being the most violent country in the world not to be in a state of war, is 70 per 100,000,[43] although it should be noted that this figure is for reported deaths, and so the actual death rate is in fact most likely higher - but not as high as the sixteen-fold difference which exists between the official Nicaraguan homicide rate of approximately 15 per 100,000 persons and that of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández[44]). In such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that *pandillas* and their violence quickly became a central focus of my research. Less obvious, perhaps, was my entry into the world of *pandillerismo*.

First Contact: Getting to Know the Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández Pandilleros

When I first moved into *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in September 1996, my immediate concern was finding out whether there was a neighbourhood *pandilla*. Foremost in my mind was identifying it, and then avoiding it, since I had had a rather unpleasant encounter with a Managuan *pandilla* the month before. However, my questioning of *Doña* Yolanda and other members of the Gómez household where I was living elicited a somewhat limited "yes, there is a *pandilla*, but don't worry about it", and since no further information was forthcoming, I reluctantly decided to initiate my fieldwork without this - to me - crucial variable, and rely on my common-sense to avoid a nasty encounter with the *barrio* gang. In time-honoured anthropological manner, and despite my stomach's insistence to continuously dissolve into itself, I set about my fieldwork enterprise by spending substantial amounts of time idling about in the streets of the *barrio*, hoping to be able to engage in conversation with anybody who cared to initiate one with me.

After two days of solitary contemplation of *barrio* life, Julio came up to me one morning, and asked me for a cigarette, which I promptly supplied. We chatted for a while about where I was from, and what I was doing in the *barrio*, until a sudden downpour of rain curtailed this preliminary interaction. Although I did not know it at the time, this was my first interaction with the local *pandilla*, for Julio later turned out to be a prominent member of the *barrio* youth gang. Over the next couple of weeks, I would get together more or less every day with Julio, as well as Miguel, Jairo, *Chaparro*,[45] Pedro, and Jader (who later all turned out to also be members of the *barrio pandilla*). We would sit on the curbside, sometimes talking animatedly about almost anything, sometimes in silence, but always communally smoking cigarettes.

Conversations with Julio and the others were obviously probing, on the part of both parties, as we mutually tried to categorize each other. I of course doggedly tried to find out whether they were members of the local *pandilla*, this much having been intimated to me by members of the Gómez family. However, they strenuously denied the existence of a *pandilla* in the *barrio* (later, though, presumably once I had passed inquiry, they happily admitted that they were *pandilleros*). Their own questions centred mainly around who I was and what I thought of a variety of subjects including drugs (no problem), the *barrio* (it's fine so far, I haven't been attacked), Nicaragua (violent), my recent experience being attacked by a *pandilla*

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[43] Cf. G. Martin, 'Violences stratégiques et violences désorganisées dans la région de Urabá en Colombie', special issue on 'Survivre: Réflexions sur l'Action en Situation de Chaos', *Cultures & Conflits*, 24/25 (Winter-Spring 1996-97), p.181.

[44] Cf. Rodgers (1999).

[45] A Central American colloquialism meaning "shorty" or "titch".

(which they identified for me as the *pandilla* "Los Rusos" and told me I was lucky to escape so lightly as they were really "*dañino*", or "harmful"), and my research project (life in the context of violence).

Why did the *pandilleros* socialize with me? To a certain extent, it was probably somewhat inevitable, considering my age (23 at the time) and gender. Furthermore, as a novel element occupying "public" space in the *barrio*, I automatically made myself a subject of investigation to the territorially-conscious *pandilleros*. But Julio also later told me that they had been mystified by my appearance, because although I was obviously older than them by a few years and I was also a "*chele*" – a Nicaraguan word used to denote Europeans, in opposition to the North American-indicating "*gringo*"; it can also mean "fair-skinned" in a more general sense, and is originally a Mayan word meaning "blue", possibly in allusion to the eyes of the Spanish *conquistadores* [46] – both of which meant that I would normally have been classified as socially "other", I also had an extreme *pandillero* look, being shaven-headed and sporting an earring, and so they wondered whether I wasn't a European "*broder*" ("brother").

