

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 is a natural corollary of the dialogical nature of ethnographic research, but it is particularly evident in situations where fieldwork is carried out in conditions imbued with violence, to the extent that in such circumstances it can make sense to talk of the 'violence' of the ethnographic process itself. Through a consideration of his doctoral fieldwork experience in Nicaragua, and more specifically of his initiation into a Managua *pandilla* (youth gang), the author exegetically illustrates the potential brutality of the ethnographic encounter, and its multiple ramifications both from the perspective of the individual anthropologist and in terms of research practices.

KEY WORDS ■ Ethnography, fieldwork, violence, gangs, Nicaragua

June 1999: Dreams of Nicaragua, like scenes from a forgotten film, drift through my nights, in passage between memory and desire...¹ Images of the second 'asalto' (attack) I suffered, just over a month after my arrival, come back to me, as terrorising as the experience itself... A dirt lane in barrio USSR, the sweltering heat, and that youth, no more than fifteen years old, who calls out to me,

'Oye, chele, ¿que hora tenés? (hey, foreigner,² what time is it?).'

'Sorry, I don't have a watch,' I reply, 'but I imagine that it's about twenty to three.'

'Ni modo, chele (it doesn't matter, foreigner),' he answers. 'I'm sure you have something I want.'

He whistles, piercingly, and I suddenly find myself surrounded by a dozen youths, one of whom thrusts the muzzle of an AK-47 into my stomach. Hard. Metallic. Terrifying. The first firearm I physically touch in my life.

'You've got money?,' my erstwhile hailer asks me, pushing through.

'In my pocket,' I manage to whisper.

'Give it to me.'

I thrust my hands frantically, manically into my trousers, desperate to comply. I hand over everything, all 117 córdobas³ that I have with me. He counts the notes, looks at me - he has brown eyes - and nods, slowly.

Suddenly, I feel pain in my back as I am pushed to the ground, and then pain again, in my legs, my arms, my chest, my back, as they begin to kick me. I cover my head, assume a foetal position, but the deluge of pain continues, unrelenting. All of a sudden it stops. I awake. But the images remain, like an immanent afterglow which I cannot blink away, a distillation of the essence of Nicaragua, 'tan violentamente dulce' ('so violently sweet')...⁴

Encountering Nicaragua

It has almost become a truism to assert that anthropologists 'construct' the field in which they carry out ethnographic research. The ways in which they are deemed to do so are varied, and include such processes as geographical circumscription, the application of particular research practices, or conceptual limitation, for example (cf. Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Hastrup and Hervik, 1994; Amit, 2000). Less considered, however, is the way in which the field 'constructs' the anthropologist and the fieldwork process.⁵ Admittedly, it has always been a generally accepted tenet of anthropological endeavour that the ethnographic encounter 'can never be subject to our firm control' (Amit, 2000: 16), and that consequently adapting to reality, discarding inappropriate pre-conceptions, and taking on board new research questions are more or less 'standard procedure' during fieldwork (Crapanzano, 1986). However, as Frank Pieke (1995) has pointed out with regards to the research on state economic reform policies which he carried out in China during the events of 1989, such adaptation involves more than just the anthropologist's efforts to sensitise him- or herself to unexpected circumstances. Social reality can also actively force itself onto the researcher, profoundly transforming both the anthropologist and the fieldwork experience in ways which go beyond mere acclimatisation, and it is this process that is explored in this article through a consideration of my 1996-1997 doctoral fieldwork experience in Managua, Nicaragua.

I travelled to Nicaragua on 10 July 1996, and it is only then that I consider my 'Nicaraguan journey' to have truly begun. Although I had spent the previous nine months preparing for my fieldwork, 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 felt as if I was beginning a totally new research project. My doctoral research proposal - based on these said readings - had been entitled *Songs of Life and Hope: Everyday Livelihood Strategies in the Barrios of Contemporary Urban Nicaragua*, and I had planned to investigate the means through which individuals and communities creatively organised themselves socially and culturally in order to cope with economic crisis and insecurity (which were widely reported to be characteristic of Nicaragua at the time). In particular, I had hoped to study the solidarity and spontaneous co-operation which I assumed would constitute the basis for such survival strategies in Nicaragua, considering the profound influence the renowned *Sandinista* revolution of the 1980s was alleged to have had, my own leftist political leanings and consequent beliefs in the inherent 'sociality' of human beings,⁶ as well as much of the anthropological, sociological, and economic literature on the organisation of life in conditions of poverty.⁷

