

# Becoming the 'Baddest': Masculine Trajectories of Gang Violence in Medellín

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# Becoming the 'Baddest': Masculine trajectories of gang violence in Medellín

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## **Abstract**

Drawing upon forty life-history interviews with gang members in Medellín, Colombia, this paper argues that many young men join gangs to emulate and reproduce 'successful' local male identities. The accumulation by the gang of 'masculine capital', the material and symbolic signifiers of manhood, and accompanying stylistic and timely displays, means that youths often perceive them to be spaces of male success, driving the social reproduction of the gang. Once in the gang, they become increasingly 'bad' using of violence to defend the gang's interests in exchange for masculine capital. Gang leaders, colloquially known as *duros* or 'hard men', tend to be the *más malo*, the 'baddest'. The 'ganging process' should not be understood in terms of aberrant youth behaviour, rather there is practical logic to joining the gang as a site of identity formation for aspirational young men who are coming-of-age when conditions of structural exclusion conspire against them.

**Key words:** gangs, urban violence, youth violence, masculinities, masculine capital, Medellín, Bourdieu

## Introduction

The homicide rate in Latin America and Caribbean is the highest in the world. Geographically, this violence concentrates in the poor *barrios*, or neighbourhoods, of the region's cities, whilst demographically it coalesces with remarkable consistency around the male youth population. Urban violence in the region is rooted in legacies of internecine political conflict; of dictatorships, insurgencies and the civil wars in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This political violence transitioned into range of social and criminal violence during the 1980s and 1990s, and unthinkably, deaths rates in some countries even began to outstrip wartime periods. This spurred academic conceptualisations of post-dictatorship violence, violent democracies, and even slum wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

Youth gangs found at the urban margins in Latin America's cities are paradigmatic of this violence and have been understood as socially generated, dystopian epiphenomena of structural systems of exclusion embedded in the political economy of the city.<sup>2</sup> Although we should caution against romanticising gangs as emancipatory projects, they have also been perceived as collective social movements.<sup>3</sup> Neither gangs nor violence show signs abating in the region, propelling the 'gang issue' up the political pecking order, where they feature heavily in populist

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Arias & Daniel Goldstein, *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. (Duke University Press, 2010); Dennis Rodgers, Slum wars of the 21st century: gangs, mano dura and the new urban geography of conflict in Central America. *Development and Change*. 40, 949–976 (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Adam Baird, The violent gang and the construction of masculinity amongst socially excluded young men. *Safer Communities*, 11, pp.179–190 (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Rodgers, Living in the Shadow of Death: gangs, violence and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38, 267–292 (2006); Jo Beall, Tom Goodfellow & Dennis Rodgers, Cities and conflict in fragile states in the developing world. *Urban Studies*. 50, 3065–3083 (2013).

rhetoric and sensationalist media reports. Strikingly, gang related crime and violence has been presented as a ‘threat to democracy’, some even calling them ‘terrorists’.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst conditions of socio-economic exclusion have long been associated with the emergence of gangs, gang formation itself cannot be ascribed to a single nor determinant factor,<sup>5</sup> but rather to a range of correlational, if not clearly identified, causal factors such as organised crime, drug trafficking, the proliferation of firearms, weak governance and rapid urbanisation. The formation of gangs is predicated upon processes of entry and membership. Some contend that the strongest correlates of membership occur at a subjective level, including exposure to domestic and community violence, delinquency and drugs.<sup>6</sup> However, prescriptive accounts of gang membership and formation should be appraised with circumspection as they can emerge in a variety of ways and circumstances.

This points to the complexities associated with gang research and the ‘ganging process’, that is, the process of becoming a gang member. Challenges include transiency of membership, the fluidity of gang-community engagement, a range of interlocution with organised crime, political patronage, and in the case of Colombia, the galvanising dynamics of the broader armed conflict.

This combines to make gang definitions particularly slippery where ‘clear cut categorisation’ is

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<sup>4</sup> Sonja Wolf, ¿Hay terroristas en El Salvador?’. *Distintas Latitudes* (2015). at <http://www.distintaslatitudes.net/hay-terroristas-en-el-salvador> (cited 12/12/2015)

<sup>5</sup> Martin Daly & Margo Wilson, Risk-taking, Intrasexual Competition, and Homicide. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, 47, 1–36 (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Angela Higginson, Kathryn Benier, Yulia Shenderovich, Laura Bedford, Lorraine Mazerolle, and Joseph Murray. Preventive Interventions to Reduce Youth Involvement in Gangs and Gang Crime in Low- and Middle-income Countries: A Systematic Review. *The Campbell Collaboration* (2015).

all but impossible.<sup>7</sup> As such, we might better speak of an incongruous gamut of gangs where a confluence of factors contributes to their emergence.

Despite these caveats, studies show that there is significant demographic uniformity to gang membership across the region: they are overwhelmingly made up of poor young men.<sup>8</sup> Even a cursory inspection shows that the poor–male–youth profile remains robust outside of Latin America. Whilst we should recognise that masculinities are not the sole determinant of gang membership, it is clear that processes of male socialisation in contexts of exclusion are central to understanding why gangs persist. This brings us to the central interrogation of this article; what is the role of masculinities in the reproduction of gang membership in the poor barrios of Medellín?

Despite the male domination of gang numbers, empirically grounded research into ‘gang masculinities’ in the region is very rare, bar a few notable exceptions, which argue that boys and young men often end up in gangs as they negotiate contexts of exclusion in search of masculine respect.<sup>9</sup> Beyond Latin America, the sociological concepts of ‘street habitus’ and ‘street capital’ have been used to explain the gang’s connectedness to the urban margins.<sup>10</sup> Following Rodgers

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<sup>7</sup> Marie-Louise Glebbeek & Kees Koonings. Between Morro and Asfalto. Violence, insecurity and socio-spatial segregation in Latin American cities. *Habitat International* (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Etienne Krug, Linda Dahlberg, James Mercy, Anthony Zwi, Rafael Lozano. *World report on violence and health: Summary*. (World Health Organisation, 2002); Liliana Bernal Franco & Claudia Navas Caputo. *Urban violence and humanitarian action in Medellin*. (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Gary Barker, G. *Dying To Be Men: Youth, masculinity and social exclusion*. (Routledge, 2005); Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*. (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Veronica Zubillaga, ‘Gaining Respect’: The Logic of Violence among Young Men in the Barrios of Caracas, Venezuela. *Youth Violence in Latin America: Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective in Perspective* (2009); Adam Baird, Negotiating Pathways to Manhood: Rejecting Gangs and Violence in Medellín’s Periphery. *Journal of Conflictology*, pp.30–41 (2012); Baird, The violent gang and the construction of masculinity amongst socially excluded young men.

<sup>10</sup> Alistair Fraser. Street habitus: gangs, territorialism and social change in Glasgow. *Journal of Youth Studies* (2013); Sveinung Sandberg, Street capital: Ethnicity and violence on the streets of Oslo. *Theoretical Criminology* 12, 153–171 (2008); George Karandinos, Laurie Hart, Fernando Montero Castrillo & Philippe Bourgois, The Moral

& Hazen's suggestion that gang research often exists as a sub-discipline that rarely relates to other fields of study,<sup>11</sup> the first contribution of this article is to combine a masculinities lens with sociological understandings of practice, proposing material and symbolic 'masculine capital' as a tool to elucidate the 'practical logic' behind male youths' decisions to join, hence reproduce, gangs.<sup>12</sup> Masculine capital is derived from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *capital*, one of his 'thinking tools' that includes *habitus* and *field* from his book *Esquisse D'une Théorie de la Pratique*, Outline of a Theory of Practice<sup>13</sup>, and is used to understand the reproduction of the gang as a gendered social practice.

The habitus is a set of subjective tendencies, generative schemes or 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions'.<sup>14</sup> It is a dispositional theory of action and practice, where interiorised patterns are constructed from the social world to influence an individual's behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Habitus operates predominantly beneath our consciousness, a form of 'cultural unconscious' that disposes the subject towards externalised behaviours that reproduce the social world.<sup>16</sup> This reproductive generation of practices between subject and society establishes the 'dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality'.<sup>17</sup>

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Economy of Violence in the US Inner City: Deadly Sociability in the Retail Narcotics Economy in *Violence at the Urban Margins* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Rodgers & Jennifer Hazen, Introduction: Gangs in Global Comparative Perspective. In Jennifer Hazen & Dennis Rodgers, eds. *Global Gangs: Street violence across the world* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Many young men and women in these neighbourhoods do not join gangs, but this is not the focus of this particular article. For a debate on these issues see Baird, Negotiating Pathways to Manhood: Rejecting Gangs and Violence in Medellín's Periphery.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1977]).