Having a totally shaved head was deemed particularly "*dañino*", or "bad". [47] Only Julio, who was considered to be one of the most *dañino* of the *barrio pandilleros*, had a totally shaved head as I did when I arrived in the *barrio*, although many *pandilleros* had haircuts which incorporated a partial shaving of their head, as the act of at least partially shaving one's head was very much associated with the image of the *pandillero*, both at the level of the *pandilleros* themselves, and wider society. Earrings were more common to the youth population generally, but still retained something of the "*pandilleresque* frisson" of "badness", as did tattoos (which, however, I did not have). Furthermore, I was spending hours idling in the street, which was *pandillero* activity par excellence in privileged *pandillero* space, and I was chain-smoking - for nervous reasons - like they had never seen anybody chain-smoke before, which caused a mixture of curiosity and a certain respect.

This perhaps probatory phase of my socialization ended after a couple of weeks, when other youths began to join our daily palavers, which sometimes became nightly ones lasting until the early hours of the morning, during which marijuana was almost always smoked, glue occasionally sniffed, and alcohol sometimes consumed. At this point, they also dropped all pretense about not being *pandilleros*, actively acknowledging and even claiming the label, as well as talking about a variety of violence- and delinquency-related topics in my presence, including planned and executed robberies, muggings and assaults.

An Anthropologist is Initiated into the Pandilla

About a week into this new pattern of interaction, the process of my initiation into the *barrio pandilla* began. Although much of what I term my "probatory" contact with the *barrio pandilleros* could arguably be considered part of an initiation process, I purposefully differentiate it from the events that follow because these were very obviously perceived by all involved as being qualitatively different in nature. Even if, as Ingrid Rudie points out, the individual anthropologist inevitably imposes a certain subjective sense onto his or her ethnographic experiences, [48] this reflexivity, as Peter Hervik argues, is grounded in the

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[46] Cf. Lancaster (1992), p.217); and C. M. van der Gulden, *Vocabulario Nicaragüense*, Managua: Editorial UCA, 1995, p.109.

[47] The word also has other connotations, including "destructive", "harmful", and "malicious".

[48] Cf. I. Rudie, 'Making sense of new experience', in K. Hastrup & P. Hervik (eds), *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1994.

"shared social experience" of the field context.[49] My interpretation was greatly shaped by the *pandilleros*' explicit and repeated subsequent labelling of what follows as my "*inciación*" ("initiation"). To what extent this was the product of my being a *chele* and an anthropologist is difficult to ascertain, however, as no youths other than myself joined the *pandilla* during the course of my fieldwork, so I have no comparable circumstances to draw upon. But whatever the case may be, in addition to situating myself in this ethnography, this latter point is another reason for describing my own initiation process (although I am not claiming it to have been in any way typical).

As most initiation processes probably inevitably tend to be, my initiation into the *barrio pandilla* was a mixture of formal and informal "rites". The first two of the three phases - "Standing One's Ground" and "Stealing Women's Underwear" - can be said to have been consciously planned by the *pandilleros*, and therefore most warrant the attribution of the traditional anthropological expression "*rite de passage*", as coined by Arnold van Gennep.[50] The second of these two "rites" was obviously modified as a result of my *chele* status,[51] and this, as well as certain actions on my part, seemed to give rise to the need for the third "rite" - "Defending the *Barrio*" - for me to be wholly accepted as a member of the *pandilla*. This third incident was however unpremeditated and spontaneous in its occurrence, and so has to be conceptually distinguished from the previous two. It is important to note, that although the *pandilleros* were obviously aware of what was happening, and that I realized following the first incident and went along, there was never an overt "agreement" that I was passing a test to be accepted into the *pandilla*, and it was only subsequently that it was explicitly said that this was what had occurred. To this extent, my initiation process differs substantially from a van Gennepian "*rite de passage*".

Standing One's Ground

The first incident occurred one afternoon about a month after I had taken up residence in the *barrio*, as I was sitting on the curbside in a *barrio* street with a dozen or so *pandilleros*. All of a sudden, conversation died down and I suddenly found that all the *pandilleros* were looking at me intently. I was about to ask what was up when one of the youth, called Norman, pulled out a knife and began to act threateningly towards me. My requests that he should desist falling on deaf ears, it was obvious that this was leading to a violent confrontation between Norman and myself, which I felt distinctly unprepared for being neither particularly strong nor skilled in combat. The knife Norman was menacing me with was a Swiss army knife, however (I hasten to add that it was not one of those small "officer's knives" which can be bought in almost any tourist shop in Switzerland, but a large one - although operating on the same flip opening and closing principle - which Swiss army infantrymen are issued with for, amongst other things, hand-to-hand combat). Having grown up in Switzerland, I have played around with such knives since I was about 10 years old, and so I am to a certain extent familiar with them. Consequently, ignoring as best I could Norman's increasingly threatening gestures, I more or less confidently asked him to "give me this knife which comes from where I come from and I'll show you some tricks you don't know".

