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**Joining the gang and becoming a “broder”:
The violence of ethnography in contemporary Nicaragua**

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Abstract: The fact that anthropologists ‘construct’ the field in which they conduct their ethnographic research has long been recognized, but less considered are the ways in which the field can ‘construct’ both the anthropologist and fieldwork practices. In many ways this process is a natural corollary of the fact that researchers must always adapt and sensitize themselves to the realities of their field locations, and more importantly, the inherently dialogical nature of ethnographic research. At the same time, this ‘construction’ can potentially have more singular ramifications, particularly when fieldwork is carried out in situations characterised by chronic violence. In such circumstances, the ethnographic process almost inevitably exposes the anthropologist to violence, but can also become intrinsically imbued with violence, to the extent that it can make sense to talk of the ‘violence’ of ethnography. This article illustrates this idea through a consideration of the author’s doctoral fieldwork experiences in Managua, Nicaragua, including his ritual initiation into an urban youth gang, and considers some of the ethical and practical ramifications of this experience.

Key words: Ethnography, gangs, Nicaragua, violence, youth

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I chose to be traitor, thief, looter, informer, hater, destroyer, despiser, coward. ...I cut the bonds that held me to the world of customary morality. ...I monstrously departed from you, your world, your towns, your institutions (Genet, 1969 [1953]: 170-1).

The greater my guilt in your eyes, the more whole, the more totally assumed, the greater will be my freedom. ...By my guilt, I further gained the right to intelligence (Genet, 1964 [1949]: 84).¹

Violence is a phenomenon that ‘actively compels attention from the social scientist’ (Lee, 1995: 1). This is arguably particularly the case in contemporary Central America, where levels of violence are equivalent or higher than they were during the wars that affected the region during the 1980s, despite these having been formally brought to an end during the early and mid-1990s (Pearce, 1998: 589-90). Yet this paradoxical situation notwithstanding, there is a significant dearth of in-depth research on post-conflict violence in Central America,² and more specifically on the youth gang phenomenon that is one of its key features (Arana, 2001; Rodgers, 1999). This state of affairs is undoubtedly largely due to the practical difficulties involved in investigating such a topic. This applies to quantitative research insofar as it is hampered by the generalised paucity of reliable statistical data,³ but is perhaps most obvious in relation to qualitative research, and more specifically to the ethnographic enquiries that are a particularly insightful element of social scientific scholarship on Central America. Such studies are traditionally based on participant observation, a research method that attempts to capture the nature of social reality holistically by means of the researcher simultaneously participating in and observing social acts, something that in violent social contexts inevitably entails exposure to a range of potential risks. As a result, most ethnographers ‘select themselves out of [such] research’, according to Jeff Sluka (1990: 124).

While this may well often be the case, as Raymond Lee (1995: 1) remarks it is not as if ethnographers never ‘work in settings made dangerous by violent conflict, or in social situations where interpersonal violence and risk are common place’. Indeed, Kevin Avruch (2001: 639) agrees that this is relatively frequent, but he also suggests that there is a propensity for resulting publications to ignore the methodological dimensions of their research.⁴ This article aims to make explicit some of the concrete practical, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of my research on Nicaraguan youth gang violence, highlighting in particular the way in which my ethnographic project was very much ‘constructed’ by the field. While this is in many ways a natural corollary of the inherently dialogical nature of ethnographic research, it is something that is arguably especially evident in situations imbued with chronic violence, to the extent that it can actually make sense to talk of the ‘violence’ of the ethnographic process in such conditions. I begin by tracing my initial encounter with an unexpectedly violent Nicaraguan social reality and discuss how it dramatically changed my original research plans, refocusing my investigations onto violence. I then go on to describe how this led to my undergoing ritual initiation into an urban youth gang in a poor Managua neighbourhood, and concomitantly adopting certain violent behaviour patterns. The last section of the article reflects the ethical and practical consequences of my actions.

¹ I am grateful to José Luis Rocha for graciously condoning my ‘theft’ of these two quotes (see Rocha, 2000).

² Two notable exceptions are Koonings and Kruijt (1999) and Moser and McIlwaine (2004).

³ This is principally due to the difficulties of reliable data collection, the institutional weakness of post-conflict Central American states, and the frequent ‘massaging’ of data for politically expedient reasons.

⁴ The excellent volume edited by Nordstrom and Robben (1995) is a notable exception to this state of affair.

Encountering Nicaragua

It has almost become a truism to say that ethnographers ‘construct’ the field in which they carry out research. Less considered, however, is the way in which the field ‘constructs’ ethnographers and the fieldwork process. Admittedly, it has always been a generally accepted tenet that the ethnographic encounter ‘can never be subject to our firm control’, and that consequently having to adapt to unexpected circumstances is more or less ‘standard procedure’ (Amit, 2000: 16). At the same time, however, Frank Pieke (1995: 76) contends that such adaptation can frequently involve more than mere acclimatization to the unknown, insofar as ethnographic research is a process that engages the ethnographer in ‘a dialogue with the entire social reality encountered’. As a result, events that might not initially be considered germane to a research project can actively ‘force’ themselves onto the researcher. This is what happened to him during his 1988-89 investigations in China, which originally concerned state-led economic reforms but ended up focusing on popular political claims against the state as a result of the Tiananmen Square protests. This dialogical aspect of ethnography can have particular ramifications for research conducted in violent social contexts, to the extent that the ethnographic process can arguably become intrinsically ‘violent’, as the following account of some of my 1996-97 doctoral fieldwork experiences in Nicaragua attempts to illustrate.

