Armed, illegal non-state actors control small but important sectors of both Brazil and Colombia. In these two countries, traffickers and large gangs concentrated in urban (and, in Colombia’s case, also rural) areas clash heavily with state security forces, dominate significant numbers of the urban poor, and play a large, threatening role in the public’s imagination. Some vital research has been done on the political and sociological dynamics within the zones controlled by these actors, but there is less in the literature that deals with the specific activities of community media and their relations with the ruling gangs and with local residents. This dissertation focuses on two community media groups, one in Bogotá, and one in Rio de Janeiro, both of which operate in informal urban slums controlled by gangs. It argues that in both cases these groups provide some checks to manifestations of authoritarian aggression, the infliction of arbitrary violence on residents and the climate of fear promulgated by the armed actors in these communities. These community media groups are able to do this by capitalizing on community resistance, by building informal relations and networks with gang membership, and by mobilizing notions of political legitimacy.
Introduction

In the barrio Juan Pablo II, built hard on the side of a mountain in the vast sprawl of the satellite city Ciudad Bolívar, in the teeming outskirts of Bogotá, a group of young citizen journalists fan out to make their visits to homes of residents, requesting interviews about a new government program designed to feed the impoverished elderly. Juan Pablo II, and several other neighborhoods in Ciudad Bolívar, is under the informal control of a non-state armed actor, in this case a reorganized paramilitary gang called the Aguilas Negras. These young journalists perform a variety of tasks in Juan Pablo II, one of which is to keep each other from gang membership. Other activities include informing residents about local organizations and branches of the municipal government that could provide some services, and educating and empowering interested young people to participate in media and political activity such as broadcasting, organizing and protesting. These actions, by the rules of Colombia’s internecine and generalized conflict, could be seen to provoke the wrath of the local militia, who use extreme violence as a routine method of social control. Furthermore, stories condemning violence, written about and by these young media workers appear on blogs, in a community web magazine and on local radio stations. Yet they go about these and other tasks mostly unmolested, picking their way silently past the men with guns.
Several thousand kilometers to the south and east, in a neighborhood called Baixa do Sapateiro in Complexo da Maré, in one of the poorest neighborhoods in one of the largest favela complexes in Rio de Janeiro, several dozen young people and two older video journalists busily make preparations in a spiffy new community center. The two video journalists have two student video crews working with them, checking recording levels on microphones, examining camera angles through view screens, and going over scripts and shot lists. The other young people present are running their lines, preparing the rough set and basic costumes, and generally looking on and piping up with advice and encouragement. These teenage (mostly) filmmakers are about to shoot a short film that several of their number had co-written, a docudrama whose subject was the violence against women so widespread in the world of the drug trafficking gangs that control the local neighborhoods. Like the group to the north in Colombia, these young media advocates could be in danger for their lives from the local armed group, called the Amigos dos Amigos. The young people criticize the trafficking gang openly in their productions, breaking the lei do silêncio (law of silence) that is supposed to reign supreme in the favela, and many in the group recently ended a gang affiliation in order to join the media group. Yet the Amigos dos Amigos gang tolerates their behavior, makes a deal with the group leaders to not recruit any of the media group members, and even negotiates with those same leaders later when a conflict arises between the two organizations.

Broad, theoretical questions emerge from specific dynamics like those described above, questions explored in different ways over the years by scholars
and researchers of these improvised urban communities, community media groups, informal institutions, and armed non-state actors. First, are these poor communities (especially those controlled by armed actors) best understood as problematic for the consolidation of democracy, resistant to the inculcation of citizenship, and as a crystallization of the problems of third world under-development, as is suggested in some of the literature? Second, if these communities are instead seen as complex socio-political landscapes in their own right, rather than merely examples of what is to be avoided, than what are the dynamics between the groups and individuals that operate inside the psycho-spatial boundaries of these neighborhoods? And third, if deep-rooted elements of a cooperative, collectivized and democratic culture can be discerned, even in communities that consistently have some of the lowest human development indicators region-wide, than what does this mean in terms of how these people and places should be studied and viewed?

Why are these theoretical questions important? Because if we accept the notion of urban peripheral communities as “brown areas” or “feral cities” which must be cleansed or tamed for development and democratic consolidation to succeed, we overlook the existing multi-directional flow of power relations present between peri-urban citizens, informal institutions, and non-state actors, and we fail to understand the intricate social mechanisms that allow these groups to coexist. If we are taught to think of political legitimacy and the dance between power and consent as the exclusive purview of state governance, than we miss how legitimacy can function in a subnational context, and how it can be conferred on or withdrawn from a variety of actors by a variety of publics. If we accept the premise that illegal
armed groups are essentially predatory bandits, we do not see the wide range of activities in which they engage, we miss the way these armed groups use narratives and ideology in order to maintain power, and we leave out the multiple nodes of connection between these actors, officials, and civilian groups. Finally, by asserting that indiscriminate violence and the attendant lack of security that flows from this violence are complete deal-breakers for democratic culture, as some scholars do, we rarely study how violence can be both accepted and resisted, how it can be incorporated into informal institutions and yet successfully challenged as a method, how its practice can sometimes be adopted into the matrix of relations in an informal community and other times rejected.

These are some of the questions that inspired this research project. As a journalist who had lived and worked for half of his adult life in Latin America at the time I began this research, I felt that too much of what was written and depicted of Latin America, and particularly the region’s many informal, lightly-governed communities, tended to follow established scripts about political instability and debates between elites, poverty, drug trafficking, corruption, violence, or what were presented as exotic cultural features. Although it is true that these elements are present in Latin America, and I too wrote stories and produced television pieces that followed these scripts, I felt that the way these stories were told obscured certain core truths that I absorbed while living there – that people resisted, that they were ingenious, that their lives were complex, and that they had developed intricate methods to solve problems and influence outcomes in their communities. When I read more scholarship about Latin America, I learned that the tension between
agency and victimization, between concepts of functionalism and of disjunctive democracies, and between theories of repression and empowerment, is just as present in the world of scholarly research as it is in journalism.

As a former journalist, I was drawn to study media groups, and my interest in theoretical questions about the nature of informal communities led me to study these groups in poor urban neighborhoods. I decided on a comparative study because I felt that the opportunity to study two different groups in two different countries might help contextualize the data that I gathered, and to possibly generalize more accurately if important commonalities among data sets were found. I chose Bogotá, Colombia, because I had lived there for several years previously, and had maintained some contacts that might help me to establish a research relationship with a community media group; and I chose Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, because it is the site of some of the world’s most well-known and well-studied informal communities, and because of this there are some well-established avenues for the research of civil society groups in the favelas. Access was a major factor in my selection of areas to study because I set out to study neighborhoods controlled by entrenched armed actors, and I knew the obstacles and dangers to carrying out research in these neighborhoods would be great.

My reasons for selecting two separate case studies are three-fold. First, I wished to enlarge the data set – drawing research from two data pools rather than one would enable me to test my central hypothesis more thoroughly. Second, I wished to compare and contrast the CMGs operating in these distinct socio-political spaces. I suspected they would simultaneously differ and overlap in terms of
organizational structure, goals, methods, and underlying beliefs, and I wished to know how these differences might affect their interactions with other actors in these neighbourhoods, particularly in how these differences affected their capacity to curb violence. Third, it seemed possible to me that CMGs willing to operate in violent, high-risk environments, whose membership is partly made up by those who have been exposed to violence, might share some strategies that could be generalized to other similar groups, and the best way to discover whether this was so would be to use two case studies.

In both cases, I was unable to make contact with community media groups before I arrived in country. Once there, I learned that in the two cities there is a plethora of different types of community media groups operating, and that membership in a variety of different civil society groups is high in peripheral neighborhoods. During 2007 and 2008, the years of this study, both cities were governed by activist municipal administrations that sought explicitly to reintegrate citizens that had been pushed to the peripheries and were subjected to manifest structural violence. Therefore I was able to make contacts with municipal agencies that helped me reach out and connect with civil society groups working in some of the most marginalized areas of the two cities. In the case of Bogotá, I met my lead informant through a face-to-face introduction from an administration official, because of his long-standing funding ties to the city. In Rio, I met my lead informants through a gatekeeper civil society group that I was introduced to through municipal and academic contacts.
Once I selected and established contact with the two media groups in this study, I was able to offer my personal digital filmmaking equipment (temporarily) and my moderate levels of filmmaking and television expertise as incentives to these two groups to permit me to observe, take notes, conduct interviews, and participate in some of their activities. Both groups were heavily engaged in digital filmmaking, and members of both groups told me that offering something that was useful to them helped in terms of granting me access. Very early on in both cases I witnessed multiple interactions between members of the media groups and members of the gangs, and I rapidly became aware of the thick web of networked social activity that characterized dynamics within these neighborhoods. I also grew closer to some of the media group members over time, and they began to relate intimate details of their lives, motivations and perceptions in long-form interviews. Gradually, from the scholarly research I conducted, from the questionnaire and survey data I gathered, from the group interactions I observed and participated in, and from the individual contact I had with neighborhood residents and group members, I formed a thesis about the interaction between armed non-state actors and community media groups in informal communities.

The main thesis of this project is that narratives of legitimacy, used as a communications strategy by community media groups and individuals within these groups, act as a check on power and violence employed by non-state actors in similar ways in marginalized communities where informal institutions and non-state actors are strong. I will define narratives of legitimacy as stories that confer legitimacy or withhold it from individuals or groups. Over the course of this
research project, I analyze the structure of relations in the two neighborhoods studied, thoroughly investigate the characteristics of the different actors integral to this project, and illustrate how narratives function as one of the most important ways in which legitimacy is constructed, projected and operationalized.

This is structured as an interdisciplinary work; therefore, I have drawn on a constellation of different scholarly and other literatures in order to analyze and explain the dynamics and concepts that are my focus. In Chapter 1, I explore the subject of narratives through scholarship on this subject, in order to demonstrate how these stories can be mobilized in marginalized communities and how they are deployed through informal institutions and associational groups. I then focus on three particular narratives used by the community media groups I studied in order to illustrate the ways in which stories are used in poor urban neighborhoods to curb violence, reduce fear, and empower individuals to reflect meaningfully on their lives and their contexts.

I finish Chapter 1 with a literature review of the study of community media groups in order to engage with the scholarly debate on this subject, to situate this project within this literature, and to establish a theoretical foundation for the forthcoming case studies. As I show in this section of Chapter 1, community media groups (CMGs) have been theorized variously as civil society groups engaged in building community ties, as quasi-political (“radical”) organizations dedicated to raising political consciousness and citizenship-construction, and as simply a category of media engaged in unpaid but professional-level activity. The fact that CMGs have been defined in these three ways is crucial for my argument, because I
will show that the CMGs in these case studies play all of these roles to varying degrees, and in so doing, I argue, have a curbing effect on violence in a number of different ways. According to my argument, the CMGs re-integrate former gang members and street kids into non-criminal social groups, thereby reducing the risk of violence in the lives of these group members, they occasionally directly intervene with the local armed actor in order to try to resolve a conflict non-violently, which reduces the threat of violence community-wide, and they provide some measure of training to participants, which can provide, if not direct professional opportunities, at least aspirations for income-producing activities outside drug trafficking work.

Chapter 2 begins by discussing how legitimacy has been studied in informal political contexts, so as to introduce the topic, and then delves into a genealogy of the concept of political legitimacy by engaging with early modern and contemporary political theorists. The discussion then turns to legitimacy and violence, in order to establish if and how they can coexist (based on scholarly sources, I claim here that they do), and to also establish the role of the state for the purposes of this research project. Chapter 2 then turns in detail to how the presence or absence of legitimacy is seen by other scholars who have looked at areas such as the ones studied here, and in so doing, I evaluate the strength of legitimacy claims made by the armed actors in this study. Chapter 3 turns to the construction of narratives, and begins by exploring the centrality of the gangster narrative in Western culture, and by extension, in Colombian and Brazilian culture as well. This chapter then examines the internal dynamics of gangs themselves, and
undertakes a survey of scholarly research on gangs in order to tease out central themes that have persisted over time and are important components of this project.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the fieldwork itself and explain the methodology I used over the course of the research project. I focus on the details of the research in Bogotá and Rio de Janeiro, including the research period, human protection procedures (such as anonymity for all participants), and how I was introduced to my gatekeepers and got access to the community. In this chapter I go on to explain the reasons why I focus on in-depth interviews with individuals and ethnography as a data set. Here also I describe the surveys I conducted; who answered, how the respondents were chosen, and the number of interviews. Finally, I question how my role as a white, male, western researcher engaging with marginalized communities, in occasionally dangerous situations, may have impacted the research.

In Chapter 5 the research project turns to the Colombian case study, and starts off by tracing the complex and evolving recent dynamics between the Colombian state and the paramilitary non-state actors present in that country, in order to provide thick and detailed context alongside the data. The study turns to a specific analysis of the paramilitary group present in the Colombian neighborhood, and presents some initial data, before providing a concise history of the district and neighborhood of this case study using current government data points, municipal archives and the testimonials of community elders. At this point, in a separate section, I tabulate responses from surveys I took in the neighborhood surveys and use this data to support three planks of my central argument; one, that non-state
actors are at least competitive for legitimacy in the minds of community members, two, that local residents are engaged in civil society and neighborhood associations, and three, that the CMG is seen by residents as curbing violence. The focus of the chapter then turns to the Colombian community media group and presents a wide variety of data about this group, using ethnographies and interviews to reveal its internal dynamics, as well as its interrelationship with other neighborhood actors. Along the way, I interpret this data, and I argue that the data reflects the use of narratives of legitimacy to curb the risk of violent outcomes.

Chapter 6 follows a similar template than Chapter 5 for the Brazilian case. First I look broadly at the role of gangs in Brazilian urban societies, and then I move the discussion to the contemporary situation on the ground in Rio. I explore some literature on how the vast funding directed at the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics (“mega-events”) is impacting communities such as the ones studied here. The chapter then turns to a historical synopsis of the Complexo da Maré and the neighborhood of Baixa do Sapateiro, and describes the part they played in the development of Rio de Janeiro. At this juncture, I introduce the survey data for the neighborhood, and use it in the same way it is used in the Colombia chapter. I then use a short ethnography and brief interviews from a drug-sales hub in the neighborhood to provide some initial evidence for the role of narratives of legitimacy in this community. The chapter turns to the community media group (CMG), focusing on the leaders, and looks closely at their strategic use of narratives of legitimacy in dealing with the gang. Finally, Chapter 6 explores in-depth interviews with CMG members in order to establish the broader meaning of
legitimacy narratives on an individual level, and in so doing argue for their profound inter-subjective significance. Chapter 7 presents this study’s conclusions.

In sum, by virtue of what I focus on here, this research project asserts that it is not useful, and may in fact be counterproductive from a policy point of view, to think of regions and communities not controlled by the state as mere outliers, as problems whose main solution lies in the increase of state security forces with a secondary emphasis on improving economic conditions. This project instead intends to add to the growing body of research that seeks to determine how local people in these contested spaces navigate the tricky webs of power while suspended above an abyss. In doing so, I hope to shed light upon the ways in which legitimacy narratives are collectively created in spaces seen by the state and many of its citizens as illegitimate, and to establish whether these narratives can perform a democratic function by acting as a check or a balance on the power wielded by groups who routinely use violence as a threat and as a method of rule-enforcement.
Can the power of storytelling be used to shape a life? Can narratives turn aside a blade, lower a gun barrel? Recent scholarship on narratives suggests that such things may be possible. Narrative production is no longer understood as merely a constitutive aspect of aesthetic production or cultural identity, and is now part of the study of politics and of social organization. (Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Maines, 1993; Somers, 1994) This research project investigates two sites where, I argue, community media groups (CMGs) deploy narratives for purposes connected to the safety and empowerment of their members and their communities at large. Researchers have argued that narratives play a key role in shaping collective identities and opening spaces for collective action, and that these groups create bonds of belonging and shared meaning through the production of stories. (Carr, 1986; MacIntyre, 1984; McAdams, 1993) I argue here that, in keeping with this research, narratives can act as tools for the protection of community and group members from violent and coercive groups.

The CMGs in this study are primarily engaged in telling stories about their communities, and secondarily in deploying stories to lessen violence and curb a climate of fear. The narratives of legitimacy that are deployed for this secondary
purpose are therefore ‘backstage’ and more difficult to tease out. Several key questions emerge out of my decision to study narratives this way. Does the existing scholarship on narratives support my hypothesis that narratives can play a social and political role? Is the work that community journalists do with their members connected to the kinds of narratives I argue they deploy to lower levels of tension and violence in their neighborhoods? If this frontstage (Goffman, 1959) process of narrative construction is connected to the backstage, then how?

This section of Chapter 1 uses a dual approach to explore the narratives used by community journalists that do more than ‘just’ tell stories. First, I present a short taxonomy of the types of narratives that I argue are deployed by CMGs to shield members and community residents from coercion, threats, and violence. Second, I use narrative analysis and the work of theoreticians of narrative to identify and bring out some thematic elements that flow from the sites of CMG narrative production into community contexts where violence and threats are routine. In the second section of this Chapter, I will review the scholarly literature on community media in order to show how other scholars and researchers have approached questions of empowerment, violence-reduction, and consciousness-raising by CMGs.

In the neighborhoods I studied for this research project, narratives were rife. Everyone had a story, and these stories mattered to who they were and what they did. (Higgins & Brush, 2006; Polletta, 2006) A different research project might have identified a broader field of narratives in the community in order to produce a more variegated picture of narrative interaction, and this could be a
productive are for future study, but it is outside the scope of this work. I focus here on the narrative construction and deployment within two CMGs of three distinct narratives. I did this in order to process-trace how specific narratives move from development to deployment, and to identify how narratives work to accomplish group goals.

There were three distinct narratives that I argue were the most commonly relied upon by the CMGs in the two case studies to shield their members and community residents. First, the good path is a normative claim that the CMG provides a safe and positive environment for youth. This narrative makes an appeal to community members and gang members based upon a presumed set of social mores. The presumption here is that gang members and residents recognize and are willing to tacitly concede that life in a gang trafficking in addictive substances, while it may make sense as a rational choice given the context of these neighborhoods, and is certainly worthy of respect, is nonetheless a life lived in a dangerous and corrupting demimonde. Therefore, those members of the community, and particularly CMG members, who are following the good path, should be allowed to live their lives without being coerced into joining the gang or being threatened with violence. This narrative requires self-criticism on the part of the gang member, and through its subtext it asks gangsters to morally judge their own role in the social pantheon. If gang membership is not the good path, then by definition gang members must to some extent be on a bad one.

The second narrative I saw most commonly used was the connectivity narrative. According to this perspective, the gang, residents and the CMGs share
profound local ties to the neighborhood – for all three groups, a powerful component of their identity is the local. As I will argue in more detail below, the gangs make their key claim to local political legitimacy based on the need to maintain social order in a community characterized by state neglect and/or repression. Community media groups also promote the interests of their communities through their core mission to give voices to the voiceless, as the scholarship on community media below demonstrates. And community residents are often excluded from the broader society and rely on each other for networks of support and connection. Therefore, these groups, and other individuals or groups who share a narrative of group identity, are connected and should protect one another and band together in solidarity rather than prey on each other or expose one another to violence.

The third legitimacy narrative that was sometimes used to defend CMG members and residents against threats or violence was the mediator. This is a slightly more complex narrative through which the CMG claims for itself and tries to project a particularly privileged role in the community. The role of the mediator is one in which the CMG mediates between the residents and the gang, and to some extent intercedes directly to try and reduce violence. The CMG claims a certain shade of neutrality in this role; the group will tend to lean more towards community goals rather than gang goals, but at the same time it respects the goals of the gang and will not explicitly criticize the gang for its criminality. This role is something akin to a conflict negotiator; normative judgment is avoided by the CMG, yet peaceful resolution is presumed as a value that all should attempt to
achieve. The CMG thus affirms that, as the mediator, it only ever deals with problems non-violently and is impatient with violence as a means to solve disputes. And finally, as the mediator, the CMG defines its own role as a group that can think critically about the way decisions are made in the community, and by thinking critically, it can act fairly or suggest more fair courses of action.

Before I explain how these narratives are formulated and deployed, it is necessary to describe the centrality of narratives in the work and the lives of the CMG members. Usually, after the filmmaking workshops finished up in favela Maré, I would head back to the entrance of the neighborhood with Josinaldo and Carlos, the two leaders of the Brazilian media group, and locate Carlos’ little car so they could drive me back to where I could catch a bus home. We made sure to leave before dusk, because darkness falls quickly in Rio, and the area was not well lit. In the car on the way home we were silent, there were no more bom papos, good chats or jokes, and both young men were as exhausted as if they returning from a long day of breaking rocks, their faces blank of expression. Carlos seemed barely able to focus on the road. It occurred to me that I had seen that blankness of expression before. Earlier that year, when I went to retrieve Francisco Cuéllar, the Colombian CMG leader, at the public housing complex where he lived in South Bogotá, his wife answered the door. “He won’t leave the bedroom,” she said. “Maybe you can talk to him.” I knocked on the bedroom door and he didn’t answer so I stepped inside. Francisco was lying on the bed fully clothed and wearing his leather jacket. Colombian rock was playing loudly. His face was blank and he was staring at the ceiling. “I’ll see you another day,” he said.
All three of these men were gifted communicators. All three had honed their skills at narration in violent and unstable crucibles. From the moment I caught up with them during their workday, to the moment I left the research site, they were talking, listening, laughing, arguing, acquiescing, persuading, advising, deliberating, whispering, cajoling and teasing. And telling stories. It was only through witnessing their complete exhaustion and eloquent silence that I came to understand how central the production of narratives was to their lives and work. As soon as they fell silent, the work of community journalist ceased – and I personally didn’t know what to do with myself. But when they spoke, they animated individuals, a group, and an entire institutional practice.

In this way, the activities of these community journalists echoed the central role of narratives in the professional lives of groups as diverse as staff at a battered women’s shelter (Loseke, 1989), juvenile probation officers (Jacobs, 1990), defense attorneys (Maynard, 1990), and copier repairmen (Orr, 1996). According to scholarship in these areas, the use of narratives can constitute the main activity of many types of workers. When I started at the research sites, CMG leaders undertook to educate me about the job of community journalist through narration, and as I shadowed them while they worked, on many occasions they would sketch the incipit of a story about the neighborhood and the people in it, only to pause while they started yet another story to someone else, and perhaps pick up the thread of “my” story later when the time seemed right, or perhaps let it drop. Over the course of a day twenty such stories might commence, wax, reach plenitude, and wane.
At first this seemed to me like the work of a set of extraordinary individual raconteurs, but gradually I became aware of how functional this narrative program was to operating a youth-based community media group in an unstable and resource-scarce environment. This effusive, almost manic storytelling was a crucial structural practice that kept the focus on the realm of words as the medium through which problems were confronted and compromises were hashed out, as opposed to the world of deeds, which could be unpredictable and dangerous. These journalists not only told stories about things that were happening, but they narrated characterizations of the people they worked with and encountered, often as a friendly form of teasing or gossip, but also as a way to keep people informed about each other. In this way, their webs of stories served as pathways down which vital information for the maintenance of social networks traveled.

It was sometimes difficult for me to distinguish between the kinds of networking narratives that these CMG leaders used on an everyday basis, and when they scripted more journalistically framed stories that were meant for a wider audience. But in both case studies, I observed CMG leaders gravitate towards narratives that helped them stake a claim to an authoritative status in the community. The source of this status was not power and influence per se, although these groups did possess standing in their communities. Instead, the source of their claim to authority was the quality of their narratives. These CMG leaders asserted that they were the source of the best and most reliable information – even if it came in the form of stories.
Other scholars have identified the ways in which more mainstream journalists make this claim for their narratives. (Fishman, 1980; Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 2002) This assertion allowed the CMGs in this study to claim a kind of arbiter role, in that they claimed a capacity to determine truth, a truth that contained a normative element, and contained more cultural content than accuracy. Researchers have also highlighted the potential for narratives to contain normative elements and to stake authoritative claims on the nature of motives and events. (MacIntyre, 1984; Ochs, 2004; Polletta, 2006; White, 1980) These community journalists composed a narrative about themselves as truth-tellers and successfully disseminated it within their neighborhoods. One key theme of this self-definitional narrative was that the CMGs were well positioned to make judgments and to mediate or adjudicate conflicts in the community because as journalists, they were less prone to bias and inaccuracy. They knew the pertinent social facts, were willing to abide by them, and insisted that others should be too. For the purposes of this research project, I define the process outlined above as part of the construction of a specific narrative of legitimacy I call the mediator.

Scholars have examined media groups and journalists in relation to the production of frames and narratives. (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 2002) The CMGs in this study are intrinsically involved with the creation of narrative frames, and therefore it is possible to link their professional activity, in terms of making stories, to the usage of stories for purposes not specifically connected to professional aims. Community journalists are practiced in composing narratives, and may be particularly aware of how legitimacy functions in the community, and
therefore are well positioned to deploy narratives of legitimacy. I argue in this research project that a key CMG goal is to frame these narratives of legitimacy so as to lessen a climate of fear and the impact of violence. The obverse of this is a narrative strategy that would be familiar to both Colombian paramilitaries and Brazilian trafficking gangs – in the communities they patrol, these groups assert that only they are powerful enough to counter community violence, notwithstanding the fact that they are the source of most of this violence. The CMGs also deploy a version of this narrative – part of the connectivity narrative is the claim that, as keepers of the peace and administers of justice, gangs should act as a check on their own violence and that only by doing so will they gain legitimacy in the community.

Media scholar Barbie Zelizer (1990) shows how journalists use narratives to self-legitimate – to defend and assert their capacity to produce authoritative stories that reflect social facts. She writes: “their [journalists’] strategies of retelling upheld their positioning through links to larger discourses that were themselves invested in legitimating journalists.” (Zelizer, 1990, p. 373) Zelizer identifies three narrative techniques that journalists use to invest themselves with the office of official storyteller – synecdoche, omission, and personalization. The CMGs in this study also used synecdochic representation in order to promulgate a narrative of legitimacy I call the good path – in their media productions, their funding requests, and in their interactions with the gangs they describe the struggles of local young people to move past destructive patterns as emblematic of
the struggles of the entire community, as the distillation of a broad struggle
everyone can relate to and should support.

In Zelizer’s account, journalists also “reaffirm their authoritative status
when retelling the news by omitting features of its telling that undermine, shadow,
or contradict their authority.” (1990, p. 371) This was also true of the CMGs in this
study and their communication with the gangs that controlled the neighborhoods in
which they operated. These CMGs took an explicitly anti-gang stance in their
messaging to their members and to their funding agencies and support networks.
But they deliberately omitted this stance when dealing with gang members or
residents who they believed could be involved with the gangs and instead
emphasized a narrative of legitimacy I call connectivity. Under the rubric of the
narrative of connectivity, according to the CMGs, participants, residents and gang
members should concentrate on their broad areas of connection and experiential
overlap, and operate as if local community bonds signified bonds of loyalty.

I also found evidence that a version of the personalization narrative that
Zelizer argues plays a role in journalistic self-legitimation was used by the CMGs
in this study. Zelizer argues that, when narratives of legitimacy are strong, the
personal experiences of journalists can be elevated to the status of authoritative
truth-claims. (1990, p. 372) This was the case in Bogotá and Rio de Janeiro when
the CMG leaders asserted their personal authority to the gang to determine
outcomes using the narrative of legitimacy I call the mediator. In both cases, these
narratives are self-referential or even tautological; i.e., I am a journalist so you
should accept my views as authoritative, and by accepting my views as
authoritative you confirm my role as journalist and arbiter of community truths. But the fact that these narratives were tautological did not seem to lessen their functionality, either in Zelizer’s (1990) account or in the research presented here. And it is clear from this and the other narratives cited above that the narrators in this research project are already embedded in stories in which they have been inserted as a character.

Before we proceed further with narrative analysis, we must address a more basic question – what is a narrative in the first place? The theorist Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1987, 1991) sought to give the narrative a substantive definition. Ricoeur (1991) argued that narrative construction is a primeval social act which selects certain events and threads them into a meaningful tapestry – at their most basic level, narratives are about “making sense” of the world. But this does not mean that narratives are “out there,” separated from the people who promulgate and generate them. For Ricoeur (1984), narratives are both lived and told – the concept of narrative does not imply a book or even the use of language. They can be embedded in material artifacts, or relations between people, and in ideas of the self. On the other hand, we aren’t just stories that we make up about ourselves. Instead, narrative configurations mediate between the (exterior) world of action and the (interior) world of experience. Social actors inhabit their own stories actively by injecting cultural content into narrative configurations, while events unfold around them and are scripted into these narratives. (Ricoeur, 1984) Thus, the individual is both the interpreter and the interpreted, as well as the recipient of interpretations; the subject “appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life.” (1987, p. 246)
At times, over the course of this project, it did seem that narratives played a role in terms of the “writing of a life” for some of the research subjects. I observed members of these two media groups create, implement and deploy more and less successful stories that sought to shape or change their everyday lives. Mostly, they used these narratives to try and differentiate themselves from criminal groups or other struggling young people, to define themselves as working towards a personal version of success, while at the same time they sought to stay related to a neighborhood of outsiders. This narrative process of identity performance and construction started with community journalists doing their jobs – telling stories about others.

The stories they told unfolded in a very specific spatial and temporal realm of the city. Following community journalists as they walked through the concatenations of labyrinths that made up Ciudad Bolivar, the work of theorist Michel de Certeau (1984) captured aspects of this improvised narrative production. For de Certeau, to spin a narrative is also to define a new space: “Stories…traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.” (1984, p. 115) The improvised communities of Ciudad Bolívar represented a temporary tilt from conceived space to lived space in the balance of the cities’ built environment; but more than this, the stories about the people that live in these neighborhoods represent a “second geography” (1984, p. 103), a cartographic narrative that comes about through being in the world rather than planning one’s role in it.
Writing, producing and performing rap and hip-hop was an important community activity that brought young people (mostly boys and young men) into the Colombian CMG because the group offered its members a chance to perform, record and occasionally broadcast their music. A key member of the group, Alvaro Rojas, was a *rapero* and had started mentoring several young men who dreamed of developing their rapping to the point where it could become a career. One of my first major assignments for the Colombian CMG was to help Alvaro produce a mini-documentary about a horse-cart recycler that was also an aspiring rapper.

Bogotá is an expanding megacity that retains a distinctly rural flavor, and horse-cart recyclers, called *zorreros*, are emblematic of this rural-urban duality. They also represent a site of class tension in that the city’s middle and upper classes publicly fret that the horses are abused and miserable, although they seem more concerned with the horse-cart as a highly visible sign of the cities’ ‘backwardness,’ while the animals remain a kind of touchstone of group identity in poor neighborhoods. Like de Certeau’s (1984) city walkers whose usages of the city will forever remain opaque from the viewpoint elite planners assume (and who resist the cities “proper” usage by the writing of narratives as they walk), these horse carts plod their way through unmapped neighborhoods, along shifting routes, claiming material designated as trash and turning it into a fragile livelihood.¹

The rapper we were sent to film lived with his family and with three horses in a makeshift compound built out of salvage and using one concrete wall of a

¹ Since this research project, the mayor of Bogotá has instituted a program to replace horse-cart recycling with motorized vehicles by offering a subsidy to the *zorreros* and issuing licenses. The program has been a qualified success in that many recyclers have joined the program and their horses have been adopted by qualified owners. (Villeneuve, 2013)
highway onramp. The entire family of eight participated in various tasks associated with recycling – even the young man’s three-year old brother sorted the cardboard on the way to the recycling plant. In keeping with the collective nature of this economic activity, the young rapper, Miguel, had set up his makeshift recording and mixing studio in his grandfather’s bedroom. His grandfather watched contentedly from under his blankets while Miguel laid down beats and rapped about the life of an unfairly stigmatized inner-city poor kid who loves horses.²

We filmed the family feeding and caring for their animals in their handmade compound, we traveled with them for hours on the cart, shooting a horse’s eye view of the streets and how they went about collecting saleable waste, and we filmed Miguel rapping about his life while he held the reins, narrating about the dead bodies he has found in the streets, the scorn and threats heaped upon him on the roads by drivers, the love of his friends and family, and how his horses and his music keep him going.³

Back at the community center, I was responsible for editing the shots into a coherent story, working with my co-producers, who showed high levels of commitment to the post-production process. I mostly followed their lead in terms of how to construct the narrative, and I was interested in the choices they made as they composed the story. My co-producers seemed to intuitively understand how to organize the story elements and how to select images to illustrate this emerging

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² “No somos ni ñero, ni vicio, ni ratón/Somos manos de obrero fuerte y frailejón/Se dicen que nos cortamos y quemamos/Los animales que amamos/Lo mentira mas cruel/Es una que causa lo real” – We aren't felons, addicts or thieves/We're strong and musical workers/They say we cut and burn/The animals that we love/The cruelest lie/Is one that becomes true – Field Journal, 13 January 2008
³ Field Journal, 13 January 2008
narrative. For Ricoeur (1987), the created narrative order or plot possesses constituent parts that are inextricable, as in Lacan’s Borromean rings\(^4\), because they are constituted relationally. These contingent story threads might all be different or even evanesce if we unwove them and examined them separately. And yet, as emplotted, these elements appear “natural” and are represented as a social fact. (Ricoeur, 1984) In the case of the short documentary about a rapping scavenger I worked on with the Bogotá CMG, the crucial social fact was that Miguel was a member of a non-criminal demimonde.

The group of young community journalists who worked on this story had a very clear vision of how Miguel should be represented in the film. Our initial interviews with him did not do a good enough job as representing him as an authentic *parce* (bro or *n*gga) of the hip-hop scene in Ciudad Bolívar, according to my co-producers. In North American terminology, he did not appear authentically ‘badass’ enough – he was too soft-spoken. So we journeyed back to his home, and asked him to give a testimonial on camera as to the fact that *he was a member of a marginalized group*. *Zorreros* have been explicitly targeted for social cleansing by paramilitary groups,\(^5\) and Miguel had been menaced in the past. This fact became crucial to the narrative structure because, as Ricoeur (1984, p. 69) argues, narratives are made up not only of actions and events but also of characters or personages. Plots relate the mutual development of a story and a character or set

\(^4\) This refers to Lacan’s interconnected view of reality; composed of “the symbolic,” “the imaginary,” and “the real.” (Evans, 2006, p. 157)

\(^5\) “The so-called ‘social cleansing campaign’, conducted by some paramilitary groups, considers scavengers as ‘disposable’ and harasses, kidnaps and expels them from certain neighborhoods …One of the most dramatic illustrations of this campaign occurred in 1992, when 40 corpses of scavengers were found at a local university…The scavengers had been killed, their organs recovered and sold for transplants. The rest of their bodies were sold to the university to be dissected by medical students.” (Medina, 2001, p. 53)
of characters – in this case the plot was the extreme difficulty of the life of a waste-picker and how music helped uplift this life. Every character in a story of any complexity both acts and is acted upon. But a narrative's characters only rise to the status of persons—fictional or real—who can initiate action when one evaluates their doings and sufferings and imputes these actions as praiseworthy or otherwise. (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 73) For my co-producers, Miguel was part of an outsider-hero narrative because of the obstacles he faced and how he chose to meet them, and his representation needed to match this narrative.

Miguel, other young rappers he associated with, and the street-level community journalists who documented them, all adopted tropes of Colombian gang culture associated with machismo, violence and drug-trafficking. Their aesthetic choices, their musical preferences, their forms of speech, and their demeanors’ and modalities of expression (such as body language and gestural vernacular) all echoed gang representations in fiction and the performance of gangster identities in ‘the real world.’ Yet at the same time, in his conversation and in his rap lyrics, Miguel explicitly denounced violence and drugs as an unethical way of life, and even repudiated domineering forms of masculinity. The mini-documentary I co-produced about Miguel sought to emplot the duality of this identity in the character of the rapping waste-picker – to narratively construct him as both an edgy outsider and as an ethically upstanding person. In Ricoeur’s terms, narrative identity mediates between “what is” and “what ought to be.” Narration occupies a middle ground between neutral description and ethical prescription.
(Ricoeur, 1991, pp. 114-115), and this played out in the way the film was conceived, shot and edited.

The above example of the narrative constructed about Miguel the zorrero is particularly important to this research project because it illustrates how the narratives produced by the CMGs to document their communities are connected to some of the narratives I argue they deployed to lower levels of violence and fear in their communities. In sociologist Howard Becker’s terms (2008, p. 110), Miguel was represented as a member of an outsider or deviant clique, and he was afforded social prestige associated with integrity and authenticity for this status. This aspect of the narrative about his life is directly connected to the narrative of legitimacy I call *connectivity* that the CMGs deployed to try to protect their members and other young people. Miguel, like other young people who might need protection, was depicted as authentically part of the neighborhood, and as such, according to the narrative of *connectivity*, this group should be protected from violence or coercion by those that appoint themselves guardians of the neighborhood. The emphasis the producers of the short film placed on Miguel’s ethical standpoint served to lionize him and clearly connected to the narrative of *the good path* that the CMGs also used to try and defend their members from threats.

This same flow of narrative elements between the media work the CMGs preformed in the community and the narratives they deployed to lower levels of violence can be discerned in the work of the Rio de Janeiro CMG. However, there are important differences. Rather than the type of narratives that the Bogotá CMG produced, which tended to focus on triumphant resistance to problems of poverty,
marginalization and violence, the Rio de Janeiro group made stories in which social problems were represented more ambivalently in that the characters were often themselves implicated in these problems.

A different interpretation of the role of narratives than that of Ricoeur is more useful in analyzing the work of the Rio de Janeiro CMG, and this interpretative framework can be found in the work of the philosopher Fredric Jameson. (1981) Jameson argues that narratives can create “imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social problems.” (1981, p. 79) In this view, rather than seeking the resolution of problems through emplotment, narratives tend to model the same social contractions that provide their subject. According to Jameson, the narrative does not so much represent reality through technique, as draw reality into itself: it seeks to “draw the Real into its own texture.” (1981, p. 81) Jameson distinguishes between his understanding of narrative process and diachronic materialism – he does not believe that narratives just serve to reproduce characters or stories that present ideological categories such as “poor” or “marginalized” (although he would say “working class”). Instead, for Jameson, narrative construction can reveal social complexity and contradictions. The narratives created by the Rio CMG tended to be fictionalized accounts of stories that members had heard about, witnessed or had experienced. The Bogotá CMG tended to produce narratives that to some extent fictionalized accounts of real lives. In both cases, as Ricouer described, narratives combined fact and fiction, and narrative identity existed at the nexus of history and literature. (1987, pp. 244-249)
The narratives generated by the Rio CMG tended to emphasize humor as a sometimes-destabilizing, sometimes-mediating force, in the sense of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. (1984) A young member of the Rio CMG, Antônio, told a story in one of the story-idea workshops that had happened to a friend of his. After teasing him about the identity of his ‘friend,’ the group decided to produce this story as a short film and I participated as lead cinematographer.6 Although Antônio related the story, the script was produced collectively, as a heteroglossic text. The character representing Antônio’s friend boarded a bus with some other friends (a kind of youth gang), and preceded to conduct themselves in a disorderly fashion, boasting loudly about stealing and generally declaring themselves by their demeanor to be delinquents and scofflaws. After a few stops during which the passengers expressed disapproval of his behavior and the bus driver showed himself to be intimidated, an elderly woman boarded the bus – this ‘actor’ in the narrative was a community member that had been cajoled into participating. In the filmed narrative, the elderly woman requested the young delinquent’s seat on the bus, pleading infirmity, and was at first ignored, but proceeded to shame the youth in front of the other passengers by haranguing him for a lack of morals. Chastened, he gave up his seat, only to discover his backpack was missing. As the bus pulled away from its stop, the youth looked out the window too late to discover the old woman in possession of his backpack, and in the last shot, she directed an obscene gesture at him.

The narrative at work here successfully demonstrated the notion that morality is a collective activity, and that by behaving immorally, the youthful

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6 Field Journal - 29 March 2008
delinquent was participating in an undermining of social bonds, and ironically (through a moment of poetic justice) the thief became a victim of an act of theft. Jameson’s view of narratives suggests that narratives display cultural norms are a site of “socially symbolic acts” (1981, p. 20) and that these acts can express an individual’s critiques of the prevailing social order. In this case, the narrative acted as a kind of commentary by the CMG members on broad social anomie brought about by a culture of criminality. This critique on the status of the community was transformed through the interactional and ludic process of the media storytelling workshop into an aesthetically textured discourse through artful operations of allusion, metaphor, narrative and prosody. From the perspective of this research project, part of this narrative process was to establish the CMG in the role of the mediator – as a commentator on the meaning of social acts, the CMG positioned itself as capable of viewing the social world of the favela from a critical standpoint.