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[49] P. Hervik, 'Shared reasoning in the field: Reflexivity beyond the author', in Hastrup & Hervik (1994), p.96. This line of argument is similar to Pieke's discussed in the Introduction (Pieke, 1995).

[50] Cf. A. van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Paris: Librairie Critique Emile Nourry, 1909.

[51] It is quite possible that the first incident, "Standing One's Ground", was similarly modified, as it seems to have been particularly innocuous, especially compared to US gang practices - cf. for example J. Moore, J. D. Vigil & R. García, 'Residence and territoriality in Chicano gangs', *Social Problems*, 31 (1983), pp 182-194; as well as M. Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991 - although the *pandilleros* consistently denied this.

Norman abruptly ceased his antics and after a moment's thought, handed me the knife, while the other *pandilleros* crowded around, excited at the prospect of this novelty. Although I was not particularly successful in demonstrating great skill in manipulating it, only managing to cut up fingers, the situation had been defused, and I seemed to have passed what I could see *ex post facto* had been a "test". As J. Patrick and Martín Sánchez Jankowski both point out,[52] respectively in the British and US contexts, such "tests" can serve to evaluate a potential gang recruit's combat capabilities, since a poor fighter is a liability to the gang in violent situations. Obviously my response did nothing of the sort, but I would argue that the underlying logic to this "test" was different. It seems to me that it was linked to notions of *machismo* - which inevitably have to be considered in relation to a male-dominated, violent social institution such as a *pandilla* in Nicaragua - rather than my potential combat capabilities. As Roger Lancaster points out, "taking risk, displaying bravado in the face of danger, is ...very much the essence of machismo's ideal of manhood",[53] and this was precisely what I (unwittingly) enacted in my dealing with Norman's attack. I had more or less managed to hide my fear and nonchalantly remark on and ask for the knife which was being used to threaten me in order to show him how to use it better. Even if I was unable to produce the intimated skill, it only served to highlight the bluster of my actions.

Luck, of course, played an important role in my being able to act in this manner, as I would probably not have been able to successfully lay a claim to Norman's knife had it not been a Swiss knife. I have absolutely no idea how I would have extricated myself from this situation had the knife been of another origin. Generally, however, it must be said that throughout my initiation into the *barrio pandilla* - and indeed, during most of my fieldwork in Nicaragua - I was extremely - in fact inordinately - lucky, particularly as much of my behaviour was improvised, spur-of-the-moment response to circumstances and situations which were generally beyond my control, and somehow I seemed to make the right decisions to ensure my survival.

Stealing Women's Underwear

Perhaps the most formal of my initiation "rites" occurred a week after the knife incident. Around about 8 a.m., it became obvious that Julio, Miguel, and Jairo were waiting in the street in front of the Gómez home for me to come out, which I duly did. They suggested that we take a trip to the nearby Huembes market, which I readily acquiesced to, as this was the first time somebody from the *barrio* had suggested going somewhere outside the *barrio* with me. As we walked to the Huembes, Julio informed me that we were going to steal something from a stall at the market. Suddenly feeling somewhat cold all over, I hastily suggested that it was probably not a good idea for me to participate, considering the fact that as a *chele* I would be easily identifiable if we were seen thieving. Julio replied with a smile that this had all been thought about - betraying the fact that this whole enterprise was premeditated - and explained the plan which was that I was to go up to the targeted stall alone and distract the seller in such a way that he and the other two could then run by and grab whatever they could. Appeasing my conscience by telling myself that I wouldn't be doing the actual robbing, I agreed to go along with the plan. It was decided that we would meet up afterwards in front of my house in the *barrio*.

Although Julio didn't say so explicitly, it was obvious that the logic of this arrangement was, on the one hand, to ensure that I would not be associated to the theft by anybody present, yet, on the other hand, that I would have actively been an integral part of the misdeed. The voluntary aspect of my participation was obviously absolutely crucial to this clearly adapted

[52] J. Patrick, *A Glasgow Gang Observed*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1973; and Sánchez Jankowski (1991).
[53] Lancaster (1992), p.195.