It quickly became apparent, however, that examples of such communal forms of social organisation were few and far between in the context of contemporary urban Nicaragua. *Sandinismo* was to all intents and practical purposes nothing more than a rapidly fading memory, and what I faced instead of solidarity and collective action in the face of crisis were circumstances overwhelmingly characterised by social breakdown, fragmentation, apathy, disillusion, and atomisation. Deeply imbued with idealism as I was, my immediate response to this 'appalling face of a glimpsed truth' (Conrad, 1990 [1902]: 65) closely echoed Kurtz's horrified reaction to his vision of human nature in Joseph Conrad's famous novella *Heart of Darkness* (1990 [1902]), and within days of my arrival I had rather cynically re-baptised my research project *Chants of Apathy and Nihilism: A Journey into the Nicaraguan Heart of Darkness...* However, beyond this ultimately rather salutary shattering of my somewhat naive personal convictions, it was being actively confronted with violence that constitutes the most direct and powerful manner in which Nicaraguan social reality 'forced' itself upon me.

The violence landscape in contemporary Nicaragua is a diverse one, ranging from widespread domestic violence to overwhelming structural violence, but - as is the case in much of Latin America today (cf. Caldeira, 1996; Rodgers, 1999) - the most notable and wide-reaching contemporary avatar of the phenomenon is undoubtedly criminal violence. Crime has literally exploded in the past decade, more than doubling from some 780 crimes per 100,000 persons in 1990 to over 1,640 per 100,000 in 2001.⁸ However, while this trend is no doubt accurate, the figures are most definitely underestimations. A CID-Gallup survey conducted in April 1997, for example, reported that one in six Nicaraguans claimed to have been attacked at least once in the previous four months (*La Tribuna*, 2 May 1997), which would proportionally work out to over 17,000 crimes per 100,000 persons just for that period! Similarly, while the official homicide rate stood around 15 deaths per 100,000 persons during the mid-1990s (Fajnzyblber, Lederman, and Loayza, 1998; Granera Sacasa and Cuarezma Terán, 1997), during the ten months of fieldwork I conducted in the low-income Managua *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,⁹ I tallied eight crime-related deaths in the neighbourhood, which works out proportionally to a staggering 320 deaths per 100,000 for the year of my stay in Nicaragua (July 1996-July 1997).¹⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly in view of such endemic levels of violence, within a week of my arrival, I was attacked at knife-point whilst walking in the streets, and less than a month later, as I recount above, I was attacked again, this time at gun-point, and robbed and beaten up by a *pandilla*, or youth gang. 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

owed less to any form of personal courage, and more to the fear that my leaving Nicaragua would be interpreted as my having ‘failed’ the ultimate anthropological test of fieldwork, as well as a certain pig-headed stubbornness on my part (which less charitably might instead be considered excessive pride). Beyond such considerations, however, these experiences of violence are important because they crucially transformed the nature of my ethnographic endeavour. As Allen Feldman (1991) has pointed out, violence is powerfully formative; it shapes people’s perceptions of who they are and how they interact with their social and physical environment in the most immediate and urgent of manners. The anthropologist is no exception, and each experience of violence I underwent during my first month in Nicaragua precipitated an ‘existential shock’ (Robben and Nordstrom, 1995: 13), profoundly affecting my relationship both with myself and with Nicaragua, and causing me to shift the focus of my research from the survival strategies of the urban poor to the social experience of violence in contemporary urban Nicaragua.

To a certain extent such a change in emphasis could be construed as simply reflecting the particular nature of my interaction with Nicaraguan social reality; in other words, the result of my own subjective preoccupations and personal foibles. Another way of looking at the issue, however, is in terms of what Raymond Lee (1995: 61) calls ‘involuntary research’. The notion of ‘involuntary research’ is distinct from the perhaps more common-sensical idea of ‘accidental anthropology’ in that it implies the existence of an element of constraint. An involuntary researcher is therefore caught up in a situation from which he or she cannot extricate themselves and they end up incidentally studying it. 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 it should be noted that Bettelheim argued that there was actually a dual constriction to his investigation. On the one hand, the obvious one of his imprisonment, but on the other hand, the need to observe his own behaviour and that of others in order to avoid breaking down mentally in the harsh camp conditions.