I originally travelled to Nicaragua in July 1996 to conduct a year of ethnographic fieldwork for a doctoral project grandly entitled *Songs of Life and Hope: Everyday Livelihood Strategies in the Barrios of Contemporary Urban Nicaragua*. I had planned to investigate the means through which individuals and communities creatively organised themselves socially and culturally in order to cope with the profound economic crisis widely reported to be the dominant feature of the post-revolutionary Nicaraguan social reality (Nitlapán-Envío team, 1995). More specifically, I had hoped to study the solidarity and spontaneous co-operation that I assumed would constitute the basis for such ‘survival strategies’ in Nicaragua, considering the profound influence the *Sandinista* revolution of the 1980s was alleged to have had, my leftist political leanings and consequent belief in the inherent sociability of human beings, as well as much of the wider anthropological literature on the organization of life in conditions of poverty.⁵ It quickly became apparent, however, that examples of collective social organization were few and far between. Traditional institutions of social solidarity such as the extended family or *compadrazgo* had shattered, *Sandinismo* was a highly tenuous memory, and what I encountered instead of solidarity and collective action in the face of crisis were social circumstances overwhelmingly characterized by fragmentation, apathy, and disillusion (Rodgers, 2000).

Deeply imbued with idealism as I was, my immediate response to this ‘appalling face of a glimpsed truth’ (Conrad 1990: 65) closely echoed Kurtz’s reaction to his vision of human nature – ‘The horror! The horror!’ – in Joseph Conrad’s famous 1902 novella *Heart of Darkness*, which I was reading at the time. Within days of my arrival I had cynically re-baptized my research project *Chants of Apathy and Nihilism*, and descended into depression. As intellectually traumatizing as this shattering of my naïve personal convictions may have been, though, I am certainly not the first ethnographer to have found his or her preconceptions about a society or even human nature to be wrong, and ultimately, this can be considered part and parcel of the uneasy process of fieldwork acclimatization. The discomfort that I felt was however rapidly compounded by a much more forceful imposition onto my being by Nicaraguan social reality, namely through the active confrontation with violence in a way I

⁵ Prominent examples of this literature on Latin America include González de la Rocha (1994), Lloyd (1979), and Lomnitz (1977), amongst others.

had never experienced before. Although post-Cold War Nicaragua is not as violent as its notoriously brutal neighbours Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador, levels of violence have nevertheless risen dramatically during the past fifteen years, to the extent that veritable pandemic levels prevail, particularly in poor urban areas. The talk and the fear of crime permeate everyday conversations, particularly regarding the *pandillas*, or youth gangs, that ubiquitously roam the streets of urban neighbourhoods, robbing, beating, and frequently killing, transforming large swathes of the country's cities into quasi-war zones, as they fight each other with weapons ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47 assault rifles, fragmentation grenades, and mortars (see Rodgers, 2006).

Perhaps not surprisingly, within a week of my arrival in Nicaragua, I was attacked at knife-point by a couple of *pandilleros* whilst walking in the streets, and less than a month later, I was attacked again, this time at gun-point – or AK-47-point, to be exact – and robbed and collectively beaten up by a gang. Neither event was in any way enjoyable, nor am I ashamed to say that I very nearly left Nicaragua after each attack. Beyond such considerations, however, these experiences are important to consider because they precipitated an 'existential shock' (Robben and Nordstrom, 1995: 13), which profoundly affected my relationship with both my own self and with Nicaragua.⁶ Violence is a powerfully formative phenomenon, which shapes people's perceptions of themselves and how they interact with their social and physical environments in the most immediate and urgent of manners (see Feldman, 1991). Ethnographers are no exception, and these experiences caused me to shift the focus of my research from the survival strategies of the urban poor to the social experience of violence.⁷ At one level this course of action could be construed as simply reflecting my personal fears, but I want to suggest that it can be better assimilated with what Raymond Lee (1995: 61) describes as 'involuntary research'. The notion of 'involuntary research' is distinct from the better-known and commonsensical idea of 'accidental ethnography' in that it implies the existence of an element of constraint. An involuntary researcher is caught up in a situation from which he or she can neither escape nor ignore, and thereby inevitably has to study it even if he or she was not planning to. The most famous example of involuntary research is probably Bruno Bettelheim's (1960) study of the Nazi concentration camps in which he was incarcerated in 1938-39. The element of constraint involved in his research hardly needs pointing out, but Bettelheim also argued that he felt compelled to observe and try to understand his own behaviour and that of others in the camp in order to avoid breaking down mentally.

