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Volumen I
Más allá de las pandillas:
violencias, juventudes y resistencias
en el mundo globalizado



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Anatomising Gang Talk

Simon Hallsworth*

In 2007, Tara Young and I examined what we came to term ‘*gang talk*’ in a paper published in the journal *Crime Media and Culture* (Hallsworth and Young 2008). This we defined as ‘the garrulous discourse’ that has as its end the claim that gangs are on the rise and are everywhere around us. The paper was written at a time when, according to various right thinking people and moral entrepreneurs, the UK was witnessing a new and terrible proliferation of armed organised gangs. According to this narrative, the gang, traditionally conceived as a US problem, had crossed the Atlantic and was taking root in the streets of the UK. Our critique of ‘gang talk’ marked our response to the emerging consensus that gangs were overrunning Britain. This was a thesis we challenged and questioned on the basis we found the very premise flawed on empirical, methodological and epistemological grounds.

In a context where more and more European societies appear to have discovered gangs in their midst (Klein, 2001), where the coverage of them is often conducted in sensational terms, a case could be made for suggesting that the problem of ‘gang talk’ is by no means confined to the UK alone. Here I want to return to the question of ‘gang talk’ and explore its nature in more detail. In so doing my aim is to deconstruct a number of archetypal features that are peculiar to this discourse. What I want to

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argue is that, while there is most certainly a Real world out there populated by gangs (however we elect to define this most elusive of concepts), there exists at the same time a parallel discourse about gangs which is not of the Real and which partakes instead of what I will define as a fantasy about them. There is, I will argue, a structure to this fantasy and in what follows I will examine its constitutive features.

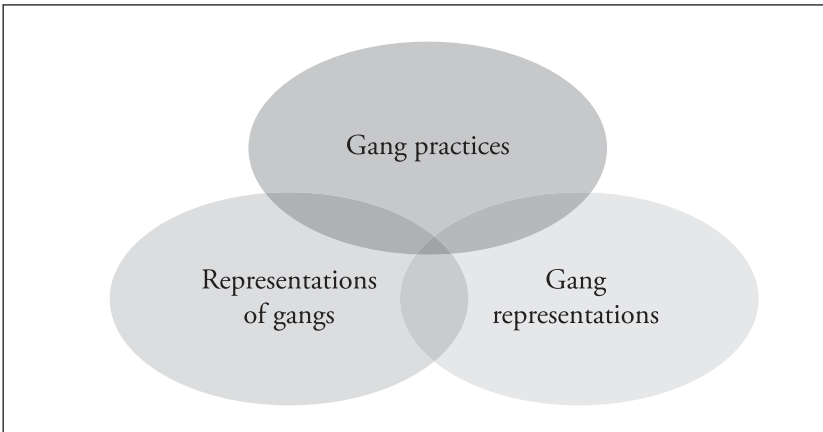
While many academics spend time trying to get to the reality of the gang by conducting research with the aim of adducing facts about them, their academic 'gang talk' while itself often problematic (see Katz and Jackson, 1997) is not the same as the gang talk that animates this parallel gang talking discourse which, as we shall see, has its own *sui generis* character. Unfortunately, and all too often, however, in policy debate, in the media and in the public arena more generally, it is the gang talking fantasy that prevails. As we shall also see, policies to confront gangs are often driven less by a sober appreciation of gang facts but on the basis of gang talking fantasies.

Locating gang talk

By 'gang talk' I mean to designate a discourse on gangs and about gangs that has wide currency. It is a discourse that operates to make meaningful the world of gangs both to those who produce this discourse and to others who are receptors of it. By and large the producers of gang talk (hereafter 'gang talkers') are those with a vested interest in gangs (of some sort) but who are not of the world of gangs. They may be journalists looking for a good story about them; enforcement agencies that want to suppress them; practitioners who want to work with them; the public who are scared of them; or policy makers who have been given the mission of developing policies to suppress them. These are people who by and large do not belong to the street world of gangs they want to talk about and who, consequently, have a distance from this world. They produce as such, to evoke the language of Lefebvre's spatial ontology *representations of gangs* not *gang representations* as those who live gang realities produce them (Lefebvre, 1991). This disjunction is important but often lost on gang

