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Gangs, gang members, and geography

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Abstract

Gangs are geographically oriented social entities as evidenced by the display of cardinal points in their graffiti, the use of neighborhood namesakes, a focus on territoriality as their raison d'être, as well as in the way they are policed and legally cordoned. Despite gang members' real and imagined penchant for transgressive place-making and demarcation, it has been sociologists and criminologists, not geographers, who have produced the lion's share of spatially nuanced research on gangs. In this article, I provide a review of the social scientific literature on gangs, concluding with a call for how to make the discipline of geography more inclusive for gang researchers who possess real-world experience with assertive place-making practices.

KEYWORDS
gang policing, gangs, space and place, street gangs

1 | INTRODUCTION

As conjured in popular media and from a public policy perspective, gangs are often little more than ghosts and "folk devils" used to justify oppressive police action and targeted neighborhood cordoning (Cohen, 1972; see also Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2004; Muñiz, 2022). But to imply that gangs exist primarily through myth making is to overlook the sophisticated spatial imaginaries gangs both possess and elicit. Despite gang members' penchant for assertive place-making and transgressive demarcation, geographers have tended to theorize gangs within studies of neighborhood crime control as the over-criminalized yet amorphous objects of police oppression and source of unfounded moral panics. Notwithstanding the lack of nuanced attention gangs have received from geographers, it is evident that gang identity and activity is geographical: from the cardinal points in their graffiti, and the use of neighborhood namesakes, to territoriality as their raison d'être.

In the scholarly literature it has been criminologists and sociologists who have acknowledged as much, routinely pointing to the geographical determinants, components, and contexts of gang life. One of the first scholarly discussions

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of "gangland" in the United States describes gang members as inhabitants of "interstitial" and "in-between" spaces in which formal controls fail and deviant identity flourishes (Thrasher, 1927; see also Bogardus, 1926). In recent years, social scientists have continued to explicitly incorporate a geographical perspective in their analysis of gangs, seeking, for example, to explore gang "set space" (Tita et al., 2005) in an effort to "demonstrate the primacy of 'place' in shaping the identity of the gang as a social group" (Brantingham et al., 2012, p. 852). But such geographical framing and spatial approaches are invariably employed to better understand, identify the location of, and predict violence (see also Papachristos et al., 2013; Valasik & Tita, 2018; and in the geographical literature Radil et al., 2010).

So central is the issue of violence within gang studies, most attempts to incorporate a sophisticated spatial perspective within criminology look at distributions of crime with the use of geographic technologies in a way that is more akin to predicative policing methods than providing nuanced social scientific understandings of gang life more broadly (Curtis et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 1997; Tita & Radil, 2010). Many of the orthodox criminological approaches belie the fact that while categorized gang members do disproportionately contribute to violent crime rates within gang territory (Cohen & Tita, 1999; Maxson et al., 1985; Valasik, 2018; Valasik et al., 2017; Valasik & Reid, 2021), the vast majority of gang life is not bound up with violence, but rather, is spent engaging in non-criminal, mundane place-making and "hanging around" (Klein, 1995; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988). Recognizing this reality, civil gang injunctions—the primary tactic used by police to abate gangs—do not even focus on violent criminality. Rather, identified gang members are legally enjoined with the use of geographically targeted nuisance enforcement that creates civil penalties for "standing, sitting, walking, driving, gathering, or appearing anywhere in public view, in a public place, or any place accessible to the public" (Bloch & Meyer, 2019, p. 1111).

While the motivation for and commission of violence is explicitly decentered in the critical criminological literature on gangs, here too space and place tend to be conceptually underdeveloped. Within such "critical gang studies," geography is implicitly treated as a broad container for "criminalized social action" from which data is gleaned, thereby "revealing [gang members'] agency as well as their structured environments, their organizational systems, rites, rituals, performances, ideologies and cultural products" (Brotherton, 2018). Part of this approach is informed by a more anthropological orientation in which geography is operationalized as a context rather than a necessary condition for the existence of gangs (cf. Conquergood, 1994; Fraser, 2013; Phillips, 2021). The near-absence of a sophisticated understanding of place within gang studies can further be observed in the common definition of what constitutes a gang. After decades of debate among academics and policymakers about what to include and exclude in the definition of a gang, the Eurogang Workshop's consensus definition identifies "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (see Klein & Maxson, 2010). The main sticking point when arriving at this definition was the inclusion of criminality as a defining characteristic. While tautological for Curry (2015), for Klein (1971) "delinquency" was a necessary component since it was delinquent incidents that attracted the attention of residents and police who were the adjudicators of what constituted and therefore called forth the criminalization of "gang behavior." The "crucial where" of gang intention, congregation, and interaction was taken for granted (Cresswell, 1992).