I am not claiming that my predicament was in any way equivalent to Bettelheim's. However, I believe that a conceptual analogy can be made with the idea of 'involuntary anthropology' to the extent that although I was not forced to go to Nicaragua, or even to stay, I found it impossible to leave once there. To a large extent this was due to a fear that – rightly or wrongly – my leaving the country would be interpreted as having 'failed' anthropology's ultimate disciplinary test of fieldwork, as well as, it must be admitted, a certain pig-headed

⁶ The 'shocking' nature of my encounter with violence was also related to the fact that nothing in my pre-fieldwork research (or my life up till then) had prepared me for these high levels of violence. In retrospect, most of the academic literature on Nicaragua published in the early 1990s was clearly based on research carried out during the tail-end of the *Sandinista* era. Any commentary about the present tended to be an (often wishful) extrapolation of previous trends. The limited media reports that I could access at the time – the internet still being in its infancy and post-revolutionary Nicaragua having fallen off the Western media map – were no better, suggesting that what little violence continued in Nicaragua was mainly rural and dwindling.

⁷ I thus want to stress the fact that I did not go to Nicaragua with the intention of studying violence. In fact, had I known beforehand that Nicaragua was as violent as it turned out to be, I would have likely chosen a different country in which to carry out my doctoral fieldwork. To this extent, I hope to pre-empt any putative accusations of 'personal adventurism' (Mahmood, 1996: 19) or 'thrill seeking' (Winlow *et al.*, 2001: 537), that are frequently levelled at those who study violence ethnographically.

stubbornness (which some might less charitably consider excessive pride). Whatever my reasons, however, the fact that I felt compelled to remain meant that I found myself inescapably *forced* to structure my professional behaviour in particular ways. Even if it was theoretically possible for me to persist with my original research project and latch onto one of the rare manifestations of collective co-operation that continued to exist sporadically amongst the Nicaraguan poor, the extent and impact of the ambient violence was such that I could neither ignore nor just passively suffer it if I wanted to truly enter into a ‘dialogue’ with Nicaraguan social reality. To this extent, one can talk of the ‘violence’ of ethnographic research in situations of chronic brutality insofar as its inherently dialogical nature will force the practitioner to turn their attention to violence, with all the risks this entails. At the same time, however, there is also another sense in which the ethnographic process can be construed as violent. Perhaps not surprisingly, the fear of violence inscribed itself into the overwhelming majority of my actions. Ensuring my own security became a prevailing aim, and I structured both my personal and professional behaviours accordingly. This had consequences that went beyond the mere pursuit of personal security, however, as the means through which I ended up carrying out my ethnographic research became themselves imbued with violence, providing a different sense in which the ethnographic process can be violent, as the next section details.

Joining the gang and becoming a “broder”

I moved to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández⁸ in mid-September 1996, in a rather serendipitous and even arbitrary manner. I had been renting a room in the home of a Managua university professor since my arrival in Nicaragua two months previously, and had been spending my days unsuccessfully trying to find a poor neighbourhood with a community organisation that would accept to help me carry out my investigations. I would frequently return to my lodging after fruitless visits to poor *barrios* around the city and pour out my woes to the professor’s house-keeper, *Doña* Yolanda Aburto Gómez. One day, she said, ‘Dennis, why don’t you come and see if my neighbourhood doesn’t suit your needs? We’re very poor, and if you want, you can come and stay with me’. The next day I went to visit her *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, and although the neighbourhood had no community organisation, it was indeed very poor. It was also reputedly a very violent *barrio*, and had a notorious local *pandilla*, something that made me rather uneasy as the memories of my rather unpleasant encounter with a gang the month before were still rather fresh in my mind. I nevertheless decided to take *Doña* Yolanda up on her offer, partly out of desperation, but also thinking that I would be living with somebody whom I trusted, and who would be able to provide me with tips and perhaps even a modicum of protection.

I made it my immediate concern on moving into the Gómez household to find out as much as possible about the local gang. My questioning of *Doña* Yolanda however elicited a somewhat limited ‘yes, there is a *pandilla*, but don’t worry about it’, and since no further information seemed forthcoming, after a couple of days hanging about the house, I reluctantly decided to initiate my fieldwork proper, and rely on my common sense in order to avoid a nasty encounter. In time-honoured anthropological manner, and despite my stomach’s insistence on dissolving into itself, I set about my ethnographic enterprise by spending substantial amounts of time idling in the *barrio* streets, hoping to engage in conversation with somebody. For two days, I engaged in a solitary contemplation of *barrio* life, but on the morning of the third day a youth called Julio came up to me and asked me for a cigarette, which I promptly supplied. We then chatted for a while about where I was from, and what I

⁸ A pseudonym, as are all the names of people and places mentioned in this article.

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 one of its more prominent members.

Over the next couple of weeks, I would get together regularly with Julio, as well as sometimes Miguel, Jairo, Pedro, and Jader, who also all turned out to be *pandilleros*. We would sit on the curb side, sometimes talking animatedly about almost anything, sometimes in silence, but always communally smoking cigarettes which I provided. Conversations were obviously probing on the part of both parties, as we mutually tried to categorize each other. I doggedly tried to confirm that they were members of the local *pandilla*, this much having been intimated to me by members of the Gómez family. They however strenuously denied the existence of a *pandilla* in the *barrio*. 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* (which they identified for me as 'Los Rusos'), and my research project (life in the context of poverty and violence).