Jameson argues that narratives represent a particular historical reality in time and space, but it is not a fixed reality; like language and history, this social reality is contingent on relations and structures that can be fought and changed. Narratives, particularly ones that seem to matter a lot to those making them and reading them, can serve to illuminate the contradictions and opportunities for change within social organization. In this way, Jameson asserts, narratives operate as screens upon which the “political unconscious” can be projected. (1981, p. 11) Furthermore, the forms these narratives can be understood as part of the content of the narratives themselves. (1981, pp. 98-99) In the most ambitious short film I helped produce with the Rio CMG, the group produced an elaborate story about
male violence towards women as a function of an ultra-macho gang culture. This short film was explicitly presented as tragic allegory, and group members who up to that point had tended to participate in media projects peripherally became more involved in this narrative project. As Jameson argues, the allegorical nature of this narrative form was an important element of the content of this story; the characters were portrayed as following a script that they could not control, living out a destiny that was predetermined by the nature of their prescribed social roles. For Jameson, it is by situating the narrative among specific social and historical constructs like gender (and race and class) that we can make sense of its critical content. (1981, pp. 83-87)

This story began by demonstrating how gendered discourses mediated romantic relations between men and women associated with trafficking gangs in the favela. The male protagonist circulated through the streets with his friends and fellow gang members, not on trafficking business but rather engaging in a gendered display of dominance enacted in the form of demanding respect from residents. As the anthropologist Ben Penglase writes of traffickers in the Rio favelas: “gendered notions of “respect” provide traffickers with a useful way to legitimate their influence, naturalize inequality, and silence contestation.” (2010, p. 317) The group of young men encounters a group of young women, one of who is the lead trafficker’s girlfriend. These young women are powerful figures in their own right, and they issue a challenge to the young men, whereupon the two groups engage in a playful, sexualized, and violence-impregnated call-and-response
banter.\textsuperscript{7} The group of women appears to accept the dominance of the men in this scene, but seek to do it on their own terms and to claim some territory to project their own gendered power – “favela residents sometimes find these gendered discourses of authority convincing, and...they use gender in an attempt to negotiate relationships with drug traffickers.” (Penglase, 2010, p. 317)

During the group exchange, no acknowledgement of the intimacy between the lead trafficker and his girlfriend was made. These two groups clearly had personal relationships between their members, but the traces of their personal relationships are present yet erased during this scene, like a palimpsest of intimacy. Intimacy is associated with vulnerability in both gender performances (Penglase, 2010), and so its presence is elided in their initial interactions. In my view, this first scene is successful at demonstrating that in a social ecosystem where group identity supersedes individual identity, the symbolic interactions between groups take precedence over individual relationships. Furthermore, as sociologist G.T. Barker has written about narratives of masculinity in favela Maré, “there were few social institutions in the community where a group of young men – sometimes noisy, sometimes unruly but rarely threatening nor violent – was truly welcomed.” (2005, p. 40) The street scenes in the CMG film depicted the street as the only public space where young people who could freely enact their coalescing identities.

\textsuperscript{7} In one improvised scene that was ultimately cut from the final version, one of the young men, referencing a popular \textit{baile funk} song squeezed his phallus through his shorts and said “oi, mulher com essa cara de safada, vai descendo e merecendo a surra de peru na cara.” – \textit{hey, woman with the naughty look, you deserve to go down on me and get slapped in the face with my dick}. He received some laughter for this, but the young woman who responded to his taunt got more laughs. She said “é a abelhinha quem fala así e faz pouca mel leva à rainha com fome” – \textit{it’s the little bee that talks like this and makes not enough honey and leaves the Queen hungry}. 

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The plot of the film turned the narrative in a darker direction, as one male and one female from the different groups conspired together to try and convince the trafficking leader that his girlfriend had sexually betrayed him. During the story development sessions, the CMG leader Carlos had the workshop members read out-loud sections of the Shakespeare play *Othello* and the Machado de Asis novel *Dom Casmurro*, both of which deal with similar themes. Intriguingly, the conspirators do not deceive the leader because they wish to supplant him, but because the love of the two main characters threatens their whole social order in that the two have planned to leave the community.

The lead trafficker’s friends exert pressure on him to take revenge, and it is this social pressure that forces him to act, similar to Barker’s observation about the pressure young men in favela Maré put on each other to make sexual conquests: “young men seek sexual conquests before the watchful and judging eyes of their male peers…‘Chickening out’ or not knowing what to say or do in the heat of the moment may result in ridicule.” (2005, p. 127). A narrative of hyper-masculinity took control of the behavior of the young men, and the dictates of this narrative meant that violence was emplotted as inevitable for social order to be restored. (Zaluar, 2012) Finally, in a tragic twist, the male protagonist murders his girlfriend

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8 *Field Journal*, 19 May 2008
9 Carlos placed emphasis on passages from *Othello* and *Dom Casmurro* that emphasized the social horror of male cuckoldry. Such as: “*I am abused, and my relief Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,*  
*That we can call these delicate creatures ours And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad And live upon the vapor of a dungeon Than keep a corner in the thing I love*  
*For others’ uses.”* (Ridley & Shakespeare, 1969 III. iii. 272–279)
even though he knows she is innocent, because he feels he has to so as to maintain his identity and restore social order.

The relevance of this narrative to the flow of narratives from the sites of production to narrative deployment in the community is that, as in Antônio’s story, the CMG configured itself as capable of rising above ‘natural’ or inevitable social outcomes. By critiquing the types of narratives that drive violence, the CMG positioned itself as the mediator – an institution capable of looking past dominant social imperatives and presenting a more credible and clear-sighted version of unfolding events. Through a sustained critique of how narratives of hyper-masculinity drive tragic violence, the CMG claimed a space of cognitive clarity of itself and encouraged its members to reconceive of how they enacted their social roles. In this way, as Jameson (1981, p. 101) argued, narratives can function as maps of the hidden nervous system of the body politic, and through this mapping of the impetuses of social action, can spark a rethinking of socio-political processes and their power dynamics.

**Theorizing Community Media Groups**

This research project studies two community media groups (CMGs). In the following section, I will outline a survey of some key scholarly work on community media groups in order to provide a sense of how scholars understand CMGs in the contemporary global media environment. Communications and cultural studies scholars have produced diverse and trenchant fieldwork on
community media in recent years that reflect a theoretical shift described by Rennie (2006) below. The theoretical underpinnings to this work are equally as diverse as the field research, and therefore it is useful to undergo a review of the literature here in order to trace why these community media case studies are constructed upon particular philosophical foundations and not upon others. Following this literature review I will hypothesize that there are a number of different possibilities in terms of how to mate scholarly theories of culture, politics and society to data collected on community media groups, and that these different theoretical approaches are of differing levels of utility depending on the type of community media described. Certain approaches suit different community/alternative/citizens media groups better than others, and the final goal of this section is to provide a selection of approaches from which I will aim to match my theoretical research to the data from the field.

Ellie Rennie (2006) discusses how community media were initially conceived as in opposition to or competition with ‘mass’ or ‘corporate’ media, and were theorized as more empowering and more democratic alternatives because they destabilized the unidirectional flow of mass media and drew upon an active audience instead of manipulating passive audiences. For Rennie, this is a limited way to understand community media. She writes: “media theory has moved beyond imperialist notions of domination over the thoughts and tastes of the audience…community media studies [was] out of touch with important developments in the media studies field that incorporate more complex ideas of power, identity, and cultural change.” (2006, p. 18)
For Rennie, it is important to move beyond simplistic notions of community media as a sort of pluralistic, egalitarian antithesis to a hierarchical, corporatist mass media and develop new perspectives that seek to renegotiate an understanding of community media as more complex actors. The findings of this research project support Rennie’s (2006) observations about CMGs in that the two groups studied did not view themselves as existentially in opposition to mass media, but rather sought to empower their membership as savvy citizen journalists with access to and expertise with media tools. The projects undertaken by the CMGs over the course of this study were not projects that were underpinned by goals of destabilizing a consumer-based media model; rather, they were projects whose trajectories were mapped out and determined by lived experience on the ground. Following Rennie, this section will explore some of the new perspectives she mentions as well as the theoretical work out of which they were seeded.

O’Connor (2004) edits a volume in which, drawing from collated data, interviews and firsthand observation, collects the work of several scholars and activists who analyze the political role played by Bolivian miners’ radio stations during the turbulent period of the 1950s through the 1980s. O’Connor writes in the introduction that “Bolivian miners’ radio belongs to a historical world that Antonio Gramsci would have found thoroughly recognizable…This is the Gramsci not of postmodern theories of identity but instead of a rather old-fashioned politics of alliances and clashes between different class factions…At the personal level, Gramsci and the miners believed in discipline, education, and order.” (2004, p. 2) The perspectives of his contributors reflect this reference point, as different
articles describe violent confrontations between government officials and broadcasting miners, clashes in which radio played a major role as a source of galvanized political resistance while class struggles played out in the streets and over the airwaves. Contributors such as Lozada and Kúncar (apud O'Connor, 2004, pp. 19, 28) claim that Bolivian miners’ radio is the most interesting case of “self-managed workers’ communication” in the world, and they are unafraid to utilize such unscholarly terminology as “fascist rabble” or “brownshirts” when describing opposition groups arrayed against miner’s radio activists. This research project broadly bears out the ways in which some CMGs connect with political groups in the research above; in both cases studied here the CMGs connect their projects to larger political projects.

From this Marxist and early Gramscian theoretical perspective, large media conglomerates are the running dogs of a fascistic or capitalistic repressive state regime, and both institutions are bent on promoting and promulgating their overlapping interests over and above all others. Community media groups are an outgrowth of the struggle of the workers against the reactionary bourgeois ideologues, the class-enemy kulaks, and the cosmopolitan ‘capitalist-roaders’ arrayed against them. It is only through the disciplined implementation of modernizing technologies, such as radio, that community media groups can hope to prevail (O'Connor, 2004, pp. 45-66) which is in keeping with some earlier scholarly views about the centrality of technology to Marx’s argument. (Shaw, 1979) Thus, O’Connor correctly identifies Bolivian miners’ radio as participatory communication with an explicit goal of direct social and political change, and
therefore a Marxist or early Gramscian perspective is appropriate as a theoretical
grounding, particularly given the historical time period during which these radio
stations thrived.

John Downing (2001), a leading theorist of ‘radical media,’ continues in
this vein, although with different emphasis, situating his vision of participatory
media firmly in a late-Gramscian or neo-Marxist camp. He describes how Gramsci
hypothesizes a socialist hegemony erected in opposition to the capitalist
hegemony, painting a picture of a dichotomous struggle over the hearts and minds
of the publics, a struggle in which “the ‘organic intellectual’ [Gramsci’s term] is
re-rendered as the ‘communicator/activist’…integrated with the laboring classes in
developing a just and culturally enhanced social order.” (2001, p. 15) In
Downing’s schemata, organizations and institutions, states and corporate entities,
are the main reference points for understanding the role of radical media as a
“counterhegemonic” force, in which the struggle to open up alternative
perspectives and to create a platform for excluded voices is the raison d’être of
most radical media. However, Downing develops these concepts further, as he goes
on to describe how Gramsci, and even more so the anthropologist James C. Scott,
extend the site of conflict over hegemony into the realm of the everyday and
interpersonal. Downing shows that Gramsci and Scott do not understand capitalist
cultural hegemony as static and monolithic, but rather as under constant
negotiation by different class groups. By making this point, Downing is arguing
that radical media are attempting to construct a counterhegemony, not just in
purely sociopolitical terms, but that they also establish loci of cultural resistance by
resorting to “insincere flattery, anonymous threats, songs, folktales, gestures, jokes, grumbling…” (apud Downing, 2001, p. 17)

The activity of radical media groups can be seen in Downing’s conception, as a form of democratic protest, and as such, it is related to the popular mobilizations that have been excluded or downplayed in some of O’Donnell’s discussions of “brown areas” and democratization above. However, for Downing, it is also important to bring out how radical media do democratic activity differently from ‘mainstream media,’ and he argues that this difference is also important to democratization of the public sphere because its “communicative thrust depends not on closely argued logic but on their aesthetically conceived and concentrated force.” (Downing, 2001, p. 52) Although Downing continues to see the role of radical media as a fundamentally contentious one, struggling against exclusionary practices, established norms and monolithic socio-structural forces, he also re-conceives these struggles as potentially taking place in and among the minutiae of everyday life, and in ways Gramsci might not have been able to foresee, given his historical context.

Downing defines radical media as having to “express oppositional strands…within popular cultures” (2001, p. 3) and he pays particular attention to interventions in public spaces as the activity par excellence of radical participatory media. Furthermore, he highlights the connections between these media groups and oppositional political organizations and radical social movements:

Equally noticeable in the examples above is their [radical media] interaction with movements of resistance: feminist, labor, ethnic, socialist, gay, antiwar. The dialogue and conversation they sparked and enabled drew much of its juice from the movements in question and in turn helped to
empower the movements. This was a form of democracy a long way removed from the formal democracy of intermittent big money elections… the counterhegemonic process operates at differing depths… (2001, p. 141)

So, although Downing does link the activity of his radical and participatory media groups to the realm of the personal and the everyday, it is nevertheless clear from his work that he sees the space in contention by these groups as a fundamentally political space, and that the highly variegated radical media groups he studies are in essence pursuing one cohesive, rational goal – the opening of the public sphere to alternative experiences and voices. I believe that this is because Downing thinks that power ultimately resides in this political arena, and is usually embodied predominately in the nation-state, which thus must be considered his primary reference point. For Downing, the primary issues of concern to the public sphere are political issues – the establishment of individual rights, the transgressions of these rights, prejudice and bigotry, the freedom to express dissent, etc.

Furthermore, Downing argues that the study of “radical media” should be part of the evaluative study of democracy and democratic consolidation, thus linking his topic with a much larger body of literature. However, for Downing, there seems to be a huge gap in this same literature: “If we examine the huge political science literature on democracy… even those who are in favor of struggling to improve democratic processes have little or nothing to say about communication or media…” (2001, p. 40) Downing believes that some of the most necessary advances to democratization, “majority-minority rights, the status of immigrants, women’s equal participation, even the ramifications of the North-
South split” should be debated and resolved in the public forum that media should be able to provide. For Downing, this is an explicit way in which to connect his research to democratization research; he perceives a clear correlation between the two – more radical media, more consolidated democracy. Downing goes on to paraphrase the scholar Raymond Williams, who, he writes “argued that media, once freed from their overwhelming subjection to private firms or the state and opened up to mass participation, could stimulate and sustain a common culture and a lively democracy.” (apud Downing, 2001, p. 42)

Since the democratization literature fails to take up this issue, Downing attempts to fill in the blind spots by asking: do the media indeed perform the positive function relative to democracy which Williams (1977) identifies? The activity of radical media groups can be seen in Downing’s conception, as a form of democratic protest, and as such, it is related to the popular mobilizations and social movements that are much discussed in literature on democratization. However, for Downing, it is also important to bring out how radical media do democratic activity differently from ‘mainstream media,’ and he argues that this difference is also important to democratization of the public sphere because its “communicative thrust depends not on closely argued logic but on their aesthetically conceived and concentrated force.” (2001, p. 52) So, although there is the clear sense that the ultimate motivator behind Downing’s radical media is political, and in particular, democratic, he does recognize the “aesthetic” nature of these groups, and the importance, not necessarily of logic or rationality, but of style.
Clemencia Rodríguez (2001) develops a theoretical basis for her research on community media that builds on but differs from that of Downing. Rodríguez takes the argument laid out by Downing even further, and proposes that the term alternative media be replaced with “citizen’s media,” a process that implies a “relocation of the debate on the democratization of communication.” (2001, p. 10) According to Rodríguez, this term more accurately captures the type of role that these media groups play in democratic struggles, because for her “the nature of political action expands to include not only demands on rights and the quality of life, but also on the very definitions of what is culturally intelligible.” (2001, p. 21) In other words, she is extending some of the arguments levied against O’Donnell above to their farthest possible extent – in Rodríguez’ terms the struggle for democratization is taking place, not just within political institutions and social movements, but also within the subject itself. So for Rodríguez, citizen’s media is an important arena in which this struggle is played out for three reasons: “first that a collectivity is *enacting* its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.” (2001, p. 20)

For Rodríguez, this theorizing provides a cogent theoretical framework for her experiences working in the field with community journalist organizations, because her vision of power at work in these scenarios is de-centered, and not primarily embodied within one particular structure such as the state, as is the case
with Downing. As she has experienced in doing her research “within a community, men and women are not fixed in one power position; instead, their identities are permanently displaced along a continuum…That is, power is activated by all and each of the relationships in which we participate.” (2001, p. 17) Again, we discover that the primary driver behind her search for a different substructure of theory came about when her experiences in studying community media groups in Colombia, Texas, and Catalonia, Spain did not fit within the prevailing models. Rodríguez writes that she was impelled to search for a “new route to conceptualizing community media” because the alternative media “debate [is located] within rigid categories of power and binary conceptions of domination and subordination that elude the fluidity and complexity of alternative media as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon.” (2001, pp. 3-4)

Rather than posit that the news media in general are part of a Gramscian hegemonic, institutional apparatus that frames the dominant discourse and crafts the shape of collective truths, and that alternative or community media groups therefore represent a counterhegemonic force, Rodríguez conceives of these media groups and their participants as involved in a more Foucauldian, mutual process of substantive subjectivity construction. (Rabinow, 1991) It is not that Foucault, and in this case by extension Rodríguez, do not believe in the power of the few exercised over the many. However, for both thinkers, the ways in which domination is exercised are even subtler, and the ways in which power is embedded in discourse are even more nuanced, then the Gramscian notion of political hegemony manages to capture. As Foucault writes of early modern
Europe in an attempt to capture this insight: “the methods of administering the accumulation of men made possible a political take-off in relation to the traditional, ritual, costly, violent forms of power, which soon fell into disuse and were superseded by a subtle, calculated technology of subjection.” (1991, p. 87)

However, what is important for Rodríguez, in keeping with the concerns of other alternative media theorists, is not so much to trace the marks of power, but to identify the ways in which alternative/community media embody dissent, collective organizing, and the power of discourse to articulate difference.

The inspiration for the study of how alternative discourses can generate alternative realities can be uncovered in Foucault’s understanding of how history is constructed. For Foucault, making history could be seen as a way of reframing identities:

> History…should become a differential knowledge of energies and failings, heights and degenerations, poisons and antidotes. Its task is to become a curative science…The final trait of history is its affirmation of knowledge as perspective…Through this historical sense, knowledge is allowed to create its own genealogy in the act of cognition…(1991, p. 90)

Foucault understands the history-making process as part of the discursive construction of the subject; much as Rodriguez sees the same identity adaptation and development take place in an alternative media setting. But history-making is also about what is ignored and what is left out. Foucault acknowledges the necessity of adopting a particular perspective in the above passage, which is similar to the making of an argument for a particular interpretation of events, and
articulating this argument through the use of alternative media. This in turn is similar to the challenge faced by Colombian women journalists in Rodríguez’s work (2001) who seek to define who they will become through leaving out old forms and behaviors as well as adopting new ones. We could say that, for Rodríguez and Foucault, new self-knowledge or identity is produced through the making of personal histories (for Rodríguez, this is studied within the context of alternative media groups), through a fluid combination of remembering and forgetting, denying and affirming, and that this new knowledge or identity can be a source of personal power for the subject. This is especially true in relation to the grave constraints placed upon the subjects Rodríguez studies; such as patriarchal dominance, economic disparity, and personal fear. (2001)

Rodríguez understands this conception of alternative media to require a new iteration; her “citizens’ media groups” intellectual project differs from other scholars of community/alternative media groups. To begin with, the belief that these groups are engaged in “conscious processes towards a common goal” (2001:22) is simply inaccurate for Rodríguez, as is the idea that their purpose is to reach a consensus bounded and circumscribed by a particular ‘rationality.’ Instead, citizen’s media groups can be splintered, de-centralized, and even internally fractious, and are often not explicitly engaged in anything as banal or as pseudo-intellectual as ‘subverting the dominant paradigm’ (to quote a bumper sticker). I believe one of Rodríguez’s key insights here is that the fragmented and unpredictable state of citizen’s media should not be coded by scholars as inadequacy on the part of these media groups, but rather the underlying
assumptions about the goals of alternative/community media groups should be questioned and altered. In other words, for Rodríguez, citizen’s media sits at the threshold of personal and political.

Cleverly couching it in terms of democratization literature, Rodríguez claims that the development of citizen’s media involves a “relocation of the debate on the democratization of communication” (2001:10) According to Rodríguez, this neologism accurately captures the type of role that these media groups play in democratic struggles, rather than alternative media, because for her “the nature of political action expands to include not only demands on rights and the quality of life, but also on the very definitions of what is culturally intelligible” (2001:21). In other words, in Rodríguez’ terms the struggle for democratization is taking place, not just within political institutions and social movements, but also within the subject itself. So for Rodríguez, citizen’s media is a vital arena in which personal and political struggle is played out for three reasons: “first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting and social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible” (2001:20).

It is specifically this activism, expressed simultaneously on both personal and political levels (or perhaps not recognizing them as truly separate), drawn from the work of Foucault, Mouffe and others, that concerns Rodríguez in her return to research in Colombia in her article with Jeanine El Gazi called “The poetics of
indigenous radio in Colombia” (2007). Although, in this work, Rodríguez and El Gazi are less interested in theorizing about types of alternative or citizen’s media, it is still possible to discern underlying theories of identity and the push to open the public sphere to highly diverse groups who may disturb the placid waters of a liberal-democratic consensus within the types of groups these scholars choose to study and they way in which they undertake their scholarship. For example, in describing the different types of strategies Colombian indigenous groups use to become active producers of media rather than passive consumers, Rodríguez and El Gazi write: “[these strategies] open the opportunity for indigenous people to find their own ways of appropriating information and communication technologies, and to learn to use them to strengthen their own articulations of reality” (2007:454). These new “articulations of reality” could have powerfully positive consequences for the darker aspects of Colombian politics, because for Rodríguez and El Gazi, strictly political change must be accompanied by personal and cultural change, in order for it to become consolidated. They write of a narrative of nation layered underneath indigenous community media strategies: “this emerging alternative notion of nationhood in the form of Colombianness that embraces difference as not just normal but desirable could have enormous implications in contributing to making non-aggressive conflict resolution part of a new hegemony” (2007:462).

A more recent work by Rodríguez directly engages with the subject of this research project. Rodríguez spent two years doing fieldwork in regions of Colombia where guerillas, paramilitaries, the army, and drug traffickers and other
violence entrepreneurs were active – the result of that fieldwork is her excellent book *Citizens Media Against Armed Conflict: Disrupting Violence in Colombia* (2011). Rodríguez has found numerous examples of people living communities controlled by these armed actors who have creatively deployed radio, television, video, digital photography, and the Internet to shield their residents and themselves from violence’s impacts on the broader community. She places these CMGs in her theoretical category of citizen’s media.

Citizens’ media are most effective, Rodríguez argues, when they understand communication as performance rather than simply as persuasion or the transmission of information and when they serve to directly engage social groups such as neighborhoods, groups of young people and women. (2011, p. 289) When this occurs, grassroots media that are deeply embedded in the communities they serve and responsive to local needs can produce media products that embody the communities fears, dreams, and ambiguous positionality, thus strengthening the ability of community members to productively react to violent acts and threats of violence. Rodríguez demonstrates how citizens’ media often portray aspects of community life not hijacked by violence, providing people with the tools and the platform to forge lives for themselves and their families that are not entirely colonized by violent conflict and its traumatic effects. She writes: “citizen’s media...[can be conceived of as the] “lived experience of non-violent ways to manage conflict, deal with difference, and interact with one another.” (2011, p. 254)
The examples Rodríguez cites highlight the creative approaches used by Colombians in configuring community media. Radio Andaqui has a radio transmitter mounted on a bicycle, which is shared across different communities in order to create a self-reinforcing network of local information and community empowerment. The Magdalena Medio project gives out inexpensive digital recorders and cameras to local children to make their own media products, and provides radio space for these children to broadcast their own program without adult supervision, in which they discuss and explore what they have learned while undertaking digital video projects. (2011, pp. 203-244)

Through recourse to these and other examples, Rodríguez tries to show that communities that have been damaged by armed conflict can use community media to repair torn social fabrics, reconstruct eroded bonds, reclaim public spaces, resolve conflict, and begin to recover peace and stability. However, it must be noted that in terms of offering evidence, Rodríguez tends to assert her claims descriptively and bolster these descriptions through interviews. While this qualitative approach is highly useful and shares much overlap with this research project, there remain two important differences between our methods and theory. First, this research project seeks to understand the differential networks of power flows between various actors in these communities, whereas Rodríguez remains largely focused on the CMGs and the people who use them. Second, this research project attempts to isolate a particular strategy (narratives of legitimacy) used by CMGs that is effective across two different cases to reduce violence, whereas
Rodríguez prefers to look more generally at how violence might be lessened by citizen’s media.

The importance of the approach of Rodríguez is underscored by the earlier work of Mario Murillo (2003) who correctly criticizes the application of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere as applied unmodified to the Colombian case. He writes: “it would not be a stretch to argue that the highly concentrated nature of Colombia’s mass media system is a significant mechanism used by the political and economic elite to maintain its grip on power…it is clear that the public sphere in Colombia is indeed a fiction…” (2003, p. 135) However, in asserting this Murillo sets up a typical binary opposition between community and mass media groups, the very type of dichotomous analysis that Downing and especially Rodríguez argue needs to be reframed. Murillo’s case study is even more problematic – he chooses a youth radio station that is not involved in politics but instead focuses mainly on cultural issues and seeks to entertain as much as to inform. (2003, p. 135) Yet he asserts that the goal of this radio station is to create “a new kind of public sphere aimed at broadening democratic participation in a country with a history of corruption, intolerance and exclusion.” (2003, p. 137) It is not clear from his (qualitative) analysis that this assertion is indeed the case, and although I have no doubt that the youth radio station seeks to push for some kind of change, it seems clear that the motivations behind the formation and activity of this community media group are simultaneously more complex and less “conscious” than Murillo would have us believe. If my suspicion is correct, and Murillo’s community media youth group is not overly interested in the construction of an...
alternative public sphere, than Rodríguez would remind us that not taking an
explicit interest in this scholar’s public sphere does not devalue the work these
types of groups accomplish. Indeed, it may make them more interesting.

Kevin Howley (2005) also grounds his analysis of community media in the
Habermasian notion of the public sphere, but he does so in a more robust fashion
than does Murillo. (2003) To begin with, he identifies different ways of conceiving
of community, and shows how these different interpretations of this extremely
slippery concept have caused community media groups to be elusive to theorizing.
Rather than unpack all the varying definitions of community (an activity he refers
to as “disappearing down that particular rabbit hole”), Howley astutely chooses to
emphasize the ways in which community and communication are intertwined.
(2005, pp. 5-6) Briefly taking his readers through how newspapers and various
other forms of print media helped establish national identity, Howley arrives at a
discussion of Stuart Hall’s notion of “articulation.” Here Howley’s contribution is
significant, because he draws on cultural studies traditions to show how this
principle of articulation might help to theoretically link such highly heterogeneous
beasts as community media groups.

Under the rubric of cultural studies, the concept of articulation helps to
explain the “complex totality” of social formations and provides a method
of analysis for examining how unities are forged out of distinct elements
that have no inherent sense of “belongingness”…articulation offers a way
to conceptualize community as a unity of differences; a unity forged
through symbol, ritual, language, and discursive practices. (2005, p. 6)
Not entirely dissimilar to Rodríguez, this passage argues that defining community media groups should take place through an analysis of their activity. In doing so, Howley further asserts that community media scholarship should highlight the subject’s agency in “rearticulating social formations,” and that scholars who undertake this type of work will benefit methodologically through closer forms of study than theorizing, by employing such anthropological methods as participant observation. (2005, pp. 6-7)

At first, it would seem as if Howley is intent on reproducing the binary divisions between community media and commercialized media that Rodríguez and Downing caution against. Howley lays out Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, and argues that despite “criticisms of the exclusivity, historical accuracy, and idealized quality of Habermas’ construct, the concept of the public sphere has enormous relevance for the ongoing project of building and sustaining a more democratic media culture.” (2005, p. 20) However, although I expected Howley at this point to reiterate Murillo’s simplistic assertion that community media provides an alternative public sphere, and thus lock in a purely dichotomous set of relations, he immediately goes on to show a more complex understanding of these groups. Citing Colombian scholar Jesus Martin-Barbero, Howley reveals that “Not every assumption of hegemonic power by the underclass is a sign of submission and not every rejection is resistance…Some aspects of popular culture respond to logics other than the logic of domination.” (apud Howley, 2005, p. 35)

Howley then goes on to build a persuasive argument for the agency of community media over and against media conglomerates and cultural
homogenization, drawing on third-world development and media scholarship.
(2005, pp. 39-50) Again, not dissimilar in theoretical terms from Rodríguez
(although her concern is more with de-centered subjects and identity), Howley
shows how communities and community media groups are involved in co-
substantive dance, in which each articulates and infuses the other with elements of
difference. However, despite his discussion of the ambiguity and fluidity of
community media groups, Howley’s text is still predominately interested in how
community media groups provide counterhegemonic discourses within their
particular media markets – his analysis in the end is closer to Downing then
Rodríguez. Why is this the case? Once again, and finally, the reasons for his
particular theoretical leanings can be traced to his field research. Howley gives
four fascinating case studies, but all four are in advanced Western capitalistic
democracies – two in the U.S., one in Canada, and the fourth in Australia. All four
of these media markets are highly sophisticated, and have been completely
saturated with converging forms of media technologies. I would suggest that the
concerns of the audiences interested in community media in these four media
markets tends to revolve more around how community media can offer an
alternative space for issues left out by commercial media, rather than, in the case of
this research project, offering a viable protection from violence.

Vicki Mayer (2003b) transcribes a multi-year project about the overall
media landscape and a community media group in San Antonio, Texas that shares
some direct territory with this research project. Mayer chooses to dive in to the rich
specificity of a particular environment rather than to construct models of
community media, with the result that, in my view, theory in this work interacts more comfortably with ethnographic detail than in Rodriguez’s work. First, Mayer lays out a four-part framework to explain the way the politics and economics of Mexican Americans in the media played out in the historical context of the San Antonio area from the Mexican Revolution to the present. (2003b, pp. 5-11) The result of these somewhat contradictory and multivalent forces was to push Mexican Americans out of positions of creative control and “out of the upper echelons of managerial hierarchy” (2003b, p. 11) within media organizations. This was partly due to the fact these media organizations were furiously consolidated by corporate holding companies and audience identification techniques enabled them to reach mass Mexican American markets without needing Mexican American managers to show them how. (2003b, p. 17)

By laying out the complex macro-level forces at work in the larger community, Mayer is able to explain where the images of Mexican Americans come from that are so prevalent in the media setting of San Antonio. From this position, Mayer can delve into two distinct but interconnected ethnographies; one of Mexican American media professionals, and the other of a community media group of Mexican American youth. She finds that although the media professionals she interviews are aware of and object to the fact that media excludes more authentic images of Mexican Americans; they nonetheless act as unknowing participants in this exclusionary process. These media professionals see themselves as important examples for the Mexican American community, but at the same time
they “adopted the same attitude as other executives who believed in a liberal world of economic winners and losers without regard to race or ethnicity.” (2003b, p. 25)

It is when Mayer turns to her ethnography of a youth community media group that the clearest parallels between her research project and this one emerge. While identifying the very real process of empowerment that takes place over the course of video project, Mayer also puts her finger on the tendency of research about these projects to engage in “utopian” thinking. She writes: “grassroots video projects do not create citizens. Rather, they are places that potentially reinforce the ways that people feel like members of a community…few people were willing and able to balance cultural arts with other social and economic demands.” (Mayer, 2003b, p. 116) Although this study of community media groups focuses on different dynamics, Mayer’s is a key insight that illuminates this research – CMGs can be sites of extraordinary effort, creativity and even provide some shelter to young people from a dangerous environment, but these groups face daunting obstacles, and even when successful cannot be expected to construct citizenship.

Conclusions

In many of the narratives I witnessed the CMGs produce about their communities, the leaders of these groups helped the participants adapt general observations about social mores or observed dynamics into workable scripts in which the emphasis was on depicting action rather than reciting dialogue. Through this process, the CMGs were able to open an accessible space for their members to
reflect on power dynamics and the use of violence within their communities.

Furthermore, the narratives that were produced about these communities tended to have thematic connections with the narratives I argue the CMGs used to curb levels of violence and fear in the community.

The participatory process outlined above proved effective in that group members eagerly engaged in discussions about ‘newsworthy’ people and events around them, and then transliterated these discussions into narratives. From these narratives about the outside world, another set of narratives were constructed based on overlapping thematic elements – a set of three narratives I call narratives of legitimacy. According to research I will detail below, both CMGs used these narratives of legitimacy to shield their members and lower levels of tension in their neighborhoods, and in this chapter I have described the three that I saw most often used. The narrative most commonly employed was the good path – that is, a story about the young people involved in community media projects that emphasizes how, by belonging to this group, these youth are following a healthier, more productive life trajectory than if they were in a gang or on the street, and that they should therefore be afforded some protection from coercion or violence. This narrative relied on a shared set of normative assumptions about what constitutes “goodness” which at least some gang members appeared to possess despite their construction as a deviant group.

A related yet distinct narrative of legitimacy that the CMGs used to defend their members from threats of violence from the armed actors was the narrative of connectivity. This narrative is a calculated invocation of shared local identity.
According to the narrative of *connectivity*, the armed actor, the CMG, and the individual member in question are all bound together in a web of local relationships, and this shared background should supersede any potential conflicts that lead to violence. A subtext to this narrative is that violence should be reserved for others, directed at those from other neighborhoods or belonging to rival groups, and that it may well be justified in these cases.

The third and final narrative of legitimacy I witnessed employed by the CMG to check violence or coercion on their members by the armed actor was the narrative of *the mediator*. Again, this narrative is related to the other two, but distinct. The leadership of the CMGs used this self-descriptive narrative to claim that they had the legitimate right to intercede for their members in the first place. As *the mediators* of local conflicts of interest, or what we could term de facto conflict negotiators, the leaders of both CMGs intervened with their respective armed actor and mobilized this narrative on behalf of their members. This narrative offered a level of protection to the leadership; they could disagree and even debate with the armed actors with lower levels of fear of violence than an average community member, because they claimed a position of authority and neutrality. It is important to mention here that this narrative appeared to be connected to broad notions of journalistic “objectivity” or fairness, which might help to explain the success of this narrative within its contexts.

Community media scholarship has often focused on how it can provide alternate voices in a stifling corporate atmosphere of infotainment-style converged media products. (Downing, 2001; Halleck, 2002; Howley, 2005; Jankowski &
Prehn, 2002) Excellent examples of how community media organizations can enrich public debates and help create (counter-) public spheres in developed Western economies have been documented. (Couldry & Dreher, 2007) More nuanced arguments of how community media can provide spaces for empowerment and the development of more authentic images for minority groups, but should not be expected to provide some sort of magical space for the development of alternative citizenship are rarer, but exist. (Mayer, 2003b)

However, in positioning community media groups (CMGs) as opening alternate spaces on corporate media hegemony, scholars have mostly looked at case studies in the conglomerated media landscapes of the West, with some important exceptions. (Jankowski & Prehn, 2002; Murillo, 2003; Rodríguez, 2011; Rodriguez & El Gazi, 2007; Rotker & Goldman, 2002) One nagging question persists from this analysis of community media groups: does their radical difference from more ‘mainstream media’ groups automatically qualify them as performing a positive democratic function? As Rodríguez herself notes “there is no neat model or formula of citizen’s media” (2001, p. 64) and a few questionable examples of democratizing media from Downing’s Radical Media include jihadist communiqués and war-mongering IRA murals. (2001, p. 175) At least one scholar (Torres Soriano, 2010) argues that alternative media can facilitate terrorism.

Recent scholarship is not convinced that radical/alternative/citizen forms of media are automatically in the game of the democratization of communication. For example, some of Rodríguez’s more recent work on indigenous radio in Colombia describes how citizens media can be used, not to present a diversity of views, but
rather the opposite – to propagate and maintain a traditional, received social and political outlook that seeks to remain unchanged and static. (2007) Ritva Levo-Henriksson, in a related scholarly work dedicated to understanding native American media in North America, relates how the one of the most important goals of these types of media is “the promotion of group uniqueness” (2007, p. 60) over and above influences from outsiders, which I would be hard-pressed to characterize as democratic communication. In the same volume, another scholar examines community media in Singapore, the organizational structure of which is built on the hierarchical, authoritarian model handed down from the Singaporean state (2007, p. 135) The scholar Rosa Maria Alfaro has noted that within community media in Peru there can be “an absence of a construction of democratic culture; a media made up of denunciations that defines itself by what it is against, not what it is for, a media that can ignore linkages in favor of fragmentation.” (2005, p. 290)

On the other hand, whether or not the specific media group in question is undemocratic, or less than successful at maintaining space in the public sphere for alternative voices, my research agenda is informed by the belief that the study of community media groups should be part of the evaluative study of democracy and democratic consolidation, as I describe Downing (2001) arguing above. The role of media in general is lightly represented in the democratization and political sociology literature, as theoreticians and scholarly writers seem to focus on the capture of media by powerful interests, and the barriers to media access and representation, rather than the ways in which they might and sometimes do
contribute to a lively, resilient and informed common democratic culture in the least likely of places.

Chapter 2: Legitimacy and Informal Institutions

In violent struggles over territory, resources and ideologies, one of the most precious tactical advantages is trust, or in political terms, legitimacy. The answer to the questions of if and how violent conquest and repression can transform itself into sustainable self-governance is too variable to capture here. However, this
study will set out to do three things that may help enrich this debate. First, I will distinguish between the concepts of authority and legitimacy through some recourse to classic texts on the subject, so as to establish how violent, criminal actors might approach legitimacy. I will do this in order to demonstrate that even repressive groups such as paramilitaries or trafficking gangs have a clear interest in legitimacy – so-called “skin in the game.” (Anderson, 2010) This is crucial for this research project as I will go on to argue below that it is precisely this interest in legitimacy that gives the CMGs in this study some room to maneuver and ultimately, to have an impact in reducing violence in their respective communities.

Second, this section will investigate the role of violence in Latin America as it pertains to the notion of legitimacy. This is important because some scholars (Carty & Rizvi, 1999) have argued that violence is a kind of legitimacy kryptonite; it is precisely violence more than any other cause that erodes support for those interested in exercising political and social control. Yet in the neighborhoods where this study takes place, violence is widespread and very much woven into daily life. At the same time as violence is rampant, I argue that legitimacy remains up for grabs. Therefore we need to understand how legitimacy and violence can coexist and even be coextensive. Third and finally, through a literature review of Colombian paramilitaries and Brazilian drug traffickers, this chapter will assert that informal, (but organized) violent groups can and do offer viable alternatives to the state’s role in policing and providing security. That is, in certain areas, particularly those historically impacted by repressive state tactics, illegal, informal institutions have challenged the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force, or
at the very least, both illegal groups studied here have established informal policing institutions that hover on the margins of legitimacy.

Furthermore, as Payne’s (2000) work illustrates, in Latin America, home to some of the world’s oldest republics, violent actors and informal violent institutions can spawn and thrive within the structural features of a democracy. This book is particularly important because it shows how violent groups use similar strategies as those of social movements in order to function effectively within democracies. Part of the success of these movements, and the functionality of their violent tactics, depends on popular support and legitimacy with certain sectors of society. While it can be asserted, following O’Donnell (G. O'donnell, 1998), that such violent groups are only successful in areas where democratic institutions are weak and unconsolidated, in the case studies to be presented it is not clear that more democracy on an institutional level means less violence locally. Finally, this study is deliberately cautious about applying discourses of Western democratic institutionalism as a panacea for social and civil conflict existing in different cultural contexts. This is because these discourses can be considered to have normative goals of their own, and can even be part of reinforcing longstanding and multiple structural inequalities through hegemony by obscuring alternative perspectives behind these normative presumptions.10

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10 See (2013a, p. 27) “The phenomenon of hegemony or systematically distorted communication is more subtle than this. It refers to how the conceptual and normative framework of the members of a society is deeply influenced by premises and terms of discourse that make it difficult to think critically about aspects of their social relations or alternative possibilities of institutionalization and action.”
Brief Genealogy of Authority and Legitimacy

The *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Science* states “Legitimacy…is critical because it goes to the heart of any normative claim by a government, a state, or a power that it should be willingly obeyed and respected…No single and universally acceptable definition of legitimacy exists.” (2001, p. 8701) Nevertheless, for the purposes of this project I will define legitimacy as the *ability to exercise power with some form of reasoned public consent*. Although not explicitly drawn from a text, this definition is crafted from the work of Max Weber. Weber’s work on legitimacy and its relationship to the state is foundational to the raft of literature which follows on the same subject. (R. Barker, 1990; Beetham, 1991) This definition seeks to conceive of legitimacy both as a vital source of power to any group or individual in a position of governing others and as a symbolic acceptance on the part of these others that the power exercised over them is to some extent just. The dynamic tension between authority and legitimacy is itself part of the definition of these two concepts, and in order to understand this idea more fully, it is necessary to understand how these two concepts evolved along side one another.

