

3 *Gangland terra nullius*

Violence, territoriality, and bottom-up spaces of peacebuilding in urban Nicaragua

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Introduction

Gangs are ubiquitously considered primary sources of violence and insecurity across the world (Hazen and Rodgers 2014). This is currently perhaps most obviously the case in post-Cold War Central America, where gangs, known variably as *maras* and *pandillas*, are widely perceived as the most important actors within a contemporary panorama of rampant criminality characterized by levels of violence often surpassing those of the revolutionary conflicts that affected the region during the 1970s and 1980s (Rodgers 2009). Not surprisingly, perhaps, Central American gangs have been portrayed as a critical regional security threat, and the corresponding policy response has been brutally repressive, to the extent that it is no exaggeration to talk of Central American states having declared a veritable ‘war on gangs’ in recent years (Jütersonke *et al.* 2009; Wolf 2017; Fontes 2018).

Given that gangs are predominantly an urban phenomenon – most likely due to the fact that there needs to be a ‘critical demographic mass’ of youth for a gang to emerge within any given locality (Fischer 1975; Rodgers 2010) – this war has not surprisingly been waged principally in the isthmus’ cities. Certainly, Central American gangs are often portrayed as a ‘new urban insurgency’ aiming ‘to depose or control the governments of targeted countries’ through ‘coups d’street’ (Manwaring 2005: 2), and much of public action against gangs has involved attempting to ‘secure’ urban territory and render it ‘safe’ (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010, 2013). The logic behind this is that ‘territoriality is generally considered a defining characteristic of youth gangs’ (Moore *et al.* 1983: 183), and much gang violence is perceived as revolving around their spatially controlling and dominating space.

This is widely considered to have critical consequences for the broader morphology of urban settlements, in so far as gang-affected cities often become ‘splintered’ (see Graham and Marvin 2001) into a patchwork quilt of disconnected ‘no-go’ areas, with rival gangs battling over control and domination and the broader mass of the urban population constituting ‘collateral damage’. As Murray (2017) points out more generally, this kind of ‘urbanism of exception’ fundamentally undermines the agglomerative benefits of city living and

perpetrates seemingly never-ending cycles of violence, thereby making gangs and their ‘ganglands’ – to use the term that Frederic Thrasher (1936 [1927]) famously coined in his pioneering study of gangs in 1920s Chicago – key vectors of urban conflict and insecurity.

At the same time, however, such apocalyptic visions are arguably based on a highly monolithic and indeed profoundly misguided understanding of the spatial and sovereign logic of both gangs and ganglands. Drawing on ethnographic research on gang dynamics carried out in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighbourhood in Managua, Nicaragua, this chapter aims first to demonstrate how gang violence can often be more constitutive than destructive, and second to offer an alternative conception of gangland that highlights its variegated nature as well as that of gang authority more generally (see Rodgers 2007a and Rodgers 2019 for methodological details). In doing so, it offers something of a counterintuitive response to the volume’s wider concern with ‘urban safety’ as a way of particular thinking about the spatial configurations of cities – crucially by identifying potential peacebuilding avenues within what at first glance would seem to be a space whose dynamics are unmitigatedly and wholly violent.

Gangland political economy

According to Thrasher (1936 [1927]: 22), ganglands are ‘geographically and socially’ distinct types of urban area with the particular characteristic that their spatial organization fundamentally responds to gang dynamics. More specifically, Thrasher argued that a gangland was

... medieval and feudal in its organization rather than urban and modern [like the rest of the city]. The hang-out of the gang is its castle and the center of a feudal estate which it guards jealously. Gang leaders hold sway like barons of old, watchful of invaders and ready to swoop down upon the lands of rivals and carry off booty or prisoners or to inflict punishment upon their enemies.

(Ibid.: 6)

As a result, Thrasher argued that a gangland was marked by ‘continuous ... disorder and violence ...so pronounced as to give the impression that [it was] ... like a frontier ... a “no man’s land”, lawless, godless, wild’ (ibid.: 5–6), which he contended reinforced the marginality of ganglands within the broader Chicagoan urban panorama.

