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# **Gang glocalization: How a global mediascape creates and shapes local gang realities**

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## **Abstract**

This article introduces the concept of 'gang glocalization' to capture the processes by which global media myths and conventions create and shape local gang realities. The different stages of gang glocalization, and the motives to engage in this process, are examined by comparison of two empirical cases – Congolese gangs in Brussels and Afro-Caribbean gangs in London. This multi-sited ethnography finds that youth use fiction and imagination in order to create individual and collective gang identities. Police and political action against gangs is then informed by the same fiction and imagination, resulting in new gang realities based not on what is real. We find that mythmaking is an essential aspect of gangs – without the myth there is no gang – and that imagination is at the core of some of its most harmful activities, namely spectacular symbolic violence. This is an update on Thrasher's (1927) old themes. The driving forces behind gang glocalization are emotions and desires tied to lived experiences of social and cultural exclusion. Implications for research and practice follow.

## **Keywords**

Ethnography, gangs, globalization, imagination, race

The father of gang research, Frederick Thrasher, exhibited a deep interest in the contribution of fiction and human imagination to the construction of gangs and the lived experience of gang membership. In his seminal work *The Gang* (1927), chapters entitled, 'The quest for a new experience' (pp. 82–101), 'The movies and the dime novel' (pp. 102–115) and 'The role of the romantic' (pp. 116–131) reported that fiction was a key resource in the gang's 'symbolic organization'

(see Densley, 2012) and that imagination was the driving force behind the gang's formation. Among other insights, Thrasher observed that, '[t]he movies ... provide a cheap and easy escape from reality and they furnish the gang boy with patterns for his play and his exploits' (Thrasher, 1927: 102). In later work, Thrasher (1949) even addressed the question of whether media (i.e. comic books) caused violence, a topic that continues to invite debate (see Huesmann, 2007; Surette, 2015).

Yet, fiction and imagination are somewhat forgotten themes in gang scholarship. Since the 1960s, 'social problems' like crime and delinquency have become the primary behaviour of interest in gang research (for a review, see Pyrooz and Mitchell, 2015: 41). By the mid-20th century, Thrasher's view of gangs as 'play groups' was anachronism, absurd even, to the extent that Jim Short found 'The movies and the dime novel' surplus to requirements of the second edition (Thrasher and Short, 1965). Continued emphasis on the role of gangs in delinquency, coupled with the 'quantification of gang research' from the late 1980s to today (Pyrooz and Mitchell, 2015: 42), has meant few gang studies (c.f. Dimitriadis, 2006; Katz, 1988; Densley, 2012) have considered fiction and imagination as important topics of inquiry in their own right. This lack of attention constitutes a veritable paradox in contemporary gang studies, as both qualitative and quantitative gang researchers consistently report on the many ways in which 'urban legends' and other forms of fiction affect the gangs they study (e.g. Fraser, 2015; Howell and Griffiths, 2016).

The current study attempts to revive and update Thrasher's lost theme by advancing the concept of 'gang glocalization'. The word glocalization, a portmanteau of globalization and localization, originated in Japanese business practices, but when it is applied to explain broader cultural projects, it captures the adaptation of global artefacts around the particularities of the local culture in which they appear (Roudometof, 2016). Glocalization has been alluded to in criminology in general (e.g. Hobbs, 1998) and in gang studies in particular (e.g. Hagedorn, 2008; Ilan, 2015), but has never been fully unpacked. Here we find it elegantly captures why and how a global mediascape creates and shapes local gang realities. To illustrate such processes, we analyze findings from two ethnographic studies – one with gangs in Brussels, Belgium, and the other with gangs in London, UK – in comparative perspective.

This article is organized as follows. First, we review the literature that examines the relationship between gangs and fiction, including disparate but complementary work on 'conventional signaling' (Gambetta, 2009) and 'global cultural flows' (Appadurai, 1996). Next, we discuss our data sources and methods. The findings section draws on the two empirical studies and sets out the stages of gang glocalization and motives to engage in this process. We demonstrate how 'hood films' and television dramas like *New Jack City* and *The Wire* serve as contemporary examples of Thrasher's films, comic books and dime novels. We find that the driving force behind gang glocalization is emotions and desires. The global and the local interact when the local emotional climate, shaped by discrimination, racism and social exclusion, merges with young people's experience of the narrative world depicted in gang fiction. Some conclusions follow, with implications for gang research and practice.

## Literature review

### Gang myths and realities

Gangs and gang members share a tenuous relationship with reality (Best and Hutchinson, 1996; Howell, 2007; Howell and Griffiths, 2016). To begin with, gangs are often easier to describe than

define and even the most widely used definitions reflect ‘consensus’ rather than unanimity of opinion (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Then, there is the fact that gangs as collectives promulgate myths, sometimes strategically (Felson, 2006), to foster social cohesion and escape predation (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Gang members as individuals likewise engage in mythmaking to establish ‘legitimacy’ and boost ‘street capital’ (Harding, 2014; Lauger, 2012). To further complicate matters, ‘gang talkers’ (Hallsworth, 2013; Hallsworth and Young, 2008) from academics to journalists, politicians to criminal justice practitioners, disseminate so many fallacies about gangs, at times literally ‘making up gangs’ (Fraser and Atkinson, 2014), that Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004: 92) have concluded that, ‘[t]he central myth is that the gang exists’.

The convergence of gang styles and sensibilities in recent years, and the presence of traditional gangs from Chicago and Los Angeles (e.g. Bloods and Crips) as far afield as suburban and rural America, Europe and Africa, add credence to this notion (e.g. Densley, 2013; Maxson, 1998; Roks, 2017; Van Gemert, 2001; Van Gemert et al., 2016). The emergence of ‘copycat gangs’, wrongly conceived as subsections of real life gangs (Maxson, 1998), certainly reflect more the cultural transmission of ideas than the migration of peoples (see Decker et al., 2009). Such gangs have more in common with traditional gang style and affectation than organization or behaviour. In some cases, such gangs are ‘all symbol, no substance’ in terms of delinquent behaviour (Klein, 2004: 26).