Montaigne was one of the first to point out the pitfalls of evaluating the violent practices of others on the basis of our own, of trying to measure legitimacy with one yardstick. In comparing the violence of the “cannibals” of Brazil to those of the religious warriors of his native France, he writes “we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current
in the land where we live. There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything.”

(1958, p. 114) Montaigne seems to be introducing a cultural, moral or institutional relativism here, and yet his perspective is more that of the skeptic than of the pure relativist – he asks us to question our own point of view, but ultimately to make a judgment. Therefore, for Montaigne, “we are justified in calling these people [Brazilians] barbarians by reference to the laws of reason, but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity” (my emphasis).

(1958, p. 114) Reading broadly into this passage on comparing forms of violence, some recourse to social science method can be adduced. Montaigne is telling us to lay out our terms before we make our determinations.

Published one year before Montaigne was born, in 1532, Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (2005) appears to be a kind of technical manual for competing warlords in which the dynamic tension between power and legitimacy is immediately identifiable. Machiavelli makes clear the terms of his argument by dedicating his text to Lorenzo di Medici, along with an exhortation to use the book as a tool to reconquer Italy – *The Prince* will be a book about what works. However, Machiavelli makes clear that what works in a political context is not just force – in fact, some observers have gone so far as to argue that Machiavelli stealthily reveals just how dependent rulers are on legitimacy from the ruled. (McCormick, 2011)

But even if Machiavelli sees power as ultimately flowing from the populace rather than the leadership, he still believes violence and cruelty to be necessary components of governance. The violence must have purpose: “Well used one is
able to call those cruelties (if one may lawfully call the bad good) which are done at once for the necessity of securing oneself, and which are afterwards not continued within, but are converted to the greatest possible utility of the subjects.” (1997, p. 54) From a Machiavellian perspective, authority is converted to legitimacy through the perception of the subjects, and the ruler can manage this perception.¹¹ Change can be imposed with sufficient will to power; out of war, even generalized slaughter, can come order, and out of ambition and the hunger for power can come justice. However, although the prince may manipulate his subjects, he is ultimately dependent on them. Even the prince of Machiavelli will fall if he continues to prey on his subjects, particularly their property and their women (which may have been treated as similar commodities in early 16th century Italy).

Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan* (1928) lays out his terms exhaustively, building a political argument up from an epistemology of the human psyche. For Hobbes, people are simply ‘meat puppets’ moved by restless desire. Montaigne’s intimations of relativism and the will to power-as-public-good of Machiavelli’s prince become more fleshed out in Hobbes, where terms like “good” and “evil” are seen as merely relative to the desires or aversions that motivate people.¹² These desires and passions place humans in direct competition with one another over

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¹¹ In one of his most relativistic and perhaps prescient of passages, Machiavelli writes: “And with respect to all human actions, and especially those of princes where there is no judge to appeal, one looks to the ends. Let a prince then win and maintain the state – the means will be always judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone, for the vulgar are always taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in this world there is no one but the vulgar.” (Niccolão Machiavelli & Bondanella, 2005, p. 54)

¹² Interestingly, Hobbes lays out his argument for the relative meanings of good and evil as originating in the fluid and evolving nature of language over time, a proto-Wittgensteinian approach to epistemology.
available resources. Also, according to Hobbes, people can only find happiness when our future desires have been addressed, that is, when we have some form of *security*. The only means for individuals to have future desires fulfilled, or to project their will into the future, is to have power, and power over others.

Furthermore, as individuals, we are roughly equal to one another initially in terms of power, so our conflict rages all the more tenaciously.¹³ For Hobbes, this conflict arises from our “natural” desires and thus is our natural state. The Hobbsian state of nature is the state of war.¹⁴

Since for Hobbes, one of the main passions which rule people is fear, fear of death in particular and the state of war in general, individuals require a greater fear of violence to rule them than the fear of an opposing individual. Therefore, in order to establish peace, individuals must allow themselves to be ruled over by a “Sovereign” (which can be any system of government, according to Hobbes), who trumps individual will. Freedom, for Hobbes, is freedom from the tyranny of the state of nature, the highest expression of liberty is in the law, and any other sense of liberty is ludicrous.

³⁴ Againe, if we take Liberty, for an exception from Lawes, it is no less absurd, for men to demand as they doe, that Liberty, by which all other men

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¹³ In this passage, Hobbes also agrees with Montaigne on the human tendency to inflate his/her own context, in that he describes the seeming superiority of a particular point of view as stemming from its familiarity. “For such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent, or more learned; Yet they will hardly believe there be so many so wise as themselves: For they see their own wit at hand, and other mens at a distance.” Hobbes, 1928, p. 24

¹⁴ On this point, as modern scholars, we could attack Hobbes on his notion of the existence of some innate quality in people that propels them toward savagery. However, it should be pointed out that Hobbes lived during a viciously turbulent era (1588-1679), in which European agglomerations of people were constantly at each other’s throats, and so violence could well have appeared as an intrinsic quality, as it does today to some Colombian observers. See (Hobbes, 1928, p. 69)
man be masters of their lives. And yet as absurd as it is, this is it they demand; not knowing that the Lawes are of no power to protect them, without a Sword in the hands of a man, or men, to cause those laws to be put in execution. The Liberty of a Subject, lyeth therefore only in those things, which in regulating their actions, the Sovereign hath praetermitted… (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1997, p. 111)

For the purposes of this study, this formulation brings forth a central dilemma. If people only obey out of fear, than the obligation to obey a sovereign state is the same as the obligation to obey a gun-toting paramilitary/trafficker. Any group which holds power, ought to have power, because power exercised is the only barrier to people destroying each other, and thus the sovereign’s existence is its own justification. This assumes a lack of distinction between legitimacy and authority, where legitimacy is understood as power exercised with some form of reasoned public consent and authority is merely the ability (or the widely-held perception of this ability) to exercise power effectively.

Yet it must be stated here that the debate on what is to be called “Hobbesian” is not resolved. Initially, the worldview that Hobbes seems to put forward appears startlingly bleak, with the choices seeming to vary between two types of tyranny – despotism or anarchy. However, scholars have long noted that for Hobbes, the legitimacy of the true sovereign arises from a contract of promises made by the subjects among themselves to be free(er) from fear, and that there is a series of binding obligations that bring sovereign and subject together in a web of interconnections.¹⁵ What this contract was composed of, and what the natures of

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¹⁵ See Brian Barry “Warrender and his critics” and A.E. Taylor “The ethical doctrine of Hobbes” in (Villaveces, 2006) Barry goes so far as to draw upon letters by Hobbes to suggest that the sovereign only rules by the subject’s assent, but this may be a rather modern interpretation.
these obligations were is still subject to speculation and interpretation, because Hobbes was primarily concerned with the establishment of order from chaos.

The German sociologist Max Weber is the social scientist most strongly associated with legitimacy. Weber begins his discussion of legitimacy by introducing the tension between authority and legitimacy; on the one hand there is a kind of consent in carrying out the wishes of others – “legitimacy orders” – and on the other, there exists the capacity for authority – “imperative control.” (1947, pp. 111-112) Group members, citizens, or bureaucratic functionaries carry out directions because of social norms, personal loyalty, or material incentives. But Weber pointed out that people usually comply not out of coercion but because of a shared belief in what constitutes legitimacy. Weber argued that legitimacy was the goal of every governing institution and that attaining legitimacy was not static, but one that involved a dynamic political process of persuasion and compliance on the part of the governed. (Weber, Gerth, & Mills, 1946; Weber et al., 1947; Weber & Whimster, 2004) For Weber, the attainment of legitimacy is highly efficacious – he considers it one of the best methods for exercising power, far more likely to result in stability than simple coercion. (Weber & Whimster, 2004, p. 178) So, in this formulation, authority grows out of the attainment of legitimacy, and the exercise of power by an institution over people is widely understood as justified when legitimacy is attained and projected.

Weber describes three types of authority, and these three can also be understood as having three distinct types of legitimacy claims. What Weber calls rational-legal authority makes its legitimacy claim based on a belief in the laws
and rules of politico-social institutions, and also the degree to which those in power have the right to enforce these rules. The system used to elevate those into positions of power is held to be a kind of legitimizing actor in this view, effectively selecting leaders and managers. Traditional authority derives its legitimacy from traditions that have evolved over time, and as traditions are socially constructed and can be unmade, this means that for Weber this is a somewhat unstable form of authority. Charismatic authority is even more unstable, because its legitimacy flows from a single individual who can be discredited or simply removed from a position of authority. (Weber & Whimster, 2004, p. 179) All three of these types of authority are present in the case studies in this research project.

Weber’s famous formulation of the state shows how integral he understands legitimacy to be in terms of relations between the individual and the collective – he refers to it as “a human community which (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” (Weber et al., 1946, p. 328) While I agree with Weber on the centrality of legitimacy, this research project argues that the concept of legitimacy should be expanded to include non-state actors and informal institutions that struggle in the trenches of marginal communities to establish their own viability. Furthermore, following other recent scholarship on armed actors (Koonings & Kruijt, 2004) I challenge Weber’s notion that the states in question possess this monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force. I further argue that challenges to the states’ legitimacy in these marginal neighborhoods has undermined their capacity to project and defend a justiciable category of universal citizenship, and has greatly eroded their ability to project
their power into these areas, echoing the conclusions of several recent works (Weber et al., 1946, p. 78) Finally, by way of adding to the scholarship on this subject, I separate out normative questions of legitimacy from this research and focus instead on the empirical questions of how legitimacy is constructed in the areas I study.

**Violence, Legitimacy and the State**

*No Other Way Out* (2001), Jeff Goodwin’s foundational text, has one unifying argument: indiscriminate state violence and repression is the most important cause of revolutions. Through his exhaustively thorough comparative case study, Goodwin determines that although many other factors may be necessary or sufficient to provoke a revolution, only promiscuous violence on the part of state power is common across all his cases of revolutions. Furthermore, state human rights abuses figure most prominently as a cause in the stories of successful revolutions.

Goodwin delves into the Cuban revolution to bulwark his state-centered approach. “The Batista regime,” he writes, “…positively weakened the civilian and military enemies of a radical revolution and unwittingly enhanced the popular appeal of the fidelistas.” (2001) In effect, by troubling its own house, the state reaped the whirlwind. Here and throughout the book, Goodwin also illuminates the many ways in which a state power can be limited or checked, and how revolutionaries are eminently capable of creating their own political opportunities.
Yet despite his admirable commitment to providing counter examples to his own argument, he returns metronomically to his belief that the state-centered approach is best for understanding how and why revolutions mobilize. As Hobbes and observers dating back at least as far as Thucydides makes abundantly clear, force is an integral part of the role and ethos of the state or polis. However, when repression and violence becomes organized institutionally within the state as an express means for achieving its goals, justice as a delimited notion becomes conceptually blurred. As Hannah Arendt (1970) shows, generalized violence unleashed by the state has a particular oceanic quality; in that when it is utilized to try to control a general populace, its purpose is to broadly terrorize, to convince that all are potential victims, regardless of guilt. Thus, when state violence becomes so systematized that its impact infiltrates most spheres of the lifeworld, then its narrative of rationality is obscured. According to the editors of a recent volume on state violence in our region of study, “contemporary Latin American states have practiced different forms of terror, including torture and physical punishment, not in a primitive or ‘traditional’ manner, but in a politically rational, calculated, modern fashion…state-sponsored terror is part of a modern political system based on the same rationality that characterizes modern, bureaucratic societies.” (Menjívar & Rodriguez, 2005, pp. 3-4) On the other hand, while it may still be true that violence is institutionalized on a structural level within different branches of the state in the Latin American countries we will examine, it is also true that neither state is a dictatorship and both are formally governed by the rule of law. In other words, in both areas in Colombia and Brazil, state violence
directed at civilians is no longer publicly touted as a means to a political end, yet it continues to be widely practiced.

Because violence and repression has remained widespread in Latin America, despite some (albeit haphazard) consolidation of democracy alongside a healthy (or at least bumptious) civil society (Guillermo A. O'Donnell, 1999), some efforts have been made to make sense of this ‘new’ parainstitutionality of violence in Latin America. What role does violence play in these societies when it can no longer occupy the space of a ‘necessary medicine,’ prescribed by the state, swallowed to preserve the social order from an enemy contagion? According to Kruijt and Koonings, “new violence instead occupies the interstices of the fragile and fragmented formal legal, institutional and political order. As a tentative definition we therefore suggest that ‘new violence’ is socially or politically organized to wield coercion by evading or undermining the legitimate violence monopoly of the formally democratic states.” (2004, p. 8) For several other scholars who have done extensive field research violence undermines and rabidly destroys any natural or public recourse to a humane society. The ‘democratization’ of violence, spreading from the state to a variety of small actors, and eliding state legitimacy along the way, is eradicating the very notion of a political entity, reducing vulnerable citizens to being impressed into these violent groups, and destroying their national identity (Frühling, Tulchin, & Golding, 2003; Wouters, 2001) as well as introducing a general state of ungovernability.

However, despite the ample evidence that violence is proliferating and spawning new acolytes, even those Latin American nation-states most plagued by
this phenomenon persist. Despite the evident gravity of the situation, in our region of focus, and elsewhere, force and its terrifying consequences have not necessarily diminished the over-all relevance of the state to its populace. How can this be explained? As the scholars aforementioned inform us, “increasing numbers of Latin Americans live in an informal society geared up for everyday survival. Here violence finds a fertile breeding ground.” (Koonings & Kruijt, 2004, p. 14) While this might be true, does it necessarily follow that this proliferation of violence will lead to state failure and collapse? Furthermore, does this increasing recourse to informal institutions imply wholesale dissolution of civil society?

It may be true that despite the moral reprehensibility of violent acts, these practices are seen as possessing a legitimate societal function, especially in societies where a legitimate state has historically been seen as the predominant violent actor. It also may be true that in specific regions where the state has historically held little influence or has been unable to extend its presence, informal institutions, including those who utilize violence, may be respected as ‘grass-roots’ solutions to problems the state has never undertaken to engage. It is also possible that in certain circumstances violence may even be culturally admired as an expression of power and masculinity or viewed as the most ‘natural’ solution to an intransigent social problem. As some scholars of violence write “In contemporary Latin American society violence emerges as much more than a social aberration: violence is a mechanism for keeping in place the very institutions and policies that neoliberal democracies have fashioned over the past several decades, as well as an instrument for coping with the myriad problems that neoliberal democracies have
generated.” (Koonings & Kruijt, 2004, p. 14) In other words, it seems relevant to question the predominant paradigm, in which violence is seen, in-and-of-itself, to pose the dastardliest threat to the Latin American polity and to the public good. At the very least, dire predictions of state collapse and general anarchy have not yet been realized. Furthermore, violence itself has not ceased to be used functionally by various civil society groups, governmental, and quasi-governmental actors. In questioning this received wisdom, it will also be necessary to better understand the nature of these shadowy informal institutions – the “rules and procedures that are created, communicated and enforced outside the officially sanctioned channels” (Whitehead, Fair, Payne, Arias, & Goldstein, 2010, p. 5) – which routinely employ violence in pursuit of their state-like policing duties.

Even as it would be a mistake to overlook the functionality of violence, it would also be a mistake to condemn informal institutions in Latin America in toto as linked to a rise in the unrule of law. The informal sector of the economy in both Colombia and Brazil (and throughout the region) has possessed longstanding functional capacity to provide avenues for trade and small-scale accumulation of capital for many to whom access to state-sanctioned markets and organized systems of credit is prohibitive. (AlSayyad, 2004; Helmk & Levitsky, 2006, p. 1) According to several scholars of these institutions in Latin America, condemning informal economic institutions is somewhat moot, as they have grown and evolved into the sources of livelihood for millions. (C. E. Flórez, 2002; Woltermann, 2002) In parts of Brazil, informal institutions have been responsible for participatory budgeting and helping to spread the equitable distribution of community capital
through citizen participation at the local level. (Baiocchi, 2005; Baiocchi, Heller, Silva, & Silva, 2011; Tendler, 1997)

Given their persistence, we can presume that informal institutions, in most forms, yield some net gains in efficiency. Furthermore, informal institutions are responsible, in Latin America, for reproducing an array of democratic practices, such as establishing norms of executive-legislative power-sharing in Chile, creating functioning coalitions in fractious Ecuador, and enforcing electoral accountability in Argentina and constructing operative justice systems in indigenous communities. (Helmke & Levitsky, 2006) Therefore, we should not presume that informal policing efforts made by criminal or illegal groups, even those marked by widespread or indiscriminate violence, are inherently arbitrary, lack legitimacy and serve only maintain the status quo ante.

**Armed Actor Legitimacy in the Brazilian Case**

If, following Durkheim (1982) we define institutions broadly as widely shared values, behaviors and ways of viewing the world that endure over time, then clearly violence has itself become a form of institution in Colombia and Brazil.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, if violence is manifested in an organization, or spread across a field of organizations, or if violence becomes part of an organizational culture, than it can be studied, at least partly, as a rational choice, or as a problem-solving tool, as some scholars have undertaken. (Briceño-León, 2005; Briceño-León & Zubillaga,

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\(^{17}\) “For, while institutions bear down on us, we nevertheless cling to them; they impose obligations on us, and yet we love them; they place constraints on us, yet we find satisfaction in the way they function, and in that very constraint.” (Thucydides, 2010, p. V.105.104)
As violent and illegal groups obtain organizational power, develop decision-making autonomy, and promote leadership cadres, they become more similar in form and function to the institutions they confront for survival. When uncivil, illiberal and violent networks began to spread and a cycle of cynicism builds in the public sphere because of predatory behavior by the state, than legitimacy becomes both watered-down and also more transferable. Of course it is difficult to untangle causal factors in these cases. However, violent informal institutions can be studied, particularly in terms of their success or failure at establishing perceived, lasting and effective legitimacy. (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994)

Despite the understandable paucity of the available literature (due to the fact that this research holds real dangers for researchers), criminal groups, especially those with a local base, have been shown to have some proclivity in establishing state-like policing forces. Despite the fact that they operate for gain, conflict waged by these groups should not be seen as necessarily separate from their political aims, merely because they resist traditional political definitions, as von Clausewitz has noted. In her article on Rio’s favelas, Donna Leeds (1996) argues that it is the lack of state presence that has led to drug-traffickers taking on

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18 See (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 45) “We see, therefore, that War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means. All beyond this which is strictly peculiar to War relates merely to the peculiar nature of the means which it uses. That the tendencies and views of policy shall not be incompatible with these means, the Art of War in general and the Commander in each particular case may demand, and this claim is truly not a trifling one. But however powerfully this may react on political views in particular cases, still it must always be regarded as only a modification of them; for the political view is the object, War is the means, and the means must always include the object in our conception.”
certain roles traditionally occupied by the state. She writes: “the public service most conspicuously absent from Rio’s favelas (and consequently the most prevalent alternative service offered by Rio’s drug gangs) is internal security.” (1996, p. 66) For Leeds, it is primarily the indiscriminate violence against the poor populations of the favelas, which in many cases is waged by the police, that has brought about a de facto decision to seek other sources for the provision of security. In the neighborhoods which provide the traffickers with protection, the drug gangs offer a form of popularly understood public order: “long histories of police harassment created a prime rationale for the mutual protection services – the neighborhoods providing the gangs with safe haven from the police in return for gang protection from noncommunity predators (including harassing police).” (1996, p. 63)

For Leeds (1996, p. 69), it is mostly the failure and devolution of state legitimacy that provides the basis for arguing that another actor has become more relevant; she has shown that in the absence of an official order, new ordering principles have become established. Through her interviews and ethnographic study, we can envision a complex nexus of relations between criminal groups and civil society and community associations that might seek to redress state failures in order to further their own goals, which include the accumulation of profit, organizational sustainability, and the projection of influence and power, as well as the strengthening of community ties. Leeds goes on to describe in detail the economic relationships between the drug gang and the community, showing how these relationships are essentially clientelistic, and as such similar to traditional
citizen-state economic relations in Latin America, but also reveals that success as a drug gang in the community is at least partially contingent upon providing a sustainable philosophy of the exercise of power (1996). In this way, drug gangs are appropriate – they provide leadership roles, and also, an attainable image of how to transcend grinding poverty. Leeds also bestows upon the Brazilian gangs an ethos similar to social movements, showing how they exist within a tradition and on a continuum of alternative governing systems: “gangs have served certain positive social functions in a segment of society where social and political institutions did not or do not function.” (Leeds, 1996, p. 60) This tendency to persist over time bestows legitimacy on these gangs.

Those positive functions referred to include some redistribution of drug profit for things like rudimentary health services and daycare, and most prominently, an “alternative justice system.” (Leeds, 1996, p. 60) However, although Leeds gives compelling evidence for the lack of the state’s ability or desire to extend its presence into Rio’s favelas, it is still not clear that the state has withdrawn so completely as to no longer provide the context for favela life. While it may be true that criminal gangs have stepped into the role of providing for public security due to a state lapse or negligence, it is not wholly convincing from her work that these criminal gangs have achieved full legitimacy, because they continue to be engaged in conflict with Brazil’s federal, military and state police forces, and because life in the favela is still unstable and insecure. On the other hand, her work does seem to suggest that drug gangs at the time of her study were on their way to making the transition between authority and legitimacy, and that
they are not seen as inherently at a disadvantage in their competition with the state, but rather as ‘another game in town’ in their own right.

This research project broadly bears out Leeds’ conclusions, with some key differences. First, many of the members of the CMGs examined here were at one time members of the non-state actors that control these neighborhoods. These individuals joined or associated with these armed groups because they were seen as a standard means to acquire some small measure of capital, but more fundamentally, they joined because the group was understood as a legitimate and appropriate feature of the neighborhood’s social and political landscape. Second, like in Leeds, the armed groups studied here are manifestations of a long running tradition of non-state actors in these neighborhoods, and as such have been incorporated into the neighborhoods’ traditions. Also, similar to Leeds, these groups have achieved some legitimacy, in the sense of providing a security service, but it is a contested legitimacy. However, unlike in Leeds, the two states in this comparative project have mobilized their security forces to attempt to force these armed groups into the shadows (although not to eradicate them as we shall see below). Despite this security surge, I argue, these states are not necessarily seeking to fully reincorporate the disenfranchised citizenry that make their homes in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, in my view, Leeds, like Goodwin above (Leeds, 1996, p. 60), is too top-down in her analytic matrix in that in focusing on institutions and organizations she overlooks the role the neighborhood residents themselves play in the dynamics of these neighborhoods.
Similar to Leeds, Donna Goldstein (2003) also utilizes a vacuum analysis of the state’s role in the world of the excluded of Brazilian favelas as an explanatory frame for the onset of criminal governance. According to her framework, the state exacerbates its own lawlessness, because police forces operate in opposition to the rule of law, by indiscriminately attacking communities and poisoning their citizens against this arm of the state. The state, for Goldstein (2003, p. 188) is primarily responsible, through the tacit or explicit sanction of death squads and drug-dealing police bandits, for the erosion of trust in the new democracy and the legitimacy of the Brazilian state. The police themselves have become directly involved in drug-trafficking, and so have forfeited a claim to legitimacy based on the rule of law: “besides being institutionally corrupt, the police have more recently been accused of participating directly in drug-trafficking…military police have been used by drug traffickers or have become involved in the assassination of drug traffickers in order to keep the product and the profit for themselves.” (2003, p. 188)

Goldstein demonstrates that in Brazilian favelas, there is a lack of a functioning state security apparatus (indeed, she shows how horribly it is malfunctioning), and describes how drug traffickers have stepped in to fill the void. In her analysis, because the state is failing to such a degree to provide any semblance of a justice system, drug gangs step in as rudimentary arbitrators, security-providers, and *patrones* doling out largesse for victims of crimes, and these gangs in turn form linkages with politically active civilians in order to develop an informally regulated institution of law enforcement that polices all
sectors of society. In this analysis, we can identify the presence of legitimacy in this informal policing institution, but this political good is still up for grabs, in that indiscriminate violence may make it difficult for the traffickers to consolidate legitimacy.

For Goldstein, the emergence of this informal institution (justice system) is less about the successful conversion of authority into legitimacy by drug gangs, and more connected to the strategies of human perseverance pursued by ordinary people in a living space circumscribed by hardship and suffering. (2003, p. 210) She demonstrates how a criminal institution that functions as a violent and arbitrary police force becomes functional in the favelas of Brazil, because of widespread disenfranchisement, anomie, and the unraveling of a compelling national narrative in the face of deeply oppressive living conditions. She claims that drug-trafficking gangs police the areas they control, and interact with the community more effectively and positively, than do the appendages of the state, which in fact persecute more often than they protect. She also shows how citizens continue to suffer under the vicissitudes of this “alternative justice system.” (2003, p. 187) Goldstein’s analytical focus here is a little closer to this comparative study than that of Leeds (1996), because she places ordinary citizens at the center of her narrative.

Desmond Arias (2004; 2006; 2006) has undertaken the most comprehensive study of criminal governance and criminal informal institutions in some of the same Brazilian favelas studied by Leeds (1996) and Goldstein (2003).
Arias argues that a nexus of actors is responsible for the emergence of an informal policing and justice institution in the favelas:

While the poor often have restricted access to government, there are ample connections between favela residents and government representatives. The problem is that these connections are often maintained by traffickers and their allies…In short, criminals, local civic leaders, police and politicians play important roles in Rio’s INs [Illegal Networks]. Each of these actors contributes in specific functional ways to perpetuating criminal activity and destabilizing local democratic governance. (2004, p. 4)

After looking carefully at governance patterns in the favelas, Arias uncovered a host of interconnected actors who operate in concert, colluding with one another in order to further their individual goals. He labels these loose coalitions “illegal networks,” and goes on to describe how these different actors function within this spider web of criminal activity. For Arias, the emphasis should not be placed on emergent political complexes that may compete with the state for authority and legitimacy, but rather on the ways in which the state actually contributes to the creation of an informal institution through its organized relationships with illegal groups, while at the same time claiming to be trying to suppress crime. (2004) The police and the parallel, criminal police are not discrete entities in this analysis so much as overlapping fields of influence and force. Arias provides persuasive examples from his extensive field research to make his point about collusion and interconnectedness, and it is clear from his work that state police are indeed heavily involved in some of the most marginalized and criminalized favelas.

According to Arias and Rodrigues (2006a) in the Brazilian favela of Tubarão, which is also controlled by drug-trafficking non-state actors, some well-
connected, respected residents will, without fear of recrimination, defy the core rule enforced by the traffickers – the *lei do silêncio* (law of silence) – by talking openly about trafficker business. Although they make it plain that traffickers will not hesitate to use violence against lower-status residents, Arias and Rodrigues also write that traffickers try to “work within a framework of outward friendship and listening” because of “the necessity of maintaining resident support.” (2006, pp. 62-63) Elsewhere, Arias (2006, p. 68) describes how certain powerful neighborhood associations in the favelas work with and openly debate traffickers, attempting to further favela goals by building communication networks within the confines of trafficker control.

Although Arias’ argument is compelling, it begs the question of the emergence of an informal policing institution. For even if illegal networks of collusion are a key feature of policing in favelas that does not mean that parallel institutions do not or will not exist. Arias’ argument does not address institutions *qua* institutions – i.e., contemporary institutions tend to have dense, voluntary political and economic relationships with other institutions, collude, form tight alliances, and in general, operate in networks. (2004) What distinguishes them as actors is their sovereignty over their sphere of influence. Arias does not examine the question of whether or not informal institutions exist in Rio’s favelas; rather he dismisses the functional notion of informal institutions in favor of the conceptual framework of networks stemming from a different scholarly tradition. (McAdam, 1982) However, it is nevertheless clear from Arias’ extensive research that drug traffickers in several Brazilian favelas operate as security forces with the collusion
or active assistance of resident’s associations, political organizations, and even, through a system of payoffs, with their direct competitors the various Brazilian police forces. (2006b) Thus, we can identify in Arias’ work the presence of legitimacy in these criminal police, although again, it is not fully established, since favela residents remain ambivalent, partly as a consequence of the competition of the two policing forces.

**Armed Actor Legitimacy in the Colombian Case**

Colombia has long had a contentious relationship with its armed groups, all of which currently have both criminal and political elements imbedded within their organizational structures. The paramilitaries in particular, have historically been seen as both criminal and as agents of public order – in this sense, these illegal actors have an ‘agonic’ relationship with the state hegemon.\(^{19}\) Accusations raised in recent congressional hearings,\(^{20}\) later supported by direct evidence uncovered by investigators, revealed paramilitary structures deeply enmeshed in the Colombian political fabric. Since officially demobilizing and disarming in late 2002, new evidence suggests that paramilitaries have turned their energies even more towards criminal activities, and, with the collusion of elected officials, have bulled their way into controlling legitimate businesses such as trucking firms, dairy farms and

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\(^{19}\) See (Foucault, 1982, p. 216) “At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’—of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.”

\(^{20}\) See (Forero, 2005, 2006)
cattle ranching operations, as well as continuing their vigilante role in Colombian society as informal police agents.

Yet despite the long-term presence of paramilitaries in Colombia, and widespread knowledge of their activities, it is somewhat difficult to assess the quality of their legitimacy, as there is a certain lack of good source material on their dynamics within a community. The political scientist Francisco Sanín (2006c) has done critical work examining paramilitaries from within their organization, and although he doesn’t look closely at how they operate within a particular community, it is still possible to use his work to make some assessments. First, looking at the data drawn from information gathered during the paramilitary demobilization process, Sanín concludes that “the bulk of paramilitary soldiers come from the ranks of the popular sectors [the poor], and some of them have made it to the upper ranks, eventually becoming important middlemen or even landowners; in this way, paramilitarism, as narcotrafficking, has opened windows of opportunity for upward social mobility, as fieldwork evidence suggests.” (2004, 2008) Sanín describes an organization that, while it clearly predates, also presents itself as a kind of ideological business. Access to extorted rents from criminal activity and taxation of poppy and coca crops provide the primary motivation for those entering the paramilitaries, and bureaucratic accountability is distributed through networks of personal interactions, wherein each node o the network expects some measure of personal enrichment.

Sanín finds that this dependence on spoils distribution is attractive in a context of scarcity, but as a primary motivator for the maintenance of loyalty ties
weakens paramilitary gangs from a legitimacy standpoint within their own organization, and, we can safely presume, in the community also. He writes: “such mechanisms [spoils] gave incentives to the lower rank to try to bump off their superiors, and to the regional leaders to try to expand at the expense of their paramilitary neighbors…even with the most terrorist forms of enforcement of hierarchy, challenges will occur.” (2008, p. 14) He goes on to describe how it is the development of an effective security apparatus, with which paramilitaries can offer a service that makes them truly sustainable within a community. So we can determine from his analysis that the degree to which a paramilitary group offers more than just financial incentives to its members, and the degree to which it actually provides a security service to a community, that will configure its appropriateness and orthodoxy.

According to Sanín, many paramilitaries are ultraviolent when they first arrive in an area, carrying out “a wave of indiscriminate violence that includes massacres, mutilations (often on those still living), torture, and the destruction and theft of property.” (2008, p. 16) Afterwards, he says, they become much more selective in their use of violence “in response to the demands of governance – it is impossible to govern during a long period based only on terror…” (2008, p. 15) In other words, despite their extreme violence, paramilitary groups become susceptible to legitimacy demands made upon them by local groups and populations over time. From this we can conclude that the long-term legitimacy of the paramilitaries, like that of the Brazilian trafficking gangs, is weak. This is because paramilitaries continue to engage in targeted killing of locals, and also, as
Sanín tells us, are directly responsible for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of peasants, causing an inverse kind of agrarian reform on a massive scale. Furthermore, despite colluding with state and military officials, they are often the targets of these same forces, and so security as a measurable good is only ever partly provided to community members.

The anthropologist Michael Taussig, whose book *Law in a Lawless Land* (2003) is a diary and a documentation of several weeks spent in a Colombian town near Cali (in the Valle de Cauca province) during which paramilitary forces carried out the policing activity known as the *limpieza*. Taussig had visited this same town almost every year for 22 years, and so was in a position to accurately describe the townspeople’s relation to the type of policing enacted. According to Taussig, the paramilitaries (*autodefensas*) were initially invited by members of the town board to come into town in order to try (suing?) the mayor for corruption. (2003, p. 116) However, once having arrived, they worked with other prominent members of the town in order to eliminate ‘bad elements’ and to enforce ‘social control.’ But for Taussig, this doesn’t distinguish the paramilitaries as much as it places them within a Colombian caudillo tradition: “…long before the guerilla and the *autodefensas* started to control local government, Colombian municipalities were run the same way, with a semi-secret group of local businessmen calling the shots, in webs of intrigue with state officials…the use of overt violence is new, that’s true, but it was always there, really, hovering in the wings.” (2003, p. 117)

Taussig probes the degree to which paramilitaries are operating with the sanction of community members, and he determines, that despite or because of
the confusion surrounding paramilitary goals, significant segments of the town believe at least in principle that the paramilitaries are there to accomplish the necessary object of enforcing order. Therefore, Taussig identifies clear elements of political legitimacy in the paramilitaries presence and activities. It is clear that some measure of support exists for the policing activities of the paramilitaries, in that they are presumed to represent a conservative political ethos that privileges order over freedom. Nevertheless, Taussig ascertains correctly that lasting legitimacy will be almost impossible to achieve in the status quo, in that the violent means of enforcing social order are the very end results that are deplored and struggled against by the community. In this sense, once again, consolidated legitimacy is found wanting in the methods of the paramilitaries.

Violence and fear, those lived experiences which security forces in principle should seek to mitigate, are not truly addressed. He writes: “the paras seem less something new than the latest actualization of longstanding fear, taking advantage of that fear to control the town as a whole. What the paras come to represent, in other words, is a promise to use violence to stop violence, to use fear to stop fear…” (2003, p. 139) Apparently, even effective narrative discourse, with its immense power to shape perceived realities, has difficulty persuading people that violence is justifiable merely in and of itself. As Taussig shows in his work, perhaps the most relevant long-term social ill that the paramilitaries and now the neo-paramilitaries have helped to cause and propagate, and that which many of the residents of Juan Pablo II were intimately acquainted with, is the constant fear of violence.
The scholar and researcher Teo Ballvé (Ballvé, 2013a, 2013b) offers some excellent data from which it is possible to make some assessments regarding the quality of the legitimacy of Colombian paramilitaries. Ballvé uses government investigations, court cases, land registry documents, journalism reports, corporate filings, and first person interviews to trace how paramilitaries co-opt the grassroots development apparatus in order to seize peasant-held lands and gain access to funding streams. The paramilitaries in this analysis have assembled “an intricate network of organized violence, private companies, NGOs, peasant associations, illicit capital, public officials, government aid, and, in some cases, funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).” (2013a, p. 16) Far from offering oppressed subjects an opportunity to make their concerns heard, or mobilized as a ‘weapon of the weak,’ the discourse of grassroots empowerment offers paramilitaries an opportunity to more fully penetrate multiple levels of state and civil society, all while operating under cover of a practice morally sanctioned by international bodies and other influential partners.

Ballvé focuses on two surreptitious land grabs in which paramilitaries successfully managed to appropriate huge tracts of land using funds from development agencies and then “launder” these seizures by creating phony peasant associations and local NGOs, all while explaining their actions in terms of grassroots mobilization. These land grabs were presented to international and national donors “as vehicles of state formation…the imperatives of the ‘rule of law,’ ‘institution building,’ and ‘good governance’ commonly associated with grassroots development remained perversely compatible with paramilitaries’
economies of violence.” (2013a, p. 12) Here we see that paramilitary groups were able to find a way to make claims in terms of political legitimacy that were not just related to the creation and establishment of a security apparatus. Here armed actors used narratives of legitimacy in order to provide cover for their criminal and violent activities, in order to enrich the nodes along their criminal networks, in a classic illustration of actor-network theory. (2013a, p. 12)

Yet even in these cases long-term, consolidated legitimacy usually proves too much of a stretch for the paramilitaries. As Ballvé writes: “The evidence shows that the PASO [a paramilitary peasant association] was not only supposed to make places like Tulapas into depositories of lands and wealth for posterity, it was also supposed to make them into durable bases of political support and bulwarks against the FARC.” (2013a, p. 18) Even after expelling peasants, and ceding these lands over to their members and supporters, and gulling NGOs and funding agencies with grassroots discourses, paramilitaries still failed to create an environment in which mechanisms of accountability functioned on their own terms, and in which they became a solidly entrenched social and political force.

Conclusion

Authority and legitimacy exist on a continuum of meaning that is negotiated within historical contexts. The thinkers who engaged these concepts, from Montaigne to Machiavelli to Hobbes, lived and wrote about periods of history
in which their communities were, at one time or another, riven by strife. Therefore, all three writers sought to understand what distinguished power from governance, and, by doing so, sought an answer to the riddle of unending violence. Far from being three stooges of authoritarian regimes, they were, to varying degrees, humanist thinkers (the author of *The Prince*, a manual some think of as ‘despotism for dummies,’ was famously an early republican). However, all three also understood that justice must be pursued concretely; that if legitimacy is to be made in a corrupt world, than it must adapt itself to this world, and not to some formal vision of ideal constructs.

Latin America is a region very much governed by *ad hoc* methods; the states that govern the people have routinely broken their own laws in the pursuit of specific results. Violence, in some cases indiscriminate, has frequently been used as a tool by Latin American states to accomplish political goals. Legitimacy is not, from a Latin American cultural perspective (and I suspect this to be true in other regions) mutually exclusive with violence. From a Western/Northern perspective, we might take this to mean that legitimacy as a concept has eroded beyond reclamation. However, I think it is more accurate to conclude that legitimacy is more fluid, more easily snared by non-state actors in regions where violence is implicitly understood to be a political tool and at times needed to protect the weak.

That being said, what emerged from the scholarly research on criminal policing in Colombia and Brazil was that legitimacy is within reach for those groups that made a project of policing. However, consolidation and durability, those most pragmatic of the elements of legitimacy, was still very difficult to
capture for criminal police forces, because this ultimately would mean renouncing much of the violence used habitually to enforce rules. In sum, that institution which enforces rules with the most measured and persuasive narrative rationale for the use of violence would seem to have the best chance for long-term success at projecting and protecting its legitimacy. Therefore, that armed actor which is most successfully engaged with narratives of legitimacy (whether perverse or not) has the greatest chances for long-term success.
Chapter 3: Gangs, Narratives and Legitimacy

The Development of Gangster Narratives

A central subject of this research project is narratives. I argue that legitimacy narratives are created and mobilized by two community media groups in their interactions with armed actors, and that they employ these narratives to pressure gangs to act less violently. In the previous chapter I identified what legitimacy narratives were, and, to some extent how they were used in Brazil and Colombia, and how effective or important they may be. However, other, “non-legitimacy” narratives also play central roles in other aspects of life in the two neighborhoods of this study – several of which have a direct bearing on my thesis. The two key narratives I will address here are: 1) the “gangster narrative” as it is developed and mobilized in the broader society, and 2) “internal gangster narratives,” that is narratives that are constructed within gangs. It is necessary to tackle this subject for two main reasons for the purposes of this research project. First, it is important to show that gangs and gangsters are not narrated as outside the social order but rather as part of it, and therefore are likely to respond to the pressure of legitimacy narratives from those outside the gang. And second, it is crucial to explain why legitimacy and narratives are important within gangs even
when their central organizing principles appear to be survival and the control over scant material resources.

In this section, I will explore how the symbolic narrative of the “gangster” was developed, and how it came to occupy a central space in the imagination of certain publics. I will suggest that the iconic narrative of the gangster arose out of a need to understand and order the modern city and the citizen’s place within this new and overwhelming environment. This image of the gangster and the labeling of a “public enemy” are socially constructed through a collective mythmaking process marked in part by a classic “moral panic.” Both Colombian and Brazilian cities imagine themselves as both dangerous, in the sense of posing a moral hazard to its own inhabitants, and necessary, as the only feasible source of economic dynamism, and the narrative of the gangster is one way to resolve this contradiction. (Briceño-León, 2005; Coy, 2006; Koonings & Kruijt, 2007; C. O. Moser & McIlwaine, 2011; C. O. N. Moser & McIlwaine, 2000; Rotker & Goldman, 2002) More specifically, the gangster narrative illustrates methods of encoding and enplotting violence in socially acceptable ways. (Castillo, 2013; Newman, 1998) Furthermore, the gangster image helped define the blurry boundaries of changing mores and norms around sexuality, gender, race, consumption and social mobility. In Colombia and Brazil, as other researchers have noted, criminals and gangsters, as deviant groups, are not apart from “traditional society.” In fact, they reflect specific concerns, anxieties, and desires present in the larger society. (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002; Martha Knisely Huggins, 1991; C. O. Moser & McIlwaine, 2011)
During the 20th century, Colombia and Brazil shifted from a predominantly rural to a more urbanized society. The density and suddenness with which populations coalesced in cities created an apparent chaos in the new industrial society, and built up sociological pressures. (Keen & Haynes, 2012, pp. 301-307) The city was seen as a dangerous and corrupting place, marked by teeming immigrant hordes, faceless corporations, and excessive, sinful consumption. Economic change associated with industrialization concentrated cultural and political power in the cities, and the men and women who moved to the city to work sought to impose some order on this perceived chaos.