Numerous studies have subsequently echoed Thrasher, whether in relation to gangs in Chicago (Keiser 1969; Suttles 1968), other US cities (Adamson 1998; Moore *et al.* 1983; Tita *et al.* 2005; Whyte 1993 [1943]), or other parts of the world, including Russia (Salagaev and Safin 2014; Stephenson 2015), France (Lepoutre 1997; Mohammed 2011), the UK (Kintrea *et al.* 2010; Pickering *et al.* 2012), India (Sen 2014), South Africa (Glaser 1998; Jensen 2008), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Geenen 2009), Nicaragua (Rodgers 2006, 2009);

Rocha 2007), and Honduras (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010, 2013), to mention just a few examples. While frequently offering extremely useful insights into gang dynamics, most such studies tend to assume a certain singularity to a gang's territoriality. Even if there is some recognition that gang territories are highly contingent and fluctuate both with conflict and as gangs emerge and disappear over time (Jensen 2008: 81–82), and also that gang territory 'borderlands' can potentially constitute ambiguous 'grey areas' (Moore *et al.* 1983: 184–185), most studies tend to assume that a gang's territory will be a relatively clearly bounded space, and that the gang will hold sway over it in a uniform manner.

In this latter regard, a commonly repeated element of the above studies is that gangs promote a form of order using particular practices of territorial regulation and control – whether in the absence of or in collaboration with other forms of authority such as the state (see Arias 2006) – based on violence, including most notably intergang conflict and differential patterns of victimization. Certainly, in my own work on gangs in Nicaragua, for example, I have explicitly explored how gangs promoted a specific form of local socio-spatial ordering. I label this a form of 'social sovereignty' (Rodgers 2006: 289), in contrast to state-based sovereign authority, and have particularly explored how the gang's sovereign regime can provide non-gang member residents within the territory over which it holds sway with certain benefits (as well as drawbacks). In particular, I show how much of the gang's violence, which at first glance might seem anarchic and highly deleterious, in fact follows a definite logic aimed at creating order rather than chaos, or, in other words, how it is socially constitutive rather than solely destructive (see Rodgers *ibid.*, 2007c, 2015, 2017).

This was perhaps most counterintuitively the case with respect to the gang warfare in which these gangs engaged. Although gang wars often had extremely negative consequences for local neighbourhood populations, these were generally indirect, with the threat stemming principally from other gangs with whom the local gang engaged in a prescribed manner that offered local communities a form of order and predictability. Certainly, gang warfare rigidly obeyed a number of precise rules and practices, to the extent that it can be qualified as having been 'semi-ritualized'. In particular, the first battle of a gang war typically involved fighting with fists and stones, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks, then to knives and broken bottles, and eventually to mortars, guns, and AK-47s. Although the rate of escalation varied, its sequence never did – i.e. gangs did not begin their wars immediately with firearms. The fixed nature of gang warfare constituted something of a restraining mechanism, in so far as escalation is a process in which each stage calls for a greater but definite intensity of action and is therefore always under actors' control. But it also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with an 'early warning system', thereby offering a means of circumscribing the 'all-pervading unpredictability' of violence (Arendt 1969: 5).

This positive function was widely recognized and indeed appreciated by local inhabitants, who not only frequently talked very approvingly about their local gang but also often provided assistance to its members, for example hiding them

if they were chased into the neighbourhood by other gang members or private security guards while engaging in delinquent activities outside the neighbourhood. Gang members returned the favour by never targeting members of their local community when they engaged in delinquency, actively going out of their way to protect local neighbourhood inhabitants whenever they saw them being threatened by outsiders, and frequently providing (free) bodyguard services as well as watching out for people's property. The motivation offered by gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández for such practices was that they wanted to show their 'love' – literally, *querer* – for their local neighbourhood. 'We show our love for the neighbourhood by fighting other gangs', a gang member called Miguel claimed, for example, while another called Julio explained in more detail that 'you show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other gangs.... You look after the neighbourhood in that way, you help them, keep them safe' (see Rodgers 2006 for more details).

As such, the gang can be said to have constituted something of a functional source of security for local inhabitants, which in the post-war context of political polarization, disillusion, and chronic insecurity that characterized Nicaragua at the time (see Rodgers 2008, 2014) was something that was explicitly recognized and even celebrated. Certainly, it was common to hear the expression *la pandilla es el barrio* (the gang is the neighbourhood) used by both gang members and non-gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. Indeed, this went even further than the gang providing physical security, insofar as there was also a clear and widespread sense of identification with the local gang and its highly performative violence; this was evident in the 'aesthetic pleasure' (Bloch 1996: 216) that local inhabitants derived from swapping stories about the gang, including in particular exchanging eye-witness accounts of dramatic acts by gang members during warfare, and spreading rumours and retelling various incidents over and over again. As such, the gang can be said to have constituted something of an institutional medium for the symbolic constitution of a sense of communal collective identity in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, which was otherwise lacking in the neighbourhood (see Rodgers 2007b).