Unlike the Eurogang definition that includes "street oriented" as part of its criteria, California Penal Code § 186.22 (f)—which serves at the national model for identifying gangs in the US since its passage in 1988—does not include geographical measures aside from the term "street" being used to identify the category of "gang" being defined.[1] Due to this omission of spatial criteria, it is passive, legal activity and superficial markers of identity such as clothing and tattoos that are used for categorization and inclusion in gang databases and for purposes of sentence enhancements (Barrows & Huff, 2009), though everyday, on the ground gang policing is still geographical in its approach (Bloch, 2020b). Moving beyond definitional issues (Ball & Curry, 1995; Esbensen et al., 2001; Kennedy, 2009), in this paper I argue it is the absence of discussions about geographical attachment and assertive place-making in scholarly research on gangs that is most striking given the fact that place, more than any other factor, is a defining motivator of gang formation as revealed in every aspect of a gang's organization, activity, and identity. There is, however, a small literature that brings a decidedly spatial and scalar perspective to the study of gangs, though it is criminologists and sociologists who have produced most of this work.

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2 | SPACE AND PLACE IN THE LITERATURE ON GANGS

Despite decades of geographical thinking about the salience of space and contours of place (Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989; Tuan, 1977), the foundational humanistic and critical human literatures alike do not identify gangs aside from the occasional passing reference to their being an otherwise nameless and nefarious neighborhood presence or mention of their "persistent appropriation of space" (Harvey, 1990, p. 259). Although gangs have been cited across the social scientific literature as one of the primary sources of police and policy action in urban environments for more than a generation (Klein, 1995), and notwithstanding the imprint gang members have had on culture and identity writ large (Lauger, 2020; Vigil, 2002), cultural geographers have tended to focus on the top-down manifestations of state and economic ideology in addition to bottom up representations of immutable identity characteristics and environments. Gangs and gang members, like police and policing (Bloch, 2021a, 2021b), have received short shrift in the geographical literature. Despite this almost complete absence from the geographical literature, with some notable exceptions to be sure, there does exist a scholarly literature on the geographical components and contexts for gang life from other disciplinary sources.

In their effort to "situate gang identities in their proper place," sociologists Lopez-Aguado and Walker (2021, p. 109), for example, find that gang members "consistently tether place to identity." Referencing the foundational qualitative work on gangs by other sociologists (e.g., Maxson, 2011; Moore et al., 1983; Vigil, 1988, p. 108) they point out that "criminalized identities are nested geographically, so that the smaller the social geographic area, the more meaningful the identity in terms of gang-involvement." "Place," they argue, "is therefore not just a background element but "a distinguishing feature of every encounter, as well as a key resource in the situational 'activation' of any gang identity" (ibid.), pointing out that "the rivalries, kinship, and meanings tied to a particular gang identity are all shaped, in part, by place" (ibid., p. 108). Further, focusing in on "gang identities as emplaced group identities" (ibid., p. 110) at various scales of gang territory—from the block and the neighborhood to the region—Lopez-Aguado and Walker (2021, p. 108) point out that place is not just a background element to gang life, but "a distinguishing feature of every encounter, as well as a key resource in the situational 'activation' of any gang identity" (ibid.; see also Burke & Stets, 2009; Gieryn, 2000, Goffman, 1963; Venkatesh, 1997).

Previously, it was the identification of "set space" that emerged from one of the first explicitly spatial studies of gang territory (Tita et al., 2005; see also Curry & Spergel, 1988; Rosenfeld et al., 1999). In their study of gangland in Pittsburg, Tita et al. (2005, p. 273) sought to, as they put it, "bring gangs back into the more general debate of how neighborhood context shapes crime." They asked gang-affiliated respondents to indicate on maps where they were most likely to hang out and socialize. Through the construction of a spatial weights matrix that linked neighborhoods, census tracts, and block groups, it became clear that gangs did not hang out in the entirety of claimed neighborhoods or namesake territory, but in distinct areas within neighborhood space which did not necessarily correlate to where gang members resided. This last finding corroborated work done by Moore et al. (1983) and Hagedorn (1988) looking at the increased mobility and residential diffusion of gang members in Los Angeles and Chicago, respectively. Tita et al. (2005, pp. 279–280) concluded that "the most important identifier is not so much the named 'gang,' but rather their affiliation with a smaller local 'set' that usually takes its name from the street on which they hang out [within a] subset of a larger gang turf or territory."