Urbanism came to be accepted as the norm in Colombia and Brazil by the 1970s, but this did not mean that all the social problems and moral boundaries that came with the new social structures had been successfully navigated. (T. P. d. R. Caldeira, 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006) On the contrary, the city was still seen to be a disorderly place, marked by lubricious sexuality, sudden violence, transgressive relationships, and rampant avarice and consumerism. (Franco & Franco, 2009; Low, 1996; Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996) These imagined qualities both attracted and repelled the men and women who lived there. The image of the gangster as criminal and delinquent was constructed out of attempts to come to grips with the new moral and social realities of city life, and reflected both the anxieties and excitement intertwined with beliefs about the metropolis. (Harvey, 2010; Harvey et al., 2013) This narrative construct has strong parallels earlier in North America - Ruth writes of Chicago in the 1920s that “the central project of
gang imagery was the exploration of a fascinating, troubling urban world.” (1996, p. 6)

Kappeler et. al (2000) process-traces how the definitions of crime and criminals develop collectively, and how these definitions can configure a social problem along the way through mythmaking. For Kappler, the function of crime myths is to order and classify our assumptions, at least in part by “othering” criminals. The villains in the stories that compose the fabric of crime myths are often unpopular groups who are visibly different. (Kappeler et al., 2000) In the case of the Chicago gangster of the early twentieth century cited above, this can be shown in the image’s close identification with the ethnically diverse immigrants that populated the new urban slums. (Ruth, 1996) Both the case of the gangster in North America, and that of the Brazilian favela and the Colombian barrio, the gangster’s face is that of the darker-skinned and impoverished malcontent. (Alcalá, 2006; Goldstein, 2003; Pedrazzini, 2013; Yablonsky, 1998)

Moral entrepreneurs or claims-makers in the US traditionally take the lead in identifying a crime problem (Killingbeck, 2001) as is the case with the rise of the gangster narrative in Brazil and Colombia. (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2010) Civic authorities and blended economic interests use various mouthpieces, such as media outlets and other writers (storytellers) to generate increased public concern which can lead to a constant, low-level moral panic, or occasionally, a state of hysteria. (Michelle Brown, 2007) These moral entrepreneurs in Brazil and Colombia make claims about the causes of the crime, specifically drug crime, opportunistically leveraging public fear in order to attribute crime to social problems in which they
have a vested interest in specific outcomes. (Robinson & Scherlen, 2014) In Brazil and Colombia, during the 1980s and 90s, different explanatory theories emerged that attempted to account for the new “crime wave” of gansterism. Some scholars of the time suggested that the criminality was inherited or innate, and used racist and classicist explanations for high crime rates or perceived threats of violence in the streets. (Fry, 2000; Hawkins, 1995; E. Moncada, 2010; Wade, 1995) Other claims-makers expounded the view that the new extremes of poverty and prosperity brought on a state of collective weakness, and that anybody with the opportunity might enthusiastically embrace criminality. A small but vocal minority of local writers maintained that crime was structural; that criminals were made by the society they inhabited. (T. P. d. R. Caldeira, 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006; Zaluar, 1995)

Claims-makers in the US used rhetorical techniques for myth creation (Newman, 1998) that functioned as a classification schema to enforce boundaries and make distinctions between different groups and to define behavior that was socially accepted. This was also true in Colombia and Brazil. (Michelle Brown, 2007; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2010) Youth delinquency often forms a key explanatory underpinning of gangster myth construction both in the US and in Colombia and Brazil. (Alcalá, 2006; Martha K Huggins & Mesquita, 1995; Villarreal & Silva, 2006) This explanatory underpinning plays out with metronomic frequency in popular culture. In the seminal gangster film *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931) the main character was depicted both as a member of an ethnic minority (Irish) and as being a ‘bad apple’ from his early youth. The
Colombian film *Rosario Tijeras* (*Maillé, 2005*), the second highest-grossing Colombian movie of all time, portrays its lead character, a violent gangster assassin, as corrupted since youth by rape and violence. In the most widely viewed Brazilian film ever, *Cidade de Deus* (*Meirelles, 2002*), the gangster L’il Zé is corrupt as a youth, and is seen all along as prone to predictably violent behavior patterns.

Powerful legends and myths about the gangster have helped consolidate Colombia and Brazil’s relationship to striking class inequities by situating the economic and social outcomes of neoliberalism and global capitalism in a meaningful narrative. The function of crime more broadly, according to Durkheim (1972), is to provide a picture of the normative boundaries of society. Late-20th Colombian and Brazilian cities present a complex problem because they contain both normatively “good” and “bad” images. The image of the gangster helped resolve these contradictions by defining the limits of acceptable behavior. (Alcalá, 2006; Martha K Huggins & Mesquita, 1995; Pedrazzini, 2013) A similar relationship between gangster narrative and citizen normative was negotiated in the US – as Ruth writes “boundaries between law-abiding and criminal, respectable and disreputable, male and female, moral and licentious, individual and group: all seemed at the same time blurry and incredibly important.” (1996, p. 8) Across these three societies, the gangster communicates to the public wherein lie important social boundaries and what rules must be followed.

Violence is inextricable with the image of early twentieth century gangsters in the US and in the past three decades of gangster mythmaking in Colombia and
Brazil. Violence is both the modus operandi of gangsters and is scripted as their ultimate fate. Newman (1998) shows that violence came to be contextualized in various scripts, or “encoded,” in order for it to be rationalized. Newman distinguishes between goal-oriented violence, instrumental violence, and explosive, emotional violence, which he calls expressive. In gangster narratives, gangsters resort to both, relying on violence to defeat their rivals and consolidate power, or erupting with violence in uncontrollable bursts.

Gangster violence has developed certain scripts and messages that serve as self-justification and also myths of self-reinforcing marginality. For example, Newman describes how a gangster protagonist in a myth might enter a hall full of his foes to wreak vengeance when he knows it means certain death. (1998) This same narrative is closely followed in other contexts. Alcalá (2006) describes how a Colombian gangster entrenched in a narrative of gangsterism both follows a gangster “ethical” code of retributive violence, but also inevitably succumbs to deeper, more emotional forces that compel him to act violently, echoing a gangster myth that occurs across other cultural contexts. In Rio de Janeiro, gangsters can be seen to follow the same type coded mythologies, according to gang scholarship. The same processes of narrative construction play out within the spaces of Brazilian and Colombian gangs.

With the rise of consumer culture, and its intense manifestations in Latin America, it became important for Colombians and Brazilians to consume; yet certain forms of consumption retained shades of the taboo. (Graham & Pettinato, 2001; Shipman, 2004) The Baile Funk gangster, who exemplifies reckless
conspicuous consumption, can show the public the pleasures of libertine consumerism, yet the same image can be mobilized to show how “excessive” consumption is a dangerous overreach for those from a specific class/racial background. (Sneed, 2008) The perils of “cocaine consumerism” have been well defined in Colombian culture for decades. (Lee, 1991) This same ordering schema appears in narratives about prominent US gangsters, an epochal ebb and flow of transgressive pleasure and moral comeuppance reminiscent of Renaissance morality plays such as Marlowe’s take on “Faust.” (Ruth, 1996) In other words, the increased availability of wealth that makes up such an important part of fantasies about the underworld does not reflect true social mobility. Although gangsters are often thought of as members of indigent family groups who rise to stratospheric heights of wealth and status, by rising through criminal means, these imaginary gangsters almost always received their comeuppance by ending up dead. Thus, the somewhat contradictory message is propagated in crime myths that money and power are achievable through gangsterism, but that they are ultimately illusory and fleeting, and the gangster will inevitable return to his true place in an immutable social hierarchy, most likely by way of violent death. (Goldstein, 2003; Pedrazzini, 2013; Villarreal & Silva, 2006)

The moral sanction element of gangster narratives reappear in terms of sexuality - greater sexual lubriciousness is woven into gangster iconography. The ‘loose’ gangster molls in their slinky dresses who were often abused by the gangster boyfriends enforced the notion that women risked disaster when they pursued sexual gratification (Ruth, 1996, p. 110) in early 20th century American
depictions of gangsters. In Colombian and Brazilian gangster films that take place in marginalized neighborhoods, vulnerable women are depicted as preyed upon and manipulated by unscrupulous male criminals as a matter of course, but also eroticized as sites of legitimized sexual violence. (Sá, 2013; Shuru, 2005) When women who are perceived to be members of gangs are policed, they are subjected to the control of “a moralistic humanitarian-rescue agenda promoted by evangelical populists and police groups.” (P. Amar, 2009, p. 515) Gender roles are thus maintained in gangster fictions and realities, as women’s independence and sexual aggressiveness is curbed and colonized by male power, particularly in marginalized neighborhoods. (Wilding, 2010)

**Gangs and Legitimacy Narratives**

As these dense links between “traditional” society and the images of the underworld show, the two social worlds cannot be conveniently separated. In fact, as Jankowski’s work on gangs and American urban society shows, the actual social structures of gangs have much in common with the larger society. (1991) Jankowski shows how there is both functionality and an organizational rationality in gangs that resemble profit-seeking corporate entities. He makes explicit his comparison by listing the entrepreneurial qualities that gang members share with the business world, which includes competitiveness, the profit motive, status-seeking, risk assessment and long-term planning and execution. (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991, p. 102)
Similarly, Arias (2004) describes how gangs in Rio have become part of the existing systems of government by coalescing around parallel state structures. Arias (2013) further offers a systematic comparative analysis of a police-connected protection racket and a drug gang in Rio de Janeiro that shows how these two groups maintain strong ties with the state officials, military personnel, and property and business owners in order to protect their membership and resources. Goldstein (2003), also writing of Rio, shows that the state and its forces have become blurred with bandits and drug gangs in the favelas, as the gangs mete out justice and take over other state functions and the police commit robbery and murder, as well as sell drugs. In this case, the image of the gangster blurs with those of other potentially violent oppressors, and within the marginalized neighborhood, the image of the gangster is not deployed in the service of a straightforward morality tale in which there is clear ‘bad guy,’ but instead to describe and outline the perils of everyday life. In fact, there are several areas of overlap between the narratives about and the practices of local/national gangs, and the actions of and stories about corrupt state officials, violent security services, and non-criminal businessmen in the two countries in this case study. The prevalence of these narratives and their centrality in ‘national conversations’ leads to the question as to whether gangs and gang narratives are only caused by deviance, and occur within marginalized communities, or if they are also caused by ‘normal’ socio-structural arrangements.

What are the important overlaps between local/national gangs, state officials, and civilian businessmen? First, in Brazil and Colombia (and elsewhere), violence is routinely used to protect the investments, project the ideology, and
enforce the authority of organized crime groups and gangs, and to perform the same function for non-criminal groups, especially when other methods fail. (Whitehead et al., 2010) Second, many citizens of marginalized communities see local/national gangs and organized crime groups as a more effective avenue to higher social status and to acquisition of capital rather than ‘legitimate’ means – yet the fundamental goals across the means remain the same. (Goldstein, 2003; Pedrazzini, 2013; Villarreal & Silva, 2006) And third, local/national gangs and organized crime groups are characterized by a male-dominated, entrepreneurial and profiteering culture also associated in part with the ‘legitimate’ business world. (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Yablonsky, 1998) On the other hand, civilian businessmen who use criminal tactics or a political corruption network have generally moved further along the continuum of capitalist sophistication and organization than have gangs, partly in order to reduce risks. Also, an organized crime network associated with business groups or states tends to be more flexible and bureaucratized than a gang, more persistent over time, and more easily able to adjust to the loss of important individuals. (Chambliss, Michalowski, & Kramer, 2010; Chevigny, 2003; Kauzlarich, Mullins, & Matthews, 2003)

Although invoking organized crime networks in business and government and gangs summon differing symbolic imagery, several interesting parallels do stand out. For example, as with “mainstream” crime networks, violent acts committed by gangs have a clear function when undertaken on behalf of the organization. As Jankowski points out, despite an increase in violent offences associated with gang presence within a neighborhood, “much of the violence
attributable to gangs is, in fact, committed by members of gangs acting as
individuals rather than as agents of the organization.” (1991, p. 141) L’il Zé, the
violent gangster leader in the Brazilian film Cidade de Deus (Meirelles, 2002)
utilizes instrumental violence to consolidate his gang’s power and drug-trafficking
business, but also expressively and compulsively – portrayed within the narrative
as pathologically violent. Rosario, the lead character in the Colombian film
Rosario Tijeras (Maillé, 2005), is portrayed much the same way.

Violence committed on behalf of an organized state or civilian crime
network is also instrumental in its goals. The functions of violence for organized
crime for Paoli – maintenance of internal discipline; enforcement of market
conditions; and control of competition (2002) – mirror the functions outlined by
Jankowski (1991, pp. 160-177) for which gangs as organizations employ violence.
Violence is not the preferred method of disciplinary power utilized by state
organized crime networks, which prefer instead to depend on bribery or blackmail
or a combination of both. (Chambliss et al., 2010) According to Jankowski (1991),
this is also the case with gangs, whose members mostly prefer to avoid violence
and use it only when no other method of control will be as effective. Status, and its
corollary of profit, is another important motivator for individuals to join both gangs
and organized crime networks or legitimate business enterprises. The Mexican
narcotrafficante Pablo Acosta, according to a fascinating character study by
journalist Terrence Poppa, once an impoverished itinerant Mexican laborer,
entered a highly volatile, extremely risky, and brutally violent marketplace, and
was able to consolidate power as a drug lord in control of a gang, “in order to revel in his fame as padrino.” (1998, p. 113)

Jankowski makes explicit the shared elements in the cultures of the world of business and government and the world of urban gangs, citing competitiveness, the profit motive, status-seeking, risk-assessment and long-term planning and execution as common values. (1991, p. 102) Unfortunately, violence often accompanies competition among gangs, because their earnings are intertwined with the illegal drug trade and justiciable remedies are unavailable. (Zaitch, 2002) Chambliss connects the task environments of organized crime and state governments by pointing out that both perform a function as mediating technologies with the broader society. (Chambliss et al., 2010) Moncada (2013, p. 18) argues that Colombian chamber of commerce groups at the local level “seek[s] to shape policy responses to urban violence in ways that not only favor its economic interests but also conserve its political power.” That is to say, both types of organization try to protect their stakeholders (including leadership within the organization itself) from the uncertainties of the modern polity. Violence is used in gangs, by state governments, and by business groups as a way of regulating risks – and across the groups the goals remain the same. (Whitehead et al., 2010) Furthermore, both types of organizations are often dominated by men and characterized by a fraternity-style in-crowd of elite leadership. (Whitehead et al., 2010)

Although gangs and mainstream organized crime groups share a methodology of violence, status-seeking, and similar cultures to the corporate
world, they do differ in important respects. Organized crime groups that are present in state structures tend to penetrate legitimate institutions to a greater extent, and to diversify their resources and alliances more effectively. (Chambliss et al., 2010; G. O'donnell, 1998; Whitehead et al., 2010) Organized state crime groups for Chambliss (2010) are excellent at creating boundary-spanning components, such as accountants or lawyers that help them blur their boundaries with ‘legitimate’ business. Corrupt Latin American politicians are viewed as having successfully co-opted the most august financial institutions in their country into a complicit relationship with their perpetuation of fraud. (Canache & Allison, 2005)

In the past, gangs in Brazil and Colombia (and elsewhere) have so interpenetrated the ‘legitimate’ establishment of media, law enforcement and politics, that the gangs and political officials became virtually inseparable for many. (E. D. Arias, 2006; Lee, 1991; Rodgers & Muggah, 2009) Although many gangs have developed connections with politicians and sometimes manage to manipulate the media for their own ends most only sporadically achieve that degree of sophistication. (Skaperdas, 2001) The drug gangs in Rio’s favelas and the paramilitaries in Colombia’s barrios, which have moved further along the continuum of sophistication than many of their US counterparts do, form intricate networks of collusion with politicians, police, and other arms of the state and even in some cases may briefly take over some roles of the state such as security provider, as I have shown above. These drug gangs sometimes seem to have achieved a quasi-institutional status that resembles organized civilian crime or a
political corruption network, and this in turn brings them into contact with established political goods such as legitimacy.

Another important difference between gangs and organized crime in state and business is organizational structure. Although gangs have different types of leadership regimes, varying from horizontal to vertical, they are almost always hierarchical, and characterized by identifiable leadership cadres headed by charismatic leaders. (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 1997) In contrast, for Paoli (2002) and Chambliss (2010), in organized crime networks that are dispersed into the broader society and housed in legitimate institutions, there tends to be no individual who controls all the various levels and kinds of criminal activity. However, other scholars have argued that contemporary transnational gangs in Colombia and Brazil behave exactly in this fashion – as dispersed networks characterized by a fluid social system where flexible exchange networks expand and retract according to market opportunities and regulatory constraints. (Enrique Desmond Arias, 2006; Kenney, 2007) Also, both gangs and organized crime networks often piggyback on existing networks of “legitimate” society, utilizing connections between police, politicians, and businessmen to distribute money. (Enrique Desmond Arias, 2013; Rodgers & Muggah, 2009) Because of this level of diffusion, gangs can be like criminal networks – not dependent on the leadership of any one person, and thus more difficult to dismantle.21

As Durkheim (Durkheim, 1982) famously demonstrated, crime and deviance are functional to society at large, but what is a specific example of this

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21 For how this network diffusion is playing out among the most sophisticated of the Mexican cartels, see (Thompson & Archibold, 2014)
functionality that is broadly relevant to this discussion? The war on drugs in the US and Latin America is a multi-billion dollar industry and provides multiple opportunities for bureaucratic creep and unintended consequences. (Peceny & Durnan, 2006) This war is in part sustained by the propagation of gangster narratives and crime myths about the dangers of drugs, which bolster law enforcement claims for expansion. (P. E. Amar, 2003) Here we can see directly how gangs and organized crime are caused by ‘normal’ aspects of the social structure than rather than by deviance, as illegalization gives rise to massive criminal networks of all types to distribute and profit from these products. (Block, Chambliss, & Block, 1981) An oft-cited example along these lines would be the Volstead Act, which created ideal conditions for crime in the US. Other researchers have theoretically explored the possibility of mobilizing legitimacy across civilian and criminal networks. (Morselli & Giguere, 2006) But this research project identifies two specific cases in which crime has evolved to adapt to a corresponding devolution, corruption and adoption of violence by state and business groups. In other words, drug gangs in these communities developed their peculiar durability and their sensitivity to legitimacy narratives because of broad, structural developments within states and among other non-criminal groups that left legitimacy “up for grabs.”

Internal Gang Narratives
But what of gangs themselves? How do gang members conceive of themselves and shape their own social roles? What role do narratives and communication play within the hothouse environment of the close-knit-criminal gang? Here we run into the problem of scarcity – few scholarly works have been written on this subject, because of the inherent challenges of safety and feasibility in terms of gathering research. Nevertheless, it is possible to chart a coherent path through the literature that produces a clearer picture of how myth-making and narrative construction functions within the gang itself. This is vitally important to this research project because the gang is making the determination upon which my core argument is based. In other words, it is the gang which decides whether or not to respond to the legitimacy narrative that is leveraged or mobilized by the community media group – and, whether to mitigate their acts of violence against their host community or not. In order to learn why or why not this may be so, we must first learn how gangs look from within.

Frederic Thrasher (1963) pioneered the first major study of urban gangs produced in a systematic, sociological fashion in a book which first appeared almost a hundred years ago, in 1927. His subject area was the South Side of Chicago, and what he lost in depth and thick description he made up for in breadth, by including over thirteen hundred gangs in his study. Thrasher used a form of participant-observation field research that drew upon data gathered from interviews with gang members. His causation theories on gangs are mostly environmental, even deterministic in the sense that he believed gangs were driven and compelled
to organize as they did because of the poverty, hardship and especially the familial disintegration within the slums they inhabited.

For Thrasher, gangs were made up of young men who possessed “esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness and attachment to a local territory.” (1963, p. 57) Much of gang activity, according to Thrasher, is centered on communicating – “chewing the rag” (1963, p. 62) – and it is unfortunate that Thrasher made no systematic attempts to specifically study gang narratives. However, it is clear from his work that recounting the adventures of petty crime and the day’s events are very persistent types of gang narratives. In fact, Thrasher makes the claim that narration and storytelling is actually one of the main rationales for the very existence of gangs, along with theft, and that it acts as a kind of foundational activity in the evolution of the gang. “Not only the main but apparently the sole bond that held these boys together has been the recounting and committing of delinquencies.” (1963, p. 60)

Thrasher also notes the fact that gang narratives are often very specifically tailored to the experiences and context of the gang, and as such operate like a code. “The gang may develop the features of a secret society – secrecy, initiation, ritual, passwords…because these devices perform a real function in its life…” (1963, p. 68) These rituals of secret communication help to give the gang status and prestige within the community, as well as to enable the gang to carry out their activities without being discovered. One of the examples from Thrasher’s field research that he uses to illustrate his point about secret gang communication is an illegal fraternity that used elaborate and rough initiation rituals to increase gang solidarity.
It is clear that Thrasher’s gangs use secrecy itself as a narrative; secrecy is a sign that indicates and enforces gang power, prestige and mystique.

Examples of gang narration that have echoes in the activities of the modern gangs in this study can be clearly identified in Thrasher’s text: “residents in the vicinity south of the stockyards were startled one morning by a number of placards bearing the inscription ‘The Murderers, 10,000 strong, 48th & Ada.’ The placards brought attention to a gang of thirty Polish boys…” (1963, p. 63) This is an example of the gang’s communication patterns with the outsiders, the placards, like graffiti tags, delineate gang territory, announce their presence, state that they are entrenched in the neighborhood, and even express ideology. In the same fashion, the Brazilian gang in this study uses graffiti [see below] as a symbolic set of signs employed (Rodgers, 1999) and the Colombian paramilitary group uses graffiti and also pamphleteering in order to spread fear and express ideology.

In Thrasher’s study of gang leadership and social hierarchy, intercommunication through narratives is seen as primary: “the gang forms and the leader emerges as the result of this interaction.” (1963, p. 351) According to Thrasher’s analysis, leadership emerges organically through the dynamics that happens mostly in narrative interaction with gang members – “the gang leader holds his prestige because he presents the boys with patterns of behavior that are agreeable to them.” (1963, p. 357) In sum, Thrasher demonstrates that narratives within the gang are the fabric out of which the gang is woven, as gangs are formed around the exchange of stories and their attendant social dynamics, and leaders.
arise and consolidate power through the communicative interaction necessary to presenting and expressing narratives.

We can identify some of the characteristics and purposes of gang narratives in later gang research as well. Yablonsky (1970) distinguished among three basic gang types: the social gang, the delinquent gang, and the violent gang and he focused on the differences between these types of gangs as opposed to their similarities. Yablonsky focused his research on the violent gang (which describes both gangs in this study), and he argued that this type of gang forms because of alienation and disaffection from the larger society. (1970, p. 8) For Yablonsky, violent gang members coalesce into groups because they fail to establish successful social and communicative contact with the world outside their own experience, and in this he finds parallels with what he terms “the hippie movement.” “Violent gang members are almost paranoid in their distrust of adults and authority figures…like classic paranoid personalities, many rebellious youths relate to adults and authority in a manner that produces “establishment” behavior…” (1970, p. 12)

The violent gang is formed, in Yablonsky’s view, at least in part because of a communication breakdown with those outside the gang. Violence becomes the mode of communication by which gang members establish their narrative, what Yablonsky describes as “the functional nature of ‘usefulness’ of gang violence for the success-motivated, sociopathic youth who is blocked or incapable of utilizing normal social channels…” (1970, p. 245) Violent gang members use violence to communicate to each other that they belong within the social group, and this violence-as-communication is a part of a constructed narrative of status. “Gang
boys can mutually expand the degree of their shared and highly valued success by reinforcing each other’s fantasies of power…little if anything is required except an occasional act of violence to support the desired success image.” (1970, p. 245) In this we can see an extension of Thrasher’s earlier point about recounting the events or crimes of the day as part of community and narrative-building among gang membership.

Rituals of violence become part of the narratives of initiation for some of the violent gangs which Yablonsky studies, and he also points out how some more peripheral members of gangs are pressured into acts of violence through the narrative construction of “belonging.” (1970, p. 256) Gang members utilize violence as a narrative act to express their connections to others in the gang, their status as a “big shot” among the membership, and as way to bolster and build their prestige among gang members. Yablonsky theorizes that this usage of violence as an element of narrative stems from the failure of the gang members to belong to any other, more selective group within the social world, and Yablonsky goes on to argue that gang members are “sociopathic” losers whose skill-sets and ability to convey a story about themselves and their group are so retrograde and limited that violence is their only recourse to constructing a compelling narrative. While this might seem an unsophisticated argument, it is nonetheless still commonly used to explain gang violence in the broader culture as I show above, and therefore is relevant to debates about gangs and violence.

Similarly to Thrasher, we can identify in Yablonsky the key value of communication and narrative construction in establishing leadership roles within
gangs. Here Yablonsky quotes Moreno, a fellow sociologist, in describing how hierarchical leadership is formed within the violent gang: “the power index of the leader is, however, also dependent upon the psychological communication networks to which his referents belong and the position which the networks themselves have within the entire collective…” (1970, p. 257) In Yablonsky’s text, the power index is the exercise of violence, the direct expression of belonging to a violent gang. The leader takes on the role of anti-hero in this narrative, in which he is both brutal and courageous, and his ability and legitimacy as leader of the gang depends directly upon his ability to communicate persuasively that this role is natural. Like Thrasher’s gang leader, Yablonsky’s must persuade through narration that he is the best leader in terms of the ethos of the gang.

Yablonsky makes the excellent point that the violent gang leader’s role is not without precedent in popular myths of violence: “He assumes a popular role socially supported, and his violent behavior is often aggrandized rather than stigmatized…” (1970, p. 259) In this sense, the gang leader draws upon images of and stories about violent outlaws to communicate his preeminence among the gang’s membership. Media representations also serve to enforce the leader’s romanticized role, according to Yablonsky. (1970, p. 259) Here we can identify how communication flows between those outside and within the gang, and how gangs and their leaders utilize myths and narratives to sustain their prestige and express the legitimacy of their actions. It is important to note that the gang is not a hermetic unit, but that gang members draw upon a popular mythos to communicate
their front stage roles to one another, and that their back stage goal of “belonging” is achieved through a narrative process of mutual reinforcement.

Elliot Liebow’s book *Talley’s Corner* (2003) does not explicitly describe its subject as gangs, however it does have several key nodes of correspondence with the subject of this research project - namely the structure and purpose of narrative construction in excluded, outsider, criminal groups or sub-cultures such as in gangs are among marginalized communities. Liebow studied a group of impoverished African-American men in a ghetto environment in Washington, D.C. His purpose, at least in part, was to understand the factors that kept human development indicators (such as employment, stable marriages, education levels) so persistently low for this group of people. What he discovered was in direct opposition to some of the findings (or assumptions) of Yablonsky on violent gangs.

In contrast to Yablonsky, who posited that members of violent gangs became part of a violent subculture because they were rejected or failed at belonging to any ‘legitimate’ societal group, Liebow (2003) argues that socio-economic structures in fact dictate that many urban African-American men will inevitably fail to gather wealth, power or prestige by the standards of US society. From Liebow’s observations, this form of structural violence ensures that personal resources are then put into building communication networks and mobilizing narratives instead of being “invested in self-improvement, career and job development, family and community activities, religious and cultural pursuits, or even in broad, impersonal social and political issues…” (2003, p. 161) For Liebow then, like Thrasher and Yablonsky, the narration of a “personal community” (2003,
made up of those in a similar socio-economic strata, is the primary activity of the excluded group he studied.

This focus on the development of a communication network and the accompanying facility of transmission has made skilled narrators out of many of the figures Liebow studies, despite their low levels of education: “An excellent storyteller, Sea Cat holds his audience as much by his performance as by the context of what he has to say. If he reports that ‘an old man was walking down the street…’ he becomes, for that moment, an old man walking down the street.” (2003, p. 25) As Liebow’s subjects live around the corner store, and spend hours of every day in conversation with one another, communicating becomes the primary activity of the neighborhood men, and so a particular narrative style of expression (an argot) develops organically, cementing the shared experiences of the men. Furthermore, in the absence of the possibility of developing a fulfilling professional life, and with the almost certain prospect of continued economic marginalization, friendships and relationships bind Liebow’s “streetcorner men” together in a web of quasi-kinship ties. “So important a part of daily life are these relationships that it seems like no life at all without them.” (2003, p. 164)

Yet paradoxically, these relationships and their corollaries, the narratives, are extremely unstable, and in the context of social dynamics, quite fragile. Liebow argues persuasively that the material pressures on this ghettoized communities are so intense that it forces individuals to act out of self-interest in situations even where friendships could be harmed. “But friendship does not often stand up well to the stress of crisis or conflict of interest, when demands tend to be heaviest and
most insistent. Everyone knows this.” (2003, p. 180) In this we can see another echo of this project in Liebow, in which the so-called ‘brotherhood’ of a gang, narrated as a powerful network of loyal family members, is actually fragile and unstable and comes apart under stress. (Pedrazzini, 2013) Also, we can identify in Liebow’s study another correspondence with gangs in regards to narratives, because gang members described in Thrasher and Yablonsky, and the marginalized black men of Liebow’s work, develop these narratives with their peers in part because of the low self-esteem they have as a result of their marginalization.

**Gang Narratives and Organization**

Jankowski (1991) takes up the subject of social hierarchy and dynamics within gangs in a highly detailed analysis that includes almost every aspect of gang structure and interaction in the lives of gang members. Jankowski conceptualizes the gangs he studies as formal groups, whose organizational structures are well-established and enduring, whose hierarchies are characterized by specific roles, and whose activities include established business procedures that function reasonably well for the accrual of wealth. For Jankowski, gangs seem to function in a similar fashion to most other well-established groups, the gangs he studied could be said to have a bureaucratic rationality.

In keeping with these observations, Jankowski noted that gangs have a deep and enduring connection to their neighborhoods, a “local patriotism” (1991, p. 56), a narrative that links gang and community groups in a complex set of social
dynamics. Gangs, to some degree, perform functions for the community, in that they can provide protection from businesses that seek to take advantage, as well as providing some rudimentary political goods like security from random crime. (G. A. Jones & Rodgers, 2009; Leeds, 1996; Willis, 2009) The gangs are, as in Thrasher’s analysis (1963), highly linked to a territory, and are prepared to use violence to defend their territory from the infringement of other gangs. In turn, the community members have complex relationships with the gang; they are willing to protect the gangs from the police, and allow the gang members to melt into the community so that they cannot be isolated by law enforcement, but if violence escalates, or other problems become too evident, they will begin to work with the police in order to dismantle the gang. (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991, pp. 202-206) In other words, community loyalty is contingent on gangs acting “legitimately” across Jankowski’s case studies.

In keeping with his comparison of gangs with other, more ‘legitimate’ groups such as governments and businesses, Jankowski delves into personality studies of gang members. He theorizes that gang behavior in part stems from the “defiant-individualism” of gang members, which is a trait characterized by strong survival instincts, competitive behavior, wariness and mistrust, and also self-reliance. (1991, pp. 28-34) In these characteristics he finds strong parallels with entrepreneurs and other avatars of the business world. However, this also means that Jankowski agrees with Liebow (2003) in that the actual social bonds that exist between marginalized and criminal groups are weak, and in Jankowski’s study of gangs, he states that members are aware that a myth or narrative is being used to
reinforce group cohesion. “They [gang members] realized that members did not really look on one another as brothers, at least not with the intensity that the brotherhood ideology intended, but that the ideology nonetheless acted as a kind of bonding agent” (1991, p. 87) Within Jankowski’s gangs, there is a constant dynamic tension – gangs stay together and form only because this is the best way to corral the scant wealth that exists within ghettos and other deprived socio-economic communities, but also because of the power of the story of being an outsider. Simultaneously, in order to persist, gangs must overcome the innate tension brought about in their organizations by the personalities of their membership.

The method through which this tension is most often resolved is through leadership, which provides common goals and a framework within which to achieve these goals. Again, when Jankowski describes the leadership structures and social hierarchies of gangs, they sound remarkably similar to types of leadership in other organizations; he distinguishes between influential, or charismatic, styles of leadership, as well as vertical and horizontal types of leadership. “The horizontal/commission model is one which allows for democracy because each of the component parts has roughly equal power. This is very similar to the balance of power in the American political system.” (1991, p. 90) Once again, as in Thrasher (1963) and Yablonsky (Haskell & Yablonsky, 1970), leadership is clearly linked to the powerful communicative skills associated with constructing an identity narrative, and tends to be organized around a communication network built and maintained by the leader or the leadership cadre. “Leaders, however, were nearly
always those who possessed a number of rather sophisticated political skills…the talent to plan and successfully complete creative business ventures, the ability to build coalitions, and the capacity to mobilize political resources over time” (1991, p. 91)

Jankowski’s analysis differs in one important respect from the others above, despite strong similarities in terms of the subject matter of this research project. For Jankowski (1991), the purpose of gang formation, and thus the service which legitimacy narratives are pressed into, is explicitly based around the accumulation of wealth, even more so than power and status. Differing strongly from Yablonsky (1970) and Thrasher (1963) in this respect, but displaying areas of overlap with Liebow (2003), Jankowski’s (1991) theory of gang formation and behavior is driven primarily by the dynamics of inequality. Given the absolute destitution of many gang neighborhoods, which Liebow (2003) also described, the formation of a gang is for Jankowski an entirely rational choice – an appropriate response to the socio-structural conditions to which potential gang members must adapt. It may be true that the changes of emphasis around gang formation is connected to changing economic conditions and a rise in inequality within the urban environment that occurred between 1970 and 1991 in the US. What is clear is that the gangs in the neighborhoods in this study are closer to Jankowski’s (1991) view of an organization arising in a context of chronic neglect, social exclusion, and urban decay than to that of earlier researchers.

The book *The Cocaine Kids* (2013) by Terry Williams, can be read as an appendix of sorts to Jankowski (1991). Although Williams’ book is smaller in
scope, and describes itself as ethnography of a particular gang, it deals directly and in detail with the primary resource-gathering activity (which Jankowski determined was the main purpose of gang formation) of a modern urban gang – the production, sale and distribution of illegal drugs. (T. Williams, 2013) Williams’ gang members are small-scale businessmen, dealing with market fluctuations, personnel problems, supply disruptions and the myriad difficulties involved in distributing a product that is illegal. “Most dealers start out in lowly positions, then move up through hard work, skill, intelligence and a little luck. A kid who can routinely handle money, control personal use of cocaine, deal with buyers, and control a weapon, may make it out of the street and into the elite world of the super dealer.” (2013, p. 45)

A large part of operating a drug gang is being capable of managing personnel, who for various socio-cultural reasons, and because of high rates of excessive substance abuse, can be extremely erratic. Williams’ main informant, the youthful leader of the gang named Max, is hard-pressed to balance the social dynamics of the gang, and to stay in good graces with both his customers and his suppliers. Max requires a complex communications network of beepers and pay phones, a base office and corner street dealers on his payroll in order to have cocaine available “three hundred sixty-five days a year.” (2013, p. 31) Max and other leaders must prove themselves as a reliable credit risk to suppliers (much of the cocaine trade is operated on a consignment basis, which works well because demand never falls off much), and their connections to these suppliers are among their most valuable assets as leaders. Yet the leader’s performance to the suppliers
can depend on the performance of their street dealers. Williams illustrates this well by detailing Max’s problems and showing the reader that gang activity can be extremely arduous: “Max is tired. Chillie is late paying for some cocaine, and Max needs the money to pay his supplier. Suzanne is still angry at Chillie, and Max is wondering if he should keep Jake on the crew…” (2013, p. 60) In providing a glimpse into the quotidian activities of an illegal gang, Williams is able to show how the business relies upon legitimacy narratives in order to function in a community, both in terms of non-gang members accepting the role of the gang and in terms of the maintenance of gang ties.

In this view, apart from the business difficulties in cocaine dealing, there are a host of other issues at stake in order to maintain a position within the gang hierarchy: “For the teen dealer, staying on top requires handling often unstable personal relationships, dealing with a constant stream of people of different ages, personalities, gender and ethnicity…after contending with all these pressures, he is expected to…dispense large quantities of free cocaine.” (T. Williams, 2013, pp. 104-105) For Max and the other “cocaine kids,” legitimacy is demonstrated by distributing largesse in the form of partying and profligately spending the very wealth that they must strive so hard to accumulate. In order for the leader to be able to maintain his (in Williams’ formulation, the leader of a Dominican gang would not likely be a woman) position within the dynamics of the gang, he must be seen to be wealthy and generous. Thus, the leadership position is highly precarious – one slip can lead to the downfall of the gang, its leader and his legitimacy.
Language and communication skills figure strongly in Williams’ study, particularly in the sense that it can be a source of self-esteem and to narrate a viable identity within the culture of the gang neighborhood. “The more creative rappers [speakers], those who maintain poise and verbal control, gain more social status among their peers” (2013, p. 91) Language skills honed by the rapid-fire world of street dealing, and the struggle to stay on top of many disparate situations, are put to use in the world of interpersonal and political relations. Some dealers are described as particularly adroit: “Masterrap is a creative inventor of language and truly a master communicator. To him, slang is an event, like a dance step, a movement, a gestural display…” (2013, p. 87) In Williams’ book we can see the burgeoning importance of legitimacy narratives, and the socio-economic pressures that pushed these narratives into prominence.

Narrative construction and the language skills that are its prerequisite are a primary attribute for success and survival in excluded, outsider, or criminal communities and gangs. Whether narratives are mobilized to bolster self-esteem, to build the gangs that later help to generate resources, to establish and consolidate leadership, or even as violence to delineate territory and generate a sense of legitimacy, they are one of the main tools available to achieve power and access to resources in the urban periphery. Communication is the raw material out of which resources can be spun, legitimacy narratives are the foundation upon which gangs must rest, and their successful deployment is the key to wealth, power and prestige in territories defined in part by the scarcity of their resources.
The Content of Gang Narratives

Although the scholarship above illustrates the centrality of narratives for gangs in terms of social practice, it remains a challenging proposition to isolate key components of this narrative content across different cultural contexts. However, there is some research that point to some conclusions that fit within the hypothesis advanced by this research project. In Monica Brown’s sweeping ethnography of gang narratives (2002), she explicitly draws connections between narratives of nation and narratives constructed and maintained within gangs. Brown introduces the category of the “delinquent citizen” which she describes as a narrative construction used by gang members who have been excluded from citizenship in the national discourse: “urban gang members are asserting a citizenship in a counternation, one that fulfills fundamental needs not accorded by the state, one that provides a sense of economic security (most often through delinquent behavior), one that establishes its own moral and juridical authority with a history tied to territory, and one that provides a sense of communal identity, belonging.” (2002, p. xxiii) For Brown, the narratives composed by the gang members she interviews and studies follow the script of national myth. Gangs employ the signifying structure of the “national symbolic” in order to define themselves as a group of connected individuals, and their cohesion depends upon how effectively they manage to mobilize these symbols.

One of the most common narrative constructs Brown (2002) finds in the mythopoeia of gangs is that of the pure, prelapsarian territory of the “people,”
usually existing in an imaginary past, a territory co-extensive with group unity. This reference to a prior state of grace helps to explain the fallen, corrupted nature of the present and presents the gang’s own morally questionable actions (such as constant recourse to violence) as necessary to deal with the spoiled modern world. Again, there is a clear parallel here with narratives of nation. Brown writes: “The complex infrastructure of certain contemporary gangs (including flags, signs, language systems, territorial loyalties, shared mythologies, “wars,” military-style ranking of soldiers, and so on) relies on a carefully articulated sense of a separate and empowered “national” identity as well as certain masculinist and homosocial behaviors. These “counter-nations” simultaneously mirror and expose some of the most oppressive facets of the dominant culture’s construction of nation…” (2002, p. xvii) According to Brown then, we can perceive distorted, perverse images of national symbols within gang narratives; symbols that have been repurposed to serve in the highly competitive and resource-scarce task environments of marginalized communities.

Brown differentiates between the concept of a prelapsarian past and that of the “homeland” – another narrative structure common to both gang and national identities. This homeland is necessarily connected to a belief in the necessity of organized violence, because it is defined as that which is worth killing and dying for. (2002, p. xxvii) In this way, the use of violence as necessary and morally justified is intertwined into the fabric of the gang’s identity. This homeland must be protected at all costs by the gang from the incursions of a perverse Other (which could be a rival gang, ethnicity or even state officials), and in this violent
imperative we can identify one of the ways in which gangs adopt national narratives for their own ends. Brown asserts that most gang members are themselves “othered” by a dominant national discourse that casts them as inferior, dangerous, and subnormal, and that this “othering” occurs because of the national need to preserve a central cohesion that is defined by exclusion. She writes: “the anxiety produced by the heterogeneous reality of the inner city must be constantly displaced, the liminal inhabitants of “this irredeemably plural modern space” destroyed, deported, or at least locked away.” (2002, p. xxvi) In other words, gang members respond to their characterization as the violently marginalized by violently marginalizing others.