talkers who imagine *their* world and the world of gang members is, in some sense, cognate. It is not. Gang talkers therefore occupy a very different discursive space from those who live the *gang realities* they are trying to comprehend through the gang talk they deploy. Those who live gang realities at the same time live their gang realities in very different terms than the gang talk gang talkers produce about them. Gang talk as such constitutes a discourse of power; it represents a way of framing the world in terms such that those who produce gang talk can comprehend it.

Diagrama N.º 1
Ontologising the gang



Just as it is important to distinguish *representations of gangs* from *gang representations* so it is important to distinguish the order of representations from the world of *gang practices*. This is a material reality populated by social relations within and between groups (gangs and others), relations that are in perpetual movement. This is the order of the Real, not directly legible either to those who live gang realities or to gang talkers who want to comprehend this volatile street world. We live, as Althusser observes, in an 'imaginary relation to our real relations' and this applies in the case of gang talkers as much as it does those who live gang realities (Althusser and Brewster, 1969). Put another way, what is often found in

the narratives that are woven about gangs emanates from the space of the *imaginary* and this certainly remains the case with gang talkers. The same often applies to gang members who, when asked by gang talkers to narrate the truth of their gangs ('tell us about your gangs please?'), often revert to gang talk which is the *de facto* language of control. Gang talk then can also be understood as an expression of the *control imaginary*. Gang talkers inhabit the space of this imaginary, while the gang talk they weave exhibits its contents.

If we accept that fantasies constitute an imaginary discourse produced by an individual or group, which has no necessary basis in reality, but which express the desires and needs of their producers, then gang talk I would argue, can be studied as a constitutive fantasy. Rather than engage with it simply as a rational discourse that is mistaken about its object (they are wrong about the gang for this or that reason), or simply as product of moral panic and which as such exhibits moral panic features (over-reaction to an event, sensational coverage, pathologising an enemy (Cohen, 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994) more can be gained by examining gang talk as a discourse that best exhibits the desire production of its producers. Gang talk then is a control fantasy that reveals the predilections and anxieties and desires of gang talkers more than the truth of the street it aspires to represent.

Sexual fantasists such as masochists often construct elaborate fantasies that enable them to sublimate their masochistic desires. This can involve imagining elaborate settings and situations designed to allow them to experience the pain they crave. Such fantasies often involve enacting carefully established rituals that can involve various props such as whips or uniforms. Fantasies in other words do not remain in people's heads in so far as they can enact them as well. In other words, reality can be remade in their image. Gang talk understood as a collective fantasy also has organisation and structure. The reality of gang suppression initiatives, I will suggest represents how far the real is remade in the image of the fantasy woven about it. To comprehend its nature we must study its component parts and constitutive features.

Reading gang talk as fantasy

If we consider the literary genre of fantasy writing, evoked in novels and cinema such as the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, then what we find distinctive about it is that the worlds in which the novels are set are not just fictional but literally fantastic (Butler, 2009). These are imaginary worlds often populated by imaginary beings set in parallel worlds or worlds set in some remote time. These are magical places populated by magical beings, but at the same time they also possess recognizably human and social structures which are what make them familiar to us.

Gang talk, I would suggest, is not unlike the fantasy genre in so far as it does not capture the reality of gang practices, but a fantasized representation of them. These are found materialized in various journalistic articles, reports and statements about gangs. Gang talk, like fantasy fiction, is an imaginary construction which reflects gangs less as they are, but how they are imagined to be, where what is imagined represents the phantasmagorical desires of gang talkers. This is why, as we shall see, the gang, as gang talk imagines it, has a sensational appearance that has little to do with a material reality that is often elsewhere. As we shall also observe, gang talk is also populated by similar tropes to those reproduced in fantasy fiction, particularly in its evocation of a world reduced in Manichean terms to evil forces that are on the move and which must be vanquished by those of the Good.