"rite of passage". While I could be "excused" from actually robbing the market, I nevertheless had to actively participate in the larceny. The heist went as planned, eight *bloomers* (women's underwear) being the booty. On rejoining Julio and the others in the *barrio*, they presented me with the underwear and told me that I now had to sell them. With the three of them trailing behind me, I approached passing women of the *barrio*, and after about an hour and a half had succeeded in selling the eight items of clothing for a grand total of 43 *córdobas*.[54] Each item normally sold for about 20 *córdobas* at the market, but as is generally the case with the sale of stolen goods a large markdown is the norm. From what Julio and the others told me, my almost 75 percent "loss" was not brilliant, but could have been worse for a first-time fence.[55]

As we gathered to talk and smoke in the *calle ocho* (Eighth Street) alleyway - so-named after a particularly dangerous street of downtown Managua - that evening, the *pandilleros* told me that I was now a true "*broder*", and a fully-fledged member of the *pandilla*. At this point, I told my now fellow *pandilleros* that although I was very happy to be a *pandillero*, I would not be able to participate fully in many of the activities which from their conversation seemed typical of a *pandilla*, such as attacking and robbing people, for a variety of reasons, but most importantly because of my personal sense of ethics. I also stated that I would not use firearms, and suggested essentially that I could perhaps be an "observer member". To my surprise, the *pandilleros* accepted this without protest. However, as became apparent afterwards, this precipitated the need for a third initiation "rite", which was perhaps also a function of the obvious modification of the second of my previous initiatory tests.

Defending the Barrio

Late afternoon, a couple of weeks after the market incident, I was sitting on the curbside in front of the Gómez house, chatting away with Argentina, Adilia, Wanda, and Manuela, with Elvis playing around with Margarita in front of us, when suddenly a group of some 30 to 40 youths came running down the road, throwing stones left, right, and center, shouting loudly, and setting upon passers-by. Elvis and I immediately started throwing stones back at them, covering the retreat of the others into the house as best we could. As soon as they were all inside and had barricaded themselves, Elvis and I entrenched ourselves behind the trees in front of the house to defend it, while the invading *pandilla* - for that was what it was - broke up into small groups which concentrated on throwing stones at houses and beating up anybody still left in the street. We were rapidly joined by three other *pandilleros* from the *barrio*, which enabled us to quickly force the retreat of the group of half a dozen invading *pandilleros* which had chosen our house as target. All around us, small groups of *pandilleros* from the *barrio* were similarly engaged, "recapturing" the *barrio* block of houses after block of house, often engaging in close quarters hand-to-hand combat, until the invading *pandilla* finally turned and ran.

As we went around the field of combat to see if anybody was badly hurt, Julio came up to me and said, "now you're really one of us, Dennis, we've seen that you've got the *onda*' ('spirit'), we've seen that you 'love the *barrio*' ('*querés al barrio*') and that you're not scared and are ready to defend it." Other *pandilleros* also came up to us, and told me the same thing, and in many ways it is at this point that I feel that I really became a fully-fledged member of the *pandilla*. Although the *pandilleros* could accept my having an "observer member" status,

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[54] Approximately 5 US dollars.

[55] There was a thriving market for such minor stolen items in the *barrio*, so I did not have much merit in succeeding to sell my wares. Certainly, the Gómez family women bought much of their jewelry from the local *pandilleros*, for example.

and could countenance that I refused to attack or rob people, I needed to actively demonstrate that I had the *pandillero* "spirit" or "way of being", which included not just having a shaved head, drinking, or (sometimes) smoking marijuana, but also identifying with the *barrio* and being willing to expose myself to danger in order to defend it.[56]

Reputation, Being "Dañino", and "El Chele Pandillero"

It later also became apparent that there were reasons other than my "*onda*" for initiating me into the *pandilla*, linked to the gang's reputation. A *pandilla*'s reputation is clearly a source of pride and even identity for the *pandilleros*, and to a certain extent it also determines inter-*pandilla* relations. It depends partly on the degree of the youth gang's violent collective behaviour patterns. One Managua *pandilla*, known colourfully as *Los Comemuertos* ("Eaters of the Dead") is considered to be perhaps the most "*dañina*" ("destructive") of all the capital's youth gangs, as a result of its constant involvement as a group in high profile violence, for example. In this regard, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was by no means amongst the most violent of Managua, although it was rapidly becoming increasingly violent, and was certainly one of the more violent youth gangs in the immediate vicinity, which made it symbolically the dominant gang within a locality made up of six neighbouring *barrios* and part of the Huembes market.