A third component of the content of gang narratives isolated by Brown is a cultural chauvinism or cultural nationalism that is mobilized “as a means of organized resistance, through the recognition of a shared social, historical and geographic reality.” (2002, p. xxvii) It is in this category that the narratives of legitimacy discussed in this research project most properly belong. In both neighborhoods in this study, an expression of resistance to neglect and abuse by state governments is common to both gang and non-gang members. In these communities, a common cultural heritage is posited as connecting these oppressed subjects – by virtue of being oppressed outcasts they are united.

The scholar James Holston (Holston, 2008, 2009) has described how gangs in Brazil employ “rights talk” to legitimate their violent and illegal activities, and he has explained how the usage of citizenship discourses by illegal groups is actually connected to the way in which citizenship was originally constructed in
Brazilian history. He writes: “it has become standard practice to use the language of democracy to explain their [gangs’] murderous violence…this slippage between the legal and the illegal is a deeply paradoxical development for political democracy…the productions of the illegal and the legal have long been reciprocating processes in Brazil, a symbiosis key to the perpetuation of the dominant regime of citizenship.” (2009, p. 11)

Holston argues that the emergence of gangs using citizenship and rights talk to defend themselves from what they identify as unfair characterizations, prejudicial treatment, and state abuse is a natural outgrowth of a larger “consolidation of democratic measure…that destabilizes, challenges, and unevenly replaces an older public sphere of citizenship grounded in very different values and justifications.” (2009, p. 11) In other words, in communities like the ones studied here, it is possible to discern the emergence of a powerful concern with rights and legitimacy among public and groups not strongly connected to the nation. Other groups are mobilizing legitimacy narratives that were once the exclusive domain of nation-states and employing them for their own ends. In fact, such gangs require the complicity of the state in that they need the state to continue to act brutally and neglect citizens on the periphery in order to justify the maintenance of an abusive and cruel parallel power structure, as some writers have suggested. (Macaulay, 2007; Willis, 2009) But as my research shows below, the emerging concern and even identification within gangs with political legitimacy narratives and citizenship rights talk paradoxically make gangs susceptible to pressure from other groups who use these same discursive tactics.
Conclusion

A symbolic narrative of the gangster developed out of the need to understand and order the modern city and the citizen’s place within this totalizing urban space, and it came to occupy a vital space in the imagination of certain populations. This image of the gangster and the identification of a social predator who rebels against the socio-economic order are socially constructed through a collective mythmaking process that serves the purpose of marking boundaries of social acceptability. Cities imagine themselves as both dangerous places of sin, corruption and violence, but also as necessary and desirable, as the key source of economic productivity, and as a space of leisure and luxury consumption. The myth of the gangster is one way to resolve this contradiction in social terms; like other wealthy city dwellers, the gangster consumes, and women are often a signifier of this consumption, but unlike other legitimate city-dwellers, the gangster also kills and preys on the innocent.

While the gangster served to establish social boundaries, competing explanatory frameworks emerged that sought to position the gangster phenomenon as due to specific causal factors. Some moral entrepreneurs made claims about what caused the rise of trafficking gangs and drug crime, deliberately seeking to cause fear in certain publics in order to attribute crime to certain social problems for which they had a cultural or political bias for privileging. Early claims-makers asserted that the criminality was hereditary or strictly a product of a culture of
crime among the poor (an explanation which pointed back toward race as a cause), and used these racist and classicist theories to justify high crime rates or supposed threats of violence.

But despite these claims-makers best efforts to marginalize and make gangs “other” to “legitimate” society, important areas of overlap remained impossible to erase. In Latin America and elsewhere, even though violence by organized crime groups and gangs is used to protect investments, project ideology, and enforce authority, non-criminal groups also routinely use violence for the same purposes, especially when their interests are seriously threatened. Also, many residents of the city view local/national gangs and organized crime groups as just one more way for them to gain higher social status and material remuneration for work rather – a high risk route to these goals, but perhaps a more accessible institutional path than some others. The cultural milieu of gangs is not particularly distinct form the legitimate business world either; these groups are characterized by a male-dominated, entrepreneurial and profiteering culture that is equally definitional of the non-illegal task environment. This structural overlap between gangs, organized crime, states and businesses means that these different groups have adopted characteristics from one another – thus we see the emergence of the legitimacy-seeking gang or armed actor. Gangs in Brazil and Colombia have, at different times, and to varying extents, interpenetrated legitimate social institutions such as media, law enforcement and politics, and this interpenetration that has further sensitized gangs to the importance of established political goods like legitimacy.
Research on the ways narratives are used within gangs shows that gang cohesion is highly narrative dependent. Gang leaders in particular rely on narrative skills to defend their leadership position, for rule-making, maintaining coherent hierarchies, and the construction of group identities. Some researchers have suggested that the subcultures that produces gangs tend to privilege communication skills like narration over other basic skill sets, so that narrations becomes over-emphasized within these social worlds. Narratives are also crucial in terms of gang-community relations. Community residents have ambiguous relationships with gangs that are developed through shared narratives of belonging. On the one hand, community members are willing to shield gangs from state security forces by permitting gang members to aggregate with the community so that they cannot be targeted, but if violence escalates, or other problems become too evident, they will begin to work with the police in order to dismantle the gang. Therefore, community loyalty is dependent on gangs acting according to rough concepts of political legitimacy, and it is this dependence that community media groups can be capable of leveraging.
The data presented here is largely drawn from a 7-month research period starting December 1, 2007 and extending to June 30, 2008. This 7-month interval was divided almost exactly in half for each neighborhood studied, with the community in Rio de Janeiro receiving five more days of study than the community in Bogotá. The fieldwork for this research project includes community
surveys, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic research as a participant-observer working with the two community media groups. All translation from Spanish to Portuguese is mine unless otherwise indicated. Some materials from the dissertation including maps, photographs, essays and articles by CMG members, and video clips will be available in an online appendix.

There are several important factors that informed why I chose the type of fieldwork I use here to develop my thesis. First, I lived and worked as a journalist and documentary filmmaker in Bogotá for two years (before starting the PhD program at Tulane University), from 2001-2003, during a period of both conflict intensification and face-to-face negotiation between illegal armed groups and the Colombian state. Prior to this, in 2000, I collected field research for a Master’s Thesis entitled “The Doors of Perception: Objectivity and War Reportage in Colombia” by interviewing Colombian and foreign journalists living in Bogotá. Over the course of this work, I had established enduring contacts with civil society groups (including three working in Ciudad Bolívar), city officials, and local journalists who covered the city beat in Bogotá. These contacts and my own previous work experience gave me access to a significant pool of local knowledge, and allowed me to contact Francisco Cuellár prior to arriving in Colombia, and to persuade him to allow me access to his organization and his network of colleagues, friends and co-workers. This meant that within 36 hours of arriving in Bogotá I had settled into an apartment 50 minutes from Juan Pablo II, and was arriving for my first meeting with Cuellár below the research site at a billiards bar in Ciudad Bolívar.
The relative speed with which I was able to gain access to the community of Baixa do Sapateiro in Rio de Janeiro and begin gathering data was less due to the degree to which I laid groundwork and more due to fortuitous circumstances, as I will explain below. However, there were two important factors associated with advance preparation that played a role. First, through conversations with my thesis advisor Dr. Mauro Porto, and with committee member Dr. Vicki Mayer, I became aware of the prevalence and influence of grass-roots media work and filmmaking in Brazil at large and in Rio de Janeiro in particular. Because of their encouragement, in 2006, while on a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship, I spent two weeks in Rio de Janeiro and during that time made contact with Cinamaneiro, the umbrella media-and-film group that would later partly sponsor the Boca de Filme project in Favela Maré that figures in this research project. The contacts I made at Cinamaneiro turned out to be absolutely crucial, because, as I was informed after my arrival during the research period outlined above, access by foreign researchers to projects like Boca de Filme became highly restricted in 2008 after the announcement of government pacification projects in the favelas began to cause tension with gangs, and the civil society groups operating in these favelas worried increasingly about researcher safety (quite rightly).

As far as the crucial element of luck involved in connecting with Boca de Filme, when I arrived in Rio and began making contacts with civil society groups that work in Favela Maré in order to try and reach community journalists, it seemed as though this initial phase might take a long time, as the first set of
gatekeepers I contacted were highly non-committal, difficult to reach, and did not show particular interest in my project. However, by chance I made a friend, a fellow cinephile that worked part time at Cinemaneiro organizing film viewings at local venues, and after attending a film together and sharing several beers afterward, he put me in touch with the project leaders of Boca de Filme. The project leaders agreed to include me in their project after a single meeting, in part because I had some filmmaking expertise and some equipment that I was willing to lend, and so could contribute to their workshops, and because the project was in its very first stages. As they explained to me at that initial meeting, had their project already started, they could never have included me, for fear of destabilizing their delicate relationships with the community, the local gang, and with their students. The result of this good fortune was that I was able to begin meaningful data collection on my central thesis question less than a week after arriving in Rio de Janeiro. This sequence of events is also significant because it suggests that several of the first set of gatekeepers were aware of the existence of the Boca de Filme project, but determined not to put me in touch with its leaders (partly, I suspect, because my intermediate level of Portuguese suggested inexperience with fieldwork), and it was only through the chance personal relationship outlined above that I was able to commence fieldwork.

From the beginning of this project a heavy emphasis was placed on human protection procedures because of safety concerns over interviewing young community journalists and filmmakers who in some cases had recent gang affiliations, and in all cases were operating in a high-risk environment. Tulane’s
Committee on Use of Human Subjects, an institutional review board (IRB) attached to the University, drilled down into the type of ethnographic data that I proposed to collect, and insisted (appropriately) on a detailed consent process and interview guide so that participants in this study would know exactly what they were getting into before they agreed to sit for an interview. Other more standard procedures were put in place over the course of the field research, including ironclad anonymity for participants – all names except that of the researcher used here are pseudonyms – and multiple steps for the safeguarding of all research materials, including secure, off-site storage, and the earliest possible destruction of all recordings after transcriptions of interviews were made.

The nature of my own concerns about the protection of human subjects varied depending on who was being interviewed. In Bogotá and throughout Colombia, for example, paramilitary groups both violently target and aggressively recruit youth street gang members, especially those involved with low-level drug trafficking. In Rio de Janeiro, there exist overlapping fields of danger in which young gang members or their loose affiliates can be imprisoned, coerced or are subject to violence by varying groups depending on the ever-shifting landscape of power relations within their neighborhood. Multiple members of the media collectives interviewed for this study have this profile, which was problematic for two reasons; because through the very process of meeting with them I could draw attention to these individuals and place them in danger, and also because they could in turn report that I presented a threat to the gangs in question because of information that I was collecting (even if inadvertently) about the gang’s covert
activities and therefore place me in danger. Experience and reports from concerned informants led me to surmise that the local armed actors in this study possessed an intelligence-gathering apparatus that was informing them to a certain extent of my activities in the neighborhoods including with whom I was meeting (indeed, it is possible that a key informant for this study was also on the paramilitary payroll).

In part because I had been kidnapped and briefly held in Bogotá in 2002 while conducting research into former guerillas that were recrudescent as organized crime syndicates, I was very cautious under what circumstances I conducted the interviews for this project and what kind of information was discussed. I tried to maintain the focus of the interviews on the activities of the community media group and how group-members and residents interpreted these activities, but inevitably, some information about the specifics of gang activity that could pose a danger to the researcher and the study participant would emerge. Since the subject of this study is whether community media can curb violence, and this illegal violence is usually perpetrated by organized armed actors, ostensibly used as a functional tool for maintaining economic and social control over the neighborhood, there was no way to avoid discussing evidence of criminal activity on the part of the gangs. This type of discussion necessarily entailed risks for everyone involved, including the gangs in question.

In order to mitigate the risks associated with discussing this type of information for the study’s participants and for the researcher, I resorted to tactics commonly used by journalists investigating sensitive subject matter for arranging meetings and conducting interviews. Meetings were arranged and often switched to
a different location or time at the last minute using SMS (text messaging) over
disposable cell phones, or sometimes these arrangements were made in advance
using an email account created for this project, or on social media platforms using
a similarly specially created profile. I preferred to conduct interviews I considered
risky in the open air, which I noticed was amendable for the participants, as they
often seemed more comfortable talking about these subjects as they walked
through their neighborhoods unconfined, where they could more clearly see who
might be listening or watching. Finally, as a frontline tactic to mitigate my own
risk, I projected a standard “journalistic” avoidance of bias, by which I mean I
sought to convince every informant I dealt with that my only goal was to present a
respectful and accurate picture of the lived experience of all neighborhood
residents to whom I spoke, and assiduously avoided throughout the research period
any shading of normative judgment.

As a white, male, Western researcher I operated within a certain spectrum
of privilege well established by researchers of ethnographic methods. (Denzin &
Lincoln, 2005; Hall, 1992; McIntosh, 1988) One major benefit of this privilege for
this researcher was that I had significantly less risk of appearing implicated in the
perceived webs of tensions and responsibilities in these neighborhoods that often
exposed the residents to forms of violence. On the other hand, incidents of violence
have befallen journalists, civil society workers, researchers and Westerners in both
of these research sites (Gerstmann & Streb, 2006; "Journalists kidnapped by
Colombian rebels," 2003; Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2013; "Murder of
journalist filming Rio drugs orgy shocks Brazil," ) which perhaps moderates the
degree of personal security sometimes enjoyed by researchers of my gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. Furthermore, because of the high levels of randomized violence in these neighborhoods, and the extremely unstable conditions under which power was exercised, I did occasionally experience high levels of fear and anxiety while carrying out this research, a feature of ethnographic research that is generally left out of discourses on methods. As Hume (2007, p. 486) writes: “The subject of fear is rarely singled out for attention in methodological discussions…Instead, many fieldwork accounts speak of danger and risk, as if these forces are somehow devoid of emotion and objectively manageable.” Furthermore, this ethnographic study does touch on the subject of the violent, in an explicit attempt to avoid what Rodgers (2007, p. 14) describes as “the existence of a critical epistemological bias within ethnographic studies of violence, insofar as most ethnographers generally tend to have to a rather ‘passive’ relationship to violence, rarely involving themselves in the praxis of violence, despite the participatory nature of their professional enterprise.”

There is also the question of psychological risk. Any interview in which traumatic situations are discussed will necessarily involve some psychological risk. However, it also possible that open discussion can have a therapeutic function for those who have been adversely impacted by traumatic events. Given that my interviews focused on the positive experiences of the subjects and their involvement with community media and civil society groups, I would say that psychological risk was minimized overall. Nevertheless, their were points at which some of the research participants became distressed or upset by the
interview process, despite the fact that they were prepared for the questions I intended to ask during our conversation. Indeed, some of the interviews ended up focusing on aspects of the trauma experienced by the interviewees as victims of violence, and this change of focus became so compelling that at a certain stage of the data collection process it threatened to shift the subject of the fieldwork away from the question of community media and the curbing of violence towards questions surrounding trauma and memory.

I must also note here that during the course of interviews whose subject organically shifted to personal testimonials about trauma and memory, I experienced grave doubts as to the value of this research relative to the effects that it might have on the interviewees. In one case in particular, one of the interview subjects related the experience of finding her parents murdered several years prior, a fact which I was aware of prior to the interview, but not fully emotionally prepared for in the context of an in-depth conversation. After the interview concluded, I seriously questioned whether I was competent to be conducting this sort of research, given the fact that I am not a trained psychotherapist. I also wrestled with the question of whether the type of ethnographic research project I was conducting justified putting any participant at significant psychological risk, and whether my motivation to gather data might color my perception of when it might be in the interview subject’s best interest to terminate the interview. In the event, I determined to proceed, because overall I trusted the participants’ capacity to give informed consent, but I also took extra care to proceed gently and methodically during these interviews of this type and to repeatedly confirm that the
participant was comfortable with the topic discussed. However, I retain some ambivalence about these questions to this day.

As far as case selection goes, although the history of development of the neighborhoods is distinct, and there are important cultural differences between the two neighborhoods, the selection of these cases for comparison is not without some key strengths. First, the demographics of Juan Pablo II and Baixa do Sapateiro can be held as a relative constant: both neighborhoods are compact, with an estimated 500-700 residents, and relatively isolated within a much larger mosaic of settlements (Ciudad Bolívar and Complexo da Maré, respectively). Second, socioeconomic conditions are similarly highly restrictive, with standard of living, access to health, education, employment, and access to city services such as trash removal, power, water and cooking gas, limited or nonexistent. Third, both neighborhoods are under the control of volatile and violent non-state actors, which are both enmeshed in transnational trafficking networks and negotiating challenges mounted by the respective states and rival illegal actors. These actors engage in varying degrees of political activity in both neighborhoods, and actively resist incursion into their domains by police and other state representatives, creating perceived realities by residents of the neighborhoods as lightly governed or even ‘state-free’ zones.

Conducting surveys in these communities was only possible after I had become a somewhat known quantity within the neighborhood. Even then, when I knocked on peoples’ doors or rang their bells, I was aware that many people did not answer. Since my survey questions revolved around civil society participation,
perceived levels of legitimacy on the part of the armed actor, and whether the CMGs had an impact on community violence, and because I lacked the staff to canvas the entire communities, I distributed the preponderance of my surveys within the networks of housing radiating out from where the media collectives held their meetings. The effect this method of distribution had was to create almost random selection, but introduce a possible mitigating factor in which the residents might be more familiar with the CMG due to its physical proximity than if they lived elsewhere in the neighborhood. My goal was to distribute 200 survey questionnaires in each case, so reaching about 1/3 of each neighborhood’s population, which I was able to do more or less. The reason for this number was purely pragmatic – it represented the most work in this regard I felt able to handle alongside my other research tasks. All surveys were anonymous, and I received 73 complete surveys from Juan Pablo II, and 67 complete surveys in Baixa do Sapateiro – a similarity in terms of number of responses that enabled me to feel comfortable comparing this data across the two case studies. Approximately one quarter of the surveys were returned by mail (I included a self-addressed stamped envelope with each), but the rest required returning to the dwellings to pick up the surveys, sometimes more than once, as residents were busy and generally took their time with their answers. For this last task I was able to enlist the help of some CMG members in both cases.

When looking at the overall picture represented by the fieldwork I undertook at the two research sites, I decided to feature in-depth interviews and participant-observation ethnography as the cornerstones of the data supporting my
central hypothesis. The reason for this decision is that these interviews and observations provide the best description of precisely how community media activity in these neighborhoods can act as a check on violence. Although the surveys I conducted convincingly provide evidence that a perception exists in the neighborhoods that community journalist groups do curb local levels of violence, the survey format did not satisfyingly indicate how this process happens. In both research sites, I was able to conduct multiple in-depth interviews, starting with my gatekeepers the CMG leaders and core group members, and then moving to workshop participants or students. In Juan Pablo II, I conducted 6 in-depth interviews, and chose to feature the 3 that avoid data duplication and provide the most distinct examples of how the narratives of legitimacy are used by CMGs to curb violence. In Baixa do Sapateiro, I gathered 8 in-depth interviews, but again feature 3 for the reasons outlined above.

The final research method used here is ethnography. It was in my role as participant observer that I saw the most direct, first-hand evidence of narratives of legitimacy used to reduce tensions that could easily have resulted in violence, and so this qualitative data set forms a core part of the supporting evidence for my hypothesis. Ethnography can be a problematic method for gathering data in charged situations (Patton, 2005), as I learned when observing a social media protest group in Bogotá, because the presence of an ‘outsider’ researcher can cause discomfort in a group setting where interpersonal trust is crucial. On the other hand, it remained the best method available to this researcher for teasing out the
warp and weft between the personal and the political, which, in the tightly-knot communities of this project, is where violence either flares up or is damped down.
Paramilitary gangs and the Colombian state

In November 2006 Colombia attracted the attention of international media outlets for the newest wrinkle in the ongoing saga (or farce) of its government’s negotiations with paramilitaries. The media reports (which had been only desultorily following the brinksmanship between paramilitary leaders and government negotiators) tended to focus on revelations that several members of the Colombian Congress had been indicted for colluding with paramilitary forces in intimidation and murder. (Forero, 2006) Accusations raised in congressional hearings, later supported by direct evidence uncovered by investigators, revealed paramilitary structures deeply enmeshed in the Colombian political fabric. Since officially demobilizing and disarming in late 2002, the new evidence suggested that paramilitaries have turned their energies towards more criminal activities, and, with the collusion of officials, have bullied their way into controlling legitimate businesses such as trucking firms, dairy farms, petroleum extraction, gem and precious metal mining, and cattle ranching operations. This new information damaged the credibility of then-President Alvaro Uribe, who had important supporters among the indicted congressmen.
Paramilitaries used protracted government negotiations as a way to burrow even deeper into social networks and lifeways in Colombia, without forsaking their practices of extorting, dragooning, massacring and “disappearing” Colombians. As negotiations drag on with the government, ex-fighters were able to use the stalling of their leaders to hide their atrocities – investigators have been led to mass graves by reliable informants, only to find the bodies gone. Also, paramilitaries targeted two of the country’s best genetics labs at universities in Medellín and Bogotá, killing professors and students who have cooperated with forensic anthropologists working to identify victims at the sites of paramilitary massacres. ("Colombia Unearths Victims of Violence," 2007) The disarmament and negotiation process, which was partly funded by the U.S. and cost over $100 million, was bewilderingly complex. For over 20 years, Paramilitaries used their positions of power not only to victimize, but also to acquire vast wealth and influence. The complexities of these cases made it difficult for investigators to untangle this web of ill-gotten gains in order to effectively prosecute perpetrators and to identify victims so as to make reparations to their families.

In order to make sense of the role the armed actor that controlled the neighborhood in which the Colombian portion of this research project took place, we need to examine the wider context surrounding paramilitaries in Colombian society, as well as to probe their recent history. But how should we read this tangled weave of events? Why does the Colombian government appear to maintain such extensive links to the very organization they are attempting to unravel? From the Colombian state’s point of view, what is the purpose of the paramilitary gangs?
And, perhaps most importantly, once initiated, why are these paramilitary groups so difficult to dismantle? I will undertake in this section to answer these questions in three ways. First, I will establish what paramilitaries are in the Colombian context. In doing so, it will become clearer what the government’s relationship might be to these illegal groups, and why they operate with such openness and impunity in Juan Pablo II. Second, I will delineate the state’s degree of interpenetration the paramilitaries. From this line of inquiry, I will explain why the Colombian state might be involved in the seemingly contradictory project of both dismantling and supporting paramilitary groups, and how these groups have become viewed in some sectors of the broader Colombian society both as illegal and as necessary enforcers of a particular social order. This will serve to shed light on a key area of this research project – how and to what extent have paramilitaries acquired political legitimacy? To what extent are they intertwined with structures of authority in the neighborhood of Juan Pablo II and what might be the impact of this on residents and community media group (CMG) members?

The phenomenon of paramilitarism is best understood as a specific outgrowth of a general state of parainstitutionality. Parainstitutionality is defined by Germán Alfonso Palacio Casteneda as “a series of mechanisms of social regulation and conflict resolution that do not rely on formal constitutional or legal means, but are governed by informal arrangements and ad hoc mechanisms.” The purpose of these parainstitutions is clear for Palacio Casteneda – “They solve problems that formal, regulated institutions cannot.” (Casteñeda, 2000, p. 106) This definition is particularly useful in that it draws attention to the functionality of
informal institutions such as paramilitarism. In many Latin America countries, the underlying conditions of weak formal institutions (such as justice systems), poorly functioning economies and the lack of consolidation of democratic practices (Guillermo A. O'Donnell, 1988, 1999) has given rise to multiple para- or informal institutions. Paramilitaries are and have been relatively common in Latin America and occur within a wider regional context of almost pandemic parainstitutionality. (Martha Knisely Huggins, 1991; Koonings & Kruijt, 2004) Before continuing, it is important to note that not all or even most of Latin American informal institutions are linked to repression and violence; many, such as indigenous justice systems in Peru and Bolivia provide a service the state is unwilling or incapable of providing. (Helmke & Levitsky, 2006)

Paramilitary gangs in Colombia are, however, explicitly linked to extreme violence. An excellent general definition comes out of Elena Manitzas’ work: “Paramilitary…can refer to death squads, private justice, armed ‘self-defense’ groups, ‘cleanup operations’ (aimed against prostitutes, beggars, homosexuals, etc.), or simply an extension of official State repression against civilians…” (Manitzas, 1991, p. 107) This definition is useful in that it shows the variety of different roles paramilitaries can play in the community, as well as suggesting accurately that these groups can operate at the nexus of all these activities. Adam Jones advances another broad definition which emphasizes the regulatory nature of paramilitary gangs: “paramilitaries are those private and/or state-affiliated organizations that use violence and intimidation to target and/or eliminate groups and individuals seen as subversive of the social, political, and economic order.”
In this sense, paramilitaries are subcontractors of the state that take charge of and run operations that the state wishes to distance itself from so as to create a discourse of plausible deniability for illegal death squad activity. Some researchers have posited that there is a “culture of violence” at work in Colombia, in that certain values and norms (such as status acquisition linked to violent acts and gangster machismo) help explain why violence is so persistent in Colombia (Waldmann, 2007) while others view violence more as an outgrowth of piratical capitalistic economic relations (Richani, 2002) but most experts agree that violence is extensively exacerbated by paramilitarism.

The question remains, what is the nature of these shadow operations and what comprises the activity of the (mostly) men who undertake them? In Colombia, paramilitaries have sprung up at various times during the history of the republic; fed, paid and armed by political parties or caudillos making a power grab. Thus, in Colombia, it has historically been seen as a legitimate, rational alternative to arm citizenry in order to combat a perceived state of general lawlessness or to help propel a leader into political power (Bushnell, 1993; Roldán, 2002) This ‘paramilitary alternative’ was enshrined in the Colombian constitution, making it legal for the government to arm and train citizenry, until 1994, when outcries at the growing strength of the paramilitaries forced legislators to ban ‘self-defense’ groups. (Kirk, 2003) In keeping with this longstanding tradition, President Uribe, in early 2003, proposed supplying yet another group of citizens with military-grade hardware to defend themselves from insurgents and to develop a civilian intelligence agency along the lines of Guatemala in the 1980s. However, the
historical moment when paramilitaries emerged as a truly empowered informal institution took place in the early 1980s, when narcotraffickers, landowners (at this time mostly ranchers) and current or former members of the military formed death squads to strike at leftist guerilla groups who had created a fertile soil of resentment through decades of kidnapping, extortion and violence.

As is often the case, these death squads were created ad hoc to “do unofficially what could not be done officially” (A. Jones, 2003, p. 34) which is to say they fought a scorched-earth dirty war against guerillas and their alleged supporters, the spoils of which was generally land. Land at first represented access to wealth through ranching and farming, but quickly this traditional conflict over land metastasized into a struggle for control over segments of the highly lucrative cocaine trade, as the rise of these death squads coincided with the explosion of foreign markets for cocaine (Richani, 2005) and the creation of a new conservative-minded business oligarchy. (M. Romero, 2003) At this time, in the mid 1980s, special mercenary units were hired from among retired Israeli special forces personnel and British ex-SAS servicemen to train these Colombian death squads into units equipped to undertake extensive counter-insurgency operations. (Giraldo, 1996) The US, through the CIA and the Defense Department, also played a leading role in the professionalization of these death squads by helping to train civilian intelligence services that later morphed into logistical command-and-control for full-blown death squads. (Human Rights Watch (Organization), 1998; Human Rights Watch/Americas. & Arms Project (Human Rights Watch), 1996)
Simultaneous with the new resource base and vertical integration of the criminal economy, and the expansion and increased professionalization of the death squads, came an increased emphasis on social vigilantism among these proto-paramilitaries. (Bushnell, 1993) It is clear that by escalating the level of violence and chaos in Colombia, and by emphasizing its independence from the state while continuing to work closely with its military leadership, paramilitary leaders were able to create new political opportunity structures for themselves as preservers of social order. As Ray Abraham writes of vigilante death squads:

Here the distinction between the maintenance of ‘order’ and the preservation or promotion of a particular ‘order’ or regime and its support base becomes quite obscure and is, in fact, often enough deliberately made more so by the propaganda smoke-screens of the state and its agents on one hand and their more revolutionary opponents on the other. In such cases, the state’s campaigns to combat crime often form part of a proclaimed political crusade against ‘evil’ generally. Political dissenters and common criminals, and by association the poor and unemployed, are compounded into an undifferentiated demonic threat which must be dealt with by whatever means, however brutal and illegal, are at hand (1998, p. 35)

As this passage notes, as state-sanctioned (tacitly or explicitly) death squads expand, so do the categories of those who are characterized as ‘enemies.’ In the Colombian case, as conflict between the paramilitaries and the guerilla forces evolved into a deadlock in which both sides retreated into their strongly held fiefdoms, and direct conflict become more sporadic, the paramilitaries moved more directly into the business of social control. The guerillas had become increasingly a difficult opponent, and sometimes an economic ally in the drug trade, while impoverished petty criminals and addicts who lived on the streets were
comparatively easy targets that allowed paramilitaries to advance a claim for their continued relevance in Colombian communities. As these social cleansing operations (*limpiezas*) were stepped up, a more clearly delineated political ideology emerged, one that can at least in part be traced to the ascendancy of the first national-level leader of the paramilitaries – Carlos Castaño Gil. (Human Rights Watch/Americas., 2008)

Castaño, a charismatic rancher’s son from a politically conservative region of Colombia called the Magalena Medio, was radicalized by the death of his father at the hands of the guerillas during a botched kidnapping. During the late 1980s and early 90s, he founded and ran some of Colombia’s best-organized counter-insurgency forces. In 1997, he declared the formation of the AUC, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, an umbrella federation under whose aegis he galvanized the various death squads around the country with a populist, right-wing ideology and declared his intention to become “the armed wing of the middle class” (Kirk, 2003, p. 175) (Castaño enjoyed several years of popular sympathy from a moderately broad sector of Colombian society (his 2001 biography was a runaway bestseller in Colombia), and, even as he expanded his links to the Colombian military (and to politicians, as the revelations above have made clear), he positioned himself as an anti-establishment outsider dedicated to correcting state incompetence. Castaño was the most political of the recent paramilitary leaders, showing a deft touch at manipulating the media and crafting a political message that resonated with people outside his immediate supporters. (Kirk, 2003) He also moved more aggressively into the drug trade even as he publicly decried the
business, and, although he denied killing the innocent, he ratcheted up his campaign of atrocities against civilians and in general ushered in a new era of ‘warlordism’ in Colombia, turning swaths of the Colombian countryside into abattoirs. According to figures gathered from the federal police in Colombia and cited by human rights worker and writer Robin Kirk, in the first ten months of 2000, while Castaño was at the peak of his popularity and power, the AUC conducted 804 assassinations, 203 kidnappings, and 75 massacres with 507 victims (2003, p. 163) on the civilian population.

Shortly thereafter, however, Castaño disappeared, and it was later discovered that a hit man hired by his brother had murdered him. Meanwhile, international pressure had been stepped up on the Colombian government to dismantle its armed groups, especially after the US State Department officially added the AUC to its list of terrorist organizations post-9/11. President Uribe began to make threats and overtures to the new leadership of the AUC, and a safe zone for negotiations was set up in the AUC’s region of strength the province of Córdoba. For years, government negotiators, spokesmen for human rights organizations, U.S. officials and paramilitary leaders jockeyed for position as the terms of the demobilization were hashed out in the Colombian courts and legislature. Uribe’s government was seen by outside observers and described in media reports as favoring “peace” over “justice,” which is to say he was excoriated by human rights groups for offering terms that amount to impunity for the paramilitaries. Other Colombian politicians, on the other hand, took the opportunity to denounce Uribe’s position and to call for stiffer penalties and more
stringent legal sanctions against the paramilitary leaders, and in the aftermath of these negotiations, these opposition politicians aggressively investigated ties between Uribe’s administration and these same paramilitaries. (S. Romero, 2008)

Why does the Colombian state evince such an ambivalent relationship to paramilitary forces? To begin with, the Colombian state is far from monolithic, and although many paramilitary commanders and their regular military protectors enjoyed special protections from prosecution for flagrant human rights violations, some concerted efforts have been made by judicial committees to prosecute paramilitary chiefs. Campbell delineates the tension in this intimate yet oppositional relationship between the state and paramilitaries in the volume *Death Squads in Global Perspective*. (2002) If death squads can be conceived as a form of paramilitarism, both of which are connected licitly or illicitly to the state security apparatus, then the state can be seen as potentially setting itself up for a fall. Campbell writes: “Domestically, citizens expect the rule of law, adherence to certain norms of behavior, or at least predictable behavior from their governments…failure to meet international norms of behavior can have all sorts of serious repercussions today, including loss of foreign loans and investment, diminution or loss of foreign aid, loss of tourist revenue, trade boycotts, etc.” (2002, p. 4) In the case of Colombia, where the tacit or explicit support of paramilitaries has been seen as part of the state’s purposes for decades (M. Romero, 2003) or where paramilitaries are understood as a proxy state actor, the state’s position vis-à-vis death squads and atrocity workers can be tenuous.

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Other research has pointed the way to the golem-like nature of paramilitaries – a state creation run amok. In the introduction to the volume *Vigilantism and the State*, Huggins makes this point by drawing on a US State Department report regarding death squads organized by the leader of Guatemala in the 1960s: “The death squads formed to support Méndez Montenegro’s war against guerilla insurgency were running the risk of inadvertently becoming instruments of regime control by undermining civil support for the Méndez Montenegro government through that government’s failure (or inability) to control its own covert network of violence and terror.” (1991, p. 4) A similar blowback occurred in Colombia, where state legitimacy was under pressure both from within, as state complicity in paramilitary atrocities was uncovered and opposition leaders made hay of these findings, and from without, as influential international actors, especially some US agencies and legislators, pressured the Colombian state to distance itself from the paramilitaries so as to at least appear to represent democratic principles of justice and respect for human rights.

We have established that the Colombian state has encouraged or tacitly agreed to permit the existence of the paramilitary gangs and their tactics for decades. A legitimizing discourse was crafted by the paramilitaries and sanctioned by the state to the degree in which the state approved paramilitary activities. This discourse states that the paramilitaries are not only the most effective counterpoint to the guerrillas, but also the best form of community policing available to

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See (Mariner, Smart, & Human Rights Watch (Organization). 2001) In this text, human rights investigators convincingly argue that paramilitaries can act as a ‘division’ of the Colombian armed forces, working with and contributing money to army brigades and police, who in turn treat the ‘paras’ as valued allies.
Colombians, and the usage of extreme and indiscriminate violence is an effective and legitimate tactic in the context of this struggle. (Schoening & Human Rights Watch (Organization)) As Castaño says in interview with Robin Kirk “It is an unequal war, because guerrillas can always go outside the law. We understand this attitude. We chose to separate ourselves from the Colombian army, so that we could become a kind of guerrilla force and fight them using the same kinds of combat.” (2003, pp. 162-163) Paramilitary gangs continue to enjoy high levels of popular support in some regions of Colombia, where this same narrative is used successfully to justify their existence and their routinized brutality toward the local populace. Paramilitary fighters also employ this particular rhetoric to journalists and (presumably) among themselves to legitimize their activities. The problem from the state’s perspective is that this discourse undermines the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force, because it posits that there is a widespread ‘disorder’ that only the paramilitaries are effective in combating. More even then pressure from international groups, this conflict of authority and, in some cases, legitimacy, forced the state to act as decisively as it could to disentangle paramilitaries from state appurtenances.

In a pattern outlined in Payne’s work on “uncivil movements,” (2000) the paramilitaries developed a legitimizing myth that positioned them as the only group able to restore ‘traditional values’ in the face of increased ‘delinquency’ and moral degeneracy but in doing so, they came into direct conflict with the state’s role as arbiter of the Colombian social order. With the death of their most charismatic and politically astute leader, the AUC, despite their extensively
documented links to the Colombian state, were forced into a new role as outliers. And, unable to recalibrate its practices, the violence once effectively wielded by the AUC as a tool for consolidating power, began to backfire. As Payne writes:

> Political threats provide uncivil movements with ample opportunities to mobilize. All of the comparative cases demonstrate that uncivil movements can take advantage of uncertainties and insecurities in either transitional or consolidated democratic contexts and transform them into mobilization. The difficulty that uncivil movements face is in building support for their movement. Even when the threat is credible, uncivil movements are stigmatized by their association with violent and undemocratic action. (2000, p. 272)

However, this double bind of discourse has not left the paramilitaries without resources to mobilize. As negotiations dragged on without conclusive closure, and evidence mounted that paramilitaries used the *de facto* impunity offered by the government as a revolving door to re-enter the world of violence and intimidation through crime, stalling for time in order to reconfigure was clearly a successful strategy for the paramilitaries. (Arvelo, 2005; Guaquetá & Arias, 2008)

Finally, the question must be posed whether Colombian governments have engaged the paramilitaries with the primary intention of dismantling these groups. As Peter Andreas points out in his book *Border Games* (2000) often new policing initiatives will be undertaken with primarily political or “symbolic” goals. Andreas shows that new initiatives by the state to regulate criminal activity are sometimes more of a performance for the media and the public, enacted to re-affirm the state’s role in preserving social order, and that these policing initiatives are not intended to lessen overall illegal activity. (2000, pp. 156-189) In Colombia, with the support of paramilitary-backed legislators in Congress, Uribe was able to alter the constitution
to enable him to serve a second four-year term as president, and was subsequently (what year?) re-elected in a landslide, shortly after taking credit for bringing the paramilitaries to the negotiating table and positioning himself as the most effective guarantor of social order.

Is it possible, that, among the welter of motivations swirling around negotiations with the paramilitaries, one important goal of the state was publicly performing the role of restorer of social order in order to reap political gains? Is it also possible that this performance was deemed primary, and that justice for the victims and accountability for the accused were deemed secondary by this administration? The balance of evidence seems to indicate that both are possibilities. However, in allowing other groups the position of actors in these negotiations, including to some extent human rights groups and some progressive members of the U.S. Congress (who had appropriations power over the enormous sums of military aid received by Colombia) Uribe unleashed political forces that had some (probably) unintended humanitarian impact.

As Uribe’s second administration wound to a close in 2010, the discovery of a mass grave behind a large Colombian army base further indicated the persistence of paramilitary-state cooperation and the continued use of paramilitary shock troops as a proxy force by the Colombian Armed Forces. In January 2010, the Miami-based Spanish language newspaper El Nuevo Herald reported that a mass grave containing almost 2,000 unidentified corpses had been discovered in an annex of La Macarena cemetery, apparently containing bodies that had been taken there by the Colombian Army and presented as guerrilla combat casualties in order
justify expenditures and funding streams, some of which was coming from the U.S.-funded Plan Colombia. (Guillan, 2010) Villagers interviewed by the newspaper suspected that relatives who had previously disappeared during the last few years would have been buried at the site and denied that they were guerrillas or guerilla-supporters. In September 2010, a United Nations official with the High Commission on Human Rights visited the La Macarena site and confirmed the presence of 446 unidentified bodies that had been reported as guerrillas killed in combat since 2002. A report by UN officials called for the identification of the bodies and confirming whether or not human rights violations had been committed. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed its concerns "about the lack of effective controls and adequate records regarding reports of people killed in combat, which raises questions about the circumstances surrounding their deaths." (International., 2011) Analyzing these events, some researchers (Maher & Thomson, 2011) went so far as to suggest that the purpose of the entire paramilitary demobilization process was to improve the public image of the Colombian state in order to pass the controversial US-Colombia free trade agreement through US Congress (which itself serves to protect large amounts of US investment in the country). These researchers point out that the demobilization process serves to obscure the continuation of paramilitary violence that continues to be used as a tool to protect the interests of large Colombian and US corporations and other economic concerns. (Maher & Thomson, 2011; Richani, 2005)

Juan Pablo II: The Local Context
Paramilitary Group in Juan Pablo II

The current crop of Colombian armed actors have their antecedents in the period of civil conflict called La Violencia (Roldán, 2002) an amorphous period of political violence the dates of which are often given as 1948-1958. Although initially largely rural, these actors have been moving into urban areas since the 1970s. This study is concerned with the Aguilas Negras, a group that is a mutation spawned from recent developments surrounding the uneven de-mobilization of Colombia’s loose-knit paramilitary umbrella organization referred to above, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC.