Predating such empirical studies of gang set space, the bulk of gang studies was informed by broader urban ecological approaches to deviance and decline developed by the Chicago school of sociology during the early-to-mid-20th century (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927), followed latter by social network theories of gang activation and behavior at the scale of the street corner (Anderson, 1976; Liebow, 1967; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Whyte, 1943; see also Papachristos et al., 2013). Such studies revealed the symbolic importance gang members attribute to place in shaping and delimiting gang members' activities and behaviors, which Klein (1995, p. 18) identifies as "the life space of the gang." At the same time sociologists were including ethnographically rich studies of gangs into their analysis of place, humanistic geographers were developing concepts taken from the world of continental philosophy and metaphysics, including Heidegger's *dasein*, Husserl's *lebenswelt*, and de la Blache's *genre de vie*, to develop theories of

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place-attachment and spatial consciousness. Perhaps counterintuitively, these philosophical discussions within the discipline of geography were comparatively unattached to grounded spatial practices, thereby "neglecting facets of human experience" (Buttimer, 1976, p. 277) in favor of emusings on "cultural landscape" appreciation (Sauer, 1925), "geosophy" (Wright, 1947), "geographical epistemologies" (Lowenthal, 1961), and "topophila" (Tuan, 1974).

In the humanistic and critical traditions that rose to prominence during the second half of the 20th century, geographers gravitated toward exceedingly esoteric as well as structurally abstract discussions of place, leaving the analysis of gang members and other marginalized real-world inhabitants and producers of the urban environment to sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and criminologists. There was one notable exception in geography during this time (Ley, 1972, 1974, 1975), followed by a decades-long silence, and, recently, some retheorization of gangs in the geographical literature, which I turn to next.

3 | GANGS IN GEOGRAPHY

Influenced at once by reading in behavioral geography and sociological approaches to understanding urban ecology, Ley (1974, p. 212) identified early on that gangs possessed "a strong locational basis" at play in the formation and defense of their social in-grouping and place-making. Analyzing gangs through a geographical lens, Ley (1975, p. 249) challenged work coming out of sociology to "show sensitivity" to the fact that place is a not a constant, and that "causal explanations" for gangs and delinquency "must include variables and ideologies which are national, and not simply local, in their range." Stressing that "gangs cannot be discussed independently of their milieu," Ley brought geographical contextualization to sociological thinking in an effort to depict "gang space" as more dynamic, nuanced, and grounded than had been discussed in the literature to that point. For Ley (1975, p. 248) "there is a spatial ecology which leads to the formation of the gang, and then an ongoing social ecology which lends a meaning to space," thereby articulating an "ambience between space and society." Ley's brand of highly localized human-centered research at the scale of the block, however, was not to be replicated as the emerging and dominant strands of the discipline were already tending toward structuralist thinking in which the study of how gang members produce meaningful and sometimes brutal places was supplanted by Marxist economic investigations into the ravages of capitalism and larger-scale processes of "ghetto formation" (Harvey, 1972).

Ley (1974, 1975) was the first and long remained the only geographer to identify and emplace the gang member, along with and distinct from the "graffiti king" (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974), in a neighborhood context. But his focus on "youth gangs" revealed only a small part of the street gang demographic. Criminologists point out that gang membership peaks at 14–15 years old (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015), though conventional thinking on life course issues and desistence notwithstanding, people sometimes remain in a gang their entire lives, with active gang banging and "kickin' it" becoming passive membership and occasional hanging out over time (Pyrooz, 2014). The naming of and focus on "youth gangs" in the scholarly literature is a result of research being conducted in schools, community centers, and other "safe" places where children are readily accessed and claims about gang membership are freely, performatively, and often erroneously expressed to outsiders (Garot, 2007). Older, "hard core" gang members (ie *veteranos* and "original gangsters" or "OGs") are more likely to be found in less accessible public set space and on prison yards, not school yards (Pyrooz & Decker, 2019; Skarbek, 2014; Weide, 2020). The fact that gang affiliated individuals discuss and perform their subcultural identity differently in different spaces and across time—including on social media and across cyber space in recent years (Leverso & Hsiao, 2021; Moore & Stuart, 2022; Storrod & Densley, 2017; Stuart, 2020)—adds to the difficulty in doing holistic gang research out of context and when spatially removed from where "gang activity" is actually practiced (Bloch, 2018).