Why did the *pandilleros* socialize with me? To a certain extent, there were obvious affinities, considering my age – 23 at the time – and gender, insofar as gang members in Nicaragua are mainly young men,⁹ and also considering the strictures of Nicaraguan *machismo*. Furthermore, as a novel element occupying public space in the *barrio*, I automatically made myself a subject of investigation to the territorially-conscious *pandilleros*. Julio however also later told me that they had been mystified by my appearance. On the one hand, I was obviously a '*chefe*',¹⁰ or foreigner, and therefore normally classifiable as socially 'other', but on the other hand I also had a *pandillero* look, being shaven-headed and sporting an earring, and so they had wondered whether I wasn't a European '*broder*' of some sort. Having a totally shaved head was deemed particularly '*dañino*', or 'bad'.¹¹ Only Julio, who was considered to be one of the most '*dañino*' of the *barrio pandilleros*, had a shaved head when I arrived in the *barrio*, although many *pandilleros* had haircuts which incorporated a partial shaving of their head, as the act of was very much associated with the image of the *pandillero*. Earrings were more common to the youth population generally, but still retained something of a frisson of 'badness', as did tattoos (which I did not have). Furthermore, I was spending hours idling in the street, which was *pandillero* activity par excellence, 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 probationary phase of 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 frequently consumed. At this point, they also dropped all pretence about not being *pandilleros*, actively talking about a variety of violence- and delinquency-related topics in my presence, including planned and executed robberies, muggings and assaults. A week into this new pattern of interaction, the process of my formal initiation into the *barrio pandilla* began. This consisted of three distinct 'rites of passage' that occurred over the course of a month. The first two rites were highly formalised – although the second was clearly modified as a result of my being a *chefe* – while the third was more spontaneous, and arguably must be conceptually distinguished from the previous two.¹²

⁹ Although female *pandilleras* are not unknown in Nicaragua, they are not common, and there were none in the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang (see Rodgers, 2006: 285-87, for an interpretation of this gender bias).

¹⁰ The term '*chefe*' is used in Nicaragua to denote Europeans – in opposition to the North American-indicating '*gringo*' – although it can also mean fair-skinned more generally (see Lancaster, 1992: 217).

¹¹ The word also has a range of other connotations, including 'destructive', 'harmful', and 'malicious'.

¹² Even if anthropologists inevitably impose a certain subjective sense onto their ethnographic experiences, this

Standing one's ground

The first episode of my initiation occurred one afternoon about a month after I had taken up residence in the neighbourhood. I was sitting on the curb side in a *barrio* street, chatting away with a dozen *pandilleros*, when all of a sudden, conversation died down and I suddenly found that everybody was looking at me intently. I was about to ask what was up when Norman pulled out a knife and began to act threateningly towards me. My requests that he desist falling on deaf ears, it was obvious that this was leading to a violent confrontation, which I felt distinctly unprepared for. At this point, however, one of the numerous instances of serendipity that accompanied me all through my fieldwork materialised, in the fact that Norman's knife was a Swiss Army knife (and I hasten to add that it was not one of those small officer's knives which can be bought in almost any airport gift shop around the world, but a larger model – although operating on the same flip opening and closing principle – which is issued to Swiss Army infantrymen for, amongst other things, hand-to-hand combat). I grew up in Switzerland, and have played around with such knives since my childhood, which meant that I am relatively familiar with them. Ignoring Norman's increasingly threatening gestures as best I could, I more or less confidently asked him to 'give me that knife which comes from where I come from and I'll show you some tricks that you don't know'.

Norman abruptly ceased his antics and after a moment's thought, and egged on by the other *pandilleros*, handed me the knife. Everybody crowded around me, excited at the prospect of this novelty, and laughed when I fell into a fighting crouch and mock-stabbed at Norman, saying 'Aha! I've got the knife now, mate! What are you going to do about it?'. Although I was unable to demonstrate any special skill in manipulating the knife, it became apparent that the situation had been defused, and that I had passed what I could see *ex post facto* had been a test. Martín Sánchez Jankowski (1991) points out that in the US context such tests can often serve to evaluate a potential gang recruit's combat capabilities, since a poor fighter can be a liability to the gang in violent situations. Obviously my response did nothing of the sort, but the underlying logic of the test was arguably different, and was linked to notions of *machismo* rather than my potential combat capabilities. As Roger Lancaster (1992: 195) points out, 'taking risk, displaying bravado in the face of danger, is ...very much the essence of machismo's ideal of manhood', 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 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, this only served to highlight the bluster of my actions, as Julio intimated when he told me afterwards 'well done, *maje* [mate], you couldn't do shit but you still got the knife!'

Stealing women's underwear

The next phase of initiation occurred a week after the knife incident. Around eight in the morning, it became obvious that Julio, Miguel, and Jairo were waiting in front of the Gómez home for me to come out. When I did, they suggested that we take a trip to the nearby market, which I readily acquiesced to, as this was the first time somebody from the *barrio* had

reflexivity is nevertheless grounded in the 'shared social experience' of the field context (Hervik, 1994: 96). My interpretation of these events as an 'initiation' divisible into distinct 'rites of passage' was very much shaped by the *pandilleros*' explicit and repeated labelling of what follows as my '*iniciación*', and their making clear distinctions between its different phases.

suggested going somewhere outside the neighbourhood with me. As we walked to the market, however, Julio informed me that we were going to steal something from a stall. Suddenly feeling cold all over, I hastily suggested that it was probably not a good idea for me to participate in the robbery, considering that as a foreigner I would be easily identifiable. Julio replied with a smile that this had been thought of – betraying the fact that the enterprise was premeditated – and explained the plan, which was to involve my going up to the targeted stall alone and distracting the seller so that the others could run by and grab whatever they could. Seeing no easy way out of the situation, and appeasing my conscience by telling myself that I wouldn't be doing the actual robbing, I agreed, and it was decided that we would meet up afterwards in the *barrio*.