In August 2002, Álvaro Uribe Vélez was elected President of Colombia and immediately thereafter, several of the most prominent leaders of the AUC decided to negotiate for peace after decades of war. Then, on December 1, 2002, the AUC declared a cease-fire. Soon, government negotiators began secret meetings with members of the AUC, and by July 15, 2003, a preliminary agreement had been reached which set a goal of disarmament by AUC combatants before January 1, 2006. On May 13, 2004, the government moved to establish a special zone known as a “zona de ubicación” (location zone) in the North-central state of Córdoba, a traditional paramilitary stronghold, as a safe area for those paramilitaries involved

See the M-19 – this urban guerilla group was founded in 1970 by left-wing university students and established a new precedent for armed actors to operate in urban areas in Colombia, as prior to this existence of this group, bandits and guerilla groups in Colombia were exclusively rural. The urban antecedents of the paramilitary groups were the Muerte a Secuestadores (MAS), a death squad composed of former security forces and professional criminals organized and funded by the Escobar cartel in Medillin to target guerillas and their supporters. See Mauricio Romero (2003).
in negotiating the demobilization. Human rights groups immediately began to protest that paramilitary leaders were not being prosecuted for major human rights abuses. (Forero, 2005)

The free zone for negotiation was part of a structure of incentives for demobilization set up by paramilitary negotiators and the Uribe administration. Many paramilitary combatants, and especially some of the leaders, have outstanding warrants for human rights violations and there are pending requests for extradition to the United States for those involved in drug-trafficking. But by special agreement, arrest warrants were suspended for all members of the AUC who stayed within the perimeter of the 368 km² zone. However, this tended to be only true of those whose criminal or military activity was plausibly deniable and those who made an effort to operate discretely. A handful of paramilitaries who continued to openly participate in the cocaine trade or armed incursions, could be and were seized and prosecuted by the state despite seeking refuge in and around the safe zone of negotiations. (The Associated, 2008)

Despite the actions of the Colombian state, and the deportation of a small number of paramilitary leaders to stand trial in the US, many paramilitary fighters have ‘re-mobilized’ in the years subsequent to the negotiations into smaller splinter gangs. The Aguilas Negras (‘Black Eagles’) is one such group. This group, formed in 2006 in the Norte de Santander state, has alternatively been described as a ‘neoparamilitary’ group, as an organized crime group, or as gunmen and security for hire for narcotraffickers. ("Que son las Águilas Negras?," 2007) The Aguilas Negras have rapidly spread, with perhaps 5000 members at the time of writing in
more than a dozen departments, with fully operational units in 246 municipalities,
("Preocupante aumento de bandas armadas en Colombia," 2008) and its persistence
and organizational composition tends to reflect a fragmentation and redistribution
of paramilitary fighters into new atomistic cells rather than actual demobilization.
("Águilas Negras están en Bogotá," 2008)

The *Aguilas Negras* cell operating in Juan Pablo II was a highly
hierarchical and semi-autonomous group of 40-50 that was (typical of cell-type
organizations) self-reliant in terms of resource management, membership
recruitment, and combat operations. They patrolled the neighbourhood openly after
dark, heavily armed with assault rifles and pistols, garbed in a hodgepodge of
camouflage and only occasionally wearing the black and red colors that identified
them as part of the organization. According to group members, the Juan Pablo II
cell was able to utilize the larger *Aguilas Negras* network of ‘neo-paramilitary’
fighters for business transactions and communications purposes, but conceived of
itself as a member of a loose federation rather than a tightly night bureaucratic
institution. In an interview in January 2008, ‘Lieutenant’ Yeferzon Navarro, a
local-level leader, told the author “When we have a problem, we don’t call on the
organization [*empresa*] to come take of it for us. We have to take care of it
ourselves. But, if they [the organization] hear anything from their listeners [official
contacts], they let us know, and they help us if we need to move something [in the
context of this conversation, this was understood to mean illegal goods, usually but
not exclusively narcotics]. But we have the same ideology. We all understand the truth of things here in Colombia.”

The ideology Navarro refers to is a justification for all actions by the *Aguilas Negras* as constituting a necessary barricade against chaos, generalized disorder, and the threat of incursion by those labelled “subversives” or the massive onset of street crime (*delincuencia*). The data gathered for this research project in Juan Pablo II is consistent with the work of other scholars who have studied local-level interactions in Colombia between paramilitary actors, the state, civil society groups, and residents including Raphael (2010), Hunt (2006) and particularly Taussig (2003).

Shantytowns in Colombia’s large cities have remained one of the epicentres for violence stemming from the armed conflict. A bewildering number of criminal activities are based in these communities that remain more or less beyond the reach of formal state authority. In neighborhoods like Juan Pablo II, heavily armed illegal non-state actors exercise considerable authority over the population and link the poor urban population to the international cocaine economy. Many of Colombia’s illegally armed groups are present in the peri-urban areas around Bogotá such as Juan Pablo II, which they use as transshipment points for products related to the narcotics trade, as well as bases of operations where state security forces are absent. The *Aguilas Negras* group has managed to control a large percentage of the coca paste and processed cocaine that passes through neighborhoods such as Juan

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24 Field Journal, 8 January 2008
Pablo II to be exported to the north of Colombia and then transshipped to Mexico and Venezuela. (Human Rights Watch (Organization), 2010)

The FARC’s 55th Front is also present in the area, and although they do not maintain much of a force within Bogotá proper, they do operate in the peri-urban areas when they chose. The FARC sell unprocessed coca paste to the *Aguilas Negras* or to two more of Colombia’s largest rival neo-paramilitary trafficking groups present in Bogotá - The *Rastrojos* and the *Urabeños* - who then export the drugs via the northern coast of Colombia or Venezuela. The *Rastrojos* are another brutal illegal armed group involved in nearly every illegal activity in the country, from gold mining to drug trafficking to kidnapping. The group is the criminally diversified heir to the powerful Valle drug trafficking organization. The *Urabaños* are made up of former high-level paramilitary leaders, death squad and social cleansing participants, and rejected Colombian Army members hardened by combat with state security forces and guerrilla armies. This group has been expanding since the early 2000s and is now a central player in drug trafficking in the country. All four groups have major ties to Mexican cartels. Peri-urban areas such as Ciudad Bolívar are particularly vulnerable to penetration by these armed actors.

**Ciudad Bolívar**

Ciudad Bolívar was constructed primarily as (and by) a group of low-income workers who commuted toward the city center. The fact that this district
was settled in successive waves of migrants is also an important driver of its early patterns of organization. The district is centered around transportation routes (at one time highways) that lead in and out of the wealthier parts of Bogotá. This has created an unusual style of urban development as groups of neighborhood residents constructed their own houses, schools, parks, plazas, churches and athletic fields with varying degrees of financial and engineering commitment and no centralized urban planning programs. The pattern of settlement tended to be the following; first, small plots of land were purchased and rural-style houses constructed that were more or less connected to municipal infrastructure, second, a large squatter settlement would form around the original nucleus of houses and siphon off or crib onto the existing road, power, water and sewage infrastructures, and third, more refugees would arrive and find ways to rent or share existing housing and construct temporary shelters in unstable or undesirable terrain that gradually became more established dwellings.  

The first wave of migrants to the district now called Ciudad Bolívar (the former township of Bosa) appeared in the late 1940s, arriving from nearby Colombian states as the countryside convulsed during the period of civil war called La Violencia (Roldán, 2002) These migrants moved onto lightly inhabited or abandoned haciendas along the Tunjuelito river basin and divided these farms up into small holdings. A slow and steady trickle followed this first wave, and some Bogotanos moved out to the area, because of its low housing costs and light

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Field Journal, 20 December 2007: Notes on Interview with Mercedes Del Carmen Rios, Secretary for Social Integration
population pressures. A much larger wave of migrants began arriving in the late 1970s and early 1980s, following a period of conflict escalation in the countryside and the subsequent organized opposition of landowners to large peasant movements that sought land reform. (Zamosc, 2006) In 1983, the population of Ciudad Bolívar reached 50,000, engulfing the former township and prompting Bogotá’s city council to aggressively seek its incorporation into the municipality. However, population inflows overwhelmed municipal officials whose sporadic efforts at planning and incorporation remained directed at the communities that had settled immediately along the roadsides. City officials preferred to view the wide swaths of adjacent territory that was clearly being urbanized at the time as belonging to the rural sector.

Neighborhoods that began as illegal settlements only received the rudiments of city services when residents organized into collective action groups and demanded these services, and even then they were accused by city officials of secretly belonging to the Communist Party or of being affiliated with urban guerilla cells. State neglect and outright hostility meant that Ciudad Bolívar became in effect a city of the displaced that replicated the personal experience of

26 From the 1983 Plan Ciudad Bolivar: “orientar el crecimiento de la Ciudad preservando el espacio de la sabana para fines útiles agropecuarios.” (to guide the growth of Ciudad Bolivar while preserving the elevated plains for farming and animal husbandry – translation by author). Archival document: Ayuntamiento Bogota, Plan Ciudad Bolivar. (Bogota D.F., Colombia, 1983).

27 See Jesús Antonio Vilalobos Rubiano, "Cambios En Las Prácticas De La Acción Colectiva En Las Organizaciones Comunitarias, Debidos a La Consolidación Urbana En Los Espacios Barriales De Origen Ilegal En Bogotá" (2011) This is an unpublished Master’s Thesis, but it is also the most up to date and thorough study of Ciudad Bolívar’s collectivized process of urbanization I have found.
displacement – extreme vulnerability, severe challenges to fulfilling basic needs, widespread anomie – within its built environment.

The national conflict intensified yet again over a long period from the late 1980s until the early 2000s, as armed actors in Colombia multiplied, and many people around the country were caught between these competing interests. This caused a steady influx of internally displaced people to seek out what they saw as the relative safety and potential for economic opportunity provided by Colombia’s largest city, as their livelihoods were increasingly taken over by rent-seeking armed actors and the Colombian state repeatedly failed to provide them with basic levels of security. (Escobar, 2003) These new migrants, often poorer and subjected to greater extremes of violence than those that came before, streamed in to Ciudad Bolívar and began building communities in the higher, more unstable foothills, terracing out from the veredas (this word has come to mean a cut-off, mini-urbanized area in the Colombian vernacular), or herding paths, that wound their way through the steep hillsides and forming tightly-knit, difficult to access, mini-urban settlements. Population pressures rapidly reached a critical stage with population density in a neighborhood adjacent\(^{28}\) to where this study took place reaching 46,900 habitants per square kilometer in 2002, making Ciudad Bolívar by far the mostly densely populated sector of Bogotá. In comparison, Tokyo has less than 20,000 habitants per square kilometer and New York less than 10,000.

(Echanove, 2004)

\(^{28}\) Barrio San Francisco – this was one of the first consolidated neighborhoods in Ciudad Bolivar.
Too poor to afford normalized housing costs, these migrants had to find alternative solutions, such as building their own houses from scavenged materials and occupying land that had little value (usually because of its erosive gradient). This extra-legal, frontier-like settlement process – called *invasiones* or *urbanizaciones piratas* by Colombians – is in part historically determined in Colombia and has been a source of social and class conflict for centuries. (Meertens & Sánchez, 1983; Roldán, 2002) Historically, laws have levied a stiff punishment for participating in an *invasion* (Zamosc, 2006) and while more recent laws have attempted to resettle displaced Colombians on land restored to them, this has not prevented informal and extralegal urban and rural communities from forming a major part of Colombia’s populations. (Summers, 2012) The World Bank has estimated that Bogotá alone has over 1400 informal settlements occupying 24% of its area and housing 22% of its population. Comprising perhaps 10% (although some sources place the number as much larger²⁹) of Bogotá’s population of 8 million, Ciudad Bolívar remains the fastest growing urban district in the city. Between 1993 and 2002, the population of Ciudad Bolívar grew by 50%, more than twice as much as the city as a whole. Population grew from 35,000 residents in 1973 to at least 567,861 in 2005 (Rubiano, 2011), completely outpacing weak municipal efforts to help these new Bogotanos achieve citizenship.

Further destabilizing state efforts to deal with the effects of massive immigration due to displacement and economic hardship is that the figures on displacement cases are themselves full of extreme inconsistencies. For example,

²⁹ See Mike Davis (2006) for a number twice that size.
while the Social Solidarity Network, a government agency, reported 97,229
displacement cases through October 2005, the leading displacement and human
rights NGO called CODHES (Human Rights and Displacement Consulting Group,
after its Spanish initials) calculated that 252,801 people had been displaced during
the same period. (A. d. R. Moncada, 2006) Displacement is a politically contested
term because the displaced are viewed as clear-cut victims of the Colombian
conflict, and have official status under national as well as international law,
whereas economic migrants are sometimes characterized as criminals or
delinquents and are generally not seen as deserving of the same sympathies and
rights as the displaced. (Olarte & rua Wall, 2012) Some academic projects have
sought ways in which to incorporate the experience of the displaced into the lived
environment to promote community healing. (Vergara, 2012) Both groups,
however, are at times characterized as ‘interlopers’ when their presence conflicts
with official goals. (Barrios & Lazarevski, 2009)

Violence, malnutrition, illness, drug addiction, and various psychological
maladies associated with trauma and stress are all major problems that afflict the
residents of Ciudad Bolívar. According to recent statistics by neighborhood
released by Bogotá’s forensic medical institute, the Instituto de Medicina Legal,
Ciudad Bolívar remains far and away the most violent neighborhood in the city,
reporting 157 murders during 2010, as compared to 111 in the adjacent and equally
poor neighborhood of Kennedy, and 12 in the wealthy neighborhood of Chapinero,
both communities which have comparable populations to Ciudad Bolívar. (Luque,
2010) The murdered are often young – 69% of those killed in Ciudad Bolívar are
adolescent boys or young men (age 15-25). In fact, assaults were the leading cause of death for residents between 15 and 44 and the second leading cause of death for people aged between 45 and 59. (Echanove, 2004) Bogotá’s recently-ousted mayor, the former guerrilla Gustavo Petro took the unusual step of speaking out publically (Colombian politicians often avoid drawing attention to the degree to which armed actors exercise control over territory and populations) against the practice by paramilitary gangs in Ciudad Bolívar of distributing leaflets informing residents of an upcoming social cleansing directed against the youth of the community. (Rubiano, 2011)

Public space and green space is scarce, underutilized and often viewed as unsafe in Ciudad Bolívar. The district has the lowest level of green space per habitant (1.94m2) and the lowest number of police stations (1 per 100,000 habitants) in the city. (Echanove, 2004) The problem is so grave that even city officials themselves recognize that the crises of access to public space was in effect caused by neglect on the part of municipal leadership.** Furthermore, a bylaw that stipulates that 30-40% of land purchased for new development be dedicated to public space is weakly or not at all enforced. The large number of dependent children per adult in Ciudad Bolívar combined with the lack of officially designated public space means that many children and youth end up utilizing the

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"Ciudad Bolívar, por ejemplo, es una localidad que lleva creciendo 30 años, de manera descontrolada y con poca atención hacia la planeación. Recuperar el espacio público ahí es una tarea de largo plazo: nos tomaría 30 años más para darle el espacio público que se merece." – Ciudad Bolívar, for example, is a neighborhood which has been growing for 30 years in an out-of-control and poorly planned manner. To recuperate public space there is a long-term job – we could need 30 more years to give it the public space it deserves. Blanca Inés Durán, Advocate for Public Space. Quoted in "Bogotá, Al Borde De La Crises Del Espacio Público," El Tiempo (2013).
streets, as has been extensively documented elsewhere in Latin America. (Christensen & O'Brien, 2002; DA MATTA, 1991; de Lima Costa, 2000; Gough & Franch, 2005) Significant scholarship on spatial segregation (T. P. d. R. Caldeira, 2000; Myers & Dietz, 2002; Rotker & Goldman, 2002; Sheriff, 2001) has argued that the proliferation of violence is adding to problems of weakened state legitimacy and citizenship ties, and that the tendency toward the construction of enclaves and the privatization of security and space is too well established to be counteracted by municipal empowerment.

However, as with many aspects of life in Ciudad Bolívar, lived experience is more nuanced than the data above would seem to indicate. For example, many public spaces that are used most heavily are informally designated; they include areas such as El Palo de Ahorcado (the Hangman’s Branch), la Piedra del Muerto, and El Puente de los indios. The political ecology of Ciudad Bolívar is such that a constellation of actors is engaged in complex negotiations around space, capital, identity and access to networks. (Escobar, 2008) And while it is true that city streets are perhaps the predominant public space in use by young people, and that this fact exposes them to danger, it is also true, as I will argue in this study, that some youth have creatively seized on this fact in order to create positive but gritty identities for themselves and for each other as empowered and insurgent urban denizens.

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31 Field Journal, 5 January 2008

32 “It is in an insurgence that begins with the struggle for rights to have a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen’s dignity…These are the citizens who, in the process of building their residential
Juan Pablo II

This neighborhood was ‘founded’ in 1982, meaning that many of the dwellings were constructed in that year on a four or five hundred meter wedge of space between a connector road (built by the city) running close to a ridge line of the surrounding foothills and the extant edge of habitation. Originally, this land belonged to a hacienda owner who had used the land as rotational pasture and continued to do so sporadically after city engineers constructed the above mentioned connector road (Tranversal 20, sometimes called Via Quebrada).

Despite its dense population and typically urban indicators, Juan Pablo II retains a distinct rural character by virtue of being adjacent to the mountain paramo and due to the style of house construction. The neighbourhood was inhabited by invasion, and here is an edited retelling of that event by local resident and elder Jaramillo Ocampo:

[We] would prefabricate pieces of our huts in the backyards of where we were staying and [expose] them to weather in the open so that they would look like older constructions, and so we could make our houses quickly. And we planted yucca and maize to bring so it would seem like we had been there a long time…we secretly occupied the land at night, clearing the bush, and digging an aquifer from the river…When the landowner heard about us, he brought in the police and later some soldiers from the army. With the soldiers came an inspector who wrote down all the details of the case. We resisted, telling them that we should be allowed to stay because we were refugees, but he dispersed us with guns, and some of us were put in jail, but not for long. Then

spaces, not only construct a vast new city but, on that basis, also constitute a polis with a different order of citizenship.” (Holston, 2008, p. 313)
he came with bulldozers and men and knocked down our houses and destroyed our plantings. But a few days later we reorganized and came back. It went like this for a while, back and forth, and some of us started to break his fences to let the cattle escape, and to mix up his herds, and all that. Finally, he agreed to negotiate with us for that piece of land because he didn’t really need it anyway.33

Most of the original occupants of Juan Pablo II were peasants from Tolima, an Andean province of Colombia where leftist peasant organizations such as the ANUC (National Peasant Association of Colombia) were active throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s. (Eckstein & Merino, 2001) Although none of the respondents I spoke to who remembered the invasion were members of these peasant organizations, the way in which the Juan Pablo II invasion proceeded strongly evokes the multidirectionality of land conflicts in rural Colombian departments such as Tolima. These land conflicts do not simply reflect land concentration and municipal or landlord absorption of peasant and/or tenant lands, “but also gains by peasants at the expense of landlords, dispossession of peasants by peasants in factional strife between neighboring rival villages, and recurrent processes of repeasantization in lands that had been sold cheaply or abandoned by other peasants and landlords.” (Zamosc, 2006, pp. 16-17)

Part of the impetus for the surge in land occupation and community building in the higher regions of Ciudad Bolívar came in part because of an Inter-American Development Bank-funded project from 1983 called “Lotes con

Field Journal, 9 January 2008. Despite Ocampo’s reference to an inspector, presumably a city official, I was unable to track down a record of this particular invasion at the municipal archives.
Servicios”, which was an abortive effort on the part of the bank to fund the process by which land could be fairly apportioned, official titles could be established, and infrastructural services could be brought to individual building lots. The project ultimately languished due to a lack of municipal will, lack of sufficient organizational muscle on the part of the IADB, and widespread corruption. However, before the project was abandoned, roads and streets were built (although most left unpaved) that led to these upper regions, and some service infrastructure was put in place, facilitating the construction of self-built communities by economic migrants and conflict refugees.

The consolidation of Juan Pablo II is a story of new, competing populations moving into this neighbourhood from much denser and more fractious neighbourhoods immediately below, such as Barrio San Francisco, currently one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in all of Bogotá. Like Ciudad Bolívar as a whole, Juan Pablo II has a particularly high rate of teenage/adolescent pregnancy, and these new and fragile family nuclei are formed in increasingly fragile living environments, as Bogotá’s current Health Secretary is aware. (Chavez, 2012) Expanding families can rarely afford to move into a bigger house; therefore they add floors to their houses, or expand sideways into shed-like annexes. New residents without established connections to the neighborhood, particularly rootless young men who found themselves in intensive competition elsewhere over living space, social status markers, and scant resources, began

34 Field Journal, 20 December 2007: Notes on Interview with Mercedes Del Carmen Rios, Secretary for Social Integration
appearing in Juan Pablo II in groups in the early 1990s, according to long-time residents. Several of these young men and teenagers formed semi-organized criminal gangs – *pandillas*. (Cardeño, Jiménez, & Avendaño, 2003)

Juan Pablo II’s proximity to mountain egresses and ingresses, and its remoteness from the sphere of city control, made it an attractive thruway and mission staging ground for the FARC’s 55th Front in the 1990s. Apparently, this group of approximately 70 FARC militants never established a permanent base in the area, preferring to stay a few kilometers over the district border in the neighbouring province of Cundinamarca. There are rumours that a small urban youth militia – a *milicia boliviarana* – was developed at the FARC’s behest in order to provide local security and collect monies, and that the 55th Front also cemented ties with certain leftist student groups, although it should be noted here that rumoured ties between student groups and guerrillas have not been substantiated in Colombia since the early 1990s. Whatever the 55th’s purposes might have been, their impact on the neighbourhood of Juan Pablo II was light.

In the mid-1990s, paralleling the extremely rapid growth and expansion of organized paramilitarism in Colombia at large, the structure of social control in Juan Pablo II radically changed. The loosely organized colonists from Tolima who had founded the neighbourhood and who had provided and to some extent enforced informal rules for the community had aged out of positions of influence, and public officials remained entirely absent. A paramilitary group called the Bloque Centauros, a battalion of the Frente Capital, which itself was nominally controlled

35 *Field Journal, 15 December 2007*
at the time by the umbrella organization of the AUC (Valencia Agudelo, 2009),

began systematically moving in to the neighbourhood and establishing control.36

Following the typical pattern used by paramilitary forces, control was exercised

first through creating fear and compliance through intimidation and massacres (the

so-called hot period), then shifting to targeted assassination and the construction of

a patronage and extortionist networked flow of monies, and ultimately through

territorial occupation and patrols (the cold period). (Sanín, 2004, 2008)

Before seeing any paramilitary personnel, multiple residents remember

graffiti appearing in the area (Colombia, 2003-2013) declaring “Death to the

FARC and the ELN (another Colombian Guerilla group)” and “Military Objective

= Criminal Scum” and “AUC appears, guerillas die.” Shortly after the appearance

of this graffiti, several young pandilla (gang) members were selected for

assassination. Threats were made by way of printed and circulated handbills

identifying by photograph and by name those targeted and shortly thereafter,

several of these killings were carried out. Community leaders from Ciudad Bolívar,

organizers of displaced people, and members of an early incarnation of the

Community Media Group this project studied were also assassinated.37 At this time,

the Bloque Centauros seized control over a large sand and gravel pit and concrete

company that was located just to the East of Juan Pablo II – above the community

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It is interesting to note that unlike many paramilitary groups that officially demobilized

and then reconstituted themselves, the Bloque Centauros was one of the few paramilitary groups

never to demobilize at all. Instead, it was wholly absorbed into the Aguilas Negras, which suggests

a commitment to combatant status on the part of the individual fighters.

37

See (Tamara, 2012). This blog is partly written and produced by members of the CMG.
and reached only by a dirt road that leaves Juan Pablo II on a steep incline. No residences border this business. This gravel pit business had originally paid protection money to the paracos, but at some point around 2000 the Bloque Centauros decided it was in their interests to take over the entire operation and force the original owners out. Following this hostile takeover, according to an informant, the buildings and land attached to the gravel pit business became important to large-scale criminal enterprises in which the Bloque Centauros were engaged (possibly used as a narcotics and arms transhipment depot).

Following this sequence of events, an armed contingent of the Bloque Centauros began permanently occupying Juan Pablo II, with several fighters purchasing houses in the neighbourhood, and other fighters, including a combat commander, moving into adjacent communities. After the Bloque Centauros was absorbed into the Aguilas Negras group, following the demobilization of the paramilitaries in 2005 and 2006, a financially important oficina de cobros was set up in Juan Pablo II – a collection point for protection and extortion money gathered from various local enterprises and business people. It became absolutely vital to directly control and police Juan Pablo II as the neighbourhood was converted into a center of power and resources for this paramilitary group. Furthermore, according to the local paramilitary chief, one of the main tactics used by Aguilas fighters to

38

Field Journal, 8 January 2008
avoid detection by state security forces is to mingle with the local population – and this tactic is completely reliant on local support.39

Survey Data of Residents of Juan Pablo II

The first survey question centered on resident civic participation. I sought to discover whether or not residents of this poor, “marginalized” neighbourhood engaged in the types of democratic associationalism that has been identified by other scholars to be a key feature of socio-political dynamics in some Latin American societies. (Hirst, 2013; Oxhorn, 2003; Stepan, 1985) If I did find evidence of significant civil society participation, I felt that this would strengthen my argument that even though they might be politically disengaged, residents of Juan Pablo II would be familiar with the kind of give-and-take process that is the conferring or withholding of political legitimacy to the armed actor. In the event, this is what the survey data showed, as demonstrated in the table below. The fact that a full 93% of respondents reported ties to either a political or a civil society group clearly implies a broad and deep familiarity in the neighbourhood with collective forms of decision-making and consensus-based types of leadership that underpin the concept of political legitimacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resident Participation in Civil Society or</th>
<th>Absolute number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field Journal, 8 January 2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second question in the survey dealt with the legitimacy of the local armed actor. As I show above, other fieldwork has indicated that in Colombia (Ballvé, 2013a, 2013b; Peceny & Durnan, 2006; Sanín, 2004, 2008; Spencer, 2001) armed actors have recently been engaged in political activity, providing or claiming to provide security, and competing with the state for dominance within the areas under their control. This fact, and the history of this society, fraught as it is with different armed groups competing for regional supremacy, is suggestive that legitimacy might be “up for grabs” in Juan Pablo II. But it was necessary to ask residents themselves. As the table below illustrates, residents who responded to the survey clearly viewed the local armed actor as playing a vital role providing order in the community, even if these same respondents also were aware of some negative consequences associated with this role. In my view, this is highly indicative of the presence of legitimacy in relations between residents and the armed actor. 55 out of 73 respondents saw the armed actor as either a temporary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Groups in Juan Pablo II</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents currently or previously a member of a non-political community organization</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents with strong affiliation to a political party or organization</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents with no affiliation, either political or non-political</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
necessity or as a “necessary evil” to maintain order, indicating a level of support that correlates with legitimacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legitimacy of Armed Actor in Juan Pablo II</th>
<th>Absolute number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aguilas a necessary evil to maintain order</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aguilas criminals</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aguilas a temporary necessity until state forces take control</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third question in the survey addresses the question of whether the community media group (CMG) is seen by residents to have an effect on local levels of violence. This question goes straight to the heart of my dissertation question. If residents do not see an effect, or if the effect is seen as the opposite, that the CMG exacerbates community tensions, than any clear conclusion about the impact of the CMG on violence would be seriously called into question. On the other hand, if the survey data corresponded with ethnographic and interview data, than my core argument that the CMG has a curbing effect on violence would clearly be strengthened. As it happens, the survey data is incontrovertible in that it clearly demonstrates a belief by a majority of residents that the CMG lowers levels of violence. On the other hand, a small but significant portion of the respondents reported that the CMG heightened tensions with the gang – a fact I attribute to the relatively direct way in which the CMG leader engaged with the gang, as I show below.
### Perceived Effect of CMG on Levels of Violence in Juan Pablo II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Effect</th>
<th>Absolute number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>El Gritón diminishes violence</em></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El Gritón is responsible for no change in violence</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El Gritón causes conflict between Aguilas and the community</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### The Collective *El Gritón* and Narratives of Legitimacy

In spite of the multifarious and profound challenges faced by the residents of Ciudad Bolívar, this conurbation has a vibrant tradition of strong civil society groups and of insurgent citizenship. By 2003 there were 40 social organizations in Ciudad Bolívar officially registered with the mayor’s office that handled over 1000 projects (Colombia, 2003-2013) funded by, among others, the European Union, the United Nations, the UNHCR, UNICEF, the Red Cross, and the US State Department. The community media group (CMG) of this portion of the study, *Colectivo El Gritón*, was founded by former print journalist and radical community media (Halleck, 2002) practitioner Francisco Cuellár. Francisco first started a left-

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40 Although it is not clear that Francisco would view himself this way, he nonetheless rather neatly fits into Helleck’s theoretical framework.
wing community newspaper called *El Gritón del Barrio* in 1994, and this newspaper continued in one form or another until 2005. This publication focused on collecting and distributing information about locally significant events, with a particular emphasis on issues important to low-paid residents and workers such as health care, education, district level politics, collective action and protest, unionization, and the costs of violence, in particular violence perpetrated by paramilitary groups, rather than civil violence or violence perpetrated by left-wing guerrillas.\(^{41}\)

Francisco has lived in Ciudad Bolívar since 1992, and founded *El Gritón del Barrio* with seed money from a municipal granting institution that gave 731 grants and micro-loans in Bogotá during the period between 1994 and 2008.\(^{42}\) The newspaper, a simply laid-out broadsheet, which ran from 8 to 16 pages in length, had a tiny budget, was designed as a weekly, but in practice, was printed every two weeks and sometimes once per every month. Distribution and layout was handled entirely by volunteers with Francisco dispensing small disbursements of cash to his staff at his discretion. The main stories were also broadcast bi-monthly on the local community radio station *Radio Contagio*.

\(^{41}\) Field Journal, 15 December 2007

\(^{42}\) This branch of the municipal government, the *Districto Desarolla Económica*, has been criticized for not providing sufficient oversight or support in managing these grants and loans. During the course of the research in Bogotá, from Fall 2007 until Spring of 2008, the author never saw a member of the municipal government come to the neighborhood to observe activities, nor was there any correspondence from the Bogotá municipality in evidence. Francisco related that in order to receive his disbursement, he was required to go and meet with his contact and give them a written report of his activities.
Eventually, maintaining the printing press and maintaining a staff which was trained in using old-fashioned plates for layout became untenable due to the proliferation of Internet access, audiovisual tools, and inexpensive printing. In 2004 and 2005, Francisco gradually came to the decision to end the publication of El Gritón del Barrio, and moved directly into the field of journalistic advocacy and education by founding the Colectivo El Gritón, a new media group that focused on blog-writing, social media advocacy, student organizing, audiovisual productions, and one-time or serial publications.

This decision actually benefited Francisco from the point of view of funding, in that he was able to compete for grants that were streamed towards youth education in communications, social reintegration of delinquents and juvenile offenders, and the consolidation of peri-urban communities. Bogotá has seen a succession of left-of-center mayors (or at least those that claim this political space), and funding streams for these types of community programs and civil society groups have been steady since the mid-1990s in Bogotá. Private sector interests have also begun moving into this type of funding space, obtaining favourable social capital internationally as well as benefiting from tax credits for charitable giving recently put in place by right-of-center politicians that are modeled on the US tax code. Cuéllar was able to attract more interested and committed young people to his organization as he broadened the types of media he provided funding for and access to.

In interviews, residents reiterated their support for Colectivo El Gritón,

43 Field Journal, 5 January 2008
saying it was neither of the state nor a business ("ni del gobierno ni un negocio"),
and several said that they would consider helping if they had the time, affirming
the two narratives of legitimacy I call the mediator and the good path. At least
three residents claimed that Colectivo El Gritón was dedicated to representing their
interests, describing in terms of the narrative of connectivity, as local resident
Julián explained:

The collective is concerned with what we are concerned – when a new
business comes, or when there is a sale on cheap clothes or food, it tells us. Also, when someone’s child does well in sports at school, we learn this from the collective. And also, if there is a problem with the militia, if someone is hurt unjustly, or if they will not listen, we know the newspaper will speak with our voices, with the community’s voice, which is usually silent.44

The citizen journalists in Juan Pablo II produce a variety of stories, some of which deal with non-threatening topics like local sports and business opportunities. Other stories discuss the damage to families whose members were murdered – families which, by the rules of Colombia’s internecine and generalized conflict could be understood as enemies of the local paramilitary group, the Aguilas Negras. Furthermore, occasional stories condemning violence appear on blogs written by members of the CMG and on local community radio stations in Colombia. (Murillo, 2003; Rodríguez, 2011) The CMG is collectively operated; no editorial control is exercised outside of the staff, many of whom can only work part time, as the positions are volunteer or very low paying. However, funding has been secured for the last several years through Bogotá’s municipal government, and a small office exists in Juan Pablo II, with some permanent equipment.

44 Field Journal, 15 December 2007
As I show in the table below, the network of support for the CMG is narrow but deep; it is funded through municipal agencies that have been effective in capturing international funding, and have been funding community media for almost 20 years. In the table below we can trace the overall task environment of this network of different organizations and groups and their contribution to the activity of the media group. Since the context I describe here is notable in part because of the inherent dangers and obstacles to doing community media work it is important to show how the CMG is able to function in terms of its staffing, funding, and the contributions in the form of commitment that it receives from its network of supporters. With this funding and the small but energetic pool of expertise in the organization, they are able to sponsor and even shape several influential grass-roots media groups. These groups include an important blog that writes about community issues and explores structural problems in the commercialized media environment, a documentary filmmaking collective that teaches the craft of shooting, editing, and storytelling, and a social media protest group. The local community center also makes available its space to the CMG, providing conference space and workshop and tutorial space to the collective.
**Profile of Community Media Group’s Members, Volunteers, Participants and Supporters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Job Description</th>
<th>Financial</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CMG: Colectivo El Gritón</strong></td>
<td>Journalist, fundraiser, network hub, community advocate</td>
<td>International NGO, public and some private monies distributed to CMG by municipal agency</td>
<td>Full time, “all-consuming”***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blog El Macarenamiazo</strong></td>
<td>Opinion journalists, liaison with local political groups</td>
<td>Occasional grant/revenue sharing dispensed by leader</td>
<td>Strong support, full information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Media Groups</strong></td>
<td>Citizen journalists, organizers</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Moderate to strong support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documentary Group</strong>*</td>
<td>Production and education</td>
<td>Equipment purchased by CMG, two designated grants from municipal agency</td>
<td>Shared workspace, semi-independent, strong support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Service Providers</strong></td>
<td>Reconstruction of community ties: nutrition, health, education are main foci</td>
<td>Bogota Humana, Alianza Publica Privada, federal government, UNESCO</td>
<td>Varying support – sought strategic alliance, also looked for alternate partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Municipal Liaison</strong></td>
<td>Prepare reports on funded groups, make recommendations regarding funding (mostly followed depending on city budget)</td>
<td>Full-time city employee with staff – a patronage appointment that changes with each administration</td>
<td>Moderate to weak support – sought unsuccessfully to cut funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Researcher worked in this capacity for study period
**Researcher worked part-time in this capacity

w with researcher January 8, 2008

During the course of the study, the members and journalists of the CMG go about their tasks mostly unmolested. In one incident, members of the CMG sought dangerous and incriminating information on the death of a health-care worker, perhaps murdered by Aguilas Negras, and were confident they would find out what
truly happened.\textsuperscript{45} Even though people in this neighbourhood are very afraid of violence directed against them by the \textit{Aguilas Negras}, they still talk to these community reporters, suggesting that they perceive the CMG in terms of the narrative of legitimacy I call \textit{the mediator} – in other words, acknowledging that the CMG is in some way “above the fray.” Community members have spoken before to these reporters, and have not been targeted for violence, despite the fact that their comments criticizing the militias have been published. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the skills of Francisco Cuellár at mobilizing \textit{the mediator} narrative of legitimacy with the \textit{Aguilas}, curbing their tendency to use violence as a problem-solving tactic to deal with these pesky journalists.

\textbf{Francisco Cuellár}

In March of 2008, Francisco Cuellár\textsuperscript{46}, lead citizen journalist for CMG of Juan Pablo II looks across the street at the headquarters (\textit{quartel}) of the local branch of the ‘re-mobilized’ paramilitary group, the \textit{Aguilas Negras}, and sighs. “I guess I’m going to have to go back in there alone,” he says.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Field Journal, 4 March 2008}

\textsuperscript{46} As a community journalist whose operational capacity is dependent on funding from a single municipal source, which is in turn is funded by international NGOs, Francisco is more akin to what would be considered a community activist in the West.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Field Journal, 4 March 2008}, Francisco had been in long-running discussions with local paramilitaries over a number of neighbourhood issues.
For the two weeks prior, Francisco, with the tacit and sometimes explicit support of many residents, battled the local gang leadership to permit a municipally funded traveling soup kitchen dedicated to seniors to operate in their neighbourhood. As aforementioned, the neighbourhood Juan Pablo II, is located high in the hills in the large conurbation of mostly informal communities to the Southeast of Bogotá called Ciudad Bolívar. This neighbourhood, and others in Ciudad Bolivar, contains large numbers of elderly refugees, pushed off of their rural farms by violence, adverse economic conditions, and demographic shifts. Many of these elderly refugees live in the utmost fragile economic conditions, some on the edge of starvation.

The content produced by the CMG is, during the course of this study, mostly dedicated to community events, student gatherings, and small-scale advertising, and makes few explicit references to violence and little mention of the role the paramilitary group plays in the community. Occasionally, however, as is the case with the soup kitchen for seniors, the collective takes a position in opposition to that held by the gang, and forcefully advocates in its publications for its point of view, without mentioning the gang explicitly. In the case of the senior soup kitchen, prominent members of the community side at least tacitly with Francisco – affirming the connectivity narrative of the CMG. This journalistic advocacy leads to direct conflicts of interest between gang leadership on the one hand and Francisco and his supporters within the community on the other, conflicts which implicitly and explicitly involve the threat of violence. It is these conflicts of sensitivities had begun to run high, and he had been warned not to bring the researcher or any other members of the CMG to subsequent discussions.
interests and others that lead to face-to-face negotiations and discussions between Francisco and members of the *Aguilas Negras*.

Cuellár is a stocky Colombian in his middle 40s from a mining family originally from Boyacá province to the North of Bogotá. He can adopt the discourse of a community development leader, and did so frequently in conversations with the author. He speaks fluently of alternative types of communication, augmenting self-esteem in the community (*un sentido de pertenencia*), of a community-constructed journalism edifice – *un construcción para todos entre todos* – and of “de-marginalization.” He claims to have radically democratized the newspaper, so that the organizational structure is no longer top-down, no longer composed of *un administrador y sus peones*. Cuellár talks knowledgeably with the author of the importance of participation and empowered citizenship in models of social systems, and how to remain apolitical in order to project a neutral stance even when advocating for a particular community goal. This last point is the underlying principle upon which the narrative of legitimacy *the mediator* is constructed; on the one hand, a skilled narrator of legitimacy like Cuellár is clearly pursuing normative goals that benefit residents, strengthen community ties and increase and inter-subjective sense of habitus (Mouzelis, 2007), on the other, he is projecting a typically journalistic independence and objectivity or neutrality that can insulate him and his organization from charges of co-optation or political bias.

Cuellár is particularly skilled at adopting different discourses when

48 Field Journal, 7 February 2008
communicating on differing subjects and with different people. The author observes him at ease with the manager of a slaughter house casually discussing the necessity of removing some “disposable” (*desechable*) youth who had been stealing from the slaughter houses’ customers. Violence is implied in this discussion. Neither is Cuellár particularly uncomfortable interacting with the *Aguilas Negras*, except when a conflict emerged between him and their organization. He and at least two members of the leadership *Aguilas Negras* are on casual greeting terms, and the preferred relation between him and the illegal armed actor in his neighborhood seems to be a form of polite ignoring. Cuellár was also well known and well liked throughout the neighborhood, and his method of reporting is to wander around the area talking to anybody who wasn’t busy. In this way he is at least acquainted with a significant proportion of residents, and his assistance is invaluable for the author in terms of finding willing participants in this study.

Cuellár tells the author on a number of occasions that he had considered a political career but had thought it too dangerous, and emphatically believes that journalism offered him more protection. When asked why he thinks this is the case at first he laughs and says that his mouth would get him in trouble. Then he says, “I don’t know. I guess maybe we journalists, bit by bit, over a long time, we build *shields* (*bareras*) of words. And sometimes we can shelter (*proteger*) others behind these shields.” Cuellár then attempts to explain to the author how words, or narratives, could protect him from bullets (*plomo*). His explanation, full of digressions, focuses on how the *Aguilas Negras* need the neighborhood in order to
operate successfully. The neighbourhood’s “marginality” or isolation is essential to the armed actor’s survival. They also need compliance from the local population, and to manufacture this, offer to provide order in the community, un ordén local. By talking about this “local order” in his publications and by disseminating this conversation throughout the neighbourhood on his rounds, Cuellár believes that he is creating a type of horizontal accountability that holds the Aguilas Negras in check, partly, in my view, through mobilizing the narrative of the mediator, by which he can claim a neutral and thus more effectively critical role in conferring or withholding local legitimacy from the paramilitaries. He also believes that if he were to cross an invisible line, and be in direct competition with Aguilas Negras as a community leader rather than as a journalist, his safety would be immediately forfeit. His personal safety and the operational capacity of his organization depend on making the Aguilas Negras believe that he and his organization mediate the legitimacy of the Aguilas Negras as a controlling organization in the community.