While in no way claiming that my situation was at all equivalent to Bettelheim’s, it seems to me that an analogy can be made to the extent that although I was not forced to go to Nicaragua, or even to stay, for reasons explained above I found it impossible to leave once there. Moreover, the fact of my remaining in Nicaragua unavoidably compelled me to structure my actions in certain ways, to the extent that it arguably makes sense to talk of the ‘violence’ of the ethnographic process itself. As Frank Pieke has pointed out, fieldwork ultimately engages the anthropologist in ‘a dialogue with the entire social reality encountered, a chain of events heard about, observed, and, above all, experienced’ (Pieke, 1995: 76). While one’s experience of social reality is obviously multifaceted, it is perhaps most emphatic in circumstances inscribed with violence (Arendt, 1969; Daniel, 1996; Feldman, 1991; Scarry, 1985), and in the chronically violent environment of contemporary Nicaragua, even if it might have been theoretically possible for me to latch onto one of the rare manifestations of collective co-operation that do continue to exist sporadically amongst the urban poor, and persist with my original research project, the insecure wider social circumstances and my personal experiences of violence made this impossible. I could neither ignore the ambient violence nor just passively suffer it, but was *forced* to actively re-structure my professional behaviour in relation to it, and study it.¹¹

At the same time, however, the potentially brutal nature of the ethnographic process in contexts of violence also has further ramifications. My violent encounter with the Nicaraguan social reality not only altered the focus of my research, but also my behaviour patterns, both

research-related and otherwise. Perhaps not surprisingly, both violence and the fear of violence inscribed themselves determinedly into the overwhelming majority of my actions. Ensuring my own security became my prevailing aim, and I structured both my personal and professional behaviours in relation to this. Even as I embarked on my study of Nicaraguan violence, it was to a large extent motivated by a desire to comprehend, and thereby tame, the phenomenon. However, as I hope what follows will exegetically illustrate, the consequences of this went beyond the bare pursuit of personal security, as the very means through which I carried out my ethnographic research became inherently imbued with violence, potentially providing another sense to the way in which the ethnographic process can become a violent one.

First contact: Getting to know the *pandilleros*

When I first moved into *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in September 1996, two months after arriving in Nicaragua, my immediate concern was to find out whether there was a neighbourhood *pandilla*. Foremost in my mind was identifying it, and then avoiding it, since as recounted above I had had a rather unpleasant encounter with a *pandilla* the month before, and moreover, from my daily reading of the newspapers, it was clear that these youth gangs were a ubiquitous feature of poorer neighbourhoods in Managua, robbing, beating, terrorising, killing, and often transforming parts of the city into quasi-war zones as they fought each other in a semi-ritualised manner with weapons ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47 assault rifles, fragmentation grenades, and mortars.

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 seemed forthcoming, I reluctantly decided to initiate my fieldwork without this seemingly crucial variable, and rely on my common sense in order to avoid a nasty encounter. 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, Pedro, and Jader, who later all turned out to also be members of the *barrio pandilla*. We would sit on the curb side, 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 categorise 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*. 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 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).

This perhaps probational phase of my socialisation 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 pretence 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.

Why did the *pandilleros* socialise with me? To a certain extent, it was probably somewhat inevitable, considering my age – twenty-three at the time – and male 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*', 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'.¹² 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 a '*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.

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 'probational' 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 (1994) has pointed out, the individual anthropologist inevitably imposes a certain subjective sense onto his or her ethnographic experiences, this reflexivity, as Peter Hervik (1994: 96) has argued, is grounded in the 'shared social experience' of the field context, and thus my interpretation was greatly shaped by the *pandilleros*' explicit and repeated subsequent labelling of what follows as my 'initiation'.

As most initiation processes inevitably tend to be, my induction into the *barrio pandilla* involved a mixture of formal and informal 'rites'. The first two of the three phases - which I've labelled '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 initially coined

by Arnold van Gennep (1909). The second of these two ‘rites’ was obviously modified as a result of my *chele* status,¹³ and this, as well as certain actions on my part, seemed to give rise to the (increased) 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.¹⁴

My accepting to undergo initiation into the *barrio pandilla* was initially not so much linked to 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. I later learnt, however, that the gang in fact protects all those living in the *barrio*, so becoming a member was not a necessary prerequisite for ensuring such support. On the other hand, 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.