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p72.

<sup>15</sup> Loïc Wacquant. Homines in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus. *Body Soc.* 20, 3–17 (2014).

<sup>16</sup> Swartz, D. *Culture & Power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. (The University of Chicago, 1997), p101.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p72.

‘Masculine habitus’ then, disposes boys and youths to undergo transitions to a gendered adulthood that reflects their forefathers.<sup>18</sup> To forge a pathway to manhood, boys and youths pursue culturally valued material and symbolic signifiers of manliness through their behaviour, actions and practices. These signifiers can be understood as masculine capital, the accumulation of which is the observable expression of masculine identity, the outcome of masculine habitus. This process is couched within a performative field of production, a metaphor for the domains which we occupy and negotiate in our social lives.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the timing of ‘exchanges’ of gangland capital are not irrelevant; turning to Bourdieu once more, masculinity is performed ‘stylistically’ and strategically in real-time to enhance its effect,<sup>20</sup> which will be discussed later when analysing the semiotics of gang displays.

Taking into account the inevitability of multiple and varied masculinities, and that the reproduction of practice is imperfect, this framework does not aim to reduce all boys to the functional pursuit of capital with the singular aim of achieving an ideal gang persona. Rather, the gang domain, the street, and the community, should be understood as an elaborate field of identity formation, which boys and youths negotiate to secure their credentials as men when coming of age. However, bearing in mind this complexity, it was clear from the narratives of young gang members interviewed that they perceived and appreciated gangs as ‘salient structures in the field of production’ of masculine identity when they were growing up.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tony Coles. Negotiating the Field of Masculinity: The Production and Reproduction of Multiple Dominant Masculinities. *Men & Masculinities* 12, 30–44 (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*. (Polity Press, 1992), p5-7; Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. (Polity Press, 2001); Pat Thomson in Michael Grenfell, ed. *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 67–81 (Acumen, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p5-7.

<sup>21</sup> Ideas around perceived and appreciated structures in the field of production and are drawn from Richard Nice’s introduction to Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

Masculine habitus influences young men to seek out pathways to normatively ‘successful’ male identities, so they will consider the tools-at-hand to secure that capital. When the legal accumulation of masculine capital is hampered by exclusion and poverty, the street gang becomes an attractive tool to achieve manhood as it is a capital laden site. Hence, there is a ‘practical logic’<sup>22</sup> to the ganging process, which perpetuates their structures in the *comunas populares*, the poor neighbourhoods, of Medellín.

This article also contributes original empirical data with gang members, which is scarce in itself. It draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2006 – 2012 in Medellín’s poor north-eastern corner of the city, whilst working with a community based organisation that focused on social work, community organisation, gender and youth focused violence reduction campaigns, often with the financial support of the international community. I interviewed many residents about gang activity, and as I gained knowledge about the community overtime and made sound friendships within the organisation, that knowledge became my safety-net in terms of avoiding danger, and those friends became my gatekeepers to gang members themselves. This gatekeeping worked precisely because of the tightly woven community networks linked to the high population density of the *comunas populares*, so colleagues were able to arrange meetings with gang members they actually knew, or when we bumped into them on the streets. We even cold-called them at their houses if they lived with their parents who my colleagues knew. This process was challenging and not without risk to the researched, researcher and gatekeeper (for an extended methodological discussion see Baird<sup>23</sup>). During this period, life-history interviews were conducted with forty male gang members with an average age of

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<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p66.

<sup>23</sup> Adam Baird, (forthcoming) Dancing with Danger: Ethnographic safety, male bravado and gang research, *Journal of Qualitative Research*, (2017).



twenty-three years old, including gang leaders or *duros*, *sicario*<sup>24</sup> youth assassins, and *carrito* child gang members.<sup>25</sup>

In this article I will describe the research setting, Medellín's gangland mosaic, then analyse the role of barrio masculinities in the ganging process, which is sub-divided into five sections; layering barrio masculinities, male socialisation and the gang, the ganging process and exclusion, becoming a duro, and, gang displays and the semiotics of masculinity, followed finally by the conclusions.

### Medellín's gangland mosaic: A war between the poor

Medellín is Colombia's second city nestled in the foothills of the Andes, made up of two and half million people living in sixteen *comunas*, or precincts. The poor neighbourhoods, *comunas populares*, described by one local as 'hyper-populated mazes',<sup>26</sup> stretch precariously up the slopes and house over half of the city's population. Even though progress has been made by recent Mayors Sergio Fajardo, Alonso Salazar, and Haníbal Gaviria, Medellín still has the most unequal income distribution of any city in the country.<sup>27</sup> Crime and violence began to emerge in the *comunas populares* as early as the 1950s, captured by the working class poet Helí Ramírez Gómez who narrated the experiences of *galladas*, gangs of poor young men 'many of whom were capable of killing'.<sup>28</sup> A sea change took place in the 1980s with the rise of cocaine and the

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<sup>24</sup> A sicario is a child or youth assassin. They came to prominence in the 1980s when drug cartels employed them as hit-men. The word comes from *sicarius* in Latin, meaning 'man of the dagger'.

<sup>25</sup> All names are pseudonyms were chosen by the interviewees themselves.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Miguel Tamayo, community social worker (11/09/2010).

<sup>27</sup> Alexandra Abello-Colak & Valeria Guarneros-Meza, The role of criminal actors in local governance. *Urban Stud.* 51, 3268–3289 (2014).

<sup>28</sup> Helí Ramírez Gómez, *En La Parte Alta Abajo*. (Editorial Lealon, 1979), p10.

professionalization of drug trafficking organisations including the infamous Medellín Cartel led by the prototype drug baron Pablo Escobar. Hundreds of millions of dollars began to flood into the city becoming an integral cog of the regional economy.<sup>29</sup> Whilst the public gaze was, and still is, drawn towards sensational accounts of cartel activity, the penetration of drugs into poor neighbourhoods was profound and transformative, as Mauricio a former gang leader recounted:

*What happened to us in the [poor] neighbourhood of Aranjuez during the 80s and 90s was really tough. It was the time of Pablo Escobar. Kids began to work for the cartel as sicarios at a really young age, say twelve or thirteen. A kid of that age would have a car or a good motorbike. At one point there was a kid who was only eighteen that had a Mercedes Benz convertible. You would see money in incredible quantities. The neighbourhood was overflowing with cash. It was unbelievable.<sup>30</sup>*

Historically, gangs in Medellín have been comprised of local men; brothers, sons, cousins, uncles, fathers and nephews, and therefore linked organically to a territory and its inhabitants. Following the drugs boom, an invigorated gangland mosaic emerged with each gang defending their patch from incursions by rival gangs. Retail drugs sales galvanised local youth gangs as incomes and gun proliferation soared, leading to increasingly lethal fighting over territory, reflecting similar experiences of community drug penetration in cities such as Rio de Janeiro.<sup>31</sup> Youth gangs progressively became more structured and institutional such as the notorious *La Terraza* gang, forging linkages to organised crime as their discourse increasingly revolved

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<sup>29</sup> William Estrada & Adriana Gomez, *Somos Historia: Comuna Nororiental* (1992), p177; Liliana Bernal Franco & Claudia Navas Caputo, *Urban violence and humanitarian action in Medellin*. (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mauricio a former gang leader, 20/06/2008.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Gay, *From popular movement to drug gangs to militias: An anatomy of violence Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro in Mega-Cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, London: Zed (Koonings, K. & Kruijt, D.) (2009); Janice Pearlman, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*. (Oxford University Press, 2010).

around ‘security services’ or ‘citizen protection’ to justify *vacunas*, literally vaccinations, the extortion of residents, small businesses and bus drivers.<sup>32</sup>

In 1980s and 1990s left-wing militias sponsored by guerrillas from Colombia’s national conflict sought to take over the city from the *comunas populares*. This led to a perfect storm of armed violence amongst street gangs, militias, police and army, and the Medellín Cartel.<sup>33</sup> Homicide rates from that period peaked at a record 381 per 100,000 in 1991.<sup>34</sup> The intensity of such violence is hard for the outsider to grasp. Elderly community leader Doña Rosalba from the hard-hit *comuna uno* precinct in the north-east of the city talked resignedly about finding dead bodies in the gully outside her home every Sunday morning.<sup>35</sup> Armando who was a gang member, and Miguel, a social worker, recalled the infamy of some gang leaders who entered into folklore, and discussed Henry’s mutilation in notably sanguine terms, illustrating the banality of quotidian violence.<sup>36</sup>

*Armando: Henry was a bloke here from the Candelaria [neighbourhood]. He was a really bad, bad, bad man. That bloke was a demon, nothin’ good left inside. He’d turn up and ‘because I don’t like you...’ tan-tan-tan-tan*  
*[onomatopoeia for shooting someone]*

*Miguel: Yeah, like that bloke Mario doing a stretch in jail for 120 years, and that other one called Morena-cara, and Terry. What murderous sons of bitches.*

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<sup>32</sup> Jairo Bedoya, *La protección violenta en Colombia: El caso de Medellín desde los años noventa*. (Instituto Popular de Capacitación, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Ricardo Aricapa Ardila, *Comuna 13: Crónica de Un Guerra Urbana*. (Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2005); Gilberto Medina Franco, *Historia Sin Fin... : Las Milicias en Medellín en la década del noventa*. (2006).