A further contributing element is a *pandilla*'s territory, both in terms of its spatial magnitude and its symbolic connotations. Although the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*'s territory was not particularly large, being confined to the neighbourhood - one of Managua's smaller *barrios* - the historical notoriety of the *barrio*, which had been one of the most dangerous *barrios* in Managua in the past, certainly rubbed off onto the present-day *pandilla*, as was apparent from reactions of Managuans who were not from the *barrio*, who often drew parallels with the neighbourhood's violent past and the present brutality of the *pandilla*.[57] The *barrio pandilleros* in fact actively claimed such an association with the *barrio* past, often calling themselves "*sobrevivientes*", or "survivors", in reference to the neighbourhood's pre-revolutionary name, "*La Sobrevivencia*", for reasons which closely echoed their wider association with the *barrio*'s pre-revolutionary past, as a comment made to me in April 1997 about the *barrio*'s historical incarnation by a *pandillero* called Wilmer reflects well:

> *¡Fué lo máximo, hombre!* (It was the best, man!). People respected us. Nobody came into the *barrio*, nobody, you know? You came in on foot at one end of the *barrio* and out in a coffin at the other. Even the *Guardia* were too scared to come into the *barrio*. Fuck, man, they bombed us with planes they were so scared to come in. We were feared![58]

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[56] To a certain extent, it could be argued that there was in fact a need to see me "prove my mettle", which perhaps supports the analyses put forward by Patrick (1973) and Sánchez Jankowski (1991) mentioned above. Whether this was the case or not, I had many occasions to reaffirm my predispositions to these requirements, for this attack was the first - and one of the more innocuous, I should add, as I subsequently came under both machine-gun and mortar fire - of many such encounters during my stay in the *barrio*.

[57] Those I questioned about this were from neighbouring *barrios* or the nearby Huembes market, and knew about the gang in a direct manner, since these were areas where the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilleros* frequently operated. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* did not have the citywide reputation of the *Comemuertos pandilla*, which was well known to all Managuans. However, most *pandilla* activities are confined to a relatively small locality, which in the case of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández youth gang was made up of six neighbouring *barrios* and the Huembes market.

[58] Moreover, it was also significant that the *pandilla* used the *barrio*'s pre-revolutionary name as a trademark "*pinta*" ("graffito") to spatially mark out their territory, in a manner similar to the territorially-demarcating "*placas*" of the Southern Californian *Chicano* gangs that James Diego Vigil describes (*Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*, Mexican-American Monograph Number 12, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988).

Beyond these more structural factors, the personal characteristics of the individual *pandilleros* in the gang were also important towards the construction of a *pandilla*'s reputation. Most often these would be something like such and such a *pandillero* was particularly crazy, brave, or savage, for example. Certainly, when talking of their *Comemuertos* colleagues - so to speak - the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilleros* would often make remarks on the lines of "*¡Hombre*, those guys are just *loco* (crazy), they kill anybody they come across!" But the term the *pandilleros* used most often was "*dañino*" (destructive/harmful). The status attribution is the result of violence. Although the Nicaraguan *pandillero* doesn't necessarily have to kill in order to be labeled "*dañino*" - but it certainly enhances his status to have done so, as the *pandilleros*' above comment about the *Comemuertos pandilleros* reveals - he does have to display some form of systematic or repeated pattern of violent behaviour and risk-taking. Julio was thus considered extremely "*dañino*" because he always displayed great courage and enthusiasm in fighting, as well as no small measure of risk-taking - most notably never hesitating, even seeking to expose himself to gunfire when this occurred in the course of *pandilla* conflicts.

I cannot claim to having been particularly "*dañino*", although I unwittingly displayed a certain measure of "*dañidad*" whenever the *barrio* was attacked, particularly when firearms were involved, as a result of my refusal to use such weapons, but my willingness to go up against them nevertheless. I was however much less inclined than Julio to purposefully expose myself to gunfire, and thus my "*dañidad*" can be thought of as having been "passive", and it was arguably more "active" forms of violence and risk-taking which contributed to a *pandilla*'s reputation. By "active" form of risk-taking I mean more or less "looking for danger". My taking risks in the contexts of attacks on the *barrio* was "passive" in the sense that it was not purposeful, as I did not seek out danger for the sake of it, but was exposed to it as a result of circumstances which were beyond my control. There were, however, a couple of occasions when I was more "active" in my risk-taking. In January and March 1997, Police patrols surprised a group of *pandilleros* (including myself) as we sat in the street smoking, drinking, and chatting late at night. By staying behind and letting the Police capture me, I covered the flight of the other *pandilleros*, who were unarmed and thus unable to defend themselves. It must be said, though, that I in fact had very little to fear from being taken in precisely because I was a *chele*, and the Police actually let me go both times before even getting to the Police station (in one case because I refused to pay the bribe they requested to let me go, and threatened to denounce them for attempted corruption).