Nevertheless, I cannot deny that becoming a *pandillero* also offered me an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the experience of violence in contemporary urban Nicaragua, and this was certainly a motivation for remaining in the *pandilla* after discovering that the gang would provide me with protection even if I was not a member. At the same time, however, joining the gang also had other ramifications. By becoming a member of the *pandilla*, I took on a social role with certain expected behaviour patterns as well as a particular social position. As a result, I underwent a number of things during the course of my fieldwork that I could have probably done without, including being attacked, threatened, beaten up, knifed, and shot at. But more importantly with regards to the issue at hand, I also actively embraced behaviour patterns which involved my being violent in a variety of manners, of which those described below were only the first (and more innocuous) of a long series. Doing so, however, was arguably intrinsic to why becoming a *pandillero* presented me with such an exceptional research opportunity.¹⁵

Standing one’s ground

The first episode of my initiation 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 airport gift shop around the world, 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 to a large extent in Switzerland, I have played around with such knives since I was about 10 years old, and so I am familiar with them up to a certain point. Consequently, ignoring as best I could Norman's increasingly threatening gestures, 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, 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 my 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 (1973) and Martín Sánchez Jankowski (1991) both point out respectively in the British and US contexts, such 'tests' can 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 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 (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 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.

It has to be said, of course, that luck 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 army knife, and 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 eight in the morning, 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 market, Julio informed me that we were going to steal something from a stall. 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 foreigner 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 involved my going up to the targeted stall alone

and distracting the seller so that the others 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 crucial to this clearly adapted '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*.¹⁶ 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 mark-down is the norm. From what Julio and the others told me, my almost 75 percent 'loss' was definitely not brilliant, but was not the worse performance they had ever seen by a first-time fence...¹⁷

As we gathered to talk and smoke in the *calle ocho* (Eighth Street) alleyway - so-named after a particularly dangerous street in 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, including my *chele* status as well as 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 Elvis, when suddenly a group of some thirty to forty youths came running down the road, throwing stones left, right, and centre, 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 the Gómez house as target. All around us, small groups of *pandilleros* from the *barrio* were similarly engaged, 'recapturing' the *barrio* block by block, 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. *¡Ahora sí, sós un broder!* (Now you’re a real brother!).’ Other *pandilleros* also came up to us, and told me the same thing, and 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, 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 and its inhabitants.¹⁸

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 the 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*.¹⁹ 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, 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!’²⁰

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 along 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 labelled ‘*dañino*’ - but it certainly enhances his²¹ 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 did participate in gang fighting and beatings, and often acted in a violent manner. I was not a particularly efficient fighter, however, even if I did gain a reputation for ‘fighting dirty’ because I was inclined to ignore the ‘shared script’ which applied to the ‘cultural performance’ of one-on-one fighting,²² whereby opponents first showed each other how they could ‘take’ each other’s blows before trying to injure each other, and tended to immediately try to inflict maximum damage in such circumstances. I also unwittingly displayed a certain measure of ‘*dañidad*’ whenever the *barrio* was attacked and firearms were involved, due to 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 foreigner, 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 seemed 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. At the time, I had

assumed this to be a gently ribbing, joking banter, and dismissed it as no more than an amusing anecdote for my dissertation. However, I was very quickly to discover, albeit in something of an indirect manner, the very real consequences of this social role I had unwittingly assumed.

A couple of 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* 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 had provided the backdrop for the third episode of my initiation having signalled the beginning of this war). Because I was now a member of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, and especially because of my *chele* status, I was an obvious prime target, as much of *pandilla* warfare centres around injuring, beating, or killing the 'reputed' members of the enemy *pandilla*. In the end, therefore, *Doña* Yolanda's lover, *Don* Saturnino, drove me the short distance 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. My newly acquired role as a *pandillero* 'broder' meant that I did rapidly familiarise myself with the various gang codes and behaviour patterns over the course of the next eight months. But that, as they say, is another story...