<sup>34</sup> Clara Suárez Rodríguez, Escenarios de Homicidios 1990– 2002. *Estudios Poéticos* 26, 185–205 (2005), p 203.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with community leader Doña Rosalba, 08/06/2007.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with gang member Armando and community social worker Miguel Tamayo, 18/06/2008.

*Armando: In the end, they took Henry up the hill and chopped him into little pieces.*

*Miguel: Yeah, well, of course they did.*

Across two decades between the 1980s and 2000s approximately 40,000 young people were victims of homicide and 93% were male, becoming known as the ‘lost generation’.<sup>37</sup> The majority of these came from the comunas populares prompting one gang member to reflect ‘it was a war between the poor, we were like the Palestinians’.<sup>38</sup> Over this period numerous academic concepts emerged in an attempt to explain the ‘necro’ and ‘narco-geographies’<sup>39</sup> of booming youth violence, which gained widespread cultural traction through a morbid and sensationalist fascination with *sicarios*, through both fictional and non-fiction accounts of street life and death.<sup>40</sup>

The early 2000s heralded the rolling out of state-led counter-insurgency strategies into the city, deploying paramilitary ‘blocks’, principally the *Bloque Cacique Nutibarra* and later the *Bloque Metro*, to expel left-wing militias from the city. This precipitated the ‘war for Medellín’ that reached a spectacular tipping point in 2002 when Black Hawk helicopter gun-ships bombarded the militia controlled comuna 13 during *Operación Orión*, which was then seized by the paramilitaries.<sup>41</sup> Crucially, paramilitary groups led the pacification of Medellín’s ganglands through *plata o plomo* (literally silver or lead), by successfully coercing, murdering or displacing

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<sup>37</sup> Suárez Rodríguez, *Estudios Poéticos*; Pilar Riaño-Alcalá. *Dwellers of Memory: Youth and Violence in Medellín, Colombia*. (Transaction Publishers, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Interview with gang member Jarrón 19/06/2008.

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Garmany, *Drugs, Violence, Fear, and Death: The Necro- and Narco-Geographies of Contemporary Urban Space*. *Urban Geography*. 32, 1148–1166 (2013).

<sup>40</sup> Alonso Salazar. *No Nacimos Pa’Semilla*. (CINEP, 1990); Victor Gaviria, *El pleaño que no duró nada*. (Editora Aguilar, 1991); Jorge Franco, *Rosario Tijeras*. (Editorial Planeta Colombiana S.A., 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Riaño-Alcalá. *Dwellers of Memory: Youth and Violence in Medellín, Colombia*, p.176

non-compliant gangs and militia groups.<sup>42</sup> One gang member, Notes, said ‘After 2003 the paramilitaries arrived and the whole world began to work with them because they paid the gangs to run territory for them... they arrived handing out money and guns, opportunities’.<sup>43</sup> Over the years, locals have become jaded by living in the shadow of a continuum of illegal armed groups, and consider young men like Notes as urban mercenaries who side with whichever group comes to power in their area. A gang member on the pay-roll of the paramilitaries concurred: ‘All armed groups around here are just mafia. One armed group or another will eventually take over, it makes no difference if they are militias or paramilitaries’.<sup>44</sup>

Medellín was effectively pacified as gang members fell into line under the paramilitaries. This underworld alliance led to a dramatic 81% drop-off in the homicide rate in 2003, bottoming out at twenty year low of 34 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2007.<sup>45</sup> Many were quick to jump on the bandwagon and hail Medellín’s miracle transformation, but in reality comuna popular residents remained hostage to pervasive systems of fear, which they referred to as the *calma tensa*, a tense calm. Although gang turf-wars had subsided, the threat of violence by armed groups for anyone who stepped out of line remained. This was relayed to me in chilling terms as ‘total social control’ by his ‘organisation’ during an interview with Fabio Acevedo Orlando Monsalve, a.k.a. Don F, a founding member of the paramilitary Bloque Cacique Nutibarra and a senior figure in Medellín’s underworld at the time.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Angelica Duran-Martinez, To Kill and Tell? State Power, Criminal Competition, and Drug Violence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, 1377–1402 (2015), p.14

<sup>43</sup> Interview with gang member Notes, 16/07/2008.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with gang member Armando, 18/06/2008.

<sup>45</sup> Duran-Martinez, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, p.14

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Fabio Acevedo Orlando Monsalve, 21/11/2007. This name is not a pseudonym.

In July 2003, then President Álvaro Uribe Vélez pushed for the nationwide disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of paramilitary groups after the agreement of *Santa Fe de Ralito*. Given the nature of Medellín's takeover, at the demobilisation ceremony in November 2003, unsurprisingly many 'paramilitaries' were actually gang members that had been re-labelled. The process was taken advantage of as a smokescreen to cover-up on-going organised crime and drug trafficking, whilst the low homicide rate was used as leverage with the municipal government on the understanding that if the paramilitaries and associated gang members suppressed neighbourhood violence, the state would not go after them.<sup>47</sup> Whilst violence reduction was broadly welcomed by the local population and applauded by the international community, the political economy of organised crime and drug-trafficking in the city remained fundamentally undisturbed. By 2009 reconfigurations in the criminal underworld began to fracture the gang-paramilitary alliance, leading to increased bloodshed amongst gangs who once again began to defend their patch.

Undoubtedly the arc of Colombia's political violence has exacerbated street-level conflict in Medellín, where grey alliances between gangs, paramilitaries and the state are textured with criminal and political dynamics. Although the city has not returned to the peak violence of the early 1990s, generalised insecurity and the continuation of gang control in Medellín's poorest comunas still defines day-to-day life.

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<sup>47</sup> Ralph Rozema, Urban DDR-processes: paramilitaries and criminal networks in Medellín, Colombia. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Cambridge University Press 40, (2008); Angelica Duran-Martinez, To Kill and Tell? State Power, Criminal Competition, and Drug Violence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, 1377–1402 (2015); Liliana Bernal Franco & Claudia Navas Caputo. *Urban violence and humanitarian action in Medellin*. (2013).

## Barrio masculinities and the ganging process

### Layering Barrio Masculinities

Manliness has been theorised as a relational construct in opposition to femininity, as a ‘defensive effort’ against unmanliness and a fear of all that emasculates, which as Butler suggests is a constant process of performing and becoming.<sup>48</sup> Connell coined the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’, the dominant and dominating forms of male identity in society.<sup>49</sup> In Latin America hegemonic male attributes are widespread as an ideological stand sanctified by others, culturally rooted in gender inequalities and patriarchy, that cut across class divisions, encompassing the attributes of social status, material wealth, sexual prowess, and often a predilection to violence.<sup>50</sup> However, we should caution against conclusive notions of a single, pan-regional hegemonic masculinity or machismo. Nor is hegemonic masculinity necessarily positioned in straightforward opposition to feminine submissiveness or *marianismo*, as gender identities and relations are characterised by ontological inconsistency given the complex interplay between social structures and identity formation.<sup>51</sup> These identities are multifaceted and situationally mutable;<sup>52</sup> men are not permanently committed to one pattern of masculinity, rather draw upon a repertoire of performance to negotiate the gendered world from one space and moment, to the next. In

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Kimmel, in *The Masculinities Reader* (Whitehead, S. & Barrett, F.) (Polity Press, 2004); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (Routledge, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*. (Allen & Unwin 1995); James Messerschmidt and Raewyn Connell, Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society* 19, 829–859 (2005); also see Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Gutmann, The Vicissitudes of Men and Masculinities in Latin America. *Men and Masculinities* 3, 235–236 (2001); Matthew Gutmann & Mara Viveros Vigoya, in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (Kimmel, M., Hearn, J. & Connell, R. W.) (Sage Publications, 2005); Roger Lancaster, ‘“That We Should All Turn Queer?”: Homosexual Stigma in the Making of Manhood and the Breaking of a Revolution in Nicaragua.’ In *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, edited by Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, 97–115. London: UCL Press (1999).

