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Panfil, V. (2017) *The Gang's All Queer: The Lives of Gay Gang Members* (New York: NYU Press); Lindegaard, M. (2018) *Surviving Gangs: Violence and Racism in Cape Town* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge); Wolf, S. (2017) *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Texas, Austin: University of Texas Press).

These three new books come as a gust of fresh air. All written by women, based on new ethnographic research, and diverse in geographical span and disciplinary home, they show that the study of gangs –once defined by statistical studies of young men in the global North – is becoming more critical, global and reflexive in outlook and orientation.

Panfil's text shines a warm sharp light on the complex politics of masculinity and sexual identity among gang-involved men, through careful and sensitive interviews with gay gang members in Columbus, Ohio. The double-take you just did –*gay* gang members?– lies at the heart of the book's enterprise and contribution. Like men's sports teams, gangs have heterosexuality and heteronormativity hard-wired into their public persona: they are hyper-masculine spaces where being a 'fag' is the ultimate insult. Yet just as in the world of sport, self-evidently there are many beyond this macho veneer who are gay or bisexual. Breaking through that veneer was not straightforward –Panfil notes several mis-haps and discouragements along the way– but richly rewarding. Through a combination of methodological rigour, human engagement and stylistic verve, Panfil portrays a fluid repertoire of responses to the tension between masculinity and sexuality that exposes not only gang masculinity but the gang itself as a fragile construct.

The study takes place in Columbus, Ohio, a mid-sized city in the mid-West. The author has deep roots in the city, but has since moved elsewhere. As a result, fieldwork was conducted in short concentrated bursts interspersed with periods of geographical and psychological distance. This style of 'appointment' sociology could have been a hindrance, but in this case it was a strength. Rather than being pulled deep into a single group or community, Panfil was able to develop meaningful connections across the city and in the end amassed fifty-three interviews with men who identified as both gay and gang-affiliated. These engagements were by no means limited to interviews: Panfil gave lifts, hung out, went dancing, and generally committed to participation as well as observation. Consequently, a real openness and honesty comes through.

This is a terrifically well-written book. Words are weighed with precision, academic references used sparingly, and endnotes used liberally, thus enabling the writing and experiences to spring from the page unencumbered by names and numbers in brackets. The text is full of characters, life and complexity – flowing between vignette, interview and analysis in a textured yet structured way. One of its real strengths is its analytical sensitivity: great care is taken to properly unpack and contextualise quotations such that the reader is clear on their significance. This narrative style is given rigour and body with a harder scientific approach to analysis. Conclusions have been drawn through careful and systematic coding, and observations are frequently backed with statistical percentages. This approach gives the text the feeling of being human yet rigorous, not an immersive ethnography but a work of flinty social science.

The book is ostensibly about the lives of gay gang members –which include groups with straight, gay and hybrid collective identities– and the comparisons that can be drawn with the mainstream gang literature. The principal distinction drawn by Panfil's participants between gay and straight gangs is spatial: straight gangs are neighbourhood-based, while

gay gangs are formed around spaces in the underground night-time economy, and shared sexual identity. Both fight with similar groups and engage in crime; though for gay cliques criminality is more likely to come in the form of 'crafting' (financial crime) or 'tricking' (sex work) than drug sales. Gay gangs are more likely to be organised along quasi-familial rather than hierarchical lines, but the notion that gay gangs are formed as a defence from homophobic bullying is not supported. Hybrid gangs demonstrate features of both gay and straight equivalents.

The book is also, perhaps more fundamentally, about the tensions of being gay in a violently heteronormative environment. Participants navigate a socio-cultural milieu where the boundaries of acceptable masculinity are strictly policed, and where perceived weakness is ruthlessly exploited. To be performatively gay in this environment is to risk being seen as weak, and therefore a target. Accordingly, participants tend to embody a macho style of dress and comportment more in keeping with gang masculinity. This is sometimes referred to as 'strategic concealment' – as one participant says, 'before I knew what I was, I knew how to hide it' (p.26). There is a revealing tension in participants' attitudes to gay men that are overtly 'swish', or flamboyant. Participants, and some of their family members, could be derisory toward men that acted in an overtly 'femme' way (p.55), but also fiercely defensive of their right to act in whatever way they pleased. The tension between tough masculinity and gay identity also comes out in other ways, too: in discussion of 'the trade' (straight gang members who engage in gay sex), 'voguing hood' (performative send-ups of 'hood' masculinity in gay cabaret nights), and 'fagging out' (enacting a flamboyant gay masculinity after winning a fight). A picture emerges of a hard-won, contingent and creative repertoire of masculine identities, the balancing of which demands energy and panache.