The variegated spaces of gangland

While I stand by the above analysis of the gang's ordering functions, I have perhaps been guilty of failing to consider properly the internal variation in gangland territorial dynamics. In particular, it is clear that diverse types of gang-related sovereignty regimes can coexist within one gangland territory, and that variety exists within Nicaraguan ganglands. This is something that became retrospectively clear to me when I recently reconsidered my notes concerning an event that occurred in April 1997, while I was running an errand with a gang member called Julio at the Huembes market near *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. As we weaved our way between the market stalls, making our way to the food hall to do some shopping for an elderly inhabitant of *barrio* Luis Fanor

Hernández who was too poorly to shop for herself, I suddenly spotted four gang members from another neighbourhood, *barrio* Nosara, with whom the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang was in conflict...

‘Shit, *maje*’, I hissed to Julio, ‘let’s get the fuck out of here, there’s four *pandilleros* from *barrio* Nosara coming our way and they’ve all got machetes and we’re unarmed!’

‘*Calmaté*, Dennis’, he answered, ‘it’s fine, we’re in the market, they’re not going to do anything to us.’

‘What do you mean? We’re at fucking war with them!’

‘Sure, but wars are only fought on gang territory, here in the market it’s different, it’s nobody’s land, you only attack somebody if you’ve got a *traido* (personal vendetta) with them, and I don’t have any beef with any of those four guys, and nor do you.’

Julio then proceeded to confidently walk towards the *barrio* Nosara gang members, while I trailed behind him somewhat diffidently, and sure enough, as we passed by them, one gave us a curt nod while the others ignored us, and we peacefully went our separate ways.

‘I don’t get it, Julio’, I said to him afterwards, ‘I thought that when we were at war with another gang, we were always at war with them. I know that this can change from one war to the next, and yesterday’s enemy can be tomorrow’s ally, but we normally never let rival gang members go by unchallenged when we’re at war with them, so what was that all about in the market?’

‘*Pues*, Dennis’, he answered patiently, ‘it depends where you meet them. If they came into the *barrio*, then of course we’d beat the shit out of them and throw them out, it’s our heartland, and if we’d met them in *colonia* Las Condes that would have been different too, as that’s part of our operating territory, and you can’t allow rival gang members to be there unchallenged if you come across them there. But the market is nobody’s territory, so it’s not the same. Unless you have a personal gripe against somebody, you just live and let live here, anybody can go through or be there at the same time, war or no war...’

This episode clearly suggests that, contrary to what is often assumed, gangland space can be internally variegated. More specifically, Julio was highlighting at least three distinct types of territories within which the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang was present, namely the *barrio* (or what might be termed the gang’s ‘heartland’), its ‘operating’ territory, and the Huembes market. At first glance the difference between the three might seem to be principally spatial, especially as each had a clear geography. The ‘heartland’ territory was made up of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández neighbourhood, a 300-metre stretch of a boundary *cauce* (floodwater channel), including its banks on both sides, a small wasteland that abutted the neighbourhood but ran into a neighbouring *asentamiento* (slum), and the whole of a pedestrian bridge over the *cauce*. The

‘operating’ territory of the gang included several nearby wastelands, major roadways, and thoroughfares, as well as *colonia* Las Condes, which did not have a rival gang, being a more affluent middle-class neighbourhood, and also the neighbourhoods of other gangs whom they had defeated in war. Finally, the Huembes was a formally constituted municipal space that covered a well-delimited location.

A closer consideration, however, reveals the distinction between these different territories to be less spatial than based on differences in the sovereignty regime exercised by the gang over them. The gang’s sovereign claim over its heartland was unambiguous and universal, and involved more than just territorial claims but also a particular relationship with those inhabiting this space. Certainly, a significant amount of gang members’ activities and violence related to the protection of local inhabitants, whom they never preyed upon. They explicitly behaved in this way towards the latter because of their residence within a definite bounded territorial unit with which the gang identified, namely the neighbourhood, and the gang enacted its sovereign claim through a mixture of active and passive territorially based strategies.