<sup>51</sup> Alan Greig, Troublesome Masculinities: Masculinity in Trouble. *IDS Bulletin* 40, 69–76 (2010), p.70

<sup>52</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (Routledge, 2011).

Mexico and Central America a man may perpetrate street violence, but caringly look after his children in private or public.<sup>53</sup> In Medellín, literature on sicarios and gang members highlights the diversity of this repertoire, where certain practices are adopted for one reality and cast aside for another, reflecting their protean masculine personas.<sup>54</sup> For example, whilst there is no neat dichotomy between domestic and social masculinity, some sicarios and gang members I interviewed were caring fathers, sons or brothers at home, but had also raped and murdered on the streets.

Micro-level practices of barrio masculinity can be confounding and contradictory, pointing to methodological and teleological tensions in the study of men and masculinities.<sup>55</sup> It is important not to idly reproduce male stereotypes, impose narratives or as Alves warns, ‘make’ masculinity from the outside.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, this paper sets out to examine the behaviours culturally coded as masculine that are associated with gang membership, whilst at the same time striving to be unambiguous in the critique of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. As Theidon noted when researching demobilising combatants in Colombia: ‘militarised masculinity [is a] fusion of certain practices and images of maleness with the use of weapons, the exercise of violence, and the performance of an aggressive and frequently misogynist masculinity. While I do not deny the diversity that exists within the group of former combatants with whom I work, neither can I deny

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. (University of California Press, 1996); Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. (University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Marta Cecilia Vélez Saldarriaga, *Los Hijos de la Gran Diosa: Psicología analítica, mito y violencia*. (Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 1999)

<sup>55</sup> Ulf Mellström, Difference, complexity and (onto)epistemological challenges in masculinity studies. *NORMA Int. Journal of Masculinity Studies* (2015).

<sup>56</sup> Jaime Amparo Alves, Narratives of Violence: The White ImagiNation and the Making of Black Masculinity in City of God. *Soc. e Cult.* 12, 301–310 (2009).



the hegemonic masculinity these men have in common'.<sup>57</sup>

The tension between the diversities and hegemonies of masculinity adds complexity to gang membership. Masculine habitus and men's use of agency is situationally specific, depending on timing, location, occasion, etc., which frames the strategies boys and men use to negotiate the gendered terrains of their everyday lives. Furthermore, whilst 'barrio masculinity' implies local nuance, it does not exist in isolation from, but rather is interconnected with, broader gender norms in Colombia society. Therefore, the gang emerges as a conduit for social relations, a gendered way for disenfranchised young people to inhabit the city and negotiate everyday realities, which is why the junctures between youth, class and masculinity can cast light on gang activity.

#### Male socialisation and the gang

Researchers have rightly focused on processes of socialisation and the way young people search for meaning and identity to understand gang life. In contexts of exclusion, the polymorphous threats of marginality have led gangs to be understood as cohesive and potent symbols of localism, value laden spaces and discursive frames of cultural reproduction.<sup>58</sup> The view that socialisation processes are central to gang formation is also empirically supported, but whilst some argue that this arises from 'a culmination of interrelated structural and process factors', it is far from a straightforward process.<sup>59</sup> This was reflected in my own research. Of the forty gang

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<sup>57</sup> Kimberly Theidon, *Transitional Subjects: The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia*. *Int. J. Transitional Justice* 1, 66–90 (2007), p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Fraser, *Journal of Youth Studies*, p.982; Sudhir Venkatesh, Afterword in Hazen & Rodgers, *Global Gangs: Street Violence Across the World*, p. 284.

<sup>59</sup> Sally Atkinson-Sheppard, *The gangs of Bangladesh: Exploring organized crime, street gangs and 'illicit child labourers' in Dhaka*. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (2015); Herbert Gayle & Nelma Mortis, *Male Social Participation and Violence in Urban Belize: An Examination of Their Experience with Goals, Guns, Gangs, Gender,*

members interviewed some displayed agency when joining the gang, albeit with divergent motivations; at times they were driven by ambition, and at others by desperation connected to poverty, exclusion or family dysfunction. Conversely, some appeared drift into gangs through peer groups or were swept along by the sheer tide of violence in their vicinity: '[I've] encountered death many times. Just by living in this neighbourhood you're part of the war', said one.<sup>60</sup> Although this often made it difficult for them to articulate why they had joined the gang, it was clear that socialisation was central to the process. Youths such as Carritas frequently talked about 'getting involved' in aspirational terms, an opportunity to be part of something, to be somebody, when the duros 'let you join up':

*Carritas: I'm gonna tell you the truth. Lots of us didn't get involved [with gangs] because of necessity nor nothin' like that, but because of friendships, because if you've got friends who are involved in that stuff then you're gonna get involved too. You wanna be doing what they're doing. And if your mates are in there, then you can speak to the boss [or duro] more easily and he'll let you join up<sup>61</sup>*

35 out of the 40 gang members interviewed referred explicitly to the importance of growing up with childhood friends, family or street contacts, and entering the gang incrementally where 'the energy of the other person begins to stick to you',<sup>62</sup> as opposed to a single-step process from outsider to insider. The gang's spatial dominion of their turf was key in determining the membership catchment area as very few youths joined a gang outside of their local community. This reinforces the notion of the organic gang, where socialisation within the geographical

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*God, and Governance.* (Ministry of Education, 2010); Higginson, Benier, Shenderovich, Bedford, Mazerolle and Murray. *The Campbell Collaboration.*

<sup>60</sup> Interview with gang member Ceferino, 05/11/11.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with gang member Carritas, 16/07/2008.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with gang member Tino, 20/11/11.

parameters of a gang's turf is integral to the continuum of its membership, constituted through life-long friends, contemporaries and families in the host neighbourhood. This was relayed by youths who told childhood stories of hanging-out, *parchandose*, with peers connected to the gang. These interpersonal relationships were a necessary interface or precursor to affiliation, where adolescents became gang members by being 'socialized to the streets'.<sup>63</sup> In one instance, Mechudo followed his older brother, El Loco, into the gang, as did his cousin El Mono:<sup>64</sup>

*Author: Why did you choose to hang out with that crowd [the gang]?*

*El Mono: Ahhh, a cousin of mine [El Loco] used to hang out with the bad lads [the gang] around here. Because those guys would hang out and be nice to me and say 'come over here, have a bit of money, it's all good kid'... So I was growing up and I would always see them. I didn't think about joining them, but when I needed help in life they were the support, I felt really supported by them. And so I began to get totally mixed up in all that stuff. I saw my mates with their guns and I wanted one as well.*

*Author: Tell me about your youth and how you got involved with the gang*

*Mechudo: Ah, that all began because of my friendships back when I was a little kid. Since I was about twelve I've been mixed up with this. It all began with my mates and what was going on round here, the drugs an' all that, you know.*

*Nah, like I was sayin', it's all about who your mates are and that's how you get involved. There were loads of dead bodies round here. I saw everything,*

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<sup>63</sup> John Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp132.

<sup>64</sup> In 2008 I interviewed Mechudo, his brother El Loco (both 03/06/2008) and cousin El Mono (17/07/2008). I interviewed Mechudo on three occasions between 2007 and 2012, and during this period I was able to develop a relationship with him. In 2010 El Loco and El Mono were arrested and began serving terms in *Bellavista* prison for drug trafficking offences.

*hard drugs, lots of violence, lots of rape, a bunch of dead people. My mates grew up with all that and got mixed up with the war at that time. Most are dead, only a few are around nowadays.*

*Author: So why did you join?*

*Mechudo: Why did I join? Because of my friendships, and I liked it, I liked it. The money, the work they give you and all that stuff. Benefits for your kids, your parents an' all that. I've got a kid. I like this shit... well so far. Me and my mates have always been doing the rounds [gang activities]. Whatever it took we always got stuck in, us same lads from the neighbourhood.*

In terms of these processes of homosocialisation, Panfil and Peterson ask a pertinent question: 'To what extent are gangs gendered masculine, not just made up primarily of male members?'<sup>65</sup> Youth gangs in Medellín are male dominated, but it is important not to make assumptions and explore the connections between the ganging process and the construction and experience of masculinity. Certainly, they are spaces of male socialisation, vivid homosocial and heterosexual enactment,<sup>66</sup> and sites hegemonic performance. For example, socialising and bonding over drinks and nights out with *parceros*, mates, and the mutual support between gang members, facilitated group cohesion, a process familiar to other gangland contexts in the region.<sup>67</sup> This cohesion then transitioned fluidly into collective violence or 'wars' with rivals when the gang felt threatened, galvanising camaraderie and male bonding within the group, which further gendered the gang masculine, as El Mono explained:

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<sup>65</sup> Vanessa R. Panfil and Dana Peterson, Gender, Sexuality, and Gangs, in *The Handbook of Gangs* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2015), p. 208-211.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Kimmel, Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity in *The Masculinities Reader* (Whitehead, S. & Barrett, F.) (Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Julia Dickson-Gomez, Gloria Bodnar, Aradenia Guevara, Karla Rodriguez, & Mauricio Gaborit, El Remolque y el Vácil: HIV among street gangs in El Salvador. *Journal of Gang Research* 13, 1–26 (2006).