However, I did have other attributes which did affect the gang's reputation, although these were not linked to violence. In particular, my being a foreigner certainly contributed something original to the *pandilla*'s reputation. Indeed, I provided it with a uniquely distinguishing feature, as to the best of my knowledge, there were no other *pandillas* in Managua with another "*chele pandillero*", as I came to be known. This aspect of the gang's reputation became well-known within the immediate vicinity, but it also eventually went beyond the *barrio* community and neighbouring *barrios*, as I discovered much to my horror in early June 1997 during an interview with a district Police captain. During our conversation, seeing that I was more or less knowledgeable on the subject of Managua *pandillas*, he asked me if by any chance I knew anything about a mysterious "*chele pandillero*" whom he'd heard was operating in one of the district *barrios*! I of course answered no... The *pandilleros* had definitely been aware of this potentially reputation-enhancing aspect of associating me with the gang, often mentioning it in conversation during my initiation. I had at first assumed this to be a gently ribbing, joking banter, but discovered the very real consequences of this social role I had unwittingly assumed in a rather anecdotal and indirect manner.

One morning soon after the last initiation phase, I woke up to find that the *barrio* water supply had been - not unusually - cut off. Having a formal appointment outside the *barrio* that day, I decided to go to the neighbouring *barrio* Pablo Quintero, where Carola - *Doña* Yolanda's eldest daughter - lived, in order to have a shower. Despite it being broad daylight, the Gómez family did not want to let me go, Adilia telling me that it was too risky, as there was a war going on between that *barrio pandilla* and ours - the attack on the *barrio* which provided the background for the third part of my initiation had been the beginning of this war - and because I was now a member of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández youth gang, and due to my special status as a *chele*, I was an obvious prime target, as much of *pandilla* warfare centres around injuring, beating, or capturing the "reputed" members of the enemy *pandilla*. In the end, *Doña* Yolanda's lover, *Don* Saturnino, ended up driving me the 750 metres from the Gómez home to Carola's place in his taxi, waited for me to have a shower, and then drove me back, while I lay low in the back seat, thinking to myself that I still had a lot to learn about inter-*pandilla* dynamics.[59]

Violence and the Dilemmas of Participant Observation

My becoming a *pandillero* was initially not so much prompted by research considerations, but more because I felt it to be a valid personal survival strategy in what I perceived to be dangerous circumstances, particularly considering the direct experiences of violence I had suffered during the couple of months prior to my moving to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. I assumed that by becoming a gang member, I would be able to draw on the *pandilla* for protection and support in the endemically unsafe conditions of urban Nicaragua, and certainly, this proved to be the case, as on many of the occasions when I was attacked after joining the *pandilla*, and could not adequately defend myself, my fellow gang members swiftly came to my assistance with their various weapons, generally with effective results, for example. However, as I later learnt, the gang in fact protects all those living in the neighbourhood, so becoming a member was not a necessary prerequisite to ensure such support. On the other hand, though, being a member of the gang also provided me with a personal status which frequently helped defuse a number of potentially dangerous situations, and deterred a number of attacks by members of rival *pandillas*, for fear of provoking a war with the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, which would not have necessarily been the case had I simply been an inhabitant of the neighbourhood and nothing more. This was certainly a factor for remaining a *pandillero* even after having discovered that I did not need to be one in order for the *pandilla* to protect me.

Joining the gang also had other ramifications, however. Because I became a member of the *pandilla*, and because with this role came certain expected behaviour patterns as well as a particular social position, I underwent a number of things that I could have probably done without, including being attacked, threatened, beaten up, knifed, and shot at. But more importantly, perhaps, I also actively and directly participated in a number of violent and illegal activities, such as gang wars, thefts, fights, beatings, and conflicts with the Police, which might be construed as "immoral", "unethical", and "irresponsible", to use some of the expressions I was subjected to on my return from Nicaragua. While to a certain extent I accept such reproaches as valid in principle, I also feel them to be very much attenuated by the practical fact that, as mentioned above, joining the gang was primarily a survival strategy on my part. Even if as it turned out, I did not have to join the *pandilla* in order for it to protect

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[59] This episode showed that the Gómez family was very aware of the *barrio pandilla* politics, so to speak, a fact which was to be confirmed over and over again subsequently (nor were they exceptional in this respect, most other *barrio* families being similarly well-informed).

me once I had moved into the *barrio*, I had no idea of this initially, and was improvising as best I could in unfamiliar and unsettling circumstances. To this extent, I feel that some of the criticisms I have received relating to the possible consequences of my actions for the reputations of the discipline - "Anthropology, Inc." to use Keith Hart's expression[60] - or of the University of Cambridge to be a little forced.