Gang members would, for example, spend significant chunks of the day and night sat in small groups on neighbourhood street corners, from where they could observe comings and goings in the neighbourhood; individuals would move from group to group regularly to compare notes, while others would explicitly engage in perimeter ‘patrols’ of the neighbourhood. Anybody who was not from the neighbourhood would be challenged, and unless they could justify their presence – by being able to link themselves to a local neighbourhood inhabitant – they were almost invariably beaten and chased out. As I describe elsewhere (Rodgers 2006), such behaviour was part of a broader set of strategies by which the gang enabled local inhabitants to live their lives a bit more securely – albeit within a restricted territorial perimeter – in a broader context characterized by high levels of chronic urban violence. The basis for the sovereign claim was unmitigatedly territorial, very much along the lines described by Gutiérrez Rivera (2010: 496): ‘traditionally, gang territoriality has been understood as: the concentration of the gangs’ activities within a “turf”; that this turf is relatively bounded; [and] that gang members defend the turf against invaders, usually the rival gang’.

The operating territory of the gang included areas where members carried out most of their delinquency, but these were clearly not considered part of the gang’s territory in the same way as the heartland. This was especially obvious from the fact that the gang’s sovereignty claim over its operating territory was both uneven and based on a different logic and strategy to that which it exercised in its heartland. In particular, *colonia* Las Condes was subject to a much more contingent sovereignty claim than *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández.¹ This was partly because the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang did not have the numbers to regulate and control it in the same way as the heartland territory, and therefore other gangs circulated within it. Although the neighbourhood’s proximity to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández – one of the entrances to the *barrio* came out of it

– meant that the gang could not ‘just let anything happen there’, as a gang member called Jader put it, and *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members would challenge rival gang members whenever they came across them in *colonia* Las Condes, they would not actively seek them out, nor did they patrol the *colonia*, which meant that in practice this neighbourhood was part of the operating territory of several different gangs.

This was not seen as a problem by gang members because the logic of the gang’s sovereign claim over *colonia* Las Condes was not the same as that which it exercised over its heartland territory. Borrowing from Keiser’s (1969: 27) insight in his study of the Vice Lords in Chicago in the 1960s that ‘the distinction between section territories is based on differential responsibility rather than differential rights’, it can be argued that the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s sovereignty claim to its heartland was based on responsibility (to protect the neighbourhood), while its sovereignty claim to its operating territory was based on an assumed right (to prey upon its population). *Colonia* Las Condes was a resource for gang members, and the gang’s violence was aimed principally at extraction, albeit discontinuous, as members would rob or mug people there whenever they needed to rather than on a regular basis. The gang did not need to control the *colonia*’s territory for this, but rather had to be able to prey on its population with impunity, including in particular being sure the residents would not call the authorities – something they achieved by being unpredictably and extremely violent in their predation, precipitating a climate of terror and fear among *colonia* Las Condes’s inhabitants.

As Jader explained during a discussion in May 1997:

... *pues*, you know, Dennis, Las Condes is where we go and rob a lot of the time, and so we’ve got to make sure that people there fear us so that they don’t call the Police, because after a while, they get to know us, know who we are. That’s why whenever you mug somebody there, you’ve got to hit them a couple of times more than you would normally, and tell them ‘*ojo*, I know where you live, so you’d better be careful’, or else ‘*oye hijueputa*, you know who I am, I’ve got my eye on you always’. Sometimes we even go to Las Condes as a group, just to beat a few people up, and for the *Purísima*, you know, in December, when we go from house to house singing and asking treats, we always take a mortar or two and shoot into a couple of houses at random, so that people are scared. That way nobody ever calls the Police.

Seen from this perspective, instead of a territorial logic there was a biopolitical underpinning to the gang’s sovereignty regime in *colonia* Las Condes – i.e. it focused first and foremost on disciplining a population rather than on controlling a space, contrary to the situation in the gang’s heartland.

Finally, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang made no sovereign claim to the Huembes market, which it considered ‘nobody’s territory’, as Julio explained. In legal terms, the Huembes could arguably be conceived as a form of *terra nullius*. This notion, which derives from Roman law, is used in international law to

describe territory that is not subject to the sovereignty of any state, or over which any prior sovereign has expressly or implicitly relinquished sovereignty. As Andrew Fitzmaurice (2008: 2–3) explained, the notion of '*terra nullius* is a product of the history of dispossession and the larger history of European expansion', and was used to justify the British conquest of Australia (see also Banner 2005) as well as the so-called 'scramble for Africa', although it arguably crystallized around late-nineteenth-century debates concerning the legal status of the polar regions, including especially 'islands that lay within the Arctic Circle and over which no sovereignty had been established'. Without wishing to get caught up in a tortuous debate about the way the concept of *terra nullius* has been used in practice, I suggest that it is heuristically applicable to the Huembes as a form of gangland space to distinguish it from other commonly-used labels such as 'no-man's land' or 'impersonal domains', which Gerard Suttles (1968) proposed in his famous study of gang territoriality in 1960s Chicago to describe two types of gangland areas that were not 'gang territory'.