This is a work of serious scholarship and intellectual craft. The methods are tenacious, the analysis rigorous, and the writing textured. By the time you finish this book you will be through the looking-glass: seeing gangs, and the academic industry that surrounds the topic, in a different perspective. I did have a few quibbles. Columbus is a city that may not be familiar to international readers, but there is an unfortunate lack of contextualisation. I had to look up Wikipedia to learn it has a population of less than a million, and is not among the more violent cities in the US. This perhaps is where the book falls short. In presenting Columbus as Anytown it removes any sense of how the city itself – its history, culture, politics, demographics, geography – might figure in the localised meanings of gangs, masculinity and sexuality presented. Without this historical and cultural context it is difficult to assess whether Columbus is exceptional in its topography of gangs, or whether – as is implicit – this study could have been done in any US city with similar results.

The same could not be said of Lindegaard's ethnographic study of the flexible repertoires of violence for young men in post-apartheid South Africa. The structural violence of the apartheid regime has imprinted a distinct, racialised and spatialised urban geography on Cape Town. The book focuses on a form of self-presentation that has emerged against this backdrop, in which young men attempt to 'blend in' as they navigate the complex matrices of racism, violence and stigma that continue to mark the post-apartheid city. Rather than a binary code-switch familiar from studies of American street culture, Lindegaard suggests that this dynamic form of chameleonism takes four forms: gang, township, suburban, flexible. This flexible repertoire represents a subjective aftermath of apartheid, during which time the population was literally sorted -spatially, economically

and socially- into White, African, and Coloured racial categories, with classifications based not only on skin-colour but accent and acquaintances as well. Today, the chameleonism involved in 'passing' represents an everyday adaptation for young people to make their way across the chequerboard of the city, exposing deep fault-lines of racialised difference.

The book is based on a sequence of ethnographic revisits to Cape Town extending over more than a decade. In the process, a lasting set of relationships was built with a cohort of young men, allowing a rare longitudinal insight into the changing dynamics of their lives. Methodologically, the study is characterised as 'deep' hanging out –observed interactions, vignettes and photographic images are used often- and also included a total of 130 interviews with forty-seven participants. The text challenges the traditional narrative form of academic monographs: it is an experimental patchwork of literature, policy, history, vignette, image, quotation, and personal reflection, not always connected in obvious ways. The analysis feels raw and unfiltered at times – some sections of quotation and fieldnote are presented with little comment or context. As a presentational device I found this intriguing: rather than a standard beat, the text followed its own rhythm that felt largely improvised. It will certainly not be to everyone's taste, but in training my ear I found themes that emerge, repeat and sustain.

The central refrain of the text relates to the concept of chameleonism, and the way this plays out in the lives of four participants. These four, chosen as exemplars of each repertoire, are introduced by way of vignettes of violent conflict in which they feature. Like photographs, these situations of violence are 'freeze-framed' in the text, then approached through a series of different concepts -dispositions, horizons, trajectories- that turn the kaleidoscope and view these episodes through a different lens. The benefit in these archetypes is to demonstrate the flexibility of self-presentation demanded of young people in navigating urban violence, and the continuing significance of racial stereotypes in social interaction. In one revealing vignette, Lindegaard introduces a young man of black heritage who exhibits a 'suburban', or middle-class identity. The boy is bullied by his black peers for enacting an identity associated with whiteness -insulted with the racialised epithet 'coconut'- yet treated as a potential criminal in the 'white space' of a suburban beach shop.