Julio later told me that normally I would have had to carry out the robbery, but that this particular arrangement was a concession to my foreigner status. It nevertheless ensured that I would be an integral part of the misdeed, something that was obviously the most crucial element of this rite of passage. My active collaboration was further reinforced after the robbery, when I rejoined Julio, Miguel, and Jairo in the *barrio*. The heist had gone as planned, and the three had stolen eight 'bloomers' [women's underwear], which they presented to me with huge grins on their faces, telling me that I now had to sell them, so that they could judge how good I was at 'bisnes', as they put it. With the three of them trailing behind me, I approached passing women in 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* (approximately US\$5 at the time). From what Julio and the others told me, this was by no means brilliant, but it was not the worse performance they had ever seen by a first-time fence...¹³

As we gathered to talk and smoke that evening in the 'Calle Ocho' [Eighth Street] alleyway – so-named after a notoriously dangerous street in downtown Managua – the *pandilleros* told me that I was now a true 'broder', and a fully-fledged member of the *pandilla*. I replied that I was very happy to be a *pandillero*, and that I looked forward to many nights chatting, drinking, and laughing together, but that I would not be able to participate in certain activities which I understood were typical of being a *pandillero*, such as attacking and robbing people and other neighbourhoods. I said that this was due to a variety of reasons, including my *chele* status, as well as my personal sense of ethics. I also said that I didn't want to use firearms, once again invoking ethical reasons but also the fact that I had no idea how to use them, and I concluded my speech asking whether I might become an 'observer member' of the gang, 'like the UN' (sic). To my surprise, the *pandilleros* accepted this without protest. As later became apparent, however, this demand created the need for a third rite of passage.

Defending the barrio

About two weeks after the market robbery, I was sitting one afternoon on the curb side in front of the Gómez home, chatting away with Argentina, Adilia, Wanda, and Elvis, when suddenly a group of some thirty to forty youths came running down the street, throwing stones, shouting loudly, and setting upon passers-by. Elvis and I started throwing stones at them, covering the retreat of the others into the house. As soon as they were inside and had barricaded themselves, Elvis and I entrenched ourselves behind some 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 each concentrated on throwing stones at houses and beating up anybody still left in the street. Elvis and I were rapidly joined by three other *barrio pandilleros*, which

¹³ The *bloomers* sold for about 20 *córdobas* in the market, but a large mark-down is always the norm with stolen goods. There was a thriving market for such minor stolen items in the *barrio*, so there was little merit in my being able to sell them. Indeed, the oddity of being a foreigner selling stolen goods probably made this easier.

enabled us to force the retreat of the small group of invading *pandilleros* that had chosen the Gómez house as their target. We then began to help other groups of *barrio pandilleros*, who were similarly engaged in recapturing the *barrio* block by block, fighting rival *pandilleros*, throwing stones and engaging in hand-to-hand combat, until the invaders turned and ran.

As I walked around the *barrio* 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], *vimos que querés al barrio* [we’ve seen that you love the *barrio*], and that you’re not scared and are ready to defend it. *¡Ahora sí, sós un broder!* [Now you’re really a brother!]. Other *pandilleros* also came up to me, and said similar things, and it is at this point that I felt that I really became accepted as a member of the *pandilla*. Although the *pandilleros* could accept my having an ‘observer member’ status, and could countenance my refusing to attack or rob people, I needed to actively demonstrate that I had the *pandillero* ‘*onda*’, which included not just having a shaved head, drinking, or (sometimes) smoking marijuana, but most importantly showing that I ‘loved’ the *barrio* by being willing to put myself at risk in its defence. This criterion was clearly one that required regular reaffirmation, however, and I was to have many occasions to – often unwittingly – reaffirm my predispositions towards it, as the attack on the *barrio* that I have just recounted was only the first and indeed one of the more innocuous of many such encounters during my stay, future battles frequently involving not only sticks and stones, but also often home-made mortars, handguns, AK-47s, and fragmentation grenades.

Reputation, being “dañino”, and “el chele pandillero”

There were also reasons other than my ‘*onda*’ for initiating me into the *pandilla*, linked to questions of reputation. A *pandilla*’s reputation is a source of identity for its members, and also determines inter-*pandilla* relations. It can depend on several factors, including first and foremost the gang’s brutality. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was for example the most violent gang within an area made up of half a dozen neighbourhoods, two informal settlements, and a market, and this contributed greatly to its local symbolic dominance. A further contributing element was the *pandilla*’s territory. Although the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*’s core territory was relatively small, the gang members roamed with impunity far and wide, and were dominant in public areas such as the nearby market or around traffic lights and crossroads (which were ideal carjacking spots). Furthermore, the historical notoriety of the *barrio*, which had been known in the past as a neighbourhood of ‘*tamales*’ [thieves], and had reputedly been one of the poorest and most dangerous *barrios* in Managua, clearly rubbed off onto the *pandilla*. Indeed, the *barrio pandilleros* in fact actively claimed an intimate association with the past, calling themselves ‘*Los Sobrevivientes*’ [Survivors], in reference to the neighbourhood’s pre-revolutionary name, ‘*La Sobrevivencia*’, which they clearly associated with something of a ‘golden age’ in terms of violence, as a *pandillero* called Wilmer intimated to me during an interview:

‘*¡Fué lo máximo, maje!* [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!’