For decades, therefore, gang members, next to media sources, have been known to be excellent mythmakers (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Lauger, 2014). Seldom operationalized, mythmaking is defined here as a process, whereby ‘impression management’ through performance (Goffman, 1959) interacts with socially shared narratives in an ‘upwards and downwards’ construction of reality (Hayward and Young, 2004). The outcome is ‘a credible, dramatic, socially constructed representation of perceived realities that people accept as permanent, fixed knowledge of reality while forgetting (if they were ever aware of it) its tentative, imaginative, created and perhaps fictional qualities’ (Nimmo and Combs, 1980: 16).

Mythmaking resonates in a world where fiction and fact are increasingly separate from each other and ‘the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street’ (Hayward and Young, 2004: 259). Much of a gang’s activity revolves around making their presence felt (Felson, 2006). In this perspective, ‘gang parading’ (Katz, 1988) is more integral to the gang’s existence than crime as it makes otherwise ‘unimaginable, transcendent possibilities now sensed as real’ (Katz, 1988: 144). Parading, referred to as ‘loafing’ by Thrasher (1927: 100), entails loitering in public space, which may seem pointless to the casual observer, but is highly meaningful in practice because it transforms public space into a ‘staging area’ (Anderson, 1999: 76) for the presentation of conventional signals (e.g. colours and other insignia) that demark membership in diffusely threatening groups (Gambetta, 2009).

Gambetta (1993: 129) posits that there are three ways of dealing with the symbolism of groups such as gangs: (1) take it all at face value, understanding the mythology of the gangs as a realistic representation of the actual thing; (2) disregard the whole complex of symbols as an ‘elaborate fiction’; or (3) reach for a middle path, acknowledging that ‘the myth lends force to a reality which would not otherwise be able to manifest itself’. Empirical evidence tends to favour the middle path. The image of gangs is both related to reality (even if this relation is in many ways distorted) and is useful in constructing reality (in the sense that real gang members draw on and take advantage of myths) (Lauger, 2014). In the case of the Sicilian mafia, for example, Gambetta (1993)

demonstrates how criminal reality exists independently of the fictional representation, but that such a representation serves to stabilize the gang's symbolism, and helps its members to be recognized for what they are by outsiders. The fact that the fictional representation adopted by the members is technically incorrect is no obstacle.

To meet audience expectations (Felson, 2006), for instance, copycat gangs 'mimic' (Howell, 2007) the 'conventional and iconic signals' of other gangs, items which 'convey information understood by convention rather than by an intrinsic link with the message' (Gambetta, 2009: xiv). A conventional or symbolic signal can be anything – a name, an item of clothing, a catchphrase – that is produced in a way that ensures coordination, so that everyone will correctly understand the signal if it appears in real life. Hence, in gang-affected neighbourhoods, it is 'common knowledge' (e.g. Chwe, 2001) that red means Bloods or blue means Crips, and when someone sees these 'external symbols' of gang membership they respond as if the person is a gang member (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: 75).

There is no style guide or etiquette school for gang members and no coordinating and standardizing authority regulating gang 'performances' (Garot, 2010). For this reason, '[h]ow a real [gang member] should behave, dress, and speak are questions for which there is no optimal technical solution that presents itself independently of what others do and perceive as the meaning of their action' (Gambetta, 2009: 264). Media about 'notorious gangs' (e.g. Fourie, 2010; Klein, 1995) provide some answers, but so too do fictional accounts of gang life, in the sense that they also offer 'common knowledge', which is the foundation of coordination in the absence of a central authority (Chwe, 2001). The widespread influence of the *Godfather* trilogy on mafia groups in the United States (Rafter and Brown, 2011), Sicily (Gambetta, 1993) and Russia (Stephenson, 2015) highlights this point. So too does evidence that the TV series *Gomorra* is shaping both the style and substance of local Camorra clans in Naples (Savino, 2016). As Densley (2012: 61) writes, 'gangs invoke fiction to make people believe they are real'.

Ricoeur (1979: 141) observes that, '[t]hrough fiction new realities become open to us and old worlds are made new'. Fiction, notably films and music, can create both signals that carry meaning that previously did not exist, and signals that can be recycled by gang members for their own purposes, even though in their origins and normal usage the signals have nothing to do with gangs (Gambetta, 2009; Varese, 2006). Such signals take hold in part because they are derived from institutions capable of reaching large audiences (Hagedorn, 2008).

## Gangs and the global mediascape

The term 'mediascape', coined by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1990: 9), indexes the 'electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information' (i.e. the different communication media) and 'the images of the world created by these media'. In a digital world, where films and music are supplemented by social media (e.g. Peterson and Densley, 2017), such imagery can directly influence, through persuasive techniques and an increasingly pervasive presence, the way that people perceive reality – including the reality of gangs.

Prior research has examined the films and music that depict gangs and gang-related themes (e.g. Hagedorn, 2008; Kubrin, 2005, 2006; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). The success of 'hood films' such as *Menace II Society* (1993) and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), or

‘gangster rap’ music, for example, resides on its perceived ‘authenticity’ and how accurately it reflects life in the urban ghetto (Harkness, 2013). For this reason, many hood films are shot on location on the West Coast of the United States, an area notorious for gang activity (Fisher, 2006: xii), and many rap artists adopt a ‘streetwise identity’ based on a ‘working knowledge’ of gangs and crime (Cutler, 2003). Rap, in particular, has been singled out as an ‘educating force’, teaching gang members how to act and respond in urban environments (Lozon and Bensimon, 2017). Studies have examined how seminal rap artists like Tupac Shakur are critical frames of reference for gang youth, both because they constitute a broader symbolic vocabulary in and beyond gangs, and because they represent qualities to which young gang members aspire (Hagedorn, 2008). Prestholdt (2009: 203) argues that Tupac in particular resonated because, ‘He offered allegories of invincibility, a voice for sentiments of frustration and angst, and reassurance that those caught in and perpetrating cycles of violence were not alone’.