While I recognize that I had responsibilities towards both institutions, I have to say that in the final analysis I find these to be rather secondary compared to my own personal survival. Furthermore, I also have difficulty conceiving my ultimately limited acts of violence as being significant enough to affect the reputations of either institution, and feel that if I been killed during fieldwork, this would have been of greater consequence. An alternative critique of active engagement in violence might be provided by a consideration of the additional potential risks invoked by such an action. Both from the perspective of the individual anthropologist, and his or her parent academic institution and discipline, the potential danger to the individual is an ethical question. The individual's right to take on personal risk in the course of fieldwork has traditionally been a matter of personal choice, although this has been mitigated by the need to consider the impact of one's actions on others, and the likelihood of others feeling personal responsibilities for your fate.

Academic institutions, however, have a moral - as well as often legal - responsibility for the consequences of fieldwork on their members or students. This was succinctly highlighted by Meyer Fortes, former Head of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, when he adapted a comment made by the US Cavalry General George Custer and stated that "the only good anthropologist is a live anthropologist". For an institution to condone personal risk taking that led to injury or death, incommiserate with the information gained, could be considered strictly immoral, or reckless, to say the least. The emphasis of this moral position, however, is that it is the risks of engaging in violence which are the issue, rather than the violence itself. As intimated in my Nicaraguan fieldwork experiences, not engaging in violence does not necessarily make fieldwork safe (viz the attacks I suffered during my first two months in Nicaragua), and in dangerous situations it can in fact be much safer to be allied with the violent, rather than being the target of violence oneself (viz the advantages of being a *pandillero*).

I cannot deny, of course, that becoming a *pandillero* also offered me an unparalleled research opportunity. It most certainly did, and I will not say that I regret it, particularly seeing how things turned out in the end. But it was definitely not the primary consideration in my initial motivations. Actively engaging in violence purely for the sake of research certainly *does* strike me to a large extent as being immoral and unethical, although this is a subjective position - what about participatory research on violence which is aimed at informing ways of ensuring "peace"? What about research which is motivated by political idealism? In the final analysis, as William Foote Whyte remarks in the methodological appendix of the enlarged edition of his ground-breaking *Street Corner Society*,[61] the ultimate determining criterion is that "the field worker ...has to continue living with himself. If the participant observer finds himself engaging in behavior that he ...think[s] of as immoral, then he is likely to begin to wonder what sort of a person he is after all."[62]

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[60] Hart (n.d.), p.2.
[61] Cf. W. F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Structure of an Italian Slum*, 2nd edition (enlarged), Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955 [1943].
[62] Whyte (1955 [1943]), p.327.

This, however, is a personal, rather than a public, matter. Furthermore, it is very much situational. While in principle I find some of my actions in Nicaragua to be of a rather dubious nature according to my own present personal index of values, when I consider them in the context of the actual circumstances I found myself in when acting them out, I find that I can quite happily live with myself. Ultimately, a relative moral standard is set, which is perhaps difficult for others who have not been in similar or equivalent circumstances to associate with. I certainly engaged in violence to defend myself. I also actively participated in gang conflicts in order to protect the *barrio* and its inhabitants. But with a couple of exceptions, I restricted my participation in violent gang activities only to those I felt amounted to a form of self-defence (albeit with a broader object of defence than simply my own self - I also actively participated in the defence of the *barrio* and its inhabitants, for example). I did not kill anybody. I also refused to use firearms at any time, which as hinted previously, was in many ways actually detrimental to my cardinal preoccupation of ensuring my own survival, as it meant that all too often I found myself in situations of trying to defend myself against gunfire with sticks and stones. Thankfully - from my perspective - my fellow *pandilleros* had no such scruples. It must be said, though, that I was lucky to be able to make such choices (and even luckier to survive them, perhaps, depending on one's perspective and priorities). My status as an outsider meant that I could lay down ground rules which were not options - both practically and socially - for other *pandilleros*. But all of these behaviours constitute an eminently individual code of conduct, one which others may or may not share or agree with.