As in Panfil's contribution, we see young men drawing on style, speech and comportment to communicate or conceal their identities, with the 'gang' a posture that can be conjured should the situation demand it – inhabited like an actor would a role. As Lindegaard notes, it is not a question of being in or out of gangs but rather 'a question of degrees of involvement. Gang affiliation is one of the many identities that young men claim' (p.223). The ability to 'turn on' the gang repertoire, as with Panfil's participants, is a means of navigating a violent and divided city. Unlike in Panfil's study, however, there were limits; in a city where racialised stereotypes are deeply cast, some forms of 'strategic concealment' are simply not possible. As one participant notes, 'My Blackness is something that follows me everywhere' (p.164).

The latter sections of the book are based on a revisit to participants in 2017, and feel different to the rest of the book. The rhythm slows, becoming more reflective and revealing, and a real fondness for these young men burns through. Remarkably, Lindegaard collated all the material from the book that related to each participant and shared it with them for comment. The fact that few recalled the 'freeze-framed' instances of violence that animated her analysis will bring a wry smile; more important is that each felt that the account presented was fair depiction of their lives. There is something quite moving in the tone of this section: both Lindegaard and her participants have aged by more than ten years during

the course of the research, and all are looking back at these earlier times with both nostalgia and a wisdom that comes with hard-won life experience. This form of reflective revisit is all too rare in gang studies and is to be commended, not only for its depth of human engagement but also for its ethnographic insight. Participants had kept moving, shapeshifting and adapting as the matured –some had become more entangled with criminal underworlds, while others had become not only spatially but also socially mobile– and a picture emerges of a changing city that is increasingly adopting a more flexible repertoire itself.

Overall, this is an unusual, unconventional and –at times– uncomfortable book. On one hand, it offers a penetrating insight into the complex negotiations of race, space and identity in post-apartheid Cape Town, and a contribution to a developing global literature on the dynamism of gang identity and street culture. On the other, it is a book that is troubling in its depiction of race and racialisation. Participants viewed the racialised categories of apartheid not as political constructs but as meaningful ways of classifying Self and Other; tellingly, one group report their struggles in ‘avoiding thinking in those terms’ (p.158). As with the broader analytic approach, the book takes an unfiltered approach to these categorisations. Rather than analysing their complexity, there is a tendency to replicate and reify, at times veering towards a degree of reductionism that feels uncomfortable. In this sense, the ethnography acts more as a window than a bridge, giving insight into individual subjectivities, but less analytical understanding of how and why these have been forged. To have given this proper analytical treatment would have demanded a high degree of reflexivity; but perhaps this would have resulted in a different study.

One set of themes left hanging at the end of the account of violence and social change in South Africa –the role of police, civil society and politics– are picked up assiduously in Wolf’s contribution on El Salvador. *Mano Dura*, or ‘strike hard’ gang policies, have become a byword for strong-arm populism that privileges political showmanship over evidenced policy. The policies in El Salvador allowed for the arrest and prosecution of suspected gang members, aged 12 and above, on the basis of tattoos, language or clothing, and resulted in a succession of high-profile raids by police. The fact that the vast majority of these arrests were unevidenced –of 19,275 arrests under the policy, 95% were dismissed in court, and homicides actually increased– did not prevent the policy garnering widespread support. The animating force of the book is in questioning how and why this came to pass – how the State got away with it, and why nobody stopped them– but also in asking why the policy was eventually abandoned. In answering these questions, there are salutary international lessons on the relationship between evidence, politics and civil society in the high-stakes arena of gang policy.

Gangs continue to be a touch-button issue for governments around the world: as I worked my way through the text, the radio buzzed with news of the US President decrying a caravan of Latin American migrants as ‘gang members and rapists’, and of claims that the Chief Constable of the London Metropolitan Police was declaring a new ‘war on gangs’. In a global climate of fear and hostility, gangs are a useful enemy. In El Salvador, *Mano Dura* emerged in the context of high rates of crime, low rates of detection (only 3.8% of murders were investigated), and low levels of trust in the police. Though there was no way of knowing what proportion of crime was gang-related, they formed an easily identifiable target: the two largest groups –MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> St– had become viewed in the US as a transnational gang threat, and were easily constructed as public enemy number one. Though the reality of the groups’ formation was much more complex and mundane than

this stereotype allows -developed from liminal migrant communities fleeing from civil war- the politics of Mano Dura is less about these realities and more about the maintenance of order.