The first type of gangland area constituted

... areas being razed, places of industrial concentration, or expressways. All of them are sections where people do not live permanently and over which no one exercises a personal surveillance. Given local ideas about who an area can 'belong to', this creates a kind of social vacuum where the usual guarantees of social order and control are lacking. Ordinarily they are viewed as dangerous, and people cross them 'at their own risk'.

(Ibid.: 35)

The second type consisted of

... non-residential areas where the safety of a passer-by is mostly in the hands of impersonal authorities who are either acting on behalf of someone else's interests or whose responsibilities do not include the entire day. For the most part, these are major thoroughfares flanked by impersonal business establishments or public institutions. During the daytime these are patrolled fairly well by businessmen, bureaucrats, policemen, and customers. At night, however, ... there is no street life, there are no lights in the windows, and there is almost no reason for anyone to be there.

(Ibid.: 36)

In other words, the distinguishing criteria Suttles proposed for these spaces were respectively either abandonment or control by a more distant form of authority (the state), neither of which applies to the Huembes market. It was not an abandoned space – quite the contrary, as it was a thriving local market and gang members from multiple neighbourhoods often went there – and while the Nicaraguan state, or perhaps more accurately the Managua municipality, would theoretically have claimed to exercise sovereignty over the Huembes, it was very rarely present.

Indeed, in terms of local authority it was in fact gang members who often acted as the arbitrators of disputes between merchants, for example. While this at first glance might seem to represent an exercise of sovereignty by gangs, they did so on an ad hoc basis, and no gang claimed the Huembes as its territory or its population as a resource, making it very different from other gangland areas, hence my suggestion that it be conceived as *terra nullius*. I also suggest this explicitly in opposition to other potentially germane notions such as ‘sanctuary space’, as developed by Jon Wolseth (2011: 105) in relation to Pentecostal conversion, because these ‘lift [gang members] out of the violence of the everyday and re-inscribe... them into a new and protective social space’. The Huembes did nothing of the sort, as the market was a space of delinquency and other forms of more individualized violence, including in particular working out individual *traidos* or personal vendettas (which frequently became spectator sports for bored vendors on slow business days). Similarly, the labelling of vast swathes of the African continent as *terra nullius* in the late nineteenth century was the basis upon which all-out war between imperial powers was arguably avoided, in so far as it established the idea that the continent was ‘nobody’s territory’, and therefore had to be effectively occupied before being formally claimed. This did not mean, however, that skirmishes did not occur on a regular basis, for example as countries sent rival exploratory expeditions or fought over resource extraction.

Gangland peacebuilding

Conceived as *terra nullius*, the Huembes as described above arguably emerges as a space of exception within the broader gangland context, where different violent actors can coexist and engage with each other in ways that do not have to entail antagonism. This is important, because it clearly opens possibilities for concrete peacebuilding initiatives within gangland areas. Indeed, it was often in *terra nullius* spaces such as the Huembes that truces and the ends of gang wars were negotiated between the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang and its rivals, or more accurately between individual gang members acting as peacemaking agents for their respective gangs. These were often individuals with kinship links across the two gangs, something which was not necessarily uncommon insofar as gangs tended to fight against other local gangs. In one particular case, for example, two cousins who were members of different gangs were able to meet up peacefully in the context of a family celebration being held at a Huembes restaurant and discuss ‘terms’, so to speak. At one level such individuals were arguably analogous in structural terms to the ‘leopard-skin chiefs’ discussed by Evans-Pritchard (1940: 163–164) in relation to the Nuer of southern Sudan, who would often mediate between both warring parties and feuding individuals. While the latter’s semi-sacred status allowed them to move between the territories or homesteads of rival parties or individuals, this was not the case of the cousins, who could only meet to talk at the Huembes due to its *terra nullius* status.