The personal characteristics of individual *pandilleros* were also an important component of a gang’s reputation. The most significant was the extent to which a *pandillero* was considered ‘*dañino*’, a status attribution linked to violence. For example, a gang member’s reputation was clearly enhanced if he had been involved in a murder, or displayed

systematically brutal or sadistic behaviour. At the same time, however, it wasn't necessary for a gang member to have killed or to be tremendously violent in order to be labelled '*dañino*'. Rather, he had to be associated with a pattern of cheerfully exuberant violence and risk-taking.¹⁴ Julio, for example, was considered extremely '*dañino*' by other gang members because he was always recklessly enthusiastic during gang warfare, for example seeking out particular adversaries and purposefully exposing himself to their gunfire – when battles involved such weapons – in order to better 'defy' them, 'daring them to do their best to injure [him] seriously', as he put it (something which happened only once during the year of my stay in the *barrio*, when he was shot in the arm). Although I was frequently involved in gang warfare, I cannot claim to have been '*dañino*' in the same way. My refusal to use firearms but willingness to nevertheless go up against them in battle however provided me with a certain measure of '*dañidad*'. But this was clearly more 'passive' in nature than Julio's 'active' risk-taking, and it was the latter that really contributed to a gang's reputation. Certainly, the multiple occasions when I unwittingly exposed myself to gunfire tended to cause more mirth than admiration among my fellow *pandilleros*.

I did, however, have other non-violent attributes. In particular, my being a foreigner contributed something unique to the *pandilla*'s reputation, insofar as – to the best of my knowledge – there were no other gangs in Managua with a '*chele pandillero*', as I came to be known.¹⁵ The *pandilleros* were clearly aware of the reputation-enhancing potential of associating me with the gang, often mentioning it in conversation. I have to admit that I initially assumed this to be banter, and dismissed it as nothing more than an amusing anecdote. I quickly discovered the consequences of this new social role when a few days after the last phase of my initiation, I woke up to find that the *barrio* water supply had, not unusually, been cut off. Having a formal appointment outside the *barrio*, I decided to go and have a shower in the neighbouring *barrio* Pablo Quintero, where *Doña Yolanda*'s daughter Carola lived. Despite it being broad daylight, the Gómez family did not want to let me go, telling me that it was too risky due to the war going on between that *barrio pandilla* and 'ours', the recent attack on the *barrio* having signalled the beginning of this conflict. My '*chele pandillero*' status made me a primary target, insofar as *pandilla* warfare revolves around injuring, beating, or killing symbolically important members of the enemy *pandilla*. In the end, *Doña Yolanda*'s lover, *Don Saturnino*, drove me 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 *pandilla* dynamics.

Violence, ethics, and ethnographic practice

My newly acquired role as a *pandillero* meant that I rapidly familiarised myself with the various gang codes and behaviour patterns over the course of the next few months. As such, joining the gang provided me with an incredible research opportunity. It allowed me extensive access to gang members, and led to open and frank interviews that were not clouded by fear (on either side). I was able to hear from gang members what it was that had motivated them to become *pandilleros*, how they perceived themselves, as well as obtain extensive details about their illegal acts. Becoming a gang member also meant that I spent significant amounts of time with *pandilleros*, both individually and collectively, during different

¹⁴ Parallels can be made with Walter Benjamin's (1986: 301) 'destructive character', who is 'young and cheerful'.

¹⁵ This facet of the gang's reputation became notorious beyond the confines of the *barrio* and immediately surrounding neighbourhoods, as I discovered in early June 1997 when interviewing a local district Police captain, who asked me whether I knew anything about a mysterious '*chele pandillero*' whom he'd heard was operating in the district. I of course answered no...

activities and at different points in time. This allowed me to compare the distance that inevitably exists between their discourses and their everyday actions, in a way that would not have been possible as a non-member. At the same time, the ramifications of my joining the gang went further than simply providing me with easy access to the object of my study. In his seminal study of boxing, Loïc Wacquant (2004: vii-viii) suggests that ‘there is nothing better than initiatory immersion and even moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation’, because this ‘makes it possible for the sociologist to appropriate in and through practice the cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and conative schemata that those who inhabit that cosmos engage in their everyday deeds’. My initiation into the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was analogous to this ‘carnal sociology’, insofar as becoming a member of the gang and adopting certain behaviour patterns allowed me to understand much more viscerally particular aspects of gang life. I might well never have understood the nature of the ‘love’ that the *pandilleros* felt for their neighbourhood, for example, because it was something that lay outside my intellectual horizons.