To study gang talk then we need methodologically to treat it as a self-enclosed, self-referential universe of meanings that has a distinctive structure we need to interpret. To study this we need to look at how the gang is precisely imagined and this invites us to study it as fantasy construction. As we shall see this is a fantasy about groups imagined in terms equivalent to what Katz and Jacobs identify as a 'transcendental evil' (Katz and Jackson, 1997). Gang talk then is rumination about the nature of the evil that gangs are and which they embody. In Garland's terms, to study gang talk is thus to engage with what he terms 'the criminology of the other' because it is as 'Other' that the gang is fantasized (Garland, 1996). The question I now want to pose here is what precisely is it that is 'Other' about them?

To address this I will consider the underlying archetypes that animate gang talk. This involves practically examining gang talk as a narrative composed out of a series of mutually self-reinforcing tropes. There are I will suggest five that require consideration. The first I label 'the shock of the new'; integral to this is the idea that gangs are a persistent novelty in the society where they are discovered. The second I identify as 'here be monsters' which explores the demonic attributes gang members are imagined to possess. The third, 'they are organising as we speak', reflects that aspect of gang talk which imagines the gang as a group moving from a state of disorganisation to progressive organisation; the fourth, 'armed and dangerous', examines the 'new weapons of choice gang members are supposed to possess; while in the fifth and final 'they are out to get you' explores how gangs are imagined as organisations that penetrate and corrupt social life. These tropes it must be emphasised are not entirely distinct, in gang talk they blur seamlessly together.

For the most part the evidence I adduce to explore and substantiate the elements of gang talk are derived from the UK experience. As a case study the UK is relevant because it is undergoing something of a moral panic about gangs now conceived as the country's premier 'folk devil' (Hallsworth, 2011). As with other moral panics the gang has found itself at the centre of moral outrage from a state that has now delegated an array of alarming coercive powers to enforcement agencies, now mandated to control and suppress them; many taken 'off the shelf' from the USA. The media continue to report the gang in sensational terms while enforcement agencies, in what has become a burgeoning new anti-gang industry, have produced an on-going blizzard of reports about them.

The shock of the new

British history is rich with groups that might well be said to constitute what we today call gangs. In the middle ages then were known as 'canting crews'; in the 17th century the highwayman Dick Turpin belonged to what was known as the Essex Gang (Hallsworth, 2005; Harris, 1971). In his novel *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene narrates the tragic history of a

would be gang member Pinky, set in Brighton during the period between the first and second world war (Greene, 1975); while in the novel *Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess paints a dystopian British future populated by gangs (Burgess, 2000). Gangs, in other words, have always been around and people have always been fascinated by the lives of gangsters.

Despite being a perennial feature of street life in many neighbourhoods gang talk constitutes the gang as an entirely new phenomena. Like the Nomads, all of a sudden they have arrived and from nowhere. Worse, they are proliferating. As Geoffrey Pearson observes in his classic study of the Hooligan, the public is eternally caught up in a form of historical amnesia about a past characterised in warm glowing colours set among what is often painted as bleak dystopian present (Pearson, 1983). Captivated by the shock of the new; the idea that they have discovered something the like of which has never been witnessed before, Gang talkers produce a fantasy of the present characterised by an immense rupture with the past. Nor is it only the public that is captivated with the discovery of a new criminal epoch dawning; academics can also fall into the same trap as witnessed by claim advanced by John Pitts in the UK that gangs today mark 'the new face of youth crime' (Pitts, 2008).