*When us lot hung out on this corner there loads of us, but we were well behaved. We just liked to dance and drink a few shots of liquor, but then the*

*lads one block up said they were going to kill us...*

*Author: But if you were good kids why did they want to kill you?*

*El Mono: Because when they came down here giving us some shit we went after them. If they have a go at one of us, then that means they've got to*

*deal with all of us.*

*Author: Like camaraderie?*

*El Mono: Yeah, when one kicked off we all kicked off.<sup>68</sup>*

Tightknit bonds between youths enhanced by the camaraderie of 'warfare' provided them with a strong collective character. Gang names such as *Los del Hoyo* or *La Terraza*, identified them in opposition to rivals, connecting them to a territory where gang life played out. Although the territory might only be a few blocks, this spatial dominion made the gang a site of subjective empowerment and cohesion, a source of symbols and narratives which insulated its young members against the pernicious effect of exclusion and emasculation, by providing them identity and meaning.

The heteronormative and hegemonic masculine traits of the gang acted as a formidable barrier to subordinate masculinities and non-conforming identities. Homosexuality, femininity and women were largely excluded 'because of the chauvinist [gang] culture, men won't let them in'.<sup>69</sup> It was telling that across the seven-year span of the fieldwork I did not encounter one (openly) gay male, nor a woman in a position of leadership in the gang; they were always *duros*, but never a *dura*.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with gang member El Mono, 17/07/2008.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with former gang member José, 20/07/2008.

However, one ‘retired’ gang member did talk about an infamous female gang leader from the 1980s who was *más mala*, even worse, than the men.<sup>70</sup> I am watchful not to make a de facto claim that openly gay gang members in Medellín do not or cannot exist, rather, that such an individual figure would be a maverick (and brave) figure. Nor do I wish to reproduce facile interpretations of women in gangs that reduce them to ‘support’ activities, sexual partners, or strip them of agentic capacity,<sup>71</sup> and further note that anthropologist Riaña-Alcalá did encounter a number of violent women in Medellín’s comunas populares (although they were not specifically gang members).<sup>72</sup> Yet it was clear from those I spoke to, that leading the gang and using violence was overwhelmingly ‘men’s work’ in the hegemonic sense of the term. When youths recalled histories of gang warfare women were often central characters, but the killing itself was exclusively carried out by men, indicating that violence was a symbolic male enactment, reflecting the camaraderie and gendered identity of the gang mentioned above. We should be wary of type-casting and seek to tease out the complexity of women’s roles and agency in the ganging process, whilst at the same time remaining critical of the hegemonic masculinity that predominantly characterises these spaces. Unfortunately, empirical research on women’s interactions with gangs and ‘girl gangs’ in Latin America represent a notable lacuna in the literature.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Panfil and Peterson, *The Handbook of Gangs*, p. 212; Dana Peterson, Girlfriends, Gun-Holders, and Ghetto-Rats? Moving Beyond Narrow Views of Girls in Gangs, in *Delinquent Girls: Contexts, Relationships and Adaptation* (Springer New York, New York, NY, 2012), pp. 71–84; Juanjo Medina, Robert Ralphs and Judith Aldridge, Hidden behind the gunfire: young women’s experiences of gang-related violence, *Violence against Women* 18 (2012), pp. 653–61.

<sup>72</sup> Riaña-Alcalá, *Dwellers of Memory: Youth and Violence in Medellín, Colombia*.

<sup>73</sup> Exceptions include: Panfil and Peterson, *The Handbook of Gangs*, p. 215; Isabel Aguilar Umaña and Jeanne Ridders, Violent Women and Violence Against Women: Gender Relations in the Maras and Other Street Gangs of Central America’s Northern Triangle Region, *Interpeace* (2012); Adam Baird, Duros & Gangland Girlfriends: Male Identity and Gang Socialisation in Medellín. In J. Auyero, P. Bourgois, & N. Scheper-Hughes, eds. *Violence at the Urban Margins in the Americas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015).

## The ganging process and exclusion

Much has been written about the linkages between collective male violence, exclusion and racial prejudice. Previously such violence has been framed as rebellious behaviour, an expression of protest masculinity,<sup>74</sup> or perhaps most fittingly as ‘reaction formations’<sup>75</sup> to structural constraints that corrode productive passages to adulthood. Here, socioeconomic deprivation and stigmatization generate collective feelings of inadequacy and ‘masculine fragmentation’<sup>76</sup> amongst young men expected to achieve normatively productive identities. Such approaches have been reaffirmed by a raft of contemporary scholars who cite ‘rebellious class heroes’ across Europe, inner city men ‘in search of respect’ in New York or Los Angeles, and coloured youths transforming themselves into ‘bad motherfuckers’ to invert a sense of powerlessness in Cape Town.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in Chicago and Los Angeles, Black and Latin gangs have been understood as meaningful collectives for their membership in the face of societal racism,<sup>78</sup> deriding notions that gangs are necessarily at odds with social cohesion, which is corroborated by the ‘tightknit bonds’ and ‘collective character’ of gangs in Medellín discussed previously.

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<sup>74</sup> Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature*, Allen & Unwin, (London 1928); Herbert Bloch and Arthur Niederhoffer, *The Gang: A Study of Adolescent Behavior*, (Philosophical Library, 1958); Richard Cloward & Lloyd Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A theory of delinquent gangs*. (The Free Press, 1960); Panfil and Peterson, *The Handbook of Gangs*, p.220.

<sup>75</sup> Panfil and Peterson, *The Handbook of Gangs*, p. 221.

<sup>76</sup> Tony L. Whitehead, Urban Low-Income African American Men, HIV/AIDS, and Gender Identity, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11 (1997) 411–447.

<sup>77</sup> John Muncie, *Youth & Crime: 3rd Edition*. (Sage, 2009); Joachim Kersten, in *The Eurogang Paradox: Street gangs and youth groups in the US and Europe*, in Malcome Klein, Hans-Jurgen Kerner, Cheryl Maxson & Elmar Weitekamp, (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001); Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*. James D. Vigil, *The Projects: Gang and non-gang families in East Los Angeles* (University of Texas Press, 2007); Steffen Jensen, *Gangs, Politics & Dignity in Cape Town*. (James Curry Ltd, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* (The Penguin Press, New York, 2008); Alejandro A. Alonso, Racialized Identities and the Formation of Black Gangs in Los Angeles, *Urban Geography* 25 (2004) 658–674; Eduardo Orozco Florez, *God’s Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery* (NYC Press, New York, 2013).

Accordingly, gang membership and associated violent, risky, and criminal activities are mechanisms used by disadvantaged young men as an esteem building process and alternate pathway to male adulthood. The conspicuous wealth of ‘gangsta glamour’ confers status, recognition and even social mobility upon its participants, which stands out vibrantly against a backdrop of deprivation.<sup>79</sup> This implies a degree of ‘social logic’ to the ganging process.<sup>80</sup> Young men negotiate formidable contexts in search of desired outcomes, and when doing so the gang often appears a positive opportunity as Pepe, a young man who worked at a community-based organisation in Medellín, explained:

*It’s easier to join gangs because there’s economic motivation. I think that when a boy has difficulties at home [they] run out of ideas and think ‘what am I going to do?’ An opportunity [to join a gang] seems like a good one in that situation, the first way out, their first option<sup>81</sup>*

In Medellín’s comunas populares the perpetual lack of quality education, formal work and inert class mobility reflect the dystopian tropes of Vigil’s ‘multiple marginalization’ and Castells ‘fourth world’.<sup>82</sup> In these pared back settings, dignity, understood by Jensen as the remaining refuge of the poor, is continually threatened.<sup>83</sup> This is apparent in the daily struggle of poor urban dwellers termed *rebusque* in the local lexicon: part resourcefulness to make ends meet, part savvy to negotiate everyday insecurity. To be a respected man in these settings is closely associated with hegemonic masculinities: ‘being strong, bringing home money, being a protector,

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<sup>79</sup> Karim Murji, *Gangsta glamour: youth, violence and racialised masculinities*. (Council of Europe, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Atreyee Sen, ‘For your safety’, Child vigilante squads and neo-gangsterism in urban India, in Hazen & Rodgers (eds.) *Global Gangs: Street Violence Across the World*, p. 207.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with non-gang member Pepe, 11/04/2008.