This is important, because as Cruz and Durán-Martínez (2016) point out, most gang-related peacebuilding initiatives, at least in Latin America, tend to

fail, often because they lack an awareness of the spatial dimension of urban safety. Certainly, as Jones and Rodgers (2015) point out, the failure of Rio de Janeiro's (in)famous Urban Pacification programme, which involved the deployment of specialized Police Pacification Units (*Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora*) in the city's poor neighbourhoods (*favelas*) with the explicit aim of wresting territorial control from locally dominant drug gangs, largely rests on the fact that such interventions displaced rather than eliminated violence, partly because they involved only a limited number of neighbourhoods (see Hoelscher and Norheim-Martinsen 2014). In a related manner, Saunders-Hastings (2015) describes how the occupation of a gang-controlled neighbourhood in Guatemala City by the National Army did not lead to an overall reduction of violence but rather its 'invisibilization', partly due to the fact that the local gang's activity mainly involved extortion rather than drug dealing, and relied on the members being able to intimidate and control the local population rather than a specific territory.

Most starkly, one reason why the 'gang truce' in El Salvador recently collapsed is arguably because it was underpinned by a tendency to assume uniform gang territoriality and dynamics, failing to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the variegated nature of ganglands. Certainly the Salvadoran state ultimately insisted that gangs cease all their activities everywhere – rather than, for example, promoting a step-by-step approach whereby gangs might first withdraw from their operating territories into their heartlands, before tackling the very different heartland gang dynamics (see van der Borgh and Savenije 2016). Meaningful urban peacebuilding might well have been achieved in cities such as San Salvador had different types of territorially related gang violence been disaggregated and received separate interventions. Seen from this perspective, understanding and recognizing the varying natures of gangland are potentially key to reducing gang violence in cities around the world. It also invites us to think about the issue of urban safety more broadly, and how to promote peacebuilding initiatives in contexts of metropolitan insecurity and conflict.

Conclusion

This chapter aims to deconstruct the logic and make-up of Nicaraguan ganglands to identify how these can contain informal spaces of potential peacebuilding. In this sense it follows on directly from Chapter 1 in this volume by Austin and Jütersonke, and its semiotic focus on spatial 'meaning-making' in urban contexts, albeit offering a bottom-up instance of the interface between urban safety and peacebuilding they theorize. It could of course be argued that ganglands inevitably remain local in scope, and therefore their dynamics cannot be related to the broader urban experience. Certainly there is no doubt that a gang's territorial reach is often quite limited. As Whyte pointed out in his classic study, *Street Corner Society*, 'the life of the corner boy proceeds along regular and narrowly circumscribed channels' (Whyte 1993 [1943]: 256), which means a well-defined and relatively limited space. As 'Doc', Whyte's central informant, pointed out:

Fellows around here don't know what to do except within a radius of about three hundred yards. That's the truth, Bill. They come home from work, hang on the corner, go up to eat, back on the corner, up a show, and they come back to hang on the corner. If they're not on the corner, it's likely the boys will know where you can find them. Most of them stick to one corner. It's only rarely that a fellow will change his corner.

(Ibid.)

Similarly, Tita *et al.* (2005: 293) noted how the Pittsburgh gangs they studied 'hang out in small, well-defined areas within neighborhoods', which they denominate as 'set space'.

Seen from this perspective, the existence of gangland *terra nullius* might seem to have limited peacebuilding potential. Such a viewpoint, however, ignores the fact that gangs are simultaneously phenomena and epiphenomena, or in other words, although they are autonomous local social institutions with complex internal logics and dynamics, they also fundamentally always reflect – and are shaped by – broader structural relations. Indeed, as Dimitriadis (2006: 338) points out, what made Thrasher's original study so innovative was precisely that it managed to capture both dimensions of gangs: it 'was highly contextual and relational, foregrounding the agency of young people in constructing their selves and social relations', but always doing so 'in their situational contexts'. This means that while Thrasher was able to provide extensive and detailed information about the minutiae of gangs, his study was not 'just' a gang study but also shed light on the political economy of Chicago. In particular, he explicitly situated ganglands within a broader understanding of the Chicagoan urban context, conceiving their particular dynamics as epitomizing the marginalization of particular socioeconomic groups – namely immigrants and African-Americans – and pointing to a much broader form of differentiated urban citizenship within American society at the time. Seen from this perspective, the variegated territorial regimes of ganglands and their particular dynamics might well indicate a way forward for tackling the deeper questions underpinning issues of urban insecurity in many cities across the world, offering a space through which to bring about concrete and meaningful peacebuilding from the bottom up.

Note

- 1 The same applied even more obviously to the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang's sovereignty claims over the territories of gangs which they defeated in war, as these were generally temporary, often lasting only a few days or at most a couple of weeks, until the defeated gang remobilized and reasserted its rights.

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