Here be monsters

It is not only the infinite novelty of the gang menace that captivates gang talkers; what also animates their discourse is the idea of the good society being invaded by outsiders. Integral to this idea is that of a monstrous organised counter-force penetrating the social body. If we consider the nature of what is monstrous about the gang then one of its most evident features is that its members are almost always imagined to belong to a minority ethnic group. The legacy of deeply inscribed racism, it could be observed, invariably reflects itself in gang talking narratives. And this explains, why in the UK, the gangs are invariably Black, Asian, Albanian and Russian. This also explains why group offending is never found in the middle class suburbs, though fears of wealthy areas being penetrated by

gangs, as we shall see, itself forms a potent trope within gang talk. Like the un-dead in *Buffy the Vampire Killer*; the gang member is conceived as someone who is essentially different from the indigenous population. And like the un-dead in *Buffy the Vampire slayer*, this is a population that cannot be reasoned with but only coercively controlled.

Monstrousness is also bound up with the idea prominent in gang talking discourses that the gang member is essentially different from the good member of society. Gang members conceived within the control imaginary are therefore people conceived of as essentially different. They may be born different or once subject to the fatal embrace of the gangster (having been 'groomed' or 'recruited') they become different. Here are the signs and symptoms that define those who have been subject to such a process, as imagined by the authors of a report into serious youth violence in the UK. A report which, to define a typical and recurring feature in the gang talking literature, adduces absolutely no evidence at all to support its claims.

Gang identifiers: Child withdrawn from family; sudden loss of interest in school. Decline in attendance or academic achievement (although it should be noted that some gang members will maintain a good attendance record to avoid coming to notice); being emotionally 'switched off', but also containing frustration / rage; started to use new or unknown slang words; holds unexplained money or possessions; stays out unusually late without reason, or breaking parental rules consistently; sudden change in appearance – dressing in a particular style or 'uniform', similar to that of other young people they hang around with, including a particular colour; dropped out of positive activities; new nickname; unexplained physical injuries, and/or refusal to seek / receive medical treatment for injuries; graffiti style 'tags' on possessions, school books, walls; constantly talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them; broken off with old friends and hangs around with one group of people; associating with known or suspected gang members, closeness to siblings or adults in the family who are gang members; started adopting certain codes of group behaviour e.g. Ways of talking and hand signs; expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past; scared when entering certain areas; and concerned by the pres-

ence of unknown youths in their neighbourhoods (London Serious Youth Violence Board, 2009).

In reading the above an array of continuities can be established between the way the gang member is being identified today and older myths and stereotypes that the US reproduced about dope fiends in the 1940s and 1950s. Everyday stories about how decent, well-behaved kids from respectable families became demented and depraved addicts having been forced to take the evil 'weed' by a drug dealer. As with the dope fiend, we find signs of dropping out of the good society as a marker of gang belonging (broken off with old friends, dropping out of positive activities) as we do signs of entry to a new monstrous gang order (adopting certain codes, new nickname, etc.)

Monstrousness is also evident in the activities that gangs are alleged to engage in. In such imaginings it is as if the gang is accorded almost satanic qualities. This is often found in the eternal fascination gang talkers exhibit towards what are often imaged as the rituals gang members indulge in. Initiation ceremonies often garner considerable and salacious interest. And several circulate though evidence attesting to their reality is often difficult to locate as gang research attests (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). A popular one is that gang members 'sex girls in'; another is that to be a member of a gang you have to kill someone; another that you randomly shoot at a car and its occupants. In the UK the media suddenly reported the growth in London of a gang that allegedly would forcibly convert young men to Islam. While there are certainly cases that might confirm the stereotype, most often these are control fantasies, attempts by people who are not of the street to comprehend in a distorted way an outside imagined in monstrous terms. A similar refrain can also be identified with the fascination gang talkers display towards what is often now referred to as 'the recruitment strategies of the gangs'. For Thrasher writing in the early twentieth century gangs were organisations that 'spontaneously formed' (Thrasher, 1927); today gang members 'recruit' or 'groom' their members and victims.

Taking the idea of the gang member as abnormal monster to its logical conclusion, images of an atrophied brain were presented by members of the Wave Trust, a proselytising organisation steeped in biologically

reductionist theories of crime, at practitioner conferences and seminars about gangs in the UK, with the implication that this is what the brain of a gang member looks like (Hallsworth, 2011). The brain, in question was that of a seriously neglected three year old Rumanian orphan. Leaving aside the vexed question of whether an image of a neglected child can be used as proxy for a gang member, a senior member of the British Police used the same slide at a conference in Rome convened by the European Union to discuss Gangs.