Also important to consider within the context of this discussion are the motivations one has with regards to undertaking such a study of violence. Although at one level, my enterprise was of course partly motivated by the personal objective of obtaining a PhD degree, I also placed my research within a broader "developmental" perspective, whereby its ultimate aim was to inform and permit efficient intervention into a social reality which I would argue is not satisfactory to its inhabitants, and (shouldn't be) to the rest of the world. I hope that my research will eventually inform "development" initiatives touching on gang violence in Nicaragua as well as perhaps other countries in Latin America.[63] While one may or may not agree with both the notions of "development" or "applied anthropology", in my mind it is difficult to criticize the moral (humanistic) justifications of either (which are distinct from both their eminently criticizable epistemological justifications and actual practices). Once again, however, this is very much a matter of personal values.

A Final Rejoinder

Finally, I'd like to end this presentation with a couple of points regarding narrative form, if I may. Violence not only has ramifications for its research, but also for its representation. For example, E. Valentine Daniel,[64] Cynthia Keppley Mahmood,[65] and Philippe Bourgois[66] all

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[63] This process has already begun, in particular through the delivery of two speeches, one in Nicaragua, to a forum of local NGOs working specifically on violence, organized jointly by the Managua NGO *Puntos de Encuentro* and the *Universidad de la Mujer* (University of Women) on 10 April 1997 (published in slightly modified form as D. Rodgers, 'Un antropólogo-pandillero en un barrio de Managua', *Envío*, 16:184 (July 1997), pp 10-16), and the other to the World Bank's LCSES "Governance, Social Capital, and Violence" seminar, in Washington, DC (USA), on 14 January 1998 (cf. D. Rodgers, 'Chaos or order?: Youth gangs and violence in urban Nicaragua', paper delivered to the LCSES *Governance, Social Capital and Violence* seminar series, The World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 14 January 1998). I have also collaborated with the World Bank on a project dealing with youth gang violence in Latin America.

[64] Daniel, cited in A. Feldman, in Nordstrom & Robben (1995), p.245. Cf. also Daniel (1996), p.4.

[65] Mahmood (1996), p.272.

[66] Bourgois (1995), pp.15-18.

suggest that by the very nature of their subject matter, ethnographies of violence can very easily give rise to a twisted practice of sensationalist anthropological "pornography", showing the intimate suffering of people's lives for all to see and revel in. To a certain extent, they have a point, but probably more as a result of the inherent nature of anthropology rather than the violent subject matter, I would argue. As Andrew Strathern once famously put it,[67] anthropologists are not far from being "professional snoops", prying into people's lives and exposing them to others in a frequently cavalier manner. Retaining Daniel and Mahmood's carnal metaphor, then, one could eventually say that the ethnography of violence is the "hard porn" to anthropology's more general "soft" voyeurism, and so since we are all in the "sex trade", so to speak, their objections relate to a question of degree, rather than substance, and are therefore not, in my mind, as significant as they maintain them to be (the crucial question is more whether one is justified to engage in the anthropological "trade" at all, which I will not attempt to answer, my answer being implicit in the very fact of my being before you today).

More problematic is the accusation that an ethnography of violence, and especially one which is at least partly centred around the anthropologist's personal experiences, runs the risk of becoming a particularly sensationalist narrative, perpetuating "hard man (or woman)" "Indiana Jones"-style stereotypes.[68] Certainly, it is true that the subject of violence is such that inevitably any participatory research-based investigation lends itself somewhat to sensationalism, particularly when one has actively partaken in violence. This makes the narrative form of the ethnography especially important. The line between writing a narcissistic and gratuituously violent account and achieving a balanced narrative invoking both the anthropologist - because the anthropologist *must* to be situated in the ethnography - and those he or she is studying is a very fine one, however, although as Clifford Geertz points out, this is a problem which is not necessarily particular to the ethnography of violence.[69] Ultimately, though, as Philippe Bourgois remarks, as is the case with violence research more generally, "the problem and the responsibility is also in the eyes of the beholder".[70]

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[67] Cf. A. Strathern, 'Anthropology, 'snooping', and commitment: A view from Papua New Guinea', in G. Huizer & B. Mannheim (eds), *The Politics of Anthropology: From Colonialism and Sexism Toward a View from Below*, The Hague: Mouton, 1979.

[68] Cf. J. van Maanen *et al.*, 'Series editors' introduction', in Lee (1995), p.viii.

[69] Cf. C. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988.

[70] Bourgois (1995), p.18.

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