<sup>82</sup> James Vigil, *Rainbow Of Gangs*. (University of Texas Press, 2002); Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. III*. (Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>83</sup> Jensen, *Gangs, Politics & Dignity in Cape Town*, p196.



having power, being respected, being a womaniser, a chauvinist, macho, brash (sic)'.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, a man's rebusque also implies the contestation of emasculation, a way of protecting their dignity, their remaining refuge.

I always asked gang members the question 'why did you join the gang?' What stood out from their responses was the pragmatic use of the gang in aspirational terms as a reputational and asset accumulating project. The prospect of being poor and unemployed often evoked a deep fear of being looked down upon by the community, as one gang member said:

*'You've got to be able to support the family, your kid an' all that. You need to have a job in a business or something like that, so the community doesn't see you like a tramp, an undesirable who does nothin', that's shit. It would be cool to have a good job'.*<sup>85</sup>

This was further demonstrated by Sayayo, a young man in his mid-twenties and gang member since the age of fourteen. He had risen through the ranks to command a drugs corner and from the proceeds rented his own apartment, describing himself as well off:<sup>86</sup>

*Kids round here admire gang members because they drive about in luxurious cars with pretty girls. You can't go to university, get a degree, buy a car or a house an' all that. You don't have no opportunities to get that shit honestly. You gotta think how you can get it? If not you're going to be poor your whole life, your whole life a poor man... [trails off in reflection]*

The gang served a dual purpose; whilst it was instrumentalised by young men to contest indignity and emasculation, it was also an outlet for youthful ambition, a way of being a

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with non-gang member Sammy, 03/06/2008.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with gang member Mechudo, 03/06/2008.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with gang member Sayayo, 30/11/11.

successful adult male. This duality is a powerful one, as a former gang member once asked ‘look Adam, is it more dignified to rob or to beg?’.<sup>87</sup> For their protagonists, gangs are places where disenfranchised young men can ‘subversively recodify’ self-perceptions of subordination.<sup>88</sup> Joining the gang should not be understood as deviant, but rather, as part of their struggle or rebusque, and a logical use of agency in what Cruz Sierra calls the ‘dispute’ for male recognition in settings of exclusion that restrict legal ‘masculinisation opportunities’.<sup>89</sup>

The logic of gang membership in contexts of urban exclusion is corroborated by their ubiquity in Medellín’s comunas populares, and indeed, in the margins of cities across the region. As opposed to deviant youth behaviour, gangs in Medellín ought to be understood as acts of resistance by young people to a political economy that generates socio-economic marginalisation, and also as a repository of experiences and symbols that give meaning to local masculinities, which provide a narrative of the city’s history of violence. If gangs are gendered symptoms of structural restraints, to draw on Wacquant and Holsten, they are a *male* ‘collective identity machine’, and a *masculine* ‘insurgent citizenship’.<sup>90</sup> Gangs are not born of anomic community disorganisation; they are socially generated by-products of urban inequity. Notwithstanding, whilst we should be critical of the conditions that give rise to gangs, we should also be weary of idealising them as an emancipatory project given the impact of violence and crime upon populations living in the poorest neighbourhoods, and their capacity to reproduce and entrench local hegemonic masculine identities, which will now be discussed.

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<sup>87</sup> Former gang member called Cardenas, in Bogotá, 07/07/2006.

<sup>88</sup> On ‘subversive recodification’ of power relations as a micro-level subjective process see Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. 3, (Penguin Books, 2000), p. 122-123.

<sup>89</sup> Salvador Cruz Sierra, I. Cruz Sierra, S. Violencia y jóvenes: pandilla e identidad masculina en Ciudad Juárez. *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 76 (4); Baird, The violent gang and the construction of masculinity amongst socially excluded young men (2012).

<sup>90</sup> Loic Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. (Polity Press, 2008); James Holsten, in *Cities and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1999).

Becoming a duro: ‘you create fear when you do things right’

Medellín’s suffers from ‘chronic violence’, Pearce’s three-dimensional concept of enduring violence, at a high intensity, in a given location.<sup>91</sup> Gang legacies and their embedding within communities leads them to become ontologically significant, even ontological assets,<sup>92</sup> in defining barrio masculinity as standard-bearers of male success. Duros are both feared and respected, affording them considerable community authority in the far flung corners of Medellín where state influence is sparse. The most established duros are sometimes referred to as *Caciques*, pre-Columbian Chiefs, with the refrain *¿quien Caciquea por acá?* (who runs the show round here?), or even *Alcaldes Menores*, local Mayors. In addition, the somewhat mythical activities of gangs, such as spectacular uses of violence, are often embellished through word of mouth within the community, contributing to the aura around duros and their potency as symbols of barrio masculinity.<sup>93</sup> It was telling that almost all of the locals I spoke to could name them readily. Furthermore, the lived experience of barrio masculinity is distilled by the reduced spatial mobility of many young boys whose world is often limited to a few barrios. Consequently, duros have become an aspirational focal point for a number of young men, as Aristizabal observed:

*I’ve always looked at [the duros] with respect and admiration in certain ways,*

*but they also have some bad points.*

*Author: Where does that respect towards the duros come from?*

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<sup>91</sup> Jenny Pearce, *Violence, Power and Participation: Citizenship in contexts of chronic violence*. (IDS Participation Group, 2006)

<sup>92</sup> Dennis Rodgers, Youth Gangs as Ontological Assets, in *Assets, Livelihoods, and Social Policy*, in Caroline Moser and Anis A. Dani (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, Washington, 2008).

<sup>93</sup> This phenomenon is not restricted to Medellín. One example is that of *jagos*, or strongmen / gangsters in Indonesia that play a role in maintaining local order. See: Ian Wilson, The Biggest Cock: Territoriality, Invulnerability and Honour amongst Jakarta’s Gangsters, *Indonesian Studies Working Papers* 13 (2010).

*Aristizabal: The way I entered the gang was my decision. I respect them because Medellín has always had its history of respect for certain people.*

*Author: But it's strange that people respect these figures, but that they also fear them. Do you think that's true?*

*Aristizabal: You create that fear yourself when you do things right. I believe that each one of us makes our own destiny<sup>94</sup>*

In these settings, masculine habitus that shapes male ambition, combines powerfully with rebusque as gendered push-and-pull factors for gang affiliation,<sup>95</sup> where many struggling-yet-aspirational youths seek to emulate the local duro. This was laid to bare by one young man:

*Imagine [for a boy] at home there's not enough food, no loving relationships and lots of violence, and the whole time they see the duro in the neighbourhood who has got a motorbike, designer shoes, girls, expensive clothes, all that sort of stuff. But he's also got respect, recognition, power. So of course the young kids round here say 'fuck me, this is the ticket!'<sup>96</sup>*

Key to understanding gang masculinities is the role of violence, necessary for territorial control to secure drugs sales, racketeering and extortion, what Glebeek and Koonings call the 'micro-monopolies' of the street.<sup>97</sup> Controlling territory requires the use of violence against rival gang interests, whilst extortion depends upon the systematic intimidation of the local population. The externalisation of violence is reflected within the internal machinations of the gang, as one twelve year old *carrito* explained; the duro reaches his position of gang leadership by 'becoming

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with gang member Aristizabal, 15/07/2008.

<sup>95</sup> On 'push and pull' factors see James A. Densley, *Joining the Gang*, in *The Handbook of Gangs* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2015), pp. 235–256.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Pepe, non-gang youth, 11/04/2008.