At the same time, however, my becoming a *pandillero* was not prompted by research considerations, but more because I felt it to be a valid personal survival strategy in what I was experiencing as highly difficult and dangerous circumstances. I assumed that by becoming a member of the *pandilla*, I would be unlikely to suffer violence from its members, and that I would be able to draw on the gang for protection and support in the endemically unsafe conditions of urban Nicaragua. This certainly 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 came swiftly to my assistance. I quickly learnt, however, that the gang at the time protected all those living in their local *barrio*, so becoming a member was not a prerequisite for ensuring such support. Being a member of the gang nevertheless 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. This would not necessarily have been the case had I just been an inhabitant of the neighbourhood, and after several such events within a few weeks of joining the gang, it became an important justification for my remaining a *pandillero* even after discovering that I did not need to be one in order for the *pandilla* to protect me.¹⁶ I furthermore also learnt a lot from the *pandilleros* in very practical terms, as they taught me certain hand-to-hand combat techniques that helped me to extricate myself from several nasty situations during my fieldwork, and also assisted in my developing certain instincts that regularly allowed me to avoid danger spots. Without these, it is unlikely that I would have left Nicaragua physically unscathed as I did.

At the same time, my becoming a *pandillero* also meant that I inevitably had to engage in a range of different forms of brutality – as well as accept even more without showing any qualms – including sometimes being pro-actively physically violent against individuals. This generally occurred in situations of gang warfare, when my resort to violence was effectively a form of self-defence – insofar as I did not attack other neighbourhoods but only defended my own – but occasionally involved one-on-one fighting with individual gang members, for reasons most likely linked to a periodic need to reconfirm my allegiance to the gang in the face of my not engaging in certain activities. Here, however, it was my initial unwitting transgression of the cognitive frameworks regulating this form of physical violence that allowed me to experientially uncover a particular aspect of the *pandillero* life, as well as learn how to deal practically with such situations. The sense of sheer terror that washed over

¹⁶ It should be noted that contrarily to what is reported in much of the literature on gangs in other countries, leaving the gang is not problematic in Nicaragua, with membership being very much seen as something voluntary, so this was not a factor in my deciding to stay in the gang.

me the first time a gang member challenged me to one-on-one combat, seemingly for no reason at all, is still a very vivid memory. Contrarily to when Norman had confronted me during my initiation, my reaction was to lash out in something of a blind panic, and I fortuitously incapacitated my putative opponent.¹⁷ While this effectively resolved the situation, it was also made clear to me by the *pandilleros* that this constituted a contravention of the usual ‘cultural performance’ that such confrontations constitute, whereby opponents follow a ‘shared script’ that entails a semi-ritualised pugilistic exchange that aims to show how they can ‘take’ each other’s blows (see Linger, 1992, for a Brazilian parallel). Not being particularly strong or experienced at the so-called ‘noble art’, I decided there and then not to even try to conform to such expectations, but learn from my successful counter-current behaviour, thereby subsequently earning myself a somewhat edgy reputation for ‘fighting dirty’.

I was lucky to be able to resort to this kind of idiosyncratic behaviour without earning more than an ambiguous reputation, however. My particular status as a foreigner meant that I could lay down certain rules which were not options for other *pandilleros*. This was not always the case, however, and by becoming a gang member I was often forced and expected to adopt a number of particular behaviour patterns, some of which were in fact compounded by my being a ‘*chele pandillero*’, as became apparent when I tried to take a shower in *barrio* Pablo Quintero. This included having to participate in a range of violent and illegal activities, including gang wars, thefts, fights, beatings, fencing, and conflicts with the Police, as a result of which I underwent a number of things that I could have done without, including being attacked, threatened, beaten up, knifed, shot at, and thrown out of a moving car. My having engaged in such acts raises some obvious personal security issues. At the same time, though, even if some of these concerns can clearly be linked to my having become a gang member, it was not the only factor that put me at personal risk, as my initial experiences of violence in Nicaragua highlight well. Indeed, joining the gang clearly had positive security functions, as I describe above, and in a general manner it can be argued that it is often safer in dangerous circumstances to be allied with the perpetrators of violence rather than their victims.

Obviously, this viewpoint raises a number of ethical questions. In this respect, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992: 22-3) argues that there are two ways in which the morality of violence can be approached. The first tends to ‘understand morality as always contingent on, and embedded within, specific cultural assumptions’. The second considers that ‘the ethical is always prior to culture because the ethical presupposes all sense and meaning and therefore makes culture possible’. These distinct viewpoints will generate very different ideas concerning the morality and immorality of violence. It is not my intention to be drawn into a tortured discussion concerning which of these positions is epistemologically most appropriate; what I want to focus on instead is a more practical form of ethics. Even if many of my actions in Nicaragua can perhaps be seen as ‘immoral’ or ‘unethical’ in principle, I feel

¹⁷ According to Hume (this issue), the role played by terror and fear in fieldwork ‘is rarely singled out for consideration in methodological discussions’. In this respect, it is important to underline that terror often precipitates ‘a doubleness of social being in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said’ (Taussig, 1992: 18). Its routinised assimilation is thus highly contradictory and can involve a spread of reactions that will emerge variably at different points in time during fieldwork. Partly for this reason, I have always found it difficult to find the right words to describe my general state of being after joining the gang. The most satisfactory characterization is probably as having undergone an ‘out of body’ experience, insofar as I do not think I was completely ‘there’ for a lot of the time, or at least not completely conscious of the potential consequences of my acts. Certainly, in stark contrast to my first few months in Nicaragua, I do not recall any feelings of fear or terror within a short while of joining the gang, although I do vividly remember ‘coming to my senses’ about a month before leaving Nicaragua, and spending this last month in a state of heightened fear.