Notes

- 1 With apologies to J. G. Ballard (1987: 7).
- 2 The term '*chele*' is used in Nicaragua to denote Europeans (in opposition to the North American-indicating '*gringo*'), although it can also mean 'fair-skinned' more generally (cf. Lancaster, 1992: 217; as well as van der Gulden, 1995: 109).
- 3 Approximately 14 US dollars at the time.
- 4 '*Tan violentamente dulce*' is the title of a collection of essays by the Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar, which have been translated into English as *Nicaraguan Sketches* (Cortázar, 1989). The word '*dulce*' can be variously translated into English as 'sweet', 'soft', or 'gentle'. I have chosen to use the term 'sweet' because of its connotations with notions of pleasure and goodness, which seems to me to be more or less what Cortázar was trying to convey about Nicaragua. However, he uses the word 'violently' as an equivalent to 'powerful', while in the present context, I use it more literally, very much in an oxymoronic sense.
- 5 A partial exception to this is the edited volume by Okely and Callaway (1992).
- 6 On this issue, cf. in particular Marx (1977: 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' (1977: 91, 153 & 115).
- 7 Prominent examples of the literature exemplifying such a viewpoint include (amongst others): Engels (1973), González de la Rocha (1994), Lloyd (1979), Lomnitz (1977), Moser (1981), Perlman (1976), Roberts (1973), or Sinclair (1995).
- 8 For detailed figures see Granera Sacasa and Cuarezma Terán (1997); *La Tribuna*, 4 June 1997 & 9 March 2000; *La Prensa*, 11 July & 5 September 2001; and <http://www.policia.gob.ni/Estadisticas1.htm> & <http://www.policia.gob.ni/deneoct.htm>.

- 9 A pseudonym, as are all the names of persons and places mentioned in this article.
- 10 Of course, this calculation should be taken with a pinch of salt, considering the small size and unsystematic nature of my sample. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this extrapolated figure is certainly indicative of a general trend. By way of comparison, the yearly homicide rate in Colombia, frequently labelled the most violent country in the world not to be (officially) in a state of war, is around 70 per 100,000 (Martin, 1996-97: 181), although it should be noted that this figure is for reported deaths, and so the actual rate is in fact most likely higher. Indeed, recent participatory research in low-income areas of Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia, have reported average homicide rates of over 340 per 100,000 persons (cf. World Bank, 2000). However, the discrepancy is unlikely to be as high as the sixteen-fold difference between the official Nicaraguan homicide rate and that of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández.
- 11 It should be emphasised that although, as Raymond Lee (1995: 1) points out, 'researchers often work in settings made dangerous by violent conflict, or in social situations where interpersonal violence and risk are common place... [and] in many cases it is the violence itself ...that actively compel attention from the social scientist', I did not go to Nicaragua with the intention of studying violence; rather, had I known beforehand that Nicaragua was so violent, I would most certainly have chosen a different country in which to carry out fieldwork. As such, it could be said that there was a added dimension of constraint to my research.
- 12 The word also has a range of other connotations, including 'destructive', 'harmful', and 'malicious'.
- 13 It is quite possible that the first phase of my initiation was similarly modified, as it seems to have been particularly innocuous, especially compared to the violence of US gang practices - cf. for example Moore, Vigil, and García (1983) or Sánchez Jankowski (1991). The *pandilleros* consistently denied this, however, and in many ways, it can be argued that this aspect of the gang initiation process focused more on bravado rather than on the ability to be violent, and so would not necessarily be overly violent. The logic behind such an analysis is that in a context where violence is already a norm, the test examines an individual's efficiency in the face of violence rather than whether they can or cannot be violent.
- 14 It is important to note, however, that although the *pandilleros* were obviously aware of what was happening, and that I realised 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 classic van Gennepian rite of passage.
- 15 For a further elaboration of this point see Rodgers (2001).
- 16 Approximately 5 US dollars at the time.
- 17 It must be said, though, that 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.
- 18 To a certain extent, it could be argued that there was in fact a need to see me 'prove my mettle', which perhaps supports an analysis in line with those 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 of many such encounters during my stay.
- 19 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 city-wide reputation of the *Comemueertos pandilla*, but it should be noted that *pandilla* activities tend to be 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.
 - 20 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 described by James Diego Vigil (1988).
 - 21 Although female *pandilleras* are not unknown in Nicaragua, they are not common, and there were none in the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang during my stay, although I was told that there had been some in the recent past. According to Managua hearsay there also existed two all-female *pandillas* in the city, one operating in *barrio* 19 de Julio and the other in the outlying Ciudad Sandino.
 - 22 For an analysis of Brazilian '*briga*' street fighting as 'scripted cultural performances' see Linger (1992).

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