They are mobilising as we speak

It is not enough that the gang has arrived in the form of an alien invader, what also animates gang talk is the sense that the gang is evolving in ever more lethal directions. The narrative runs like this. 'Once upon a time the groups were disorganised; but now they are organising as we speak'. And later: 'see now, they have accumulated highly organisational features'. At its most developed this aspect of gang talk works by conceding to the gang bureaucratic attributes that best describe the structure of corporations and armies. In this projection a street reality which are most often composed of loose, amorphous, fluid and rhyzomatic, networks becomes reconstructed in terms that best describe the organisations that gang talkers typically inhabit. And so the gang is ascribed with elaborate divisions of labour and a complex vertical hierarchical structure.

This attempt to *corporatize the street* by projecting upon it attributes that best define formal social institutions is by no means new. To return to the medieval ages the Canting Crew was imagined in organisational terms that corresponded to that of the medieval guild. Entry to the *Company of Thieves* required a solemn oath while the Canting order was imagined to possess 12 orders presided over by the 'Dimbler Dambler', the Prince of Thieves (Harris, 1971). Move forward to the 1950s and the same process can be observed in the USA, nowhere more brilliantly worked through than in Cressey's evocation of the Mafia as a shadow corporation (Cressey, 1969). This fantasy of organised crime as a criminal corporation involved conceding to it a pyramidal structure presided over

by the Godfather, supported by a company lawyer (the 'consigliere') run by various middle managers (the Lieutenants) who run the street soldiers. This model it could be observed can also be found exemplified in the Godfather movies. The same process can also be seen at work in the UK today, in accounts of gangs that rework street terms like 'elders' (older gangsters), 'youngers' (younger men), 'tinies' (young children) and 'wanabees' (would be gangsters) and transforming this into a bureaucratic gang structure (see Pitts, 2008; Antrobus, 2009).

To deploy the terminology of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, gang talkers are invariably arboreal in their predilections (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). By arboreal he meant to designate a way of thinking about the world which is profoundly tree-like in structure. Hence their predilection for always finding within gangs tree-like divisions of labour, and pyramidal command structures. This also explains why they are inherently unable to understand the real world of gang practices which are largely rhizomatic, or grass like. Given that the control imaginary is constructed in arboreal terms, where gang talkers live the round of their life in arboreal institutions, it is unsurprising that the ontic horizons of the control imaginary are themselves shaped in arboreal tree like way. This explains why they relentlessly corporatize the street.

Armed and dangerous

As the attraction of gangs is bound up ineluctably with the violence that gang members do it is unsurprising that much of gang talk is concerned with what are often referred to as the 'new weapons of choice' of gang members. To a degree this aspect of gang talk is also bound up with the idea that as the gangs become more organised, so they are likely to carry weapons, while the weapons they carry become more lethal.

In the UK the gang talking narrative that surrounded the contemporary (re)discovery of the gang exhibited precisely this narrative. The gangs were no longer fighting with fists; they were now carrying knives and were increasingly arming themselves with guns to sort out their 'gang wars'. If that was not enough, the gang was also beginning to innovate by

using what the media and other right thinking people liked to term ‘new weapons of choice’. According to Acting Deputy Assistant Commissioner Steve Allen: ‘Pit Bull-type dogs had become a weapon of choice for gang members, drug dealers and street corner thugs’ (BBC NEWS, 2009). A refrain also picked up by the RSPCA who felt qualified to state

Dangerous dogs are widely used by gangs and criminals to intimidate and cause injury to other people and also some animals. The possession of them is often closely associated with other worrying elements of ASB and gang culture, including knife violence and drugs (RSPCA, 2010).