The rise of mediascape has been a defining feature of the last two decades – as has the rise of cultural criminology (Ferrell et al., 2015: 172). The ‘blurring distinction between the virtual and the actual’ (Ferrell et al., 2015: 172), or between what is fact and what is fiction (e.g. Johansen and Søndergaard, 2010), what Baudrillard (1998) describes as ‘hyper-reality’, is but one consequence of this. Further, media consumption can cease functioning as a means to ‘escape from reality’, as Thrasher (1927: 102) argued, but rather, can form a means to ‘imagine’ it. Appadurai (1996: 5) explains: ‘Imagination has become an organised field of social practices ... A form of work and a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility’.

The work of imagination in the mediascape means that people not only fantasize about a different life, but also take action to pursue lifestyles beyond their own locality, largely on the basis of nothing more than their imagination. The mediascape delivers ‘scripts of imagined lives’ that people can use to construct ‘imagined worlds’ (Appadurai, 2006: 35). People come to understand particular realities exclusively based on representations diffused by this mediascape – or, in Wolf’s (2013) words, ‘worlds at hand’. Thus, without any actual encounter with that reality, transmediating media consumers are able to tailor representations with the use of their imagination. The result is ‘an infinite hall of mirrors where images created and consumed by criminals, criminal subcultures, media institutions, and audiences bounce endlessly off the other’ (Ferrell, 1999: 397). For example, Afrika Bambaataa, the ‘Godfather’ of hip-hop and founder of the first hip-hop organization, The Zulu Nation, said that the 1964 film *Zulu* inspired the name for his group (Cheng, 2005). In other words, a group comprised of youth co-opted from the Black Spades street gang, that celebrated African culture and heritage, was named after a film celebrating English imperialism.

## Towards gang glocalization

Gangs were once bounded entities, hence early researchers described gang members as ‘corner boys’ and gangs as ‘corner groups’ (e.g. Miller, 1958; Whyte, 1955). ‘Global cultural flows’ (Appadurai, 1996) and revolutionary developments in transportation and communication have changed this (Roks, 2017), to the extent that gangs now are increasingly understood as unbounded ‘networks’ defined socially rather than spatially (Sierra-Arevalo and Papachristos, 2015). The global mediascape has restructured the means by which individuals

perform individual and collective gang identities (Lauger and Densley, 2017). Gangs are now global phenomena, in some cases commodified, but still locally realized (see Hagedorn, 2008), and this urges us to reconsider Thrasher's (1927) foundational work on the role of imagination in gangs in terms of 'glocalization'.

Glocalization refers to the simultaneity of universalizing (global) and particularizing (local) tendencies (Robertson, 1995) in what is an increasingly unbounded world (Appadurai, 1996). Some define glocalization as globalization experienced locally, 'refracted' through a local lens (e.g. Alexander, 2003). Others argue only the 'glocal' exists and we are neither global nor local, although it is unclear whether glocalization is a 'bottom up' response to the global (Robertson, 2013), or a 'top down' adaptation to the local (e.g. Ritzer, 2003). Whether the global and the local are mutually exclusive or interconnected and reciprocally interpenetrating principles is also subject to debate (e.g. Beck, 2000, 2006). Still, glocalization accounts for the many ways in which people incorporate the products of a global mediascape into their everyday lives. Such a phenomenon is well documented outside of criminology (for a review, see Roudometof, 2016); however, its potential to explain gang life remains untapped.

From its title, *Urban Legends*, for example, one might expect Fraser's (2015) book to have examined the intersection of popular culture and street culture, but instead his work grapples more with the collateral consequences of neoliberalism and globalization for gang formation and control. This, and the ways in which street culture is intertwined with processes of social exclusion and inclusion, are resurgent themes in gang studies (e.g. Ilan, 2015; Pitts, 2008), but neglect an important part of the story. Part of the challenge is that it is difficult to conduct the type of multi-site, multi-method, comparative research necessary to capture gang glocalization in action (see Klein, 2005). The present study, however, advances a comparative, multisite ethnography to achieve this goal. It is more directly focused on how gang members interpret their mediascape realities, but the perspectives of control agents are also included where they directly intersect with the lives of gang members. The following questions guide us: What role do fiction and imagination play in the lives of gang members? How exactly are images delivered by mass media incorporated in local gang repertoires? Before engaging with these questions, let us introduce the methodology and the two empirical cases: Congolese gangs in Brussels, Belgium, and Afro-Caribbean gangs in London, UK.

## Method

We recognize that the term 'gang' is contested (see Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004), which makes comparative research on 'gangs' difficult (for a discussion, see Fraser and Hagedorn, 2016), but the 'consensus Eurogang definition' of durable and street-orientated youth groups whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity (Klein and Maxson, 2006: 4) was designed for such purposes and is sufficiently general to capture the essence of the groups described herein. The first empirical case, conducted by the first author from 2010 to 2012, entailed participant observation with one black African gang and in-depth interviews with 30 young men, aged 18 to 35, embedded within seven different black African gangs in Brussels. Data were triangulated with interviews from local criminal justice professionals, judicial files, parliamentary proceedings, media coverage of gangs and content from gang-related 'web blogs' and rap videos (Van Hellefont 2012).



The second case, conducted by the second author from 2008 to 2010, comprised fieldwork with 12 black Afro-Caribbean gangs and semi-structured interviews with 69 young men and women, aged 13 to 34, embedded in gangs. This study also included interviews with more than 100 people who were in contact with gangs in the course of their personal and professional lives (e.g. law enforcement and outreach workers) and content analysis of media sources (Densley, 2013).

While the London study included women, only men are quoted in this article. The quotes are coded and differentiated by location (London or Brussels) and a number representing the order in which they were interviewed. Both studies were approved by their relevant human subjects' committees and adhered to important ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality.

The methodological principle underlying this comparative study is that of a focused 'heuristic revisit' (Burawoy, 2003). Simply put: one ethnographer compares his or her own fieldwork with another ethnographer's documentation. The revisit here was 'focused', meaning the original field-notes and interview transcripts from the two field sites were axially re-coded using a protocol covering the themes of fiction, imagination and related concerns. The comparative analysis was dialectic (between both researchers) and reflexive. Once consensus was reached, data were re-analyzed in a comparative perspective. The fact that both studies gave precedence to the voices of gang youth and were markedly similar in approach, relying on gatekeepers, snowball sampling and the valid and reliable method of 'self-nomination' of gang status (see Decker et al., 2014), for example, facilitated this type of analysis. Still, some limitations must be acknowledged.

First, this is not a true 'global exchange' (Fraser and Hagedorn, 2016: 5). The second author worked from the first author's English translations of their original French and Dutch data. Second, only half of the London interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, compared to all the Brussels interviews. Third, while we both occupied social positions 'other' to our research subjects in terms of race and class (us: white, privileged; them: black, disadvantaged) and we both had to overcome some barriers to acceptance (i.e. geography, language), one of us is female and the other male, and it would be naïve to think that our gender identity did not influence our experience in the field and out of it. Acknowledging this fact is key to a reflexive approach to ethnography.

The most vital added value of a comparative ethnography is that it opposes positivist claims that ethnographic data, despite its 'thick description', have minimal relevance beyond the local context from which they are collected (Katz, 1997). Instead, the current study should be framed within the growing field of global ethnography (e.g. Burawoy et al., 2000).

## Findings

### The origins of gang glocalization: Fiction and metaphor

Gang affiliated youth and gang practitioners alike explained the rise of gangs in Brussels in reference to one film, *New Jack City*, which charts the rise and fall of megalomaniacal crime lord Nino Brown, played by Wesley Snipes. Their advice was to 'watch *New Jack City*' (Brussels 15) and 'everything started because of *New Jack City*' (Brussels 8). As one interviewee explained, '[i]t started because of a movie. A movie released in the [United] States: *New Jack City*. And well,



afterwards, it just started here' (Brussels 17). Law enforcement as well were, and still are, strongly convinced that *New Jack City* was the root of the gang phenomenon in Brussels. This is because 'The New Jacks' were the first registered gang in Brussels and they derived their name from the film:

Ok, *New Jack City*, in the beginning, it was abstract. But if you copy *New Jack City* ... I mean it was imaginary in the beginning, but it did become real ... That's the power of street thugs ... They created something real out of nothing. (Brussels 5)

*New Jack City* was the highest grossing independent film of 1991 in the United States. The label 'New Jack Cinema' is still used to refer to the range of hood movies that were released in its wake (Aristide, 2013). The film is also widely believed to have triggered real gang violence (Collison, 1996; Przemieniecki, 2005), so much so that some small mall theatre owners refused to screen it (Baker, 1999). The film continues to be associated with gang and 'street' life and is an important source of inspiration for those who want to represent it. For instance, *New Jack City* supposedly inspired the graphics of the renowned *Grand Theft Auto* videogame series. Hagedorn (1997: 14) even uses the category 'New Jacks' to refer to those gang members who 'over-conform and live out exaggerated fantasies of the success they believe rich white people enjoy'. Davis (2006: 179) likewise uses the term 'New Jack City' to emphasize the dangerousness of Los Angeles.

London lacked a central organizing *fictional* narrative for its gang 'origin story', but the narrative was still very much a global one. It was also a historical one, which was a crucial difference between the two research sites. In the 1960s, the Jamaican diaspora introduced 'rude boy' culture to the UK, including fashion inspired by American cowboy and [Prohibition era] gangster films, and 'sound system' ska, rocksteady or reggae music that filled warehouses, clubs and street corners (Staple, 2009). The violence that sometimes occurred at dancehalls and its association with the rude boy lifestyle inevitably brought its adherents into conflict with police. Popular media images of black youth in London had, by the 1970s, established a link between race, crime and disorder.

A full history of race and police-community relations in Britain is beyond the scope of this article (see instead Gilroy, 1987; Pryce, 1979). In short, however, by the later 1960s and early 1970s, the West Indian community was absorbing new ideas about 'Black' identity and cultural consciousness emerging from the American civil rights movement, and developing new styles and sensibilities in and around African heritage, which were in antithesis to mainstream white sensibilities. The Rastafarian movement in particular positioned itself in opposition to white colonial capitalism and, in part because its adherents considered the prohibited drug cannabis a sacrament (Pryce, 1979), it was interpreted as indicative of a new gangland phenomenon. The police, in turn, began to intensely supervise and saturate the new native 'colonies' at the heart of the city (Hall et al., 1978: 357). Before long, drug use and historically reoccurring forms of street crime were redefined as examples of 'black specific' transgressions, 'somehow expressive of the ethnicity of those who carry them out' (Gilroy, 1987: 117).

Under the rubric of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, known colloquially as the 'sus law' because it permitted a police officer to stop and search an individual based on *suspicion* alone, disproportionate patrolling practices and frequent stop and account tactics emerged. The subsequent loss of confidence in the police felt by the black community contributed to further adoption of oppressive

policing methods, which allowed crime to increase and culminated in the 1981 Brixton riots (Lea and Young, 1984). Alienated from the police and other agents of social control, the children of the ‘Windrush Generation’ plunged deeper into lives defined by crime (Gilroy, 1987). Conflicts between the police and corner groups of youth in many cases contributed to the creation of more formalized structures and, ultimately, gangs.

Interviewees further associated the rise of modern ‘gangs’ with the ‘Yardies’ (a term derived from the patois for home or ‘yard’) who during the 1990s exported their violent trade in crack cocaine from the garrison communities of Kingston, Jamaica to areas of Caribbean settlement in London (Pitts, 2008). Jamaica has one of highest murder rates in the world and serves as a strategic trans-shipment point for cocaine traffickers – a backstory that fed the myth that the Yardies were a new breed of criminal. As Thompson (1995: 58) writes, the Yardies’ ‘willingness to display and use guns has virtually forced other criminals, black and white, to do the same, or risk being ripped off or shot dead by their Yardie counterparts’.

The gangs that grew up inspired by and in response to the Yardies, immortalized in the dance-hall music scene, however, used fiction to compensate for their lack of ‘gangsta’ heritage. Like the New Jacks in Brussels, the Stockwell-based ABM (All ‘Bout Money) drew its name from that of the fictional Philadelphia gang portrayed in the 2002 hood movie *State Property*, which starred rappers Beanie Sigel and Jay-Z. The Streatham-based PIF (Paid in Full) likewise took its name from the title of a 2002 film about crack dealers in New York. A number of gangs also aligned themselves with the American Bloods and Crips brands. And like New Jack City, such metaphors imputed gangs with qualities they did not necessarily have in reality. They did not change the object of the metaphorical comparison, but rather enabled the world to see another meaning, a ‘second-order’ meaning (Barthes, 1957), that was not there before. That meaning was connotative, hence the label ‘New Jack’ or ‘Paid in Full’ connoted its movie source and what it represented.

Much of the metaphorical references to movie gangs were made while ‘parading’ (Katz, 1988), namely copying fashion styles and behaviour that stand out in films. Yet, these music- and movie-derived signals were in many cases themselves inspired by and copied from street life as it unfolded at the time the film [or song] was made. Its costumes, soundtrack, even dance moves (‘the New Jack Swing’) gave *New Jack City* some verisimilitude (Shiel and Fitzmaurice, 2003). But just as art imitates life, life imitates art. The song ‘I’m Dreamin’, from the film’s soundtrack, for example, topped the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip-Hop chart (Hess, 2009: 497). In Brussels, *New Jack City* even intensified some of the activities and performances that local young men were engaged in already – such as music and dance:

So, everybody wanted to start a dancing crew because of the dance of New Jack City. It was massive! And you can see why people were so attracted to the dance in that movie because dance has such a central place in our community as well! (Brussels 5)

That is what I wanted to do: Start a club *New Jack City*! (Brussels 6)

A similar phenomenon was observed in London, whereby the acclaimed US drama series *The Wire* (2002–2008), known for its accurate depiction of criminological phenomena (Collins and Brody, 2013), became a source of inspiration for gang youth and a means for control agents to explain ‘gangs’ to themselves and others.

*The Wire* is fiction set in Baltimore, Maryland, some 4000 miles from London, but one respondent explained, for instance, how the series' emphasis on surveillance and counter-surveillance (the show's plot revolves around the use of wiretap technologies by the police – hence the title, *The Wire*) encouraged his own real gang to 'get smart' about their drug dealing operations:

We knew the Feds was watching us, you know, but didn't pay no mind until someone saw *The Wire*, and we was like, 'mans watching, we better get smart'. That's when we started more using prepaid phones and using like code messages. [On CCTV] ... putting hands over your mouths to speak, like not saying nothing, no paper trail, you know. Yeah, it's funny yeah, but *The Wire* sort of upped our game. (London 19)

How the fictional gang (in Episode 5.8) used the hour and minute hands of a clock to indicate the Cartesian coordinates for a drug drop was singled out as a source of inspiration. This continues today, with an August 2017 article in the *Evening Standard* quoting criminologist Simon Harding as saying that gang members 'have all seen *The Wire* and ... know how they can tracked by their phone' (Davenport, 2017).

Interviewees further referenced *The Wire* and its characters (e.g. Stringer Bell) to help explain the narrative worlds of their gangs, at times paraphrasing famous lines from the show to get their point across (e.g. 'You come at the king, you best not miss', 'follow the money'). For example:

A thing that you should watch is *The Wire*. I don't know if you've seen that ... There are a lot of Stringer Bells in this world, really there are ... the one calling the shots ... That's proper gangsta. (London 18)

One scene from Episode 5.9, when an ambitious young gangster named Marlo Stanfield learns his rivals are 'calling [him] out by name' and 'talking shit' about him and he responds: 'He used my name? In the street? ... My name was on the street? ... My name is my name!', was twice re-enacted during the fieldwork to demonstrate how a gang member's reputation was inherently tied to his or her 'street name' (see Densley, 2013). Perhaps this explains why a south London drug dealer was recently caught having registered a car and phone in the names of Marlo Stanfield and another show favourite, Avon Barksdale (*BBC News*, 2017).

During the fieldwork, former Shadow Home Secretary Chris Grayling made hyperbolic public remarks about how London's streets had come to resemble *The Wire* (*BBC News*, 2009), but it was true that *The Wire* had become shorthand for how law enforcement policed gangs – e.g. the *Evening Standard* (2011) headline, 'Police go to *The Wire* in dawn raids to target London gang' – and a lens through which police sought to make sense of the actions of the gang members they encountered:

That investigation, the things we had to do, it was like *The Wire*. Which was fitting because the gang, the stuff they were up to, was like *The Wire* too ... they'd set up counter-surveillance that was pretty sophisticated considering. You could see it playing out on CCTV and we sat back and said, 'they've been watching too much TV'. (London, Police officer 4)

The lad thought he was Stringer Bell or something ... When we raided his house, he had stacks of books about business, finance, 'The Art of the Deal', and all that ... College lad. Studying business ... Seriously, he had big aspirations [as a drug dealer]. (London, Police officer 7)

Both in Brussels and in London, however, there were other fictional frames of reference. For example, a respondent in Brussels was named 'Dhalsim' after a video game character in the *Street Fighter* series. One in London had taken 'Li'l Zé' from Brazilian crime film *City of God* as his *nom de guerre*, similarly because the character represented qualities to which the interviewee aspired. And in social media correspondence, London youth would remind their more conspicuous peers of the perils of wearing a metaphorical 'fur coat' – a reference to the US\$100,000 floor-length chinchilla coat worn by gangster Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington) in the 2007 biopic *American Gangster* that was so flashy it put Lucas in police crosshairs.

## The drivers of gang glocalization: Desire and the experience of narrative worlds

As discussed, the lines between fiction and reality interact and blur and both gang members but also (law enforcement) practitioners get sucked into the simulacra-like situations. However, both *New Jack City* and, to some extent, *The Wire* mirrored many of the hardships of our respondents' daily lives, as induced by living in impoverished neighbourhoods and within disrupted communities. When *New Jack City* was released in 1991, for example, sub-Saharan migration to Brussels was changing owing to political stability in Congo. The Belgium-Congo colonial past, but also the neglect and repressive response of the Belgian government to the issues that arose within this context, gave way to a deep mistrust and resentment vis-a-vis the State. At the same time, many Congolese experienced devaluation, whereby qualifications earned in their home country did not translate, and many parents were forced to work multiple menial jobs to survive – a narrative that was repeated throughout the fieldwork.

While London's history was different, respondents there similarly reflected on experiences of 'multiple marginality' (Vigil, 2002) from mainstream cultural and institutional life and cultural influences often steeped in a dark history of political violence (Gunter, 2017). The social situation of the main characters in *New Jack City*, *The Wire* and other sources, before engaging in crime, mirrored many of the hardships that respondents and their parents encountered during their daily lives. The film storylines also ran parallel with the respondents' desires and dreams for material wealth, discussed in other studies (e.g. Densley, 2015). They represented lifestyles that in their perspective would counter much of these daily frustrations and strains.

In Brussels, gang youth described the film effect in terms of seduction. *New Jack City* was made to convey an anti-crime message, but for our respondents the film was about how to get rich and command respect, and only with hindsight did they comprehend their selective interpretation:

In the film, you are shown a lifestyle full of joy, luxe, money, nice cars. And then, suddenly there is this tiny part on how the main character dies because he did something stupid. However, it is not that part of the story that is emphasized the most, you see? (Brussels 16)

We didn't interpret it like that. We understood it wrong. We understood the movie as: 'Wah Ok! We can earn a lot of money by selling drugs, extorting people, doing burglaries and killing each other'. That is what we got out of the film. We didn't get the moral of the movie. (Brussels 15)

So, in fact we forgot how they got rich, and we just remembered one thing. We got that he got rich, notorious, that he had beautiful women and that he drove a nice car. But we forgot what he had done to get that. (Brussels 14)

In London, it was telling how many young people cited rapper 50 Cent's mantra, 'Get rich or die trying', as they explained the rules of gang life (London, 2, 6, 9, 10, 22, 34). They too, it seemed, had taken the sentiment literally, rather than as a cautionary tale about the dangers of street life, as intended. Importantly, however, these 'facts' do not take away any of the magic or seductive qualities of the specific films, characters or narratives. Most hood stories do not have a happy ending (think *Scarface*) and, as discussed, the whole cultural product is not fully incorporated into the local street or gang experiences. Dying trying to get rich, or their favourite character from *The Wire*, Stringer Bell, dying in a hail of bullets, is perhaps not the most interesting, seductive, appealing part of the story for gang youth fantasizing about a different life.

While many overt similarities exist between hood films and real life, this explanation glosses over the most powerful driving force behind their impact, the 'paradox of fiction' (Radford and Weston, 1975; for a discussion, see Paskow, 2004). However irrational it might sound, the fact is that human beings experience thoughts and emotions congruent with events represented in films, all the while knowing that the plotlines, characters, even the worlds depicted in films, are purely fictive. The fact that humans emotionally react to fiction as if it were real, while knowing it is not, constitutes one of the most resistant paradoxes in philosophical thought (Friend, 2010; Gerrig, 1993; Mar and Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999). *New Jack City* and other hood narratives are engineered to appeal to the frustration and rage felt particularly by black males (Chan, 1998: 36). These two principal emotions advanced in fiction ran parallel with the emotional state of many young black men we interviewed. Fiction reflected their frustrations about poverty, racism, residency problems, devaluation of degrees, hardships of life as a refugee or ethnic minority, but especially the rage – or 'la haine' as the respondents in Brussels called it – towards the repressiveness of State intervention and the daily humiliation of these young men. Or as stated by one of the older Brussels respondents:

This film [*New Jack City*]! They should have known that if you show it to black communities in that era, that it would have an impact in black ghettos. Because, although we do not live in the States, we were experiencing the same pain. Because in the nineties, the level of racism here was the same! The level of racism was absolutely mind-blowing! (Brussels 1)

When consuming fiction, viewers also undergo 'a form of experience not found elsewhere' (Green et al., 2004: 311). They engage deeply in an imagined world or, in many of the cases outlined here, a simulation of a real social world. But as they react to represented events as if they were participating in them, their immersion in that fictive world has 'absorbing emotional

consequences' (Mar and Oatley, 2008: 173). The most important emotional response that *New Jack City* generated, for example, was an experience of valorization. It made viewers foremost experience how it would feel to be in charge and to be respected in ways that their everyday reality, as they experienced it, could not offer:

The difference between *New Jack City* and the other films. Well in that movie: those in charge? Black. The smart ones? Black. The dangerous ones? Black. Before, every movie we watched depicted Italian gangs. They were always in charge and the black people? Stupid! They were depicted as stupid or drug addicted. As if that's all they could do. And the first time we felt proud to be black, that was after *New Jack City*. A black person in charge of everything. I know it is somewhat strange as we did valorize each other in doing evil. However, we didn't have an Obama back then. (Brussels 5)

Simply postulating that the New Jacks emerged because of a movie, therefore, ignores the local reality of the Brussels' Congolese community at the time of the film's release. Likewise, in London, the reason why Stringer Bell was such a powerful role model for gang youth was because he transcended the unsophisticated 'black gangsta' stereotype. He was strategic and entrepreneurial. The fact that he was portrayed by Idris Elba, who was born and raised in London, not Baltimore, probably helped him resonate with local youth.

Films, therefore, mirrored the commonly felt malaise experienced by our respondents, while featuring positive emotions that were absent in their daily lives. Owing to their identification with each story, the experience of fiction goes beyond stimulating the imagination of a different lifestyle. The intensity of our respondents' emotional experience in consuming fiction encouraged them to pursue their imagination.