Due to the aforementioned macro scale of critical analysis, combined with geographers' lack of insider status and other socio-spatial barriers to accessing gangs due in part to the class, race, and social composition of the discipline (Pulido, 2002), research on street gangs in geography has remained exceedingly rare during the decades since Ley's (1972) study of Philadelphia's "Black inner city." Despite widely applied discussions of globalization and scale

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within geography in recent decades (Marston, 2000), gang activity and gang identity have garnered no more than mere mentions in favor of conceptualizing capitalism in all of its incarnations (cf. Fraser & Hagedorn, 2018; Fraser & van Hellemont, 2020). In fact, geographers have appeared loath to mention gangs at all even in studies of globalization and urban marginality, aside from important but fleeting references within the literature on racial cordoning and exclusion and in the context of transnational crime flowing into and emanating from Central America (Fontes, 2018; Jefferson, 2018, 2020; Winton, 2005, 2012; Ybarra, 2019). Notable but rare exceptions within geography in which gangs are thoroughly brought into conversations with spatial politics, writ large, include work by Alonso (2004), Bloch (2020a) and Bloch and Phillips (2022).

Writing about the formation of Black gangs in Los Angeles, Alonso (2004, p. 663) argues that “to fully understand the dynamics of these gangs, we must view them from an historical perspective that illuminates the roles of race, place and social structure in early gang formation.” Based in part on his reading of the “multiple marginality” thesis offered by Vigil (1988) in his analysis of Chicano gangs in LA, Alonso (ibid., 669) argues that “race is central as an etiological factor” in gang formation, but that the racialized production of segregated spaces, as well as racist policing by both local and federal law enforcement agencies, creates a socio-political and economic environment in which gangs flourish (see also Brown et al., 2012; Felker-Kantor, 2018). Similarly, Bloch and Phillips (2022) examine how officially mapped and targeted gang neighborhoods in Los Angeles were likely to be declared “hazardous” and therefore redlined due in large part of their ethnic and racial composition during the 1930 and 1940s under the auspices of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation assessment scheme. They point out that “street gangs have laid claim to neighbourhood spaces throughout Los Angeles since the at least the 1940s, creating a quasi-autonomous geography of enmity and alliance that authorities and the public simplistically see as having been produced unidirectionally, from the bottom up” (Bloch & Phillips, 2022, p. 752). Like Alonso (2004), as well as Bass (2001) for whom policing race is dependent upon policing space, Bloch and Phillips (2022) take a historical geographical perspective of the formation of gang space in Los Angeles, informing their work with (auto)ethnographic place-based knowledge of how gangs struggle and survive in those spaces to this day.

Despite the explicit geographical framing within gang research, gangs have most often been mentioned by geographers as the amorphous objects of police oppression and the source of moral panics in places such as New York, Los Angeles, London, and elsewhere (Elliott-Cooper, 2019; Jefferson, 2018; Meyer, 2021). When not theorized as such within discussions of security politics and scapegoating, or what Meyer (2021) identifies as a “security symptom” in the context of displacement by gentrification, gangs are often mentioned among a litany of other over-policed sources of neighborhood disorder such as prostitution, drug dealing, homelessness, and graffiti within the geographical literature critiquing broken windows policing and other forms of geographically-targeted order control (Diniz & Stafford, 2021; Herbert, 1996; Seymour et al., 2010; c.f. Langegger, 2013). In the vast critical literature on the politics of public space, gangs do not even register even though they are a public facing, rampantly criminalized, and place-claiming social formation whose membership is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands in the United States alone (Decker et al., 2022).