The book is based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork with NGO workers, including 180 interviews, as well as a media analysis of gang news stories. It is well-researched, well-written, and comprehensive; a measured piece of scholarship, robust and calibrated. It takes aim at a range of powerful actors that were instrumental in the Mano Dura policy -a shadowy cabal of political, military and media elites who exert powerful control over public life-, and with efficient logic takes down the official narrative piece by piece. The first chapter covers a social history of El Salvador, the second the policy of Mano Dura, the third the media construction of gangs, and the remainder are spent on NGO case-studies. It is a quietly devastating approach; unsparing in its critique, unflinching in its analysis, and unadorned in its appraisal. After working through these chapters, there are few stones left unturned.

There is a great deal to like, and learn, in this book. In its critique of state power and sharply drawn analysis of the political economy of El Salvador, it offers an understanding of the gang phenomenon that is all too rare. The book situates the development of gangs within the context of a civil war that killed 75,000 people, and the fragile political settlement that emerged in its aftermath. Gangs are but one of a complex patchwork of non-state actors thrown up by the conflict -alongside security forces, private armies, extra-judicial killing squads and quasi-state police- that continue to broker power in the country. The masters behind these armed groups are a ruling class hewn from postcolonial sugar and coffee aristocracies, who control both political decision-making and media narratives; with little space for critique. Civilianised police are compromised by a lack of real power, and civil society groups struggle to gain credibility or political capital. The media are complicit, 'dominated by a handful of advertising-rich, audience-strong outlets that fail to offer a critique of the dominant political and socio-economic order' (pp.79-80). And the long arm of the United States features heavily: deportation and migration form a revolving door for gang recruitment, monitored at arms length by an FBI gangs taskforce.

Against this backdrop, the book interrogates the extent to which three civil society groups -one legal, one rehabilitative, and one religious- contributed to the abandonment of the controversial policy. These case-studies, based on extensive interviewing, apply an analytical approach drawn from the field of NGO studies and find the evidence mixed. The legal charity was successful in helping 'publicize the abuses and flaws associated with Mano Dura' (p.120), through application of basic human rights and constitutional rule of law, but lacked the politically savvy to lobby for change. The gang rehabilitation programme, organised along horizontal lines and involving gang members as key actors, gained legitimacy in the community but was compromised politically. The religious NGO had notable support from government and successfully lobbied for change in relation to Mano Dura, but was less successful in relation to advocacy and media relations. Though each of these NGOs played a role in contributing to the change in policy, however, it was a high-profile truce between gangs and government -involving cash payments and prisoner transfer in return for reductions in violence- that put a stop to the controversial policy. In the epilogue, we learn that the truce ultimately failed, and policies from the Mano Dura era have crept back. In the realm of gang policy, politics trumps evidence, and there are no clear-cut answers.

The book represents an authoritative account of the rise and fall of Mano Dura, and a considered take on the topography of gangs in El Salvador. Though limited to sources outside of government, police and gangs themselves, the book makes a compelling case for the complexity of gang politics, and their role in the perpetuation of inequality. As an ethnography, it perhaps lacks a sense of the human face of these struggles -vignettes are drawn on sparsely- and at times the analytical approach feels overly rigid, but if anything, this adds to the book's brute force. Notably, one human consequence of Mano Dura is that gang members have stopped getting tattoos and hand signals that communicate their identity. Instead, they increasingly engage in forms of strategic concealment not unlike the presentation of gang identity in evidence in the studies by Panfil and Lindegaard.

This dynamic, shapeshifting and flexible understanding of gang identity – bringing together political economy with human spontaneity – represents an important point of comparison between these three texts. Taken together, they suggest a shift in the gravitational centre of gang research. In illuminating the malleable nature of gang identification in the US and South Africa –and the *realpolitik* of government response in El Salvador– these texts demonstrate the continuing need for grounded, rigorous and humane accounts of the causes and consequences of the global gang phenomenon to contest official accounts.

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