One important occasion which illustrates this mobilized narrative of the mediator for Cuellár and the CMG occurs as the time period for the study is drawing to a close. A municipally funded program called “Lunch for the Grandparents” recently began organizing free lunches to be distributed to elderly and impoverished residents of Ciudad Bolívar. It is the first beneficent state benefaction.

49 Field Journal, 10 January 2008

50 Field Journal, 10 January 2008
program that many residents of the upper neighbourhoods in Ciudad Bolívar had ever encountered. The municipal program enlisted the help of local community leaders and organizers, because there are few government workers willing to enter these neighbourhoods, and no municipally owned buildings to stage the lunches. In Juan Pablo II, as is true of many neighbourhoods in Ciudad Bolívar, unemployed, abandoned, despondent and deeply impoverished elders made up a disproportionate number of population. Overwhelmingly, the neighbourhood residents support the lunch program. However, the Aguilas Negras resist state incursion into the neighbourhood of any kind, and they shot and killed a community organizer from another neighbourhood who had disregarded warnings and was attempting to establish a base from which to distribute the food.

At this point Cuellár steps in, after being approached by numerous residents, and holds several talks with an Aguilas Negras leader. Prior to this, Cuellár petitioned the researcher to negotiate with him on behalf of the community. But it became dangerous for the researcher at this time to be in the neighbourhood, and this course of action seemed unadvisable, so the conclusion of the incident was related to the researcher over the phone. According to Cuellár, although the Aguilas Negras is unwilling to change their decision about not admitting any city-sponsored programs, they agreed to step up food allowances to the elderly in the neighbourhood, and for the moment at least, were honouring this commitment. They did so, Cuellár, related, because if they did not, he threatened to destroy their “honor,” a concept certainly related to political legitimacy, within the
Alvaro Rojas arrived at participation in the CMG through a tortuous route. Born in Juan Pablo II, he and his three siblings were raised in the most economically precarious of circumstances by his single mother. His youngest sister suffers from physical congenital disorders that caused her to become severely disabled, and left their mother struggling to find options for her daughter’s care. His mother was consumed with anxiety for her daughter and dedicated virtually all of her limited earnings as a shopkeeper into trying to fund medical care and home care for a single member of the family. This meant that Alvaro and his other siblings had very limited material and emotional support as children. Alvaro describes this foundational experience as providing the greatest single reason for his becoming involved with a gang and becoming a frequent drug user as an adolescent.

My relationship with Alvaro is vital to this phase of the research project. Of all the informants at the Juan Pablo II CMG, he is the most willing to dedicate time to helping me, and the single best source of raw information about the lives and landscape that surround me over the course of this study. Despite having been formerly a member of a gang targeted by paramilitary forces, Alvaro appears to be on good terms with the local Aguilas Negras contingent, and confidently leads me

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Field Journal, 27 March 2008
passed armed men on our journeys through Juan Pablo II and beyond, at times saluting these fighters by name. There is no question that he is confidently mobilizing the narrative of legitimacy I call *connectivity*, and affirming his status as belonging to a group more or less safe from violence. He is also a key member of the CMG, in part because of his encyclopaedic local knowledge of the webbing of upper neighbourhoods of which Juan Pablo II is but one section, but also because he makes himself available to help with various media projects almost every day. A rapper himself, Alvaro has recently declared his intention to form a new NGO dedicated to cultivating the talent of local rappers and other street artists and bringing these young artists to a broader audience in Colombia. He has the full support of the CMG for this project. As he explores how this might be possible, Alvaro has started talking with key funding agents of Ciudad Bolívar’s civil society groups, individuals that he introduces to me and who are able to explain the way organizations such as the CMG are funded, which is an important subset of information for this study.

However, Alvaro is also a complex figure. First, there are times that I sense he is not telling me the truth, although I never catch him in an outright lie. Second, he has no visible means of support beyond tiny allotments from the CMG, yet he seems to be relatively well off, in that he lives alone in a small apartment, he can afford to drink beer any time he chooses and eat out every day at inexpensive restaurants. This fact is suspicious in the broader context of extreme poverty that surrounds us, as other informants point out to me. If he is being paid surreptitiously, it is by an organization whose intentions and purposes are
intentionally kept secret, such as a state security or a paramilitary group, purposes that could well clash with the CMG’s stated goals of nurturing an informed and empowered local citizenry. Third, he is a role model to some of the younger kids from the high school involved with the CMG who look up to him and admire the authenticity of his tough background. However, he has committed very serious and violent crimes, including robbery, assault and murder. It is possible that he is inadvertently encouraging some of these kids to expose themselves to danger by example. It is also possible that his criminal history could raise ethical problems for a researcher with participant-observer status such as myself. Other informants might be intimidated or frightened when I am in his company, or I could inadvertently expose Alvaro or someone else to violence (the local Aguilas Negras explicitly target delinquent youth as do certain segments of the police) by possessing recordings of his past criminal actions and those of his named accomplices, or even that I might personally become embroiled in a violent scenario by being seen as his associate and friend.  

Alvaro is an extremely open informant from the beginning of our interview sessions, and despite the fact that he experiences remorse recalling some of his actions and choices, he will speak of serious criminal offenses, including those for which he has never been prosecuted. Furthermore, he will eagerly engage with me in a discussion about the CMG or any other subject he is familiar with at almost any time of my choosing. He is a 20-year-old man, tall and lean, with dark hair

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In the event, none of these things took place to my knowledge. But other researchers have been forced to navigate just these types of problems. See Rodgers (2007) and Winton (2007).
kept carefully short and gelled, and a square face with lively features that continually seem to be in motion. Alvaro is a highly changeable person, one minute projecting the stoic, even menacing toughness of a gang member, the next turning to sorrow, self-pity and hopelessness, then showing ebullience and cheerful perseverance against adversity. Occasionally, he tries out a small moustache over the course of my time in Ciudad Bolívar, only to decide to shave it off. Because Alvaro is restless and seems very attached to the streets, we often conduct our discussions in the open air, moving about the neighbourhoods in the upper reaches of Eastern Ciudad Bolivar. He is apparently well-known to many residents of these neighbourhoods, and it becomes clear to me as I follow him on his rounds, that he has not abandoned many of the practices that governed his life as a gang member (although he no longer consumes heroin, methamphetamines, or the cocaine derivative called basuco, he is still an avid smoker of cigarettes and drinker of beer) but through working for the CMG he may have found a way to transform these practices in such a way that they have become part of a more self-actualizing set of actions or at the very least less violent and destructive.

Alvaro’s specific role in the CMG organization is primarily to gather information. Although he is not illiterate, his writing skills are poor, perhaps at a sixth-grade level. Francisco will have him write a paragraph of information on a particular subject, and then this paragraph will be extensively re-written, usually by Francisco himself, depending on whether it is for print, radio broadcast, or voice-
over for the documentary archive. When a member of the CMG becomes aware of particular event or initiative that they determine to be important, Alvaro will be dispatched as a kind of scout or ambassador. First of all, he simply locates where the event is taking place, which can be difficult in and of itself in the labyrinthine neighborhoods of Ciudad Bolívar. Then he introduces himself and the CMG to the key people involved. And finally, he will often go directly into the community where the event is taking place to find out how local residents feel and think. All of this information he reports back to the CMG in detail. Through this set of tasks, we can clearly see the mobilization of legitimacy narratives which allow him to feel safe in the gathering of information – not only is he part of a connectivity, but he is also a member of the mediators, in that he can be trusted to gather information neutrally.

On one of our rambles around a nearby neighbourhood, on our way to gather information for the CMG on a public-private initiative organized by the city government to fund maternal education, Alvaro sees a corner that was the main post of his particular territory when he was a member of a gang. We stop for a moment, I pull out my voice recorder, and he describes both dealing drugs and consuming them as an activity that bound him to his compatriots of the street – por

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53  Field Journal, 10 January 2008
54  Field Journal, 15 January 2008
55  See (M. Flórez, 2005) for a description of interconnected social groups in these neighborhoods.
fin no era solamente yo pero muchos parceros con quien consumir y compartir mis penas – for him it was in fact a kind of relief to join with others who felt as plagued by emotional problems as he. Staring at this non-descript corner of a residential street, and obviously reliving past experiences, Alvaro goes on to relate to me how he came to get his start as a rapper:

It was around this time that I started hanging out with some guys who collected cardboard for recycling. They always had money for weed, and we would get together at their house and listen to music and smoke. They had a recording device, just a simple thing, and they had started writing raps and singing them over pre-recorded stuff, like old salsa songs by Grupo Niche and reggaeton. And then I started writing raps about some things that were going on up here in the neighborhoods and people really liked them. And eventually we decided to take our songs to those guys at the station [Radio Contagio].

The aforementioned Radio Contagio was at the time more traditionally what is thought of as a community media project in that it did not solicit or receive any significant advertising revenue, did not offer any services for hire, was funded through grants and public money, and staffed mostly by volunteers. However, even then Contagio was an ambitious, growth-orientated media organization that provided a hub for grass roots networking among local people interested in community media and those interested in branching into more profit-orientated models of media production. It was in the offices of Contagio that Alvaro was first introduced to Francisco Cuellár, who was at the studio to broadcast a weekly synopsis from his new community newspaper.

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56 Field Journal, 15 January 2008
Contagio broadcasts a bi-weekly program in which they gave airtime to local Bogotano rappers (usually from the poorer neighborhoods, as young musicians with wealthier backgrounds from Bogotá tend to style themselves as DJs), and this program provides an aspirational structure for local youth, according to Alvaro. To do a show on Contagio in which you featured your own raps and those of your friends meant garnering huge social capital among certain youth groups and beyond. (Acosta & Radiofónica, 2006) But, Alvaro assures me, not just anyone could do a show – you had to be good, he says with pride. It becomes clear to me from Alvaro’s story in an environment where poor youth were dehumanized and targeted for extra-judicial killing by police, death-squads, and other controles internos, a system of valuation was nevertheless constructed by youth that permitted for concrete and achievable measures of success and validation.

Rapping about life and struggle in the poor neighborhoods has an established history in Bogotá, and mention of rapping as an empowering and definitional group activity among Ciudad Bolívar’s youth can be found in articles in the mainstream national newspaper as far back as the early 1990s. (Rotker & Goldman, 2002, p. 125) While talking about this period of his life, Alvaro becomes energized and enthralled by his own story, and it is clear (as will emerge out of interviews with other CMG members) that even amidst the degradation, addiction, and life-threatening danger of living as a criminal delinquent on the streets, there existed a kind of dramatic, narrational redemption in his life, a storyline that made the ongoing suffering make some kind of sense.57

57 The association of an earlier, edgier time in Ciudad Bolivar with a purity of purpose or a
On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that these stories may not be factual. Alvaro is caught up in a classic postmodern experience of being enmeshed in a web of representation from which it is difficult to untangle his own experiences. In this case, a TV program entitled *Pandillas, Guerra y Paz II* was in production during the course of this research project. Borrowing liberally from Brazilian and American versions of the gangster tale, this program dramatizes the lives of gang members and drug dealers operating in Ciudad Bolívar, and is the second installment of an earlier, highly successful series which first aired in 1999-2000. Similarly to the first series, this program uses non-professional actors who are current or former gang members both as supporting cast members and as production advisors. Alvaro is aware of the production; he is familiar with some of the former and active gang members hired by the production team, as well as the locations of the shoots, and even some of the ‘true’ stories upon which plot lines are based. As a boy, he watched the original series, which successfully raised consciousness on a national level about lives of young gangsters in the sense that the challenges of life and work were more straightforward is also reflected in a jeremiad against the corruption and cooption of community media projects written in *El Macarenazoo*, the community media blog produced in part by members of the CMG. A writer for the blog tells of an earlier time of unity in the face of violence: “Aunque en esta época la localidad era una de los más violentas, ya que asesinaron a varios líderes sociales, desaparecieron jóvenes que participaban de estos espacios, la comunidad en general se organizó en defensa de los derechos humanos...” (Tamara, 2012)

“In any case, the virtual camera is in our heads. No need of a medium to reflect our problems in real time: every existence is telepresent to itself. The TV and the medi long since left their media space to invest ‘real’ life from the inside… we have all swallowed our receivers and this produces intense interference on the account of the excessive proximity of life and its double…” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 26)
neighborhoods of Ciudad Bolívar, but which inevitably glorified these lives, even while trying to accurately depict their destructiveness. (Bogue, 1993; Mayer, 2003a) Broadly speaking, the lives of gangsters as they are represented in media productions, even those that try for gritty realism, are consciously made more glamorous than these lives as they are lived – a fact which Alvaro stated on several occasions to me, but a fact which he also ignored when describing his own life as a gang member.

After meeting him a few times at the radio station, Francisco Cuellár invited Alvaro to work for his new community newspaper called *El Gritón del Barrio* (later changed to the CMG *Collectivo El Gritón*), gathering information and helping to put together articles, and offered him a small stipend to do so (less than $2 USD per day he worked). Alvaro tells me that for more than two years he continued to live on the streets and function as a gang member and an addict while working for Francisco. He admits that he thought about robbing Francisco on two occasions during this period when he was desperate for drugs, even going so far as to set him up for a snatch-and-grab theft before changing his mind and calling it off at the last second. I ask Alvaro what he thinks led to the changes in his life, to his

59 According to *El Tiempo*, the show “converted itself into a pedagogical space with which to teach the country about the problems of delinquency.” ("EL CASO DE UNIDAD INVESTIGATIVA," 2000)

60 The best visual illustration of the contrast and connective tissue between representation and reality of gangs in Ciudad Bolívar that this researcher has seen is a photo essay produced by the photographer Philippe Revelli who was for a time an embedded observer with members of the CMG. See Online Appendix: photos used by permission of author.
quitting the gang and drugs and to his efforts to move into the NGO sector, and he
tells me it was first the rapping and then working for community media. I ask why
and he tells me that it was through rapping that he saw himself for the first time
clearly as an individual and it was through community media work that he saw
himself as a member of a group – *era como rapero que veo mi mismo verdadero y
era como periodista comunitario que veo yo como un miembro de un grupo.*61 By
this he seems to mean that writing songs about his life caused him to critically
observe the individual choices that he was making, and working and writing for *El
Gritón* helped him to see the forces outside himself that were shaping his life and
actions and the lives and actions of others in similar situations. If it was his own
“problems” that led him down the path to delinquency and addiction, he tells me, it
is also true that until Francisco appeared, he had few if any avenues through which
he could help himself change.

Only at the end of our conversations together, does Alvaro reveal the most
essential component of his commitment to the CMG. He relates that some time
after abandoning the gang, he began to receive death threats from the *Aguilas
Negras*, as did several of his former compatriots in the *pandilla*. Shots were fired at
him as he returned home from a birthday party. He fled the neighborhood, and
contacted Francisco. According to both Cuéllar and Alvaro, the leader of the CMG
made contact with the paramilitaries and explained the role Alvaro now had within
the organization. Initially the gang was reluctant to revoke the ‘death sentence’ it

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“…it was as a rapper that I got to know who I really was as an individual, and is as
a community journalist that I see who I am as a member of a group.” *Field Journal*,
21 January 2008
had passed on these former members of a youth gang, and only after Cuéllar invoked his threat to the group’s local legitimacy did the fighters relent and promise safe passage for Alvaro and his two friends back into the neighborhood.  

Over the course of multiple interviews with Alvaro, I begin to grasp the essential contradictions of the space he occupies. On the one hand, his violent past is essential to the construction of his identity as a sort of ‘expert’ of the underground life of Juan Pablo II; yet, on the other, he must explicitly renounce violence in order to have a chance at remaking a viable future for himself as an NGO worker (it seems to me that his very survival is at stake in his renunciation of violence). In a further contradiction, Alvaro is well aware that the life of a gang member in Ciudad Bolívar is very far from glamorous, despite the media representations that saturate his pop culture environment. However, he himself often becomes a participant in the narrational process by which gang life is made attractive, contributing to this replicative form. Alvaro is interpolated between two worlds, and constantly negotiating an uneasy truce between them. It is nonetheless starkly apparent, both from observation by this researcher and from his own testimony, that long-term membership in the CMG has lessened violence in Alvaro’s case, and quite possibly is responsible for preserving his life. But the CMG has also provided a way in which the violence of his past can be made useful, as experiential data that makes him an expert navigator of a dangerous world, and it has given him a valid way to reject violence – to find validation

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Field Journal, 17 January 2008
through his skills as a journalist, to be both on the good path but also an integral part of the connectivity.

**Anti-FARC Facebook Protests**

In January of 2008, during the early stages of this research project, a 33-year-old mechanical engineer from Baranquilla named Oscar Morales made a Facebook page called “Un Milion de Voces contra las Farc” with some friends. This page rapidly became the centrifugal point for a cyclonic global protest movement. Morales set up the Facebook page in response to the latest skullduggery on the part of the FARC guerrilla group, which claimed in the fall of 2007 that it was negotiating to release a young boy known as Emmanuel who had been born in captivity to a high-profile kidnapping victim. It turned out the boy been abandoned by the guerrillas two years earlier at the age of three, malnourished and unidentified, and was taken into foster care in Bogotá. (York, 2008) The FARC had engaged in a long process of negotiation over the boy’s release, involving heads of state from neighboring countries, all while not even holding the boy. The revelation of this cynical ploy (and the subsequent rescue of other high-profile captives) caused a devastating blow to the FARC’s already feeble levels of legitimacy among Colombians. (G. Miles, 2008)

Facebook was at the time relatively new to Colombians, but nonetheless the social media platform demonstrated enormous organizing capacity in terms of rapid mobilization. The protest movement turned out to be the biggest in the
country’s history, as 4.8 million people demonstrated against the FARC in 365 marches throughout the country, and smaller marches took place in Europe, Asia and the United States – all just weeks after Morales’ page first went online. (York, 2008) Despite this tidal bore of anger unleashed (peacefully) against the FARC, not all participants in this protest movement were comfortable with the exclusively anti-FARC focus of most of the protesters. Some journalists noted that certain Colombian civil and political groups participated in the mass movement but chose to protest against the use of violence and kidnapping in general, or even to protest over the injustices they perceived to be at the root of the Colombian conflict rather than the FARC alone. (York, 2008) Members of the Colombian CMG in this study organized one such civil society protest group.

During this period of national rapid mass mobilization, a politically active youth group gelled in the so-called Altas (heights) neighborhoods of Ciudad Bolívar, including Juan Pablo II, under a Facebook page titled Colectivo Juvenil Comunicación Alternativa (this was later to become Colectivo Juvenil Bakata). The avowed purpose of this group was to participate in the marches and demonstrations, but in so doing to draw attention to how the conflict overall impacted Colombian youth – not to just point out that the FARC were actors operating in bad faith. Although Francisco Cuellár, leader of the CMG, was not the only community journalist involved in providing guidance and encouragement to this group, he was the single most important, according to a group organizer.63

63 Field Journal, 22 February 2008
Initially, the group sought to interest young people who might be developing political consciousness or who just liked the idea of participating in a march. The group organizers did so by unabashedly seeking to recruit teenagers who participated in an after school workshop run by the CMG in which basic journalistic techniques of news-gathering and interviewing on camera were taught to interested high school students (some of these students attended these workshops because parents and school administrators were worried about their after-school activities). Later, the group began meeting regularly to educate, articulate and learn from each other about the challenges young people in conflict-prone parts of Ciudad Bolívar had to deal with. The group staged several warm-up marches and protests, and began to coordinate with other groups who were gearing up for the big protest themselves. Finally, the group participated in the coordinated march in downtown Bogotá that was synchronized with all the other protests in Colombia and around the world. In all of these activities, the social media group (SMG) was forced to deal with the threats they faced from illegal armed actors in the neighborhoods, especially when they decided to make the focus of their protests broader than the FARC. The researcher attended several of these meetings and marches.

**Ethnography of the SMG**

One of the key organizers of the SMG, Silvia Moreno, was initially very resistant to the presence of an adult Anglo researcher at foundational group
meetings for young Latin Americans from poor backgrounds. Silvia was quite vocal about her objections when I first posed the question of whether or not I could observe, saying that the young people would not feel comfortable with someone like me around – *ellos no sientan tranquillo con la presencia de una persona como Ud.* She went on to say that my presence would actually disturb (*molestar*) some of the teenagers she wanted to join her group. Although she ultimately agreed to allow me to be present, observe, take notes and record (voices only), she turned out to be absolutely correct in her assessment of the initial constraints my presence placed on the group. The following entry from my field notes illustrates this:

*Field Journal, 15 January 2008.* Arrived for my first meeting with the protest group [SMG] today in the classroom at the Colegio today, and the moment I walk through the door, the laughter and elevated, excited voices I heard from down the hall ceased and an incredibly awkward silence descends…The kids, some of whom were sitting on the tables, or standing and chattering animatedly when I entered, grudgingly take their seats and stare rigidly ahead, refusing to meet my eyes. Two boys simply walk out. I have the feeling I made a terrible mistake in pushing to be a part of this. I can feel Silvia’s annoyance from across the room and I am sympathetic with her frustration with me…Embarrassed, I consider leaving and terminating this phase of research.

However, after finding a place to sit in the back of the classroom, and withdrawing into the role of the unobtrusive observer, the environment in the classroom began to warm up. First, Silvia enquired how many students present were familiar with the work of the CMG, and a little over half of those present (26 in total) raised their hands in the affirmative. As the group took shape over time, I noticed that most of
the core membership was drawn from this initial group who had acknowledged that they knew about the CMG.

The high school is *Colegio Aborizadora Alta*, and it is the school that most students who live in the upper-most neighbourhoods of this South-eastern section of Ciudad Bolívar attend. All of the communities in which the students live are or have been illegal or informal in nature, and the transportation networks, infrastructure, built environment and city services that surround the school reflect this. This means that the students who attend this school are highly acclimatized to living in a “marginal” area, and are used to the sets of informal rules and the informal institutions that govern everyday life in these neighbourhoods. The exception to this is their school. Although the *Colegio* suffers from privations of almost every sort – power and water were shut off on three occasions while I was on the premises and scholastic and sport materials are in drastically short supply – it nevertheless remains a high-value institution in which students and teachers approach their respective roles with a great deal of seriousness and commitment. Students and teachers at the high school are aware of its reputation as a place of delinquency, danger and high-risk behaviours and instead of attempting to refute this narrative, they embrace it.64 In other words, according to the lead informant of this case study, the teachers and students of *Aborizadora Alta* collectively foster the creation of a resilient, gritty, urban identity among the student body, an identity that does not shirk from the dysfunction and neglect that characterize aspects of

64 The slogan of the school is *Corre el Riesgo*, or “Run the Risk.”
life in the local neighborhoods, but that seeks improvements and positive change in whatever ways possible.  

According to the student membership of the newly formed SMG, the school is a core integrative symbol (more so than the police, the various community churches, or health care workers) of formal civic participation. A recent large scale research project conducted by a municipal agency in cooperation with international aid groups and led by Colombian psychologists and sociologists confirms the centrality of *colegio* in local conceptions of citizenship. {RODRÍGUEZ, 2005 #805} This data is not gathered by means of a questionnaire or interviews given by the researcher, but instead is introduced by the organizers of the SMG as a topic for group discussion regarding membership views of the institutions of the district. All those present for the above discussion agree that the school is the single most important institution in their lives and the one in which they see the most opportunity for themselves. Importantly, the discussion moves on to establish consensus within the group that one of the reasons for why the school is so central is through its openness to extracurricular groups and programs such as the SMG itself. This researcher witnesses substantial evidence that practices which empower young people are being established at the school and in the broader civic culture of Ciudad Bolívar. Student/youth cultural interests are actively cultivated through local groups and institutions, both as a conscious strategy to capture youth

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*Field Journal, 27 March 2008* An overlap with the CMG’s tactic of mobilizing a narrative of legitimation and presupposing a commonly held gritty urban identity to protect journalists and citizens can be identified in the way the school works to create a viable identity for its student body.
engagement and also because of an apparent commitment to principles of democratic, citizen-based participation.\footnote{See Online Appendix} This lends support to the above statement about the formation of student identity made by this case study’s lead informant.

Silvia and other members of the Juan Pablo II CMG help the Colegio Aborizadora Alta develop its website before convening the SMG group around the FARC protests of 2008, and although the website remains very much under construction as of this writing, it contains a popular message board used by students to post and discuss important features of their lives including unemployment, hip-hop ways of thinking, Rastafarian religion, Goth music and its ethos, soccer hooliganism, domestic violence, teenage motherhood, and drug addiction.\footnote{Anonymous, "El Mundo De La Droga," Que Opinas???? (2010), vol. of http://www.iedaborizadoraalta.org/} Furthermore, the SMG meetings result in a series of essays written by student membership and edited by teachers that were published in the El Gritón magazine online which deal directly with the habitus of the local adolescent
These essays discuss frankly the problems that adolescents in these neighbourhoods face daily, problems that are often stigmatized in Colombian society as signs of moral, social or intellectual degeneracy or even used as rationales for targeted killing. (Human Rights Watch (Organization), 2003; Kirk, 1994) The fact that these socially stigmatized behaviours are discussed, written about, published and distributed underscores how a narrative strategy of legitimization through a discursive strategy of openness and non-violent confrontation is used by community media groups to interpose between citizens and the violence that surrounds them.

The SMG’s media output such as the Facebook group, published essays, and radio broadcasts is striking in terms of how quickly it is produced and how successfully it resists the modalities of shame, fear, apathy and hopelessness that are powerful valences among the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of Colombian society. Much of this success is achieved through online and in-person group discussions, focused brainstorming, collaborative planning sessions, and social gatherings led by Silvia and two other CMG members who were graduates of the high school and now attend a local technical college. These SMG leaders in turn receive training and guidance from the leadership of the CMG, especially Francisco Cuellár, the results of which the researcher observes in action:

Field Journal, 20 January 2008... The main group of students is split into roughly five groups of five and they get to pick topics (these topics were winnowed from a list they themselves produced in an earlier meeting) related in the

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68 See Online Appendix. For an interesting theoretical argument on why intra-habitus exchange increases reflexivity, see also Mouzelis (2007).
To help the students think of some starting points to talk about the conflict, Silvia and the other organizers put three headings on the board – Ciudad Bolívar, Mi Vida, and Noticias. She then asks the students to come up with scenes from the conflict from these three categories; that is, from their neighborhood, from their own lives, and from the news media. The immediate result is somewhat chaotic, as, after an initial pause during which the group members gather their thoughts, they soon throw out all sorts of observations, thoughts and reactions. The group leaders systematically sort them, selecting some examples without question and putting others to a vote to see if the group thinks the observation in question belonged in a discussion about the Colombian conflict. The types of examples used to support the selected instances of the conflict’s impact on youth generated by the SMG during this meeting can divided into three conceptual categories that roughly
mirror the categories Silvia writes on the board: contextual, referential and representative.\(^69\)

A contextual example is one which places the experience of Ciudad Bolivar youth in a broader context; i.e., \textit{here in Bolivar the problem is not so much the FARC as the fact that they have made violence normal, cool, even a good way to get what you want since everyone is screwing you over}. This type of example implies broader knowledge about the Colombian conflict, but places the observational action firmly in a contextualized place, in this case Ciudad Bolivar. Referential examples are testimonials about the conflict or the FARC that draw on the teller’s own experience – \textit{I was threatened by one of the armed groups. They called my house and said if I didn’t stop what I was doing they would hurt my younger sister. My mom freaked out and kicked me out of the house}. A representative observation about the conflict follows the following format: \textit{when the FARC said they were going to negotiate for peace, I thought they were liars. Why should I believe them? They never told the truth before}. This form of evidence refers to a specific event or moment reported in the news and infers a conclusion from the way events unfolded – here the underlying claim is that an action or even is representative of a broader pattern.\(^70\)

The purposes of this exercise became apparent to the researcher over the course of this seminal SMG meeting. First, virtually everyone attending became

\(^69\) This taxonomy is broadly adapted from Chris Hale (2008).

\(^70\) Field Journal, 20 January 2008
more personally committed to the issue of the FARC and the Colombian conflict because the entire group had a story to tell or an opinion to give. Furthermore, the effect of assigning equal validity to stories of personal experiences of violence and to impressions of the situation in the neighborhood or the country at large was two-fold. It meant that those who shared an experience of violence could feel that they formed part of a collective experience and so were not isolated by their trauma. And it meant that those whose lives had been left relatively unscathed by physical violence felt empowered to discuss the symbolic violence of fear, social and spatial exclusion, and limited access to opportunity structures that is both a cause and an effect of conflict violence in Colombia. This was the early stages of narrative construction about community journalism; the notion that participants in the project were somehow both connected enough and critically apart from events in order to lessen their fear enough to act – the underlying principle at the hear of the narrative of legitimacy I call the mediator. Finally, following this exercise there appeared an overall increase in the metacognition (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) that is thought to facilitate the growth of a political and social consciousness; the SMG membership was encouraged to reflect on their thoughts about the conflict, and what these thoughts might indicate about their place within the broader Colombian society.

Between this meeting and the one that was convened five days later, Silvia and the other SMG leaders were able to maintain some of the momentum they had created by judicious use of the group’s Facebook page. The social media strategy they employed began by the posting of articles (usually selected from a broad
swath of online, Spanish-language community and alternative media publications) whose subject could be broadly described as youth activism. In some cases but by no means all, seemingly careful to preserve their legitimacy by being selective, the moderators of the page would reference one or more of the SMG members as being like someone who might/did figure in a particular article, thereby conferring social capital on this SMG member as well as encouraging the membership to think of themselves as participants in a dramatic process. Despite this careful discursive strategy of online consensus-building, in at least one more meeting, some of the SMG membership voice concerns that in participating in a march against the FARC they are not protesting the problem which is of greatest concern to them – how violence impacts the daily lives of youth in a broader sense (rather than the specific rejection of one armed group’s political legitimacy).71

Since it emerged at the meetings that the students were frustrated with violence and on-going conflict, but in some cases were sympathetic to the stated goals of the FARC, Silvia and the two other leaders posted official statements given by left-wing political parties (such as Polo Democrática) and left-wing political figures that advocating protesting violence at large while eschewing polarizing criticisms of the FARC. Meanwhile, the SMG leaders posted stories by local media outlets that had quickly caught on to the exponential growth of the anti-FARC protest movement and had began promoting it, as well as several stories written by the Uribe administration’s public relations office, which had began mobilizing its powerful information distribution machine in support of the

71 Field Journal, 26 January 2008
protests. At the same time, the moderators were careful to prominently feature upcoming meetings and to introduce sign-making, face-painting, and sloganeering as participatory preparations in advance of the main march. This discursive strategy proved successful in that the SMG Facebook page had a vibrant comments section and at subsequent meetings of the SMG, the membership seemed prepared in terms of having a clear overall grasp of their collective view on why they were protesting the impact of conflict violence on youth.

It was at this time, two weeks before the scheduled march, that rumours circulate among the SMG membership that the local armed actor, the *Aguilas Negras*, believes that FARC-controlled youth gangs have infiltrated the Facebook group – so-called *milicias bolivarianos*. This researcher hears second-hand reports of SMG members being openly threatened in the streets by armed men, and at the group meeting immediately following this, the SMG leaders start the meeting by proposing that members return home from future meetings in groups or accompanied by willing adult residents.

Field Journal, 27 January 2008...The atmosphere at the meeting called to discuss the death threats to the students is almost shockingly blasé, the kids seem completely unconcerned at first, just shooting the breeze as usual... but when Alvaro raises his hand to tell the group which of the *Aguilas* threatened to kill him, he becomes so stone-faced

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72 This Facebook protest movement has grown enormously fast and continues to grow...Caracol [TV and Radio broadcaster] is really hyping it and people seem to be responding from the reports I am getting. Uribe has turned the narrative into a nationalistic one and is leveraging it in his saber-rattling match with [then-President Hugo of Venezuela] Chávez which also seems to be working in terms of gathering march participants from his political supporters. Field Journal, 26 January 2008
that I can tell he is desperately trying to control his fear…the others are very quiet…four others raise their hands out of the 20 present to say they have been threatened…Silvia tells them she will deal with this problem and I have absolutely no idea how she intends to do this. It seems impossible – the group will have to disband.

One of the tactics that Silvia implements to calm the group is community mapping. She has the students form groups and draw maps of the neighbourhood identifying threats and other key factors in staying safe on the streets. This activity has an immediate effect on the morale of the SMG. As group members get involved in affectionate competition over whose map is the best, and where specifically the dangers lie in the neighbourhood, the usual chorus of voices replaces the frightened silence. This tactic also focuses their minds on violence against youth, the very thing they are gathering to protest.  

After this meeting, according to lead informant and gatekeeper Francisco Cuéllar, Silvia petitions the leadership of the CMG to intercede on the behalf of the SMG. This he later acknowledges doing, saying: “we told them that the students would be only protesting the FARC – that they hated those communist pigs and wanted them crushed – *machacado* – for stealing their jobs. We told them the students were on their side, and that they looked to them for leadership. We figured they wouldn’t really know the difference between protesting violence and protesting the FARC. And we were right.”  

73 Field Journal, 30 January 2008  
74 Field Journal, 27 March 2008
will strategically mobilize narrative legitimacy in order to allow its participants to operate in safety – they remove themselves from political debates by claiming the territory of neutrality. The SMG Facebook page then announced it was safe to gather again, and there were a chorus of exclamations of relief. Given the sudden surge of death threats against the SMG members, this researcher has cause to believe that information about several group members sympathizing with stated FARC goals leaked out through a network of informants inculcated by a climate of fear and habits of intimidation. (Sanin, 2004) However, here again the community media strategy of conferring and implying the potential withholding of legitimacy to the armed actor proved effective in restricting the potential for violence.

One week before the main protest was scheduled, thirteen demobilized paramilitary leaders, including former AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso, expressed their support for the protests through a communiqué released to the Colombian press. Immediately following this, Carlos Andrés Santiago, one of the founders of the original Facebook protest movement rejected the support of these paramilitaries calling it destructive to the goals of the movement and implicating the paramilitaries in the very problems the protest movement sought to criticize. These events were closely reported on in the Colombian press and the articles were posted on the SMG Facebook page and proved to be galvanizing for the SMG. It became apparent that media groups were able to stand up to and affirm their independence even in the face of violent actors, as their own group had just done on a smaller scale. It was at this point that the decision to participate in the march in downtown Bogotá became more like unanimous consensus, thanks to the SMG’s
ability to articulate through its Facebook page and its group meetings this sequence of events. The protest was enjoined, and was widely considered a success.

The very rapidity at which these events unfolded revealed in micro terms the power of a social media group to capture shifting opinion among its group members and galvanize its membership around a common goal despite some differing views about the purpose of the protests and the threats of violence. Furthermore, as researchers have argued, (Luque, 2010) the anti-FARC social media platform also served to polarize Colombians into dialectical camps rather than to empower them to make political judgments, and the SMG was able to counter this polarization by developing their own narrative online of what they were protesting against. Thus, the SMG constructed knowledge about the conflict and violence against youth in a collective crucible online and in face-to-face meetings and in so doing demonstrated the power of an open forum to develop fluency about an issue that had become central to the larger society. Links between individuals were rabidly built up in order for narratives to both proliferate and to become more directed. Reference points around which people could mobilize were established, in order for the membership to interpret information collectively, to prioritize observations, re-contextualize experiences, and to come together in productive action. The built capacity for the SMG membership to reflect on its own collective body of experience – primarily constructed through the leadership of Silvia Moreno – was key in terms of how this community media group mobilized to resist subjugation to threats of violence.

Field Journal, 2-5 February 2008

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In-Depth Interview: Silvia Moreno

Silvia is a compact, strong-looking young woman of 27 with direct brown eyes, an unflappable demeanour and a calm, quiet voice. Silvia is highly fluent in language games of culture-as-a-resource (Osborne, 2006; Yúdice, 2003) which she has clearly transcribed from the leadership of the CMG, in that she is able to consistently frame the severe problems in Juan Pablo II as having knowable solutions. In conversation, she proceeds methodically and systematically, first marshalling evidence to argue for a set of causes as being the sources of a particular problem that besets her neighbourhood, and then using those causal claims to argue for a set of measures to address this problem. This is a rhetorical style also cultivated by Francisco Cuéllar, and I believe it has at its source the concept that problems themselves are at once terribly debilitating and also a kind of opportunity structure, in that one can narrate oneself at the center of potential solutions to problems, and thus capture and manage the direction of mobilized resource streams. (S. Miles & Paddison, 2005)

At first, Silvia is unenthusiastic about this research project and openly ambivalent about sitting for a personal interview. She sees much more value in this researcher’s other role as a journalist, and petitions the lead informant, Francisco Cuéllar, to convince the researcher to write an article or produce a television piece about the CMG rather than to gather material for an academic dissertation. Her reasoning is that an academic project generally serves only the researcher, and that
at least a journalistic piece might be used to leverage more influence with the mayoralty through its Office of Communications. Perhaps ironically, Silvia is herself interested in pursuing a Master’s Degree in Communications, and is hoping to analyze community media in Ciudad Bolívar at the prestigious Universidad Nacional. Currently, she is enrolled in an undergraduate public relations course at a local technical university. It becomes clear to me over the course of repeatedly requesting an interview with her that her resistance stems from protectiveness for her own research project, which she feels is fragile because she is still formulating it in her mind. She does not want her own nascent project to become diluted or to be made redundant, particularly by an outsider studying her home, culture and profession. If problems are potential resource granaries, than the grain must be husbanded.76

Over the course of attending her social media group meetings at the high school, and in the throes of the emotional and intellectual excitement brought about by the vast social mobilization around the FARC protests, Silvia changes her perspective. She becomes much more friendly and open, and seems to no longer view me as a potential competitor, but rather as a participant and ally. It certainly helps that I share notes that I have gathered on various alternative media groups in the district, and that I share contacts I have established with city officials. But more importantly, she tells me, she agrees to the interview because she wants to struggle against the tendency to closely husband knowledge and resources, a tendency that she believes has created destructive factionalism among civil society groups in

76 Field Journal, 10 February 2008
Ciudad Bolívar, and undermined the formerly prevalent spirit of cooperation and compromise that germinated the growth of these groups in the first place.\(^{77}\) It is a theme that she returns to again and again in our conversations – in an environment of extreme scarcity, how is it possible to maintain a commitment to a solidarity that is broader than factional loyalties?\(^{78}\)

Our first in-depth interview takes place in the community center used by the CMG to conduct their workshops (Junta de Acción Communal) on a warm and quiet afternoon. Silvia appears to be alone in the building, which is one block from the plazolota at the base of Juan Pablo II. The plazolota occupies a very traditionally Latin American place in the pattern language of the community in that it houses the key symbols of community participation – there sits the church, in the center of the square is the sculpture commemorating the massacre of 12 young people in 1992 (Human Rights Watch (Organization), 2003) and the elementary school is around the corner. This setting seems to relax Silvia, and make her feel close to her base of support. We settle into a comfortable sort of conference room with couches and posters on the walls marking various community initiatives, concerts and events.

Silvia begins by telling me the story of her adolescent life; she relates how she lived in another part of Bogotá until she was 14 when she became pregnant. At

\(^{77}\) Field Journal, 22 February 2008

\(^{78}\) For an excellent exegesis on how scarcity in a world of surfeit creates conditions of violent and unstable competition see Jeremy Lind and Kathryn Sturman (2002).
this point, her mother, who was the head of the household, announced that she was a woman and would have to leave school in order to manage the affairs of the household and help with her four younger brothers while she (the mother) would continue to work in order for the family to subsist. She acceded reluctantly to her mother’s demand, but later that year, she heard from a friend that it was possible to live in the upper neighbourhoods of Ciudad Bolívar very inexpensively, and so she announced her determination to leave with her infant, and after some very acrimonious arguments, she did so, moving to Juan Pablo II and striking out as a young mother on her own before she was 15.

She determined to do this, she tells me, because she felt she had become a kind of domestic worker in her own home, her personal trajectory completely subsumed by household responsibilities. At this point in the interview, she turns to me with a great deal of mixed emotions, including both pride and anger, and asks me if I can imagine what it is like to be a young girl with a child, on her own in a violent and scary world, with no resources, no education, no support networks, and no idea what to do next or what life will hold. This is obviously a rhetorical device, meant to more richly communicate her extreme vulnerability at that moment, and it works. I find myself losing some critical capacity as I become emotionally in thrall to this great underdog tale.79

While scratching together enough money as a street vendor (through a program by which she was given wares to hawk by the municipal government) to subsist, Silvia began attending dances in the neighborhood organized by the neighborhood organized by the

79 Field Journal, 22 February 2008
community center. There she learned about El Gritón and the existence of community kitchens in other neighborhoods where she could obtain free food for herself and her child (she was at this time living on very little nutrition – *ni desayuno, ni almuerzo*). She also made friends with other single mothers and they helped her join a daycare collective which meant she no longer had to bring her daughter with her while she sold small items on the street.