<sup>97</sup> Glebeek & Koonings. *Habitat International*, p.4.

the *más malo*’, the ‘badest’, capable of publically displayed and often spectacular violence.<sup>98</sup> This means eschewing any traces femininity or non-hegemonic masculinity such as being a *loquita*, a pussy or hanger on. But a *duro* is more than just a thug, they must be dextrous enough to avoid arrest, being killed, and demonstrate good management of gang finances by keeping the money rolling in for the troops. Havana talked garishly about what ‘badness’ could entail:

*Author: Whom did you admire growing up as a kid?*

*Havana: I admired the brother of my girlfriend a lot, Manfre [a duro] rest in peace. He was a hard bastard. One Tuesday morning in ‘88, ‘89 or ‘90, a lad passed by, some arsehole, and says [something bad]. So we started throwing stones at him because we didn’t have guns back then. One of them made him crash off his bike, and Manfre went over and jumped on his chest and he passed out. There were road workers there with picks and spades, and all sorts. And Manfre did the unexpected, in the middle of the day in front of everyone. He grabbed a drill and he put it though the heart of the kid and then here [points between the eyes] through his head. Destroyed...<sup>99</sup>*

Becoming gang member requires learning and displaying ‘badness’, a necessary rite-of-passage central to the ganging process. Badness is the ‘strategic essentialisation’<sup>100</sup> of certain hegemonic masculine performances within the gang, particularly those associated with violence. In other words, it is not a static ‘hyper’ or ‘exaggerated’ masculine identity<sup>101</sup>, rather it is deployed strategically and in a timely fashion, for example, by showing courage during turf wars when

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<sup>98</sup> The *carrito* was interviewed on 19/06/2008. A *carrito* is a young gang member under the age of fifteen who runs errands for older more senior gang members, such as carrying guns, munitions, drugs and money around the neighbourhood, or acting as a look-out for rival gang and the police. *Carrito* literally means ‘trolley’.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with gang member Havana, 12/06/2008.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Garot, Gang-banging as edgework. *Dialectical Anthropology* 39, 151–163 (2015), p.158

<sup>101</sup> E.g. James W. Messerschmidt, *Crime as structured action: gender, race, class, and crime in the making* (Sage Publications, 1997); John Hagedorn, Frat Boys, Bossmen, Studs, and Gentlemen: A Typology of Gang Masculinities, in *Masculinities and Violence* (Sage Publications, 1998), pp. 152–167.

called upon. It is an acquired set of hegemonic symbols, discourses and actions, added to each youth's masculine repertoire as they 'become' a gang member, eventually operating at an intuitive level, a Bourdieuan 'cultural unconscious', as they inhabit gendered gangland realities fluidly from moment to moment. The strategically successful become the *más malos*, the baddest, the duros, and those left wanting were threatened by the humiliation of being feminised as loquitas at the other end of the gang's gender spectrum.

Like soldiering, the capacity for violence is a rite of passage into the gang and a definitive assertion of male adulthood. Notes said 'holding a gun for the first time means putting on the big trousers', and Rasta explained poetically:

*'Picking up a gun is like sitting on the highest throne, it's like... this world is mine, everything around here belongs to me. I'm the ringmaster at the circus, and everyone works for me.'*<sup>102</sup>

Semiotically, the gun is perhaps the most palpable symbol of hegemonic male power. It has an aesthetic, even libidinal quality, reflecting the emotion, seduction and 'power of commodity desire'.<sup>103</sup> As José said 'I had an incredible .57 Magnum, so you can imagine a boy seeing these guns 'ooh!' [they gasp in awe].<sup>104</sup> Mechudo added 'women like men with guns, the shooters, because it gives you power, so boys look up to you and say, 'Wow! I wanna be just like you'.<sup>105</sup> The relational notion that militarism exacerbates hegemonic masculinity in Colombia is not new, nor is the role that violence plays in compounding gender orthodoxies, although occasionally this

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with gang member Notes, 16/07/2008; Interview with gang member Rasta, 12/11/11.

<sup>103</sup> Deborah Curtis. *Pleasures and perils: Girls' sexuality in a Caribbean consumer culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2009).

<sup>104</sup> Interview with former gang member José 20/07/2008.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with gang member Mechudo 03/06/2008.

is disputed.<sup>106</sup> When applied to gangs in the comunas populares, the imagery of violence and the cultural production of gang infamy are potent. Overtime, gang displays have become signifiers of success for many disenfranchised young boys, which can be seen clearly when they are out partying on weekends, to which I will now turn.

### Gang displays and the semiotics of masculinity in *La Salle*

Lancaster noted in Managua that ‘by adolescence boys enter a competitive arena where signs of masculinity are actively struggled for by wresting them away from other boys around them’.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, the comunas populares of Medellín can be understood as a Bourdieuan field where adolescents vie for masculine capital and corresponding status and identity. Of course, there is no standard form of masculinity; not all young men aspire to hegemonic identities, gang life, nor vie for the same masculine capital.<sup>108</sup> If they did, the gang would be even more popular given its relative position of capital strength in poor neighbourhoods. However, masculine capital acquired through the gang is dependent upon performance and timely public displays to have meaning. Capital is at once material, including motorbikes, trainers, money and guns, and symbolic of male success, by generating respect, status, and sexual access to women, amongst other ‘benefits’.

Observing capital in the field is a semiotic process befitting of the ethnographer, and in

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<sup>106</sup> Donny Meertens, Conflicto armado exacerba el machismo. *El Espectador* (2014). see <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/paz/el-conflicto-armado-exacerba-el-machismo-donny-meertens-articulo-534172> 30/08/2015; Kimberly Theidon, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*; Paul Kirby & Marsha Henry, Rethinking Masculinity and Practices of Violence in Conflict Settings. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, (2012); Dietrich Ortega, Looking Beyond Violent Militarized Masculinities. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, 489–507 (2012).

<sup>107</sup> Lancaster, *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, Parker and Aggleton (eds.), p108

<sup>108</sup> For a discussion see: Baird, 2012. Negotiating Pathways to Manhood: Rejecting Gangs and Violence in Medellín’s Periphery. *Journal of Conflictology*, pp.30–41.

Bourdieuian terms, where habitus becomes visible. *La Salle* is a typical main street in a poor neighbourhood up in the hills overlooking Medellín. During the day, it bustles with life: mini-markets, bakers, butchers, and motorbike mechanics. At weekends it transforms into a notorious gangland party strip, as Negra, a former girlfriend of a gang member said ‘you’ll only find junkies and gangsters there. There are no law-abiding people, not one’.<sup>109</sup> From around 10 p.m. the bars start to blare out competing ballenato, porra, and reggaeton music; salsa is considered a little old-fashioned. Gang members begin to pull up and park their motorbikes in long rows outside bars, sometimes with a *mosa* or *grilla*, a lover or weekend girlfriend, on the back. Occasionally a duro will arrive in a 4x4 *camioneta* SUV. The men sit looking out onto the street drinking *girafas*, tall tubes containing litres of beer with a small serving tap at the bottom, *aguardiente* licour or on occasion the more prestigious Chivas Regal whisky. The gangs’ interactions with girls and women were most publically visible through *mosas* ‘displayed’ during raucous partying in places like La Salle. It was unnerving to see girls as young as 12 years old, made up and dressed in short skirts, parading past the tables of men outside the bars. Negra called this their ‘biological moment’ when they had reached puberty and were old enough ‘to go out and party’, although most appeared to be in their late teens and early twenties. La Salle is decadent, and the girls would gradually accompany men at the tables and join them in drinking, then dancing and drug taking inside the bars, which could ensue well into the next day, reflecting experiences of *el vácil* gangland nights out observed by Dickson-Gomez in El Salvador.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Former girlfriend of a gang member, Negra, 11/10/2011.

<sup>110</sup> Dickson-Gomez et al., *Journal of Gang Research*



The successful man in La Salle is one who owns a fast *Pulsar* motorcycle, wears expensive trainers and jeans and has the capacity to attract girls, as one young man who was not in a gang lamented:<sup>111</sup>

*There aren't any heroes [for young people], just unfortunate imaginaries of what the 'good life' is. It's about owning things; young men need to show off. Life is about partying, good clothes, having a motorbike. The role models that kids around here look up to are the ones who have taken up offers from gangs and today they live well, so that is presented as an excellent option for them.*

La Salle was where gang members came to flaunt capital loudly and brightly as the semiotics of masculinity played out situationally, not statically, amidst structural conditions of exclusion. Bourdieu argued that 'timing and choice of occasion' of exchanging gifts gives them social meaning, 'it is all a question of style, [where] almost all important exchanges have their own particular moments'.<sup>112</sup> Partying in La Salle was a ritualization of interactions whose 'timing and occasion' were socially efficient at promoting the gang's masculinity, membership benefits and 'success', precisely because these were 'seen from outside'<sup>113</sup> by the on-looking public. Gang members seeking these rewards must in turn follow the rules of the game by exchanging or 'giving back' to the duro and the gang collective at strategic moments. For example, by displaying the 'badness' and violence necessary to secure extortion monies from scared locals, or by 'going to war' against rival gangs when called upon (at great risk to themselves) to defend the gang's territorial interests.

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with non-gang member Pelicorto, 10/06/2008.

<sup>112</sup> Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p.6.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid*, p.5.

Promoting or defending the gang's interests represented an exchange of 'services for capital', an informal contract or gangland *quid pro quo* that members had to grasp at some level: 'if the system is to work, the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges'.<sup>114</sup> Any individual unwilling to comply with these exchanges is likely to be marginalised and eventually expelled, because 'until he has given in return, the receiver... sees his capital diminished from day to day'.<sup>115</sup> This is exemplified by the gang's treatment of loquitas, literally a hysterical little girl or pussy, the hangers-on who seek to acquire the benefits of gang membership but are unwilling to 'give in return'. They are feminised and ridiculed for their lack of 'badness', in juxtaposition to the duro, and are eventually excluded, thus consolidating the gender order of the gang.