that they are very much attenuated by the fact that joining the gang was primarily a survival strategy on my part. Although it turned out that I did not have to join the *pandilla* in order for it to protect me once I had moved into the *barrio*, I had no idea of this initially, and by joining the gang I was improvising as best I could in unfamiliar and unsettling circumstances. Furthermore, maintaining a disapproval of violence can be difficult in practice. It calls for levels of judgement that can crumble as one becomes more and more associated with violent individuals, to say nothing of violence itself. The simple fact of engagement often reveals the perpetrators of violence to be perfectly normal, often pleasant individuals, who almost inevitably become friends and confidants, to the extent that it is impossible to straightforwardly condemn them (see Fielding, 1982).

Seen in this way, what arguably ultimately matters is not simply violence as a moral or immoral act, but the reasoning behind its deployment, and with regards to ethnographic research the determining criterion is perhaps 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’ (Whyte, 1955 [1943]: 327). This is something that I believe is very much situational. While in principle I find some of my actions in Nicaragua to be somewhat dubious according to my current personal index of values, when I consider them in the context of the actual circumstances I found myself when acting them out, I can quite happily live with myself. I did not kill anybody, even if I did engage in violence. Some of this brutality could be seen as gratuitous or unjustified, but most of it was directly aimed at protecting myself or the inhabitants of the *barrio* that I was living in, both of which I felt were valid reasons for being violent. At the same time, for ethical reasons I put certain limits on my violence, restricting my active participation in gang brutality only to those acts that occurred in the neighbourhood, and refusing to use firearms, something that was 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). All of these behaviours constitute an eminently individual code of conduct, however, which others may or may not share. In the final analysis, a relative moral standard is set, which is perhaps difficult for others who have not been in similar circumstances to understand or associate with.

Conclusion

The basic issue that I have tackled in this article through a consideration of my experiences researching Nicaraguan youth gang violence is the fact that ‘at some level, to be able to discuss violence, [the participant observer] must go to where violence occurs, research it as it takes place’ (Robben and Nordstrom, 1995: 4). This is obviously dangerous, and has clearly deterred many researchers. At the same time, however, large numbers of anthropologists have experienced violence while carrying out ethnographic research around the world. Despite this, there has been a serious lack of debate concerning ‘the methodological and subjective issue of the dangers anthropologists [can] face while in the field’ (Sluka, 1990: 114). The problem is partly conventional, insofar as the subject of violence is such that the narrative deriving from any ethnographic investigation will almost inevitably lend itself to a high degree of sensationalism, particularly when the researcher wants to clearly situate him- or herself in the writing. There are high risks of falling prey to writing what Philippe Bourgois (1995: 18) calls a ‘pornography of violence’,¹⁸ and this is

¹⁸ Although I agree with the intentions that lie behind the use of this strongly moralistic expression, it should be noted that the metaphor of ‘pornography’ hints at a rather detached conceptualization of the relationship

why I have operated a subjective form of self-censorship in this article by focusing mainly on my initiation into the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, which was a comparatively innocuous component of my experiences researching Nicaraguan youth gang violence. Whether I have succeeded or not in achieving an appropriate balance I leave to the reader to judge; ultimately, as Bourgois (1995: 18) remarks, ‘the problem and the responsibility are also in the eyes of the beholder’.

More generally, however, what I hope that this article will have demonstrated is the existence of a critical epistemological bias within ethnographic studies of violence, insofar as most ethnographers generally tend to have to a rather ‘passive’ relationship to violence, rarely involving themselves in the *praxis* of violence, despite the participatory nature of their professional enterprise.¹⁹ In other words, while the participant observer might be imagined as a victim of violence, he or she is rarely considered as a potential perpetrator of violence. This is linked to a particular moral bias, whereby many social scientists investigating violence often do so with an agenda, looking to find positions from which ‘to speak and write against violence’ (Nordstrom and Martin, 1992: 3). Such an endeavour is generally easier to achieve when writing from the perspective of victims rather than victimizers, for obvious reasons. Yet studying the violent is arguably just as crucial as studying their victims if we are to fully understand the complexities of violence. As Cynthia Keppley Mahmood (1996: 272) remarks in her study of Khalistani Sikh militants, ‘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 overwhelm more pragmatic attempts to lucidly grapple with the problem of conflict’. Seen in this way, then, it can be argued that until ethnographers find ways to effectively ‘[make] danger a calling’ (see Nietzsche, 1969 [1883-1885]: 48), we are unlikely to reach any coherent understanding of the violent dynamics of contemporary Central America.

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between the researcher and violence, with the former implicitly being projected as a ‘voyeur’ of the latter.

¹⁹ Even those (few) researchers who actively claim to have attempted to forge ethnographic links between themselves and the violent have ultimately tended to conceive of these in a manner removed from the violent practices themselves. For example, Joseba Zulaika (1995), who tried to join the Basque separatist organisation ETA in order to study it, portrays ‘the anthropologist as terrorist’ not because he asked to join ETA and might have had to participate in violence, but because he entered into a dialogue with ETA activists and (putatively) provided them with a public forum.

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