Nor is it only dangerous dogs that the gangs are now using as their ‘new’ weapon of choice for apparently they have many. According to a report by ROTA (Race on the Agenda)

Sexual violence and exploitation are significant weapons used against females associated with, or involved in, gang violence. Rape has become a weapon of choice, and used against sisters, girlfriends and on occasion mothers, as it is the only weapon that cannot be detected during a stop and search. (Firmine, 2010)

Unfortunately when you look for the evidence that provides the ground from which these sensational claims are deprived, it is nowhere to be found. In the ROTA report, ostensibly based on ‘research conducted with 350 women with gang connections’, the only evidence that gangs rape mothers is a single unsubstantiated claim made by one woman who claims to ‘know’ mothers who have been raped. In the case of the reports made that link gangs to dangerous dogs then no evidence is supplied at all except that of the anecdotal form.

The invaders are here

To fears about the ‘new weapons of choice’ of the gang are compounded various fears and anxieties about the level of coercive control the gangs are alleged to exercise over social life in the places where they are found. In

his analysis of the New Face of Youth Crime, for example, John Pitts claims to have identified what he terms super extended gangs that coercively exercise total control over social life in the estates where they are based. These gangs, he argues, force young people to become gang members and should they refuse then they are violently assaulted. These he terms 'reluctant gangsters'. Another part of this fantasy of total control takes the form of imagining that the gang ruthlessly use and exploits the vulnerable, particularly young children and women. In a report produced by London Councils we are told

One London project working with girls who are involved with gangs reports that nearly all of the girls they have contact with have been raped by male group members. Some senior gang members pass their girlfriends around to lower ranking members and sometimes to the whole group at the same time (London Serious Youth Violence Board, 2009)

In addition to coercively using young women for sexual pleasure gangs are also imagined to 'groom' the vulnerable and by so doing entice them into a life of vice and crime.

Gang members often groom girls at school and encourage / coerce them to recruit other girls through school / social networks. There is also anecdotal evidence that younger girls (some as young as 10 or 12) are increasingly being targeted, and these girls are often much less able to resist the gang culture or manipulation by males in the group. The girls often do not identify their attackers as gang members and tend to think of them as boyfriends. They may also be connected through family or other networks.

Girls are often groomed using drugs and alcohol, which act as disinhibitors and also create dependency. Girls may also be used as mules to transport drugs, which frequently involves trafficking within the UK (London Serious Youth Violence Board, 2009)

Again we are back to the idea of the gang as a satanic cult which works to corrupt the moral universe of the good society whose safe spaces they can penetrate with impunity. These provoke dark fears and often ruminations about the corruption of the young. In 2007 for example school inspec-

tors in the UK felt qualified enough to observe a burgeoning gang culture in the playgrounds of the schools they visited; while in the ROTA report on the sexual violence of gangs one of its key findings was that:

Girls who carry firearms and drugs for their boyfriends often live in areas that are not perceived to have a 'gang-problem', may attend grammar or private all-girls schools will rarely be under any form of surveillance or be known to any specialist services such as children's or youth offending services have their own bank account where their boyfriend can store his money (Firmin, 2010).

This is a pretty good summation of the gang talking reality that is to be found in the UK today where fears of gangs abound. All nicely brought together in this, one of the 'key findings' of the ROTA report. Note what is being evoked, the world of childhood innocence corrupted, a world where decent girls who attend their privileged girls school, are targeted by evil gang members who force them to carry their criminal goods, which are 'rarely under any form of surveillance' by formal authorities. Unsurprisingly this report made an instant hit when it was released with its author feted for her sterling work defending young women from predatory gang members.

The Primacy of the Imaginary

None of this is to dispute the fact that gangs exist and can be dangerous. There are gang realities and clearly these need to be comprehended. Guns and knives are most certainly not discursive constructions, not least when used by gang members to shoot each other which they sometimes do. Gangs, as such, are not spectres or chimeras of the control imaginary. That said, as I have tried to show, when gang talkers attempt to engage with the reality of the gang, it is not the reality of *gang practices* that they engage with, what is forged instead is an imaginary set of representations about gangs that typically take the archetypal forms I have described above and it is these that typically take precedence when gangs are being evoked by the wide gang talking fraternity.