Of course, gang displays in La Salle did not captivate nor appeal to all young people in the neighbourhood, and the relationship between capital and identity is complex,<sup>116</sup> but the consistency with which gang members referred to some type of masculine capital displayed by the gang as a pull-factor for joining was striking. The vivacity of these displays was paramount in strengthening the gang's ontological reach in terms of male identity formation, reflecting what one gang member's girlfriend referred to as *el power* of the gang.<sup>117</sup> In other words, gangs gain ground in defining what successful manhood is relative to other male identities in the community, which as Zubillaga has similarly noted in Caracas, augments motivations for gang affiliation.<sup>118</sup> It is also important understand *el power* in terms of its impact on boys and youths

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<sup>114</sup> *ibid*, p.6.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid*, p.6.

<sup>116</sup> E.g. On commodities and identity formation see Curtis. *Pleasures and perils: Girls' sexuality in a Caribbean consumer culture*.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with former gang member girlfriend, Femina, 13/10/11.

<sup>118</sup> Zubillaga, *Youth Violence in Latin America: Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective in Perspective*.

given the age at which they join gangs, which across this study was an average of fifteen years old. These were impressionable youngsters stepping out into the world at a time when masculine habitus, the latent desires for manhood, push to the surface. This is a period in a young person's life when drinking and partying with friends, riding a motorbike, having sex, or money in your pocket for the first time were novel, therefore particularly meaningful experiences.

*Havana: Like I said we live in a city with lots of partying so you need nice things, nice earrings, a motorbike... So at that time I was famous as 'the lad from La Terraza' [gang]. And the trainers I had! Back then you could get trainers for \$15,000 pesos [US\$5], I wore ones that cost over \$300,000 [US\$100]. So I robbed to buy my trainers, my clothes, for a good woman.*

*Author: For your self-esteem?*

*Havana: Those things made me feel good. In that period La Terraza was famous and that inflates your ego. In the end there's nothing like La Terraza. And then we got the girls, on our motorbikes with pussy on the back, as the saying goes.<sup>119</sup>*

The symbolism of attracting young women was extremely powerful as an affirmation of hegemonic masculine success. As Cruz Sierra aptly notes from Mexico's gang culture '*entre más mujeres tienes eres más chingon*', the more women you have, the more badass you are.<sup>120</sup> It was clear from gang members' narratives that sexual access to coveted young women was, in part, another masculine capital they aspired to. Therefore, displaying *mosas* in settings such as La Salle strengthened both the individual and gang performances as sites of hetero-normative male success. Of course, relationships between gang members and *mosas* are complex; where young

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with gang member Havana, 12/06/2008.

<sup>120</sup> Salvador Cruz Sierra, *Violencia y jóvenes: pandilla e identidad masculina en Ciudad Juárez*. *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 76, p. 627

women's agency in seeking such relationships plays out alongside their vulnerability and frequent sexual victimisation,<sup>121</sup> issues which I have discussed at length elsewhere<sup>122</sup>.

Unsurprisingly then, sexual access to women was a staple discussion point raised by gang members during interviews. They often claimed that attracting women required 'making a name' for themselves, and that joining the gang was a sure-fire way of doing so, as Jarrón said 'the baddest gang member is the one who gets the best girl, has the best motorbike, you just get carried away with it all'.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, Aristizábal explained:

*Yeah, well [I joined the gang] for a lot of reasons. I was looking for easy money, for luxuries, women... women today are only interested in material things, being with a duro to feel like they're with someone with power. Gang members go for the young girls who want to go to parties*<sup>124</sup>

Mechudo led a small gang of teenagers that ran a lucrative drugs vending point on the edge of his neighbourhood located high up on the north-eastern hillside of the city. I asked him what legal job offer would tempt him to leave the gang, giving him a similar type of social status to understand *el power* of the gang from a different angle:

*Ahhh yeah a job, yeah. I'd like to work but there's nothin' to do bro. I wish there was work. Round here it's tough. In Medellín it's really hard*

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<sup>121</sup> On sexual violence and the gang also see: Mo Hume & Polly Wilding, 2015. "Es que para ellos el deporte es matar": Rethinking the scripts of violent men in El Salvador and Brazil. In Auyero, Bourgois, & Scheper-Hughes, eds. *Violence at the Urban Margins*; Mark Totten, Girlfriend Abuse as a Form of Masculinity Construction among Violent, Marginal Male Youth. *Men and Masculinities* 6, 70–92 (2003); Phillipe Bourgois, Everyday violence of gang rape, in Nancy Scheper-Hughes & Phillipe Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology* (Blackwell Pub., 2004).

<sup>122</sup> Baird, Duros & Gangland Girlfriends: Male Identity and Gang Socialisation in Medellín.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with gang member Jarrón, 19/06/2008.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with gang member Aristizabal, 15/07/2008

*to find a job, I wish there was something to do, like I say it's tough, it's tough,  
I haven't got a job.*

*Author: [For you to leave the gang] what sort of job would it take?*

*Mechudo: A stable job and to get ahead, a good, good job that pays you  
some dough. You need to have a job in a company or something like that...*

*Err, like working in a bank downtown. One of those jobs. [I like] how they  
wear a suit, how they are polite and treat people well. I'd like to work in a  
bank, not just for the money but for the status it gives you, working in a decent  
job at a good company.<sup>125</sup>*

It transpired as we talked, that the job of equivalent standing to his position in the gang 'for the status it gives you' would be a bank manager in the city. It was clear parallel indication of the standing and esteem that gang life afforded him. This was confirmed one evening when we overlooked the lights of the city below as customers rolled up regularly to buy drugs. Mechudo had aguardiente in one hand, a joint in the other, and money and cocaine in his pocket. He was *el power* personified as he said 'from up here we're just like the bourgeoisie'.<sup>126</sup>

## **Conclusions**

In Medellín's comunas populares, the masculinities of gang life are a repository of meaning that narrate the city's history of violence. Where masculine habitus underlies youths' urge to be productive and locally valued men, exclusion and poverty collude to block legal and dignified

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with gang member Mechudo 03/06/2008.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with gang member Mechudo, 12/10/11.

pathways to manhood. Consequently, as disenfranchised male youths use rebusque, the daily struggle to survive, there is practical logic to joining the gang which stands out, not just as a mechanism for survival, but for demonstrable success, as a capital rich site for male identity formation.

Gang members rarely said they joined ‘to be violent’ bar the occasional case of revenge, rather, the use of violence was developed after affiliation. Survival and progress within the gang required becoming ‘bad’, the learning and performance of which was added to the gendered repertoire of each youth’s behaviour. Gang members were not permanently committed to ‘badness’ all of the time, rather it was used strategically when and where required. This range allowed duros to kill and to also be loving fathers on the same day.

The timing and occasion of displays of masculine capital and badness provided them with enhanced meaning. The gang was a space of camaraderie and bonding. Combined with the capital accumulation and conspicuous displays of their riches in places like La Salle, this gave the gang *el power* to become ontologically significant for local meanings of masculinity, particularly for boys and male youths coming-of-age, a juncture in their lives when they begin to seek out productive pathways to adulthood. As such, the gang was socially cohesive for its membership, insulating young men against their very real fears of emasculation. This was highlighted by the gang’s capacity to transform these young men from feeling like ‘a tramp, an undesirable, a poor man your whole life’ into the ‘bourgeoisie’.<sup>127</sup> When gang members ‘went to war’, they were not just defending their territory and economic interests, they were defending the

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<sup>127</sup> Interviews with gang member Mechudo, 03/06/2008 and 12/10/11; with gang member Sayayo, 30/11/11.

group's collective identity, their esteem, social status and manliness, which ultimately protected them from the multiple threats of exclusion and associated emasculation.

There were implicit, unwritten rules to gang life; even a twelve-year-old *carrito* came to understand the Bourdieuan exchanges of 'masculine capital for gang services', where being cunning, 'bad' and not behaving like a *loquita*, secured continued privileges of membership that lit up places like La Salle. The promotion of 'badness' shaped the gender order of the gang, from the most admired, violent and capital laden *duros*, the *más malos*, at one end of the spectrum, to the feminised, capital-less *loquitas* at the other. Becoming the *más malo*, underpinned the gender dimensions and violence of the ganging process in Medellín, driving the social and cultural reproduction of the gang itself. These are powerful forces indeed. Lamentably, when discussing these issues with community leaders over the years, it does not appear that *el power* of the gang nor *duro* symbolism is on the wane.