Gangs in the geographical literature also come into focus within studies looking at place-based policing, and therefore as objects of criminalization more than agents who engage in transgressive place making. In addition to the central role professional geographers and geographical technologies such as Geographic Information Systems have played in locating gangs atop Euclidian space with the use of Cartesian coordinates for the purposes of containment and criminalization (Cahill & Roman, 2007), Herbert's (1997) exploration of police territoriality speaks to the antagonistic relationship between the Los Angeles Police Department and LA's street gangs. While police cordon and regulate space through legal means, gang members illicitly demarcate space and covertly navigate neighborhoods to both exert their control and elude law enforcement bent on their removal. Like Herbert (1997) who analyzes gangs vis-à-vis anti-gang policing, Bloch and Meyer (2019) contend that despite gangs being a real and formattable presence in their case study site—noted more for hanging out and barbequing at the park than anything else—the specter of the “gang member” is wielded by respondents within discussions about safety in the context of liberal security regimes, thereby rendering the “gang member” a potent political product more than an actual participant

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in the making of place. At security-obsessed residents' request, civil gang injunctions utilize public nuisance laws enforced in geographical distinct and mapped "safety zones" to banish purported "gang members" from appearing in public space even in the absence of actual criminal activity so long as their physical presence is seen as "annoying" or "disruptive." Such geographically targeted civil injunctions appease dominant sensibilities about who belongs where, and almost exclusively target racialized community members (Bloch & Meyer, 2019; Graziani et al., 2021; Muñiz, 2014; Ramírez, 2020).

The importance of space and place in both theorizing and policing gangs is without question. The loss of geographical specificity is not just an oversight in the literature, it allows for the blanket application of the gang identifier in the broad criminalization of immigrants and young men of color in particular. This displacement of territory and movement away from place as a defining feature of gang activity allows for gang members to be "tied to the much more abstract terrain of 'the street'" (Lopez-Aguado & Walker, 2021), thereby allowing for the increased criminalization of places vis-à-vis unwanted populations. Whereas gangs used to be thought of as place-based, their place-attachment has in recent years been replaced by symbolic and appropriated "brands of gang culture" (Lopez-Aguado & Walker, 2021) that fall under the placeless monikers and horizontal leadership structure of, for example, "transnational gangs" such as the Crips, Bloods, Latin Kings, and Mara Salvatrucha, each of which have been targeted under RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations act) statutes in addition to "community policing" efforts and local injunctions (Durán, 2013). This loss of space as a defining component of gang activity has, in short, increased the scale at which "gang members"—both real and imaged—can be targeted by law enforcement. The removal of place specificity in the labeling and policing of gangs is both constitutionally questionable and in need of direct scrutiny by geographers (Bloch, 2020c).

4 | PUTTING GANGS IN THEIR PLACE

Given their affirmative identity construction and declared allegiance to specific localities as represented in gang names and as expressed in the willingness to assert and defend claims made to those spaces, gangs can best be described as engaging in aggressive place making and exclusionary community formation. Conventional as well as critical notions of gang formation argue that gangs are a manifestation of social cohesion and community building that arises in the face of structural collapse, community neglect, and willful deprivation and marginalization. Gangs are likewise, I add, a proactive and resolute social formation in which inclusion and exclusion are mutually dependent—a basic feature of all community formation (Bloch, 2021c). The notion that gangs are formed primarily in the absence of inclusive and stable social structures robs them of the expressed, willful desire for proactive, exclusionary community building afforded to other groups who, to one degree or another, violently lay claim to space: that is, security-obsessed homeowners' associations, white nationalist groups, break-off libertarian societies, anarchist communities, etc. As I have argued in other work (Bloch, 2016), defending and romanticizing over-policed subcultures in an effort to present them as more palatable to mainstream publics can actually rob them of their edge and agency, in effect dealing a death blow from below (see also Brotherton, 2015; Ferrell, 1993).

Similarly, to attribute gang formation to the abstract forces of, say, racial capitalism and the state does not jibe with how many gang members see themselves, including through a reactionary lens, and draws attention away from the role some gang members are known to play in extorting immigrant street vendors (Muñoz, 2016), disproportionately engaging in violent crime (Sanchez et al., 2022), as well as controlling whole neighborhoods as well as prison complexes through highly organized social networks of discipline and control in the interest of producing environments more amenable to illicit business transactions and racialization that is spatially contingent (Bloch & Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Weide, 2022b). Gangs also consist of a diverse membership of actors for whom outward violence and intimidation are far less important than other, more mainstream methods of earning pride, prestige, and notoriety. Nevertheless, "gangs" conceptualized as monolithic place-takers are policed in a way that criminalizes whole neighborhoods and uses race and other superficial indictors of identity and style to

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target, capture, and disproportionately punish whole populations of Black and Latino men and boys (Muñiz, 2015; Rios, 2011a; Shabazz, 2015).