Silvia describes herself at the time as a lover of newspapers, which she says she initially began reading to follow the lives of telenovela actors and the plots of shows while stuck at home with her baby and youngest brother (according to her, her mother forbade her to watch TV), but soon began to read more for current events. The notion of belonging to a media group appealed to her, she tells me, and so she sought out Francisco Cuéllar. At this juncture of the interview, despite my powerful feelings of sympathy for her, I register some scepticism – I am aware of the facility with which she crafts narratives and histories so as to make of them smooth edifices of progressive, teleological empowerment, and her early interest in print media and current affairs strikes me as storytelling embroidery.  

When I ask her specifically what happened to start her interest in a community journalism, she tells me that Cuéllar brought her and two of her friends to a reading room that is in a municipal building in downtown Bogotá run by the Mayoralty’s Secretary of Social Integration:

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80 When I attempted to confirm the facts of the story with Cuéllar, he became annoyed with me and said: “It’s her story – why would you have wanted to change it? - ¿Es la historia de ella – porque la hubiera querido cambiar?” This somewhat out-of-character and defensive response only increased my scepticism. *Field Journal, 27 March 2008*
Field Journal, 22 February 2008. There was material there on how to work with the people [hacer trabajo popular] as an activist. We read books and pamphlets there about the situation with young people in Latin America. I spent the entire day there although I should have been working. And we went back again and again. There were videos there. We watched one video, it was a documentary, about a journalist who was being prosecuted, she would try to tell the truth, and everyone would threaten her, business people, the mafia, the government. She saw things as they were but no one would let her speak. And she was killed. And this opened a window for us, because we saw that the situation was not good for her, but it was also not good for us. We saw things in our lives that never went reported because powerful people didn’t want it to be told.81

As Silvia relates it, this exposure to materials about the dangers of journalism and of speaking truth to power as a heroic endeavour was a radicalizing event. It was following this that she began to organize her friends into a kind of youth cadre for the Francisco Cuéllar and the CMG in Juan Pablo II, gathering information, distributing copies of printed materials, and experimenting with writing articles. Silvia re-entered high school at Aborizadora Alta when Cuéllar began distributing a stipend to her to manage.82

81 This reading room is located at a municipal office in Bogotá called Punto de Integración Social and does contain various materials on press freedom in Colombia and Latin America. However, when I visited this reading room, the video Silvia refers to was not there.

82 She says: Francisco provee recursos a personas como yo, capaces de manejar proyectos periodísticas con un enfoque basado ampliamente en el reconocimiento de las comunicación alternativa. Francisco provided resources to people like me, people capable of managing journalistic projects with a broad focus and an understanding of alternative communication, translation by the author, Field Journal, 22 February 2008.
Silvia recounts how, while at high school, and under the tutelage of the leaders of the CMG, she and her friends began to question why there was so much poverty in Ciudad Bolívar, why there are such intransigent barriers to higher education, why so many young women were having children in horribly insalubrious conditions, why so few had access to contraception, and most of all, why violence was such a constant and threatening presence in people’s lives. One of the answers to these questions, she began to feel, is that solutions to community problems are not being offered in the commercial media, and therefore citizens and residents of neighborhoods like Juan Pablo II retain a feeling of helplessness. She describes coming to understand that it is by constructing legitimacy in the community, that by representing truthfully what the community experiences and aspires to, community journalism is able to mitigate violence.

In a subsequent interview, she says it was this long period of reflection that led to increased engagement with community media groups. From exposure to other alternative media in Ciudad Bolívar, and the experienced journalists and researchers that staff these organizations, she describes a growing urge to professionalize, to acquire a skill set that will afford her credibility, to become a better writer and producer. In order to try and accomplish this professionalization for herself, as well as to modernize the Juan Pablo II CMG, she reached out piecemeal to various journalists in the alternative media community. For her it was a step-by-step process:

Field Journal 22 February 2008. At first, I didn’t know how to write a whole article in a way that made sense and my grammar was intolerable. But then it was like this collective activity. Someone would say, hey I have this bit of
knowledge about this thing here, and then another would say I have this bit of understanding about this other thing, and someone would say, well I know this person that knows how to do this. And it was like the parable of the loaves and the fishes – with each piece of the puzzle we were able to start blogs and websites, make documentaries, network with alternative media internationally, publish magazines and social media.

It was this growing professionalization that for Silvia became the keystone in the social construction of herself as community journalist and now has positioned her to apply to a prestigious Master’s Program. She describes convincingly how her greatest satisfaction looking back over her young adulthood is how she and others succeeded in overcoming obstacles (above all the fear of violence) collectively, each individual contributing something of themselves so as to be made less vulnerable. She says that community journalists are in some respects artisans of hope – *artisanas de esperanzas* – in that they build out of hopes something more powerful than the threat of violence, and that it is by maintaining the capacity for hope in people that violence can be checked. Here she makes clear that she is not just talking about residents or journalists, but also about armed actors, whose hopes cannot but include a legitimate role in the community that will afford them respect and allegiance.

Silvia’s interview underscores how delicate the process of weaving a structure out narratives of legitimacy actually is. First, individuals have to be able to see their own lives in a broader context in order to grasp intuitively how legitimacy might function – which means being both a part of the processes that dictate the rules and yet somehow make a narrative claim of being slightly apart.
Second, they have to acquire skills and a position in a community that enables them to claim credibility in determining what constitutes legitimacy. And finally, they have to be willing to challenge a violent force with only their community ties to protect them. As she convincingly illustrates, she was a frontline participant in this process with Francisco Cuéllar and the Juan Pablo II CMG.

**Preliminary Conclusions**

As established above, the armed actor that occupies Juan Pablo II occupies a tense position in the community. First, the *Aguilas Negras* need (they have made a significant investment here) and lay claim to political legitimacy in the neighborhood, identifying themselves as the main local agent for the provision of security and social control. Second, they require some participation on the part of residents in order to remain intermingled with the civilian population and thus evade persecution and elimination by the Colombian state, which as illustrated above maintains a decidedly ambiguous relationship with paramilitary groups, but is certainly capable of and willing to utterly destroy this group if it seems to seriously threaten state interests. A third factor at work is that citizens of Juan Pablo II report low levels of trust in the *Aguilas*, although they also recognize the group’s capacity to project power, which means that the level of legitimacy necessary to maintain the *Aguilas’* position is fragile.

In multiple scenarios, over the course of this case study, this researcher witnessed the ability of the CMG to operate in territory controlled by the *Aguilas*. 
Residents who responded to the questionnaire prepared by the researcher reported that the *Aguilas* were important in the neighborhood, but that their position was somewhat tenuous. More importantly, for this research project’s hypothesis, on at least three occasions the CMG or its leadership directly challenged the local armed actor and utilized the threat of de-legitimization in order to press for their goals. Once, when the municipally funded food program was on the point of being withdrawn because of armed actor resistance, Cuéllar persuaded the *Aguilas* to provide their own food allotment for the local elderly. A second time, when Alvaro Rojas and other former members of a youth gang (pandilla) were threatened with extermination, the CMG again responded to the armed actor with the threat of de-legitimization. And a third time, when a social media protest group was accused of having left-wing sympathies, potentially making them targets, the armed actor was convinced to ‘stand down’ by the CMG, which claimed it would withhold legitimacy from the group were any violence to take place.

These three circumstances, as well as gathered survey data and interviews, seem to strongly suggest that legitimacy can be employed by CMGs to counter the threat and usage of violence in a community. There is support for the ‘democratizing’ or ‘violence-tempering’ influence and effects of community media in other research; however, this research tends to be either more theoretical in nature. (Halleck, 2002; Romano, 2010) In the cases where scholars have done rich field research, this work has opened opportunities for other research projects such as this one to cover new territory. (Coryat, 2008; Mayer, 2003b; Rodríguez, 2011) This research project sets out to explicitly understand the mechanisms of whether,
how and under what circumstances community media can lessen violence over the long-term within a specific community, as well as how this lessening effect can be traced to mobilized perceptions of political and social legitimacy. In order to begin answering this multifaceted question, I have here identified different narratives of legitimacy at work in the dynamics between armed actors, residents, and a community media group.
Violent gangs and favelas in Brazil

In São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city and capital of the state by the same name, one major Brazilian gang, the PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital) controls large numbers of peri-urban dwellers, functionally governing (albeit with mixed results) many municipalities. The PCC was originally founded in 1993 with a quasi-political agenda, seeking to reform São Paulo’s prison system. Formed in the aftermath of the 1992 Carandiru prison rebellion, in which 111 prisoners were executed by São Paulo State paramilitary police, the PCC rabidly spread throughout the region, growing to control virtually the entire São Paulo prison system, and then extending its sphere of influence into the poor neighborhoods from which its members originated. (Adorno & Salla, 2007) The gang uses violent tactics such as attacking state security forces to protest prison conditions and to intimidate those who seek to prosecute their membership, and they have quickly branched into drug-trafficking, arms trafficking and violence-entrepreneurship (Jütersonke, Muggah, & Rodgers, 2009) as a main source of revenue. However, this gang also collaborates and shares resources with the Brazilian state security
apparatus in various ways in order to evade persecution and maintain its power base. (Willis, 2009)

The favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s second largest city, have long been controlled by gangs. In 1969, in the Cândido Mendes prison, on the island of Ilha Grande, leftist guerillas joined forces with criminals to create the Comando Vermelho (CV) gang. The CV gradually developed criminal enterprises in many favelas for the next 25 years, consolidating control over large sectors of the population of Rio, and trafficking profitably in drugs and guns as those businesses grew in the mid-80s. (Misse, 2007) After internal division and conflict in the mid-90s, splinter factions within the Comando Vermelho created two major new gangs, the Terceiro Comando Puro and the Amigos dos Amigos (ADA), which grew to control several more favelas, including Rocinha, Rio’s largest. These gangs vied for decades with each other, with police, and with militias formed by civilians and off-duty or retired police for control over the favelas and drug-trafficking franchises. (Zaluar, 2004)

Despite their recent history of competition with the Brazilian state over political goods (Enrique Desmond Arias, 2006; E. D. Arias, 2006), it is nonetheless true that gangs in Rio in general, and the ADA in particular, were at the time of the study becoming weaker and more fragmented, although their ability to counter state influence remained strong in some areas, including this project’s research sites, Baixa do Sapateiro. During the research period, the process of gang attenuation and withering was apparent. The power base of the ADA trafficking gang was formerly centered in the ‘middle class’ favela Rocinha, a significant
distance away from Baixa do Sapateiro, but was forced to reconfigure around the time of this study due to policing, militia and rival gang pressures. The ADA in Baixa do Sapateiro was therefore both part of a hierarchical organizational structure, but also forced by circumstances to be relatively self-sufficient in terms of recruitment and financing. This created an atmosphere of extreme tension among the membership of the ADA witnessed by the author, as they felt isolated and vulnerable to attack. Fighting between rival gangs, typically over control of lucrative drug territory or routes, has taken place for decades. However, the balance of power has now shifted to the state as gangs are under increasing pressure from new police-led security operations, as well as the consistent presence of community-based militias.

Despite growing external pressures, the ADA remained the most powerful organization in the neighborhood during the period in which the study was conducted, and capable of competing with the state for legitimacy. As shown above, Rio gangs have been shown to have some proclivity in developing state-like appendages, providing rudimentary security, health care, economic support, and have embedded themselves deeply into local political institutions. (E. D. Arias, 2004; Enrique Desmond Arias, 2006; E. D. Arias, 2006; E. D. Arias & Rodrigues, 2006; Goldstein, 2003; Leeds, 1996) Research has shown that gangs arose and grew in power in a context of severe neglect combined with systematic repression or exclusion on the part of the Brazilian state towards its poorest citizens. (M. Davis, 2006; Martha Knisely Huggins, 1991; Martha K Huggins, 2000; J. Perlman, 2010; J. E. Perlman, 1979) Many of these trends remain intact. Furthermore, the

83 Field Journal, April 8 2008
relationship of the image of organized gangs to the city of Rio at large is far more complex than that of parasite and host, as it is sometimes popularly represented. In fact, the story of the Rio gangster and the story of the marginalized are fiercely contested areas within the construction of a local and national identity, as recent events in Rio have born out.

Starting in 2008, just after the research period, significant changes have dramatically altered the landscape of gang control in Rio. Behind a big push from State Public Security Secretary José Mariano Beltrame and Governor Sérgio Cabral, public officials and security forces in Rio de Janeiro developed a comprehensive occupation program of the favelas called the Favela Pacification Program (FPP). By far the most controversial and prominent component of this plan was the creation of a new police force trained and directed to occupy favelas, the Police Pacification Unit (Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora – UPP). Plans for occupying favelas had been around for some time, however when Brazil was selected to host the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics the program received multiple funding streams, including from the private sector, and far more organizational muscle. (Baena, 2011) This organizational muscle seems to have been directed both at militarily repressing so-called criminal elements and also at socially and politically integrating favela residents into the broader civil society.

The UPP are backed by a wide swath of political elites. Cabral, Beltrame and Rio de Janeiro Mayor Eduardo Paes are all members of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro - PMDB), which has an alliance at the federal level with the Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT) after backing then-President Luis de Silva in the presidential elections of 2006. This alliance has enabled formal cooperation between the state military police, the municipality's urban development programs, and the federal government's Growth Acceleration Program (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento - PAC). Thus, the UPP has the potential to function as a multi-tiered institution that implements security strategies holistically.
Prouse argues that the structural framework of the FPP means that it does “focus on social development of infrastructure and democratic decision-making even as it legitimizes violent military intervention.” And that “[because] the Brazilian state is compelled to frame its interventions in this manner does, perhaps, open greater possibility for resistance through democratic and peaceable means.” (Prouse, 2013, p. 15) Other scholars have argued that in developing policing strategies based on “a political response to a specific crisis,” (Hinton, 2006, p. 126) the Brazilian state has attempted to address its policing problems piecemeal, moving from crisis to crisis without addressing structural problems such as massive wealth disparities, and that this reaction-based response tends to produce poor policing outcomes over time. (Martha K Huggins, 2000; Pereira, 2000; Pinheiro, 2000)

Furthermore, some research suggests that despite some recent decrease in violent crime, the FPP and other changes to Rios infrastructure and institutions in advance of the Olympic Games will primarily impact the wealthier residents and neighborhoods. According to one group of Brazilian researchers “development [for the Olympics] is highly uneven and tends to benefit private developers and construction interests while creating spaces of leisure for wealthy residents and the international tourist class.” (de Almeida, Mezzadri, & Júnior, 2009, p. 178) From this perspective, the leading goal behind the FPP is actually social control and satisfying the regulatory bodies of the mega-events by bringing some level of social development to poor areas, not creating sustainable community development and integration of favela residents into the general citizenry. The city of Rio underwent reform before the 2007 Pan American Games; the positive impacts for
many citizens were only temporary, leading to skepticism about development programs linked explicitly to mega-events. The changes for the Pan Am games “never resolved the issue of social control entirely; instead they merely introduced a new set of antagonisms and changed the contours of the struggle between those who were benefitting from the new Rio and those who were not.” (Gaffney, 2010, p. 16)

Recent protests that have gripped Brazilian cities began with a hike in bus fares and quickly metastasized into angry criticism of what protestors view as the priorities of the Brazilian state. Media reports have identified specific scenarios in which poor Brazilians are being displaced because a variety of elite interests intend to appropriate the land as a real estate investment in the wake of the planned mega-events. (Dalbert, 2014) Scholarly research has shown that the municipal administrations of many cities including Rio de Janeiro have shifted from managerialism to urban entrepreneurialism over the last 20 years, an ideological regime under which it becomes desirable or even necessary to put the apparatus of the state at the service of business interests. (Harvey, 1989, 2010; Harvey et al., 2013) In the case of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics in particular, research illustrates how Rio de Janeiro’s recent administrations are presiding over an enormous transfer of resources from the public to the private sectors, as well as reproducing socio-spatial inequities on a massive scale. (Castro, 2012) One Brazilian NGO formed to protest the way in which state efforts are directed during the upcoming mega-events claims that 250,000 people have been displaced from their homes by preparations for the World Cup. (Nacional, 2014) Empirical data
shows that protestors and cyberactivists were effective at leveraging public opinion about these state priorities through the use of new technologies. (Fossa, Pinto, & Dalla Valle) In other words, the inequities of Brazilian society were highlighted by the choices made by political elites surrounding these mega-events, and the June/July 2013 protests reflected broad-based public anger by the Brazilian middle class towards their political leadership, but this anger has yet to translate into results for non-elite Brazilians.

Furthermore, efforts on the part of security forces to pacify the Complexo da Maré are underway at the time of this writing. The pacification process in the region began in October 2012 when security forces occupied Jacarazinho and Manguinhos favelas (called Faixa de Gaza or the Gaza Strip by some residents for their high incidents of violence), both located next to Maré and along major roads that lead to Rio’s International Airport, explicitly as part of preparations for the coming mega-events. In March 2013, security forces occupied nearby Complexo do Caju and indicated Complexo da Maré would be next. Government officials announced the creation of Rio’s 31st Pacifying Police Unit at Maré in March 2013, and a year later, security forces finally began the fraught and complex process of driving out three powerful and entrenched gangs, a process that Security Secretary Beltrame recently admitted was belated and badly flawed in an in-depth interview with the correspondent of a Portuguese news magazine. (Lucas Coelho, 2014)

Beltrame’s cautionary remarks seem prescient as pacification efforts move forward. Some media reports suggest a rise in violence in Rio as a result of the pacification efforts, pointing to the fact that 110 police officers have been shot over
the past year. (S. Romero & Barnes, 2014) In a typical sequence of events from April of 2014, UPP units killed a young resident of Maré they suspected of being a member of a gang, stray bullets from an unidentified gun battle killed an elderly woman, and the UPP seized a small amount of cocaine and detained three people for trafficking. ("Após ocupação das Forças Armadas, Maré tem dois mortos e um baleado," 2014) So Maré currently sits on a precipice; still partly controlled by gangs, but with the state security forces poised to smash gang control, and residents uneasily awaiting an unknown outcome.

**Narrative Construction and Marginalization in Brazil**

The national identity of Brazil can be understood as a contested space in which different narratives struggle for supremacy. The Brazilian state has often played a repressive role in the struggle over what constitutes “Brazilian-ness,” perpetrating acts of prejudice and discrimination against subaltern groups such as the poor, women, and Afro-Brazilians. Yet despite or perhaps because of the state’s exclusion and marginalization of these groups, the poor, women, and Afro-Brazilians have all contributed to how Brazilian national identity is constructed and understood. Furthermore, the image of the gangster in Brazilian society has played a key role in constructing and enforcing social rules. All of these narratives intersect and serve to help define the others.

From relatively early in Brazil’s history, it is apparent that class would be an arena of fierce contestation, where violence would be routinely employed by the state against the poor to enforce authority and to claim definitional rights over the
national identity narratives. The Canudos settlement, founded in 1893 in by impoverished workers and farmers in Bahia, clashed with the Brazilian state authorities over what constituted allegiance to Brazil only four short years after Brazil emerged as a republic. (Meade, 2010, p. 104) As Meade writes “Most of the educated, urban, and coastal Brazilians…pointed to the backlanders’ superstition, ignorance, poverty and absence of cultural and political sophistication as indicative of the problems Brazil had to overcome in order to take its place in the modern world.” (2010, p. 108) In other words, the very existence of the rural poor endangered the narrative of progress that elites were attempting to construct. It is significant that the Canudos settlers were not only indigent, but also a large proportion were freed or escaped slaves and women (including abused former prostitutes), and that they were virtually all slaughtered by the state. Less than twenty years later, a similar uprising exploded among the poor in the South, the Contestado Rebellion, again erupting because of “distrust of a distant and uncaring republican government.” (2010, p. 135) Again the Brazilian state responded with violence, crushing dissent and silencing the voices that had arisen with a competing story of what it meant to be Brazilian.

It is ironic that soldiers employed by the state to annihilate the threat to a narrative of nation in Canudos may have helped found the first favelas in Rio de Janeiro, a social agglomeration which continues to bedevil new efforts by the state to define Brazilian identity through the glories of modern Rio. (Meade, 2010, p. 135) The sociologist Gianpaolo Baiocchi examines how the Brazilian state sought to exclude the favelados and the migrants gathering in these communities from a
presence in the discourse of who made up the population of Rio, and, by extension, of Brazil. Baiocchi examines public debates surrounding crime and urbanization in order to reveal the “symbolic contestations over the boundaries of inclusion into civil society.” (2011, pp. 1-2) He goes on to describe how dominant discourses struggled to prevail over some voices of dissent in excluding the poor from representations of what comprised the city of Rio, but he also shows how the poor entered the self-image of the city regardless. Baiocchi reveals the eerie correspondence between symbolic and physical exclusion, as violent state security forces continue to repress favela residents, but also shows how favelados have seeped into the narrative.

In agreement with Baiocchi, Janice Perlman writes in the beginning of The Myth of Marginality: Urban Politics in Rio de Janeiro “favela dwellers are not economically and politically marginal but exploited and repressed; not socially and culturally marginal but stigmatized and excluded from a closed social system.” (1979, p. 135) Perlman goes on to describe how the culture of poverty argument came to be adopted by Brazilian policy makers and how influential thinkers on both the right and the left went about constructing a narrative of marginality that defined favelados as unproductive and dangerous outsiders. (1979, pp. 136-137) For Perlman, the dominant and state-driven narrative is all the more pernicious because it has no basis in fact – she shows through assiduous research the values and activities of favelados are not even remotely what they are assumed to be. Other researchers have pointed out that the favela has become a sort of idealized type of poor urban community, used discursively to signify urban disorder, when in
fact a third of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro have urban facilities that are equivalent
to neighborhoods that are "typically urbanized" and that high concentrations of
urban poverty are present in other places such as poor subdivisions, and overall
there is notable heterogeneity within poor communities in Rio. (Freire-Medeiros,
2009; Preteceille, Valladares, & Henriques, 2000; Vaz, 2010) Furthermore, in
Perlman’s updated analysis (2010) far from being passive clay which elites use to
sculpt an Other in their hegemonic metanarrative of “Brazilian-ness,” the favelados
are able to affect some change in the way they are envisioned and portrayed.

Early Brazilian fiction can also provide clues as to how the role of poor
women has been constructed in Brazil. The novel Senhora: Diary of a Woman, by
José de Alencar (2010), explicitly takes up the role of poor women in the national
narrative of Brazil during the Second Empire (1840-1889), as the eponymous
protagonist struggles valiantly to find her independent voice within the huge
constraints placed on her by social rules (which were enforced at the time by the
laws of the state). Aurélia, the title character, is disgusted and enraged by the fact
that marriage in her social context exists primarily to transfer property – she has
been made painfully aware of how women are commoditized in Brazilian society
by tying their value as people to their financial worth. Since she is wealthy, she is
able to push against the dominant narrative by creating one of her own – “she
would indicate the relative merit of her suitors by attributing to each a certain
monetary value. She quoted her worshipers in the language of finance, referring to
the price each might reasonably be expected to bring on the matrimonial market.”
(2010, p. 5) Aurélia is thus able to express her scorn for the social regime that
excludes women from equal participation by inverting traditional gender roles. Imprisoned in a transactional system where her worth is determined by others, Aurélija finds a way to strike back by pushing the underlying rules to ironical extremes, as Alencar has her angrily say “Thus will the world find in me its creature – the woman it celebrates, upon whom it lavishes adoration. I shall be for it what it has made me.” (2010, p. 119) This same dynamic can be seen at work in the identity of the gangster as outlined above; trapped into a confining and undervalued typecast, the subject will sometimes challenge rigid norms by pushing them to such extremes that they can collapse. However, the end of the novel finds her happily married and reincorporated back into a safe gender role for Brazil’s masculine national narrative.

The poor, Afro-Brazilian woman Carolina de Jesus expressly took up the challenge of redefining the Brazilian narrative surrounding women through the creation of a private discourse, and for a brief moment, it seemed possible that she might indeed have a lasting impact on society at large. As told in the book The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus, her journals were adopted by mainstream publishers and reviewed favorably in newspapers, and her book became a huge bestseller in Brazil. (Levine & Meihy, 1995) She wrote frankly as an unmarried woman with children that she found marriage untenable – “The men who wanted to marry me were mean and the conditions they imposed on me were horrible.” (1995, p. 48) She described how men sexually abused women and women were afraid or unable to fight back or confront their abusers, but were instead counseled by the mores of the time to seek solace in religion. (1995, p. 77) However,
ultimately her narrative was discredited by her excoriation in the popular press and she was treated more as a “curiosity” than as a legitimate writer. (1995, p. 81)

Similarly, in the book *The Hour of the Star* (Lispector, 1986), the protagonist, a poor and sheltered young woman for the north trying to create a life for herself in modern, urban Brazil, is ultimately forced to retreat into a world of fantasy as her attempts to transcend the iron cage of gender roles are firmly rebuffed by the world around her. In these stories and others, we witness how a narrative of a repressive, structurally violent social order is imposed on various oppressed subjects, who then either succumb to this domineering narrative or find a way to construct identity and agency over and against its power.

The ideological construct of racial democracy is a powerful narrative force used to deflect charges of prejudice and discrimination against Afro-Brazilians within Brazil. However, this construct can be shown to have developed fissures. As Huggins and Rodrigues show, “Stereotypes about poverty and blackness, especially when taken together, dehumanize poor youth and make them vulnerable to neglect at best and physical violence at worst.” (2004, p. 37) In more explicitly narrative ways, black Brazilians challenge the idea of racial democracy as Roth-Gordon notes in her article on Brazilian hip-hop: “coming from a racial system which judges people primarily on the color of their skin…the hip-hop movement seeks to create unity through a black/white distinction they see as a more honest description of racism in Brazil.” (Roth-Gordon, 2009, p. 67) These black Brazilians are contesting the notion fervently adopted by the state that so much
blending has taken place in Brazilian society that discrimination is necessarily minor.

Building on the seminal work of Gilberto Freyre (1986), the anthropologist Peter Fry also shows how the narrative of racial democracy is being challenged on several levels as racism becomes more explicitly discussed in Brazil and discrimination is exposed: “Brazil is confronted with a “reality” that challenges the self-image of a mixed-up society and replaces it with one in which there are “racial” authenticities.” (2000, p. 99) However, Fry also shows how the narrative of racial democracy was crucial to social control by the state during the military dictatorship, as any charge that Brazil was racist could lead to charges of “subversion.” (2000, p. 99) According to Fry, although the modern, democratic state has made more efforts to be inclusive of Afro-Brazilians, it has not repudiated the core belief in racial democracy. Fry goes on to delineate the contemporary debates between scholars and policy makers on the usefulness or destructiveness of the national myth of racial democracy, especially surrounding affirmative action policies, which underscores that this push-and-pull over the narrative of race, class and gender within the national identity is far from resolved.

**Baixa do Sapateiro: The Local Context**

The tight weave of favelas known as the Complexo da Maré sits next to the shores of Guanabara Bay, is sandwiched between the two main routes of access to the city of Rio de Janeiro, and lies about halfway between the center of the city and
its international airport. Originally, what is now Maré was a bucolic mangrove tidal forest interspersed with small, pristine beaches and rich in biodiversity. (VAZ and ANDRADE 1994) In the 1930s and 1940s, the area was designated as industrial as part of Brazil’s national industrialization plan and factories were built and connected to the city via a major artery – Avenida Brasil. (CASTRO 2012) The industrial zoning of the factories caused the Maré area to be enclosed between the bay and the factories. (Varella 2002) Low-wage factory workers built small communities just across Avenida Brasil from the factories, using leftover and scavenged building materials from the factory construction.

In a similar pattern, groups of settlers began to move in to the area along the shoreline of the bay in the late 1940s, many of whom were low-wage workers employed during the construction of the Osvaldo Cruz bridge and later, during the megaproject of the campus of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro on Fundão Island (some were displaced from their homes on this and other barrier islands that lie just off shore). (Varella 2002) These settlers began building the distinctive dwellings that were long associated with Maré, the palafitos, or stilt-houses (photo in Online Appendix). One of the earliest coastal neighborhoods, started in 1947 right next to entrance of the Osvaldo Cruz bridge, originally called Favelinha do Mangue de Bonsucesso, would evolve into the neighborhood in this study – Baixa do Sapateiro.

Repressive tactics used by state security forces against some of these neighborhoods began contemporaneously with their construction. The first neighborhood in Maré, built on a natural rise called Morro de Timbau, was
monitored systematically by a motorized division of the Brazilian Army who occupied a nearby base – this division forbade the use of any permanent building materials under threat of demolition (such as masonry walls or tile roofs), forbade the development of any system of public works, and extorted “occupancy fees” from residents. (SANTOS and SILVA 1983) Meanwhile, in the nascent community of Baixa do Sapateiro, the Municipal Guard was directed to demolish the newly-built palafitos using steel cables attached to tractors that would cut the stilts, sometimes with residents still inside their homes. (Varella 2002) This devastating destruction, systematic displacement, and sometimes violent repression sparked some of the first residents associations of favela dwellers in Rio de Janeiro, including the Associação de Moradores da Baixa do Sapateiro, founded 1957. Once organized, these associations were gradually able to gain some access for their membership to municipal services such as water, electricity, sewer, and street paving and garbage collection. However, despite these impressive and hard-won gains, access to these services remains sporadic to this day in parts of Maré.

In the 1980s, the growing concentration of favelas on the coast was considered by government officials to present a major obstacle to sanitation and to the orderly development of city habitation. The federal government, at the time a military dictatorship, launched the Projecto Rio in 1982, a vast but poorly executed attempt to incorporate many informal settlements and reshape Rio de Janeiro into a

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This has now become a major international news story, as the area will be utilized for water sports competition in the 2016 Olympic Games. See Romero and Clarey (2014)
more ordered city. Under this plan, the last of the *palafitos* in Baixa do Sapateiro were demolished, and these residents were again forcibly displaced, this time to residential complexes inland.

(VAZ and ANDRADE 1994) Also during the 1980s, macroeconomic forces associated with globalization caused the closure and shuttering of many of the factories that had provided employment to residents, and the pace of construction projects slowed, and then stopped altogether. Homeless, impoverished, but resourceful residents divided up the abandoned factory buildings and vacant, bulldozed lots into dwellings according to a system of informal rules, a process that took place mostly unnoticed or ignored by city officials, and were largely hidden from the rest of Rio by the high walls alongside the roadways and next to the old factories. (Vaz 2010) Fewer and fewer opportunities were available for work, for access to public housing, and for social services, and it was at this time that the labyrinthine, hybridized, improvisational, and informally complex nature of Maré and Baixa do Sapateiro became entrenched, a process which coincided with the rise of the trafficking gangs in Rio and the establishment of a clandestine economy. (Vaz 2010) As the survey data below makes clear, a high proportion of residents of Baixa do Sapateiro had contact with the gang at the time of the research period, suggesting significant gang interpretation with everyday life.

According to recent data, the Complexo da Maré is home to between 130,000 and 200,000 residents out of a total population of 6,161,047 in Rio de Janeiro, making it the third largest favela in Rio. (Vaz 2010) The favela complex
has the third or fourth worst Human Development index and third-highest rate of violence in the city as well. (Vaz 2010; UNESCO 2004; Prefeitura 2010) Baixa do Sapateiro is currently, and was during the course of this study, a major drug hub within Maré, and remains an object of struggle between security forces and local traffickers. Many residents have deep concerns about violence from several different groups, as the survey data presented below illustrates. This neighborhood is a contested space, with a rich history of informal rules and institutions. The growth and establishment of the favelas that make up the Complexo da Maré is in part the story of exclusion – symbolic, literal and imaginary. But it is also a story of how precariousness can be turned into a source of strength.

Perhaps one of the most concrete examples of the vibrancy of Maré’s civil society despite the vulnerability of its population is the proliferation and influence of local NGOs within the favela complex. A young member of the community media group, interviewed by at his home in Maré, made this claim about the favela: “É a favela mais académica e intelectual que tem no Rio, por conta dessas ONG.” – It is the most academic and intellectual favela we have in Rio, because of the force of these NGOs.

Perhaps the most prominent NGO in Maré, and one of the most well-known and active favela NGOs in Rio, is the Observatório de Favelas, founded in part by the urban geographer Jailson de Souza e Silva (2003; 2005; 2004). This organization conducts research, funds a highly variegated set of

86 Field Journal, 24 April 2008
cultural, educational, media, and social groups locally, and generally acts as a
gatekeeper organization for anyone seeking to connect with the community.

Other important NGOs in Maré include (but are by no means limited to) the
citizenship group Ação Comunitária do Brasil (ACB/RJ), the socio-educational
group and publisher of the community journal O Cidadão Centro de Estudos e
Ações Solidárias da Maré (CEASM), the women’s group Centro de Referência de
Mulheres da Maré (CRMM), and the alternative school for children traumatized by
violence called Projeto Uerê, which is located in Baixa do Sapateiro, the
neighborhood in this study. In other words, although it is characterized in part by
poverty, violence and medium-low levels of traditional political participation, very
high levels of participation within a relatively mature civil society also characterize
Favela Maré, as we can see in the survey data below.

Survey Data of Residents of Baixa do Sapateiro

In the interests of data comparison, I kept the survey questions the same
across both neighborhoods. Therefore, the reader will be familiar with the
reasoning behind the selection of the survey questions from Chapter 5. In the table
below, the question on civic or political participation shows high levels of civil
society participation in Baixa do Sapateiro, and comparatively low levels of
political affiliation. Evidence of civil society participation in these numbers (65%)
might also help to explain the large protest movements (see above) that arose
shortly after this research period in response to perceived violations of citizenship
rights associated with the preparations for mega-events in Rio de Janeiro.

Regardless, I assert that this data is indicative of the presence of a pluralistic
culture of civic responsibility in Baixa do Sapateiro, and therefore points to an
existing sense of the ebb and flow of legitimacy within the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resident Participation in Civil Society or Political Groups in Baixa do Sapateiro</th>
<th>Absolute number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents currently or previously a member of a nonpolitical community organization</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents with strong affiliation to a political party or organization</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents with no affiliation, either political or nonpolitical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is possible that the perceived legitimacy of the gang by the respondents,
which the following question is intending to ascertain, may have changed
significantly since the research was conducted. The presence of police in the
neighborhood attempting to provide security for residents, instead of merely
conducting raids on traffickers, may have served to change residents’ minds on the
necessity of the gang to provide order. On the other hand, in the Complexo da
Maré at least (see above), new initiatives of community policing have involved the
death of residents and the shooting of police. This makes it difficult to speculate
how the views of residents have changed, even after the ADA was ousted and
replaced by the Terceiro Comando Puro (TCP) in the neighborhood in mid-2008.
What does seem clear from the survey data though is that a majority of respondents
at the time of the research project saw the gang as performing the necessary
governance function of providing community order, whether temporarily or indefinitely, and that therefore, legitimacy was in play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legitimacy of Armed Actor in Baixa do Sapateiro</th>
<th>Absolute number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADA a necessary evil to maintain order</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADA criminals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADA a temporary necessity until state forces take control</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents showed strong awareness and support of the CMG, as the table below shows, even though Boca de Filme was a relatively small organization. One clear conclusion we can draw from the fact that a pronounced majority of respondents saw the CMG as lowering levels of violence is that the community is very tight-nit – that respondents would even be comfortable addressing this question indicates that many had independently considered the role of the CMG in their community, and knew enough about what the group was doing to draw some conclusions about their activities. Finally, the survey data below shows that respondents overall supported the main argument of this dissertation; that community media groups operating in these contexts do lower levels of violence.
Ethnography of a *Boca de Fumo*

Rua do Serviçois, a continuation of Rua Nova Jerusalém which runs between Avenida Brasil and Via Expressa Presidente João Goulart (Linha Vermelha), forms one border of the neighborhood of Baixa do Sapateiro, which lies nestled tightly within the densely populated (depending on how the complex is measured, population estimates vary between 130,000 and 200,000) nexus of favelas called Complexo da Maré. A tightly woven, slim swatch of streets and sidewalks spin off Rua do Serviçois towards Guanabara Bay and Ilha do Gobernador. For seven or so blocks on the North side of Rua Nova Jerusalém, an eclectic mix of dilapidated and solidly-built, newly constructed residences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Effect of CMG on Levels of Violence in Baixa do Sapateiro</th>
<th>Absolute number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe <em>Boca de Filme</em> diminishes violence</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe <em>Boca de Filme</em> is responsible for no change in violence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe <em>Boca de Filme</em> causes conflict between the gang and the community</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
characterize the built environment of this wafer of a neighborhood that is bounded by the airport highway (Linha Vermelha).

This neighborhood has historically been predominately Afro-Brazilian and poor. Recently, within the past three to five years, the population has become somewhat better off economically and there has been a steady in-migration of mixed race residents from across the Brazilian color spectrum. Traveling a parallel arc to this demographic shift, at least two family-owned loja ‘corner stores’ along the stretch of Rua do Serviçois that forms the border of Baixa do Sapateiro have been bought by a business consortium that operates citywide. According to local residents, this consortium has a business arrangement with the local trafficking gang that currently controls the Baixa do Sapateiro drug sales franchise.87 Thus, places that had once been heavily patronized by Afro-Brazilian residents, and which operated as de facto community centers (as well as, in some sense, addict supply centers for those residents suffering from alcoholism), have become transformed into a hub and hangout for the various traffickers needed to operate a boca de fumo, or drug-sales outlet.

In a business ecosystem overshadowed by the sale of drugs, a certain withering of the built environment is perceptible. Several small concerns along Rua Nova Jerusalém have gone out of business, and these abandoned storefronts are now sometimes used as drug stash points and meeting places for trafficking gang members. This small periphery of a peri-urban community had evolved into a

87 “I have been hearing scattered rumors for months of collusion between a prominent legitimate business consortium that franchises lojas and the traficantes. When I mentioned this to Josinaldo he became angry and shouted at me to shut up about this. I was alarmed – he has never shown anger towards me before. This reaction suggests he knows something about this.” Field Journal, 24 June 2008
micro-urban landscape where the dominant shaping force on the people and pattern language of the place was the drug trade. (McLennan, Bordin, Bennett, Rigato, & Brinkerhoff, 2008) By contrast, the community beyond the periphery was largely free of the most visible impacts of trafficking. This meant that the *boca de fumo* was highly distinct from where the community media group operated, in terms of its sphere of influence, and if the CMG could be shown to have some influence in curbing violence around this drug hub, than this is a significant supportive data point for to this research project’s overall hypothesis.

The outdoor tables and chairs belonging to *Loja Ribeiro* sat three doors down from a *barzinho*, or small bar, where I met four or five times a week for close to four months with my gatekeepers to, according to what they told me initially, see if it was a good day or not to go work with the media group in the interior of the favela. 88 Usually, my informants would arrive, we would chat together for some minutes, and then proceed into the favela. At times they would already be at the community center, and I was told to wait at the bar until somebody could be sent down to walk me in. Once and a while, one or both of my lead informants would arrive very late or not at all, and I might receive a text message late in the day informing me that something had happened and the workshops were called off for the day. This type of arrangement meant that on many occasions during the course of my research in Rio, I waited for hours next to the *boca de fumo*, sipping beer, watching the street, and collating my notes, and on a few occasions, I ended up sitting for most of the day at the *barzinho*. I later learned that all this waiting was partly so we (and especially I) could be observed

88 *Field Journal, 18 May 2008*
sitting at the bar by gang members so as to determine whether security forces or unknown individuals had followed us.89

Early on, I decided to take advantage of this time to do fieldwork. It was the only time during the course of this study during which I could observe and interview gang members over a continuous period. I kept a small, dated journal specifically dedicated to different observations of, and face-to-face interactions with, the group of young men and boys at the boca de fumo, as well as with community members who lived and worked alongside them. From this field journal, I was able to construct a short ethnography at whose center are active gang members. This ethnography describes the day-to-day activities of the group of trafficking employees that convened at Loja Ribeiro, a corner store/bar near the junction of Rua Nova Jerusalém and Rua do Serviço, and their interactions with some members of the community who worked or spent time in this part of the community. The purpose of this short ethnography in the context of this research project is to show how the narratives of legitimacy mobilized by the CMG in Baixa do Sapateiro acted to curb violence and tensions even at a distance from the site of their actual community project.

The block of Rua do Serviço is where the drug sales hub is located is a block in the throes of successive transformations brought about by the violent throes of unstable capitalism. Half a dozen buildings are undergoing remodeling or renovation projects have proceeded in halts and starts. Roughly half of the houses and businesses on this block have already been extensively renovated and modernized, representing an investment in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

89 Field Journal, 24 June 2008
Yet these same buildings also show signs of inferior or reused materials, aborted construction goals, and of having changed ownership multiple times over the last decade. The building that houses Loja Ribeiro, on the Northwestern corner, is a shambling two-story, mid-century faded yellow building. The building immediately to the East on the ground floor of the building once housed