These archetypes are deeply ingrained in the social imaginary more widely. The image of the gang, in this sense, parallels archetypes about fearsome outsiders everywhere. Historically, elements of these can most certainly be found in the folk literature and fairy tales, they also provide the stable of much fantasy literature that also hinges on the arrival into the good society of dark subterranean forces that mean it harm. In our insecure age, primordial fears about the *Other* enjoy wide dissemination. If we were to study the fears and anxieties that surround terrorist groups then these both reproduce older Orientalist modes of thinking (Said, 2003) but such fears are themselves closely articulated with the kind of gang talk described here (See for example: Graham, 2010). And so we find a world reduced to Manichaean terms, the good healthy (white society) and confronting it the feral menace that threatens to overwhelm it unless beaten back. In a recent paper McGuire explores further what it is about the Other than constructs it as such (McGuire, 2011). To arrive at this we need, he argues, a science of abnormality, a teratology; in effect, a science of monsters. Gang talk in this sense is one of our society's potent teratology's, a contemporary update on primordial fears about the Other deeply inscribed in western culture.

Why are these teratology's resurrected in the space of our contemporary? The answer to this is that they are performative; they provide an interpretative grid through and by which murky difficult chunks of reality may be readily comprehended. They offer a ready-to-hand vocabulary that puts messy reality into context and place. Not least, gang talk provides a vocabulary about gangs that everyone can quickly recognise even if, as I often suspect, many have never met gang members.

Teratology's like 'gang talk' are never neutral discourses; they do not operate only at the level of explaining what the gangs are doing now. What gang talk does is simultaneously appeal to deeply inscribed fears, phobias and anxieties the good society has about its monstrous outside in its very evocation of it. Fears grounded on primordial ontological insecurities that gang talk mobilises, harnesses and then translates into widespread fear and indignation. In so doing gang talk also establishes the emotive register than comes to define the control response. Fears easily translated through media amplification spirals into the demand for coer-

cive action against enemies reduced to terms of absolute essentialised difference.

Fantasies are not merely fictions that can be discarded if they have been falsified. People cling to them with faith, rather like scientists attached to paradigms that has been falsified but who refuse to accept the failure of their science. And so it is with gang talk, the Philistogen theory of the street. It produces a self-referential reality that everyone readily comprehends. Given this, what gang talkers tend to want to find, is not evidence that challenges the gang talk that constitutes their orthodoxy, so much as a further iteration of the archetypes. Let me take this argument further. Academics who do respectable gang research, whose findings either challenge the orthodoxies of gang talk or which fail to deliver the sensational truth of gangs, are those most likely to be ignored. This has certainly been the situation in the UK. If, however, the researcher appeals directly to the archetypes embedded in gang talk (they are here, they are expanding, they are corporatizing, etc) then the findings will almost invariably be celebrated and widely reported –and funding is likely to follow.

And when we come to study policy formation in respect to gangs the same logic applies. Gang suppression is less a rational proportionate response to a threat whose nature is carefully identified in a world dominated by ‘evidence driven policy’; it conversely takes the form of a set of knee jerk responses, where overwhelming force is used to address the problem of the gang, when the only evidence being marshalled is that produced through gang talk. And this takes me back to where I began with the distinction between the reality of the gang and the constitutive fantasy that we call ‘gang talk’. In a world where reality is reconstructed in the image of the fantasy, gang suppression programmes are invariably constructed within the imagery of gang talk and its constitutive archetypes. And this also helps explain the often wildly disproportionate responses that gangs often attract. Wars often declared against an imagined evil, rather than a proportionate response to social problems posed by unruly groups.