Like any subject knowledge predicated upon actual experience, gang research in the absence of insider perspectives is bound to be discussed in terms informed by abatement practices on one side of the spectrum and abstract apologist viewpoints on the other. Therefore, gang research produced by (former) gang members relying on data gathered in gang spaces is needed to navigate between the demonization on one hand and romanticization on the other that currently comprises much of the academic, activist, policy, and popular literature.

5 | CONCLUSION: MAKING SPACE FOR GANGS

Sociologists have produced the lion's share of geographically nuanced gang research within the relatively small area of scholarship. One of the possible reasons for this is the degree to which the discipline has accepted autoethnography as a method, and therefore has made room for contextualized reflections on gangs and gang spaces from an experiential perspective by former gang members and gang affiliates. Like formerly jailed and incarcerated "convict criminologists" and scholars of graffiti who have entered academia in recent years and remain "in search of academic legitimacy" (Ross et al., 2017; Tietjen, 2019; see also Bloch, 2019; Bloch & Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Walker, 2022; Weide, 2022a), former gang members have carved out a space in the sociological literature that has hitherto consisted of research on crime, criminalization, and criminality conducted from a bird's eye view or based on official data stored on an Excel spread sheet (Bolden, 2020; Contreras, 2013, 2018; Durán, 2009, 2013; Huerta, 2016; Rios, 2011b). What remains lacking in geographical research is the "elegant knowledge" (Ferrell, 2018) on gangs and gang geographies produced by insiders and complete member researchers engaged in autoethnographic reflection and writing (Adler & Adler, 1987).

Autoethnography that is simultaneously analytical and evocative consists of writing (*graphy*) about culture (*ethnos*) from the perspective of personal experience (*auto*) (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). In geography, Butz (2010, p. 152) points to autoethnographic research and writing as capable of producing a "knowledgeable perspective on the metropolis from the margins, [which] is emotionally invested, grounded in place, saturated with local specificity, the ebb and flow of daily life, and what is going on behind the scenes," or as Sircar (2021, p. 8) has written, it is a "methodological tool that combines the experience of embodiment with the agency of narrative." Speaking more directly to subcultural research and writing, it is criminologist Jeff Ferrell's (2018, p. 147) definition of autoethnography as "a way of living in and knowing the world" that provides an argument for centering the perspectives of ex-gang members in the literature on gangs and gang spaces. Autoethnography, Ferrell (2018, p. 150) argues, provides members of groups being studied with a place to articulate what he calls "elegant knowledge" that otherwise eludes outsider research that examines phenomena from a temporal, spatial, and emotional distance. As Ferrell (ibid.) puts it:

> Elegant knowledge suggests that, upon close inspection, human activities that might be dismissed as simplistic or uninteresting, or human beings who might be dismissed as unskilled or uneducated, in fact embody constellations of knowledge that are nuanced and sophisticated—and that are elegant as well in their graceful ingenuity. Further, this elegant knowledge is generally a form of situated knowledge, an ability to read, reference, and make sense of particular situations that mostly remain opaque to those outside them.

An "elegant," autoethnographic perspective, I assert, moves gang research away from being a proxy for studying crime and criminalization, and closer to more rigorously analyzing how space is perceived, conceived, and lived in a way that has been all-but ignored in the geographical literature (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Fraser, 2013; Langegger, 2013; Schwarze, 2021). By opening the discipline up to ex-gang members and gang affiliated scholars

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through more inclusive and targeted mentoring and recruitment starting at the high school and undergraduate levels, we not only move the writing on gangs away from traditional criminological perspectives, but likewise avoid the rehearsed narratives on gang territoriality, identity, and demarcation that typically come out of orthodox scholarship and activist conceptualizations of gang life. More so, as geographers with ex-gang members among our ranks, we can advance our understanding of the human dimension of assertive place-making from the bottom up.

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ENDNOTE

[1] California Penal Code § 186.22 (f) identifies a gang as "any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more criminal acts… having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in, or have engaged in, a pattern of criminal gang activity."

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