## The devices of gang glocalization: Transformative magic and mythology of violence

Storytelling plays a central role in the metaphorical process. Three things matter: (1) the kind of stories told; (2) the variety of narrators; and (3) the longevity of storytelling. And in both Brussels and London, the first narratives of intergroup violence were crucial in making any metaphorical comparison stick. Renditions of violence are a well-documented feature of gang life (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Lauger, 2014), an antidote to the drudgery of daily gang existence (Klein, 1995). In regards to gang glocalization, however, violent stories are integral to the credibility of the metaphorical statement. The latter is mainly achieved by the two other criteria, that turn storytelling and performance into mythmaking.

*New Jack City* successfully equated gangs with violence. A spectacular shootout between a member of the New Jacks and members of a rival gang, the Black Demolition, in La Rue Neuve, the busiest pedestrian street in Brussels, ensured the New Jacks lived up to these high expectations. During the fieldwork, the story about the shooting in La Rue Neuve was retold more than 32 times, 25 times by young gang-affiliated men, but seven times by police officers. For law enforcement, the 'New Jack Era' was the benchmark they compared all other gangs against: 'We still talk about those great gangs: *The New Jacks*, *The Kung Fu*. There are many detectives who still remember that great era' (Brussels, Police officer 1).



In London, the Yardie gangs and, later, Brixton's Peel Dem Crew (PDC) were spoken about with a corresponding sense of reverence and nostalgia (see Pritchard, 2008): 'Everybody knows PDC. Kids still rep Angell Town. They're legends now' (London 17). Today, many actors (community members, media, control agents) continue to tell stories about these foundational gangs, but the stories are embellished, second or third hand. In the absence of information and any attempt at verification, the metaphorical statement is used. For example: 'Everybody knows that story! My parents, even my father. Actually, really everyone knows!' (Brussels 13); 'Everywhere we heard people talking about them. Even our parents were talking about that: New Jack, New Jack ... I heard a lot of stories' (Brussels 16).

Stories about the New Jacks are so numerous that understanding about them is more based on fiction than on reality. Gang glocalization occurred in part because people saw what they wanted to see in the New Jacks based on *New Jack City* and the sensational stories told about them. And because the New Jacks were black males, albeit of Congolese descent, to the untrained eye they resembled the African-American actors in the film and played the part perfectly. The audience, the Belgian population, was very receptive to the metaphorical statement. Back in the 1990s, when the gang phenomenon took off in Brussels, Belgian politics towards Congolese migrants was marked by racial prejudice and discrimination (Demart, 2013), and media reports echoed the political viewpoint of *Matongé*, their neighbourhood, as 'a no-go zone where gangs fight over turf' (Decourty, 2001). Similar statements were made in relation to areas of Caribbean settlement in London – namely, Hackney, Southwark and Lambeth – to the extent that still today such communities are known for their gangs (see Pitts, 2008). However, gangs can leverage racial stereotypes to their advantage, as demonstrated by London's DFA gang, whose name, 'Don't Fuck with Africans', speaks to public anxiety about the 'other' (De Beauvoir, 1949).

Still, although *Matongé* culminated in a period of 'ghettoisation' (Arnaut, 2006: 66), the real New Jacks in many ways failed to live up to their source material. Police records show that the New Jacks engaged in racketeering of Congolese merchants and event organizers and in small scale prostitution, armed robberies and extortion, but never did they rise to large scale crack cocaine distribution, as the collective of black males did in the film. These facts were lost in translation, and the media, in particular, was keen to play up similarities between the gang and the film, to the extent that the name 'New Jack' now extends beyond Brussels' Congolese community to refer to all black African gangs in the city. In London, the infamous Muslim Boys were another gang that failed to live up to their billing, this time as being as dangerous as the Irish Republican Army (see Densley, 2014: 527).

## Discussion and conclusion

Comparative ethnographies in gang research are rare (c.f. Van Hellemont and Vandenbergardien, 2016) and much has to do with the constraints of ethnographic research in general. The fact that the population is hard to access, and that a full-fledged ethnography takes extensive commitment and resources, makes a true 'revisit' – in the sense of two researchers doing fieldwork at the same locations – almost impossible. The current study represents a compromise between academic quality standards and the practical considerations of ethnographic research. It is an imperfect endeavour. The different foci of the respective data sources meant that they were not entirely compatible. Further, this line of inquiry would benefit from a comparative ethnography that a priori studies the processes of



gang glocalization. However, the current study advances the literature by demonstrating how gang ethnographers can transcend the specific findings of local gang realities and theorize gang processes that would be difficult to capture quantitatively, even in a multi-site study. Like recent studies in this vein (e.g. Fraser and Hagedorn, 2016), we hope it inspires other ethnographers to follow suit.

Compressing the empirical richness of two ethnographic studies into one article unavoidably has its limits. In exploring ‘gang glocalization’, our focus has been documenting the processual similarities across research sites. It must be noted, however, that our studies show substantial differences in the characteristics of the product of this process; that is, the gang phenomena in London and Brussels. In fact, we even found that with the longevity of the process, characteristics of these phenomena become even more diversified due to the peculiarities of the local context. A full discussion is beyond one article. Still, in both sites, American fiction played a central role in gang beginnings, but owing to the looping between media and reality (Hayward and Young, 2004), Francophone music (gangsta rap from Paris or Brussels) and films (e.g. *Banlieu XII*, *Ma Cité va Craquer*, *La Haine*) play a much more prominent role in the Brussels gang scene today than US-based fiction. As one older respondent stated: ‘Today rappers like Booba [from Paris] are role models. But in our days (1990s) we didn’t have those yet’ (Brussels 6). In fact, following the release of the film *Black* (Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah 2015) – a film about Brussels’ gang life shot at known gang locations – the Brussels gang scene has its own hybrid representation.

Likewise, in London, it is true that Tupac Shakur and the other American gangsta rappers were seminal in establishing the look, the aesthetic and not least the affective register of gang life (Hagedorn, 2008). During the fieldwork, gang youth wore Tupac t-shirts, and the grime, drill and trap rap subgenres of music now associated with gangs (see Irwin-Rogers et al., 2018; Storrod and Densley, 2017) and practised by the young people in this study build completely on these roots. But young people today perceive the UK music scene as something distinct from its American counterpart, and with films like *Bullet Boy*, *Kidulthood* and *Adulthood*, and television dramas like *Top Boy* (for a discussion, see Jones, 2016), more indigenous representations of gangs play a prominent role in cultural production and reproduction.

Differences matter (Fraser and Hagedorn, 2016), but none of them change our advance of the concept of gang glocalization. The current study provides new insights into how globalization affects gangs, but also complements the contributions of gang researchers who have considered gangs as glocal phenomena (e.g. Fraser, 2015; Hagedorn, 2008; Roks, 2017). As such, the concept brings the central role Thrasher (1927) assigned to play, imagination and fiction back to the centre of gang studies. This shift also redirects our research focus in what behaviour to study to capture ‘the gang’. Mythmaking activities – performance and storytelling – are key; however, they are insufficient to propagate a gang myth. With the process of gang glocalization, it becomes clear that symbolic violence is essential to the creation of myth, which, in turn, makes this process much more intimately associated to the gang as a phenomenon than to individual gang members. With pointing at the irrational and emotional fundament of gang glocalization and its demand for spectacular violence, this concept also captures why tackling gangs may need a much more creative policy toolbox than the one too often employed to tackle crime committed by individual gang members (see Densley 2011).

The current study relies on concepts at the heart of many anthropological and sociological global studies (e.g. Appadurai, 1996), but which are too little explored in criminology, notably the influence of the global ‘mediascape’ on human behaviour, here gang behaviour. The current

study also explains how the global is localized, and in doing so it revives a central theme of the seminal work on gangs that reverberates through the annals of gang scholarship. This is another important contribution. In uncovering the ways in which global fiction influences local reality, while also accounting for people's motivation to engage with this process, this study again takes seriously the role of imagination, first introduced by Thrasher in 1927. The force of imagination is seen in the fact that the gang phenomenon in Brussels did not take off on the basis of how the New Jacks and their first opponents (the Kung Fu Clan) were in reality, but on how young men imagined them to be based on fictive sources (the film and narratives), much like Thrasher predicted. Responses to gangs, in turn, were built upon these imagined realities, such as *The Wire* in London. In many ways, therefore, *New Jack City* and *The Wire* are contemporary examples of Thrasher's comic books and dime novels.

How can one film produced over 25 years ago in the United States inspire the gang scene within a sub-Saharan community in Brussels? The short answer is because fiction is marked by the 'nothingness of unreality' (Ricoeur, 1979) and when the referent of fiction is non-existent, it can refer to *all* reality. Here we draw on cultural studies and semiotics. While as a whole fiction has no referent, if treated as a complex representation, elementary parts of fiction refer to corresponding entities in the world 'out there'. *New Jack City* was filmed on location in New York and its audience can recognize the cityscape, but at no point does the specific location feature in the film's plot or dialogue. Instead, the narrative unfolds in an urban space like any another. Hence, this work of fiction opens up 'new ways of referring to [all] reality' and new ways to 'produce' reality (Ricoeur, 1979: 123), with the implication that any city – Brussels, for example – can be New Jack City. The 'work of imagination' comes to the foreground when circumstances are met in the 'classic rhetoric identified as the metaphor' (Ricoeur, 1979: 130).

Metaphors are representative or symbolic of something else (e.g. X is like Y). *New Jack City* was a metaphor for 'gang life', a 'conventional signal' (Gambetta, 2009), and imagination was the force that allowed people to make sense of it. However, because people see what they want to see, the signal concealed as much as it revealed. The signal endowed its receivers with meanings beyond original intention – a group claiming the New Jacks label – and transferred certain qualities from one sign to another – qualities of the film to the group in reality (Thwaites et al., 2002: 51).

Metaphorical comparison is the central mechanism of the glocalization process, and mythmaking activities are its main devices. These mythmaking activities are operationalized as performance and storytelling, while 'spectacular' violence is seen as key in intensifying mythmaking activities – increasing the intensity of narration, expanding the variety of narrators (i.e. from gang insiders to police and media outsiders) and assuring the longevity of storytelling. Future research should look more into the role of the news media in the process of gang glocalization. Spectacular violence also affords the mythmaking process the credibility it needs to change reality. As such, a myth is created that adds a connotative meaning derived from the fictional source and imputes its objects with qualities it might not have had originally.

This study represents one of the few attempts to account for the irrationality of human behaviour in the creation of social phenomena such as gangs. Mythmaking occurs because of emotional needs and desires that originate in the interaction between communities, individuals and societies. Experiences of racism, discrimination and deprivation can flow through ethnic minority communities and merge with the emotions that drive the production of a fictive representation. For many, it remains just a source of media enjoyment, but for those whose emotional state strongly

convergences with that of the fictive narrative, it becomes the script of an imagined life. As such, in line with the work of Appadurai (1996), fiction makes people imagine a different lifestyle, but also makes them pursue it.

This finding has important implications for practice. Gangs fulfil desires and answer to emotional needs that go beyond a sense of belonging. Gangs are more than a response to social deprivation in the sense of poverty or poor housing. Gang identity can, because of the fascination it enjoys in the global village, channel the humiliation and anger felt by those experiencing denigration coming from racism and discrimination. Only by addressing the appeal of the global gang in the context of ‘multiple marginality’ (Vigil, 2002) can we ever hope to prevent its influence on the ground. Gang glocalization shows that gangs do not originate out of a local social situation alone. Instead, gangs emerge from our collective imaginations about gangs, fostered by movies and other gang representations, that run through the mediascape and, in turn, inform the ‘conventional signals’ of gangs (Gambetta, 2009). Hence, gang glocalization also contributes to our knowledge about the processes that create the ‘symbolic organisation’ of gangs (Densley, 2012).

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