Let me provide a terrifying example to illustrate this point, in this case, the Federal Government’s response to the plight of the predominantly Black victims of Hurricane Katrina. Within 24 hours of a catastro-

phé that would see New Orleans buried beneath an avalanche of water, what was the single worst humanitarian crisis in recent American history became reconstructed, literally overnight, as crisis of law and order. Instead of seeing the Black population as victims cruelly abandoned by a government seemingly impervious to their plight, the dominant narrative –and one that appeared within hours of the catastrophe, was constructed in the image of gang talk. And this is why despite the visible presence of victims a dominant theme in the reporting of Katrina was of black looters, armed black gangs on the rampage and black rapists. And so reality was itself re-ordered in the image of gang talk. And the power of gang talk was such that when the authorities eventually returned to the abandoned city; it returned as much as an invasion force with orders to shoot lawless elements on sight, than as a rescue effort. The fact that the stories of black criminality were found to be wildly overstated gives salience to the argument I am making here; gang talk populated the control imaginary and this over-determined the visual reality of an abandoned black population that the racist control imaginary could not comprehend as victims.

But gang talk can also produce unforeseen consequences in its Othering of the gang. To understand this however we must return to the insights of Labelling theory as this was articulated in the work of Becker and Goffman many years ago. As Becker argued, labels are potent objects, they exist not only as vehicles through which deviant groups become classified as deviant by those with the power to label, they determine both how agents of social control respond to and perceive the rule breakers; they can also help shape the way rule breakers subsequently perceive themselves, often in the manner of a self fulfilling prophesy (Becker, 1963). Gang talk in this sense is a potent way of labelling groups; it defines what they are, the magnitude of their difference; the appalling nature of their crimes. It establishes them as a public enemy and legitimates their treatment as such. Living with the burden of stigma, as Goffman's work demonstrated is difficult, in so far as it often forces those stigmatised to acquire a deviant personality (Goffman, 1963).

The Gang talk that saturates the USA is illustrative of this process. By classifying entire generations of ghetto youth as a public enemy, by legitimating their treatment as such, so the preconditions have been created

where the culture of the ghetto responds to and works to accept the labels that have been produced. These may then be thrown back in the face of the white mainstream excluding society. “We will be the nightmare you imagine us as” arises as a predictable response. This is, not least, a fact recognised by organic intellectuals within the Hip Hop movement; one exemplar would be the group ‘Public Enemy’. Tupac Shakur’s groups ‘Thug Life’ and ‘Outlaw Immortalz’ also reflect the pervasive sense of persecution and demonisation directed at the ghetto and its gangs, as indeed do his raps. Looking more widely here are some raps from the song ‘Nigga Witta Gun’ by Dr.Dre

Who is the man with the masterplan?
A nigga witta motherfuckin gun
Who is the man with the masterplan?
A nigga witta motherfuckin gun
D-R-E
A motherfucker who’s known for carryin gats
and kick raps that make snaps
Adapts to any environment that I’m located at
If you see me on the solo moves best believe that I’m strapped
.4-4, .tre-8 or AK-47
Cos slowly but surely send you on a stairway to heaven
Just put my finger on the trigger and pull back
and lay a punk motherfucker flat
(Dr Dre: 2011)

In a nutshell, every white suburban middle-class nightmare about black gangsters condensed into lyrical form. And the kids in the UK are waking up to this process, as in response to pervasive demonising rhetoric of gang talk, they too begin to assume the form of the very Public Enemy Gang Talk positions them as. And this takes us logically then to the final irony: *the unintended consequence of Gang Talk is that it constitutes the Other it designates.*

Conclusion

Trying to have a reasoned debate on gangs in any society is difficult. The object of enquiry does not lend itself to easy definition as the academic gang literature attests. And real problems arise, as Katz and Jacobs argue, from the way gangs are often reproduced in academic discourse. But attempting to get to the reality of the gang is also bedevilled by gang talk of the kind I have tried to identify here. This remains a populist discourse through and by which the reality of the gang is understood by a population of gang talkers widely distributed in the public at large. This is a discourse about gangs which is not shaped by the realities of the gang but which represent instead projections of the control imaginary in the form of representations of gangs organised around highly emotive demonic archetypes. Unfortunately, policy is also shaped by Gang talk which also may help explain the often disproportionate and punitive response gangs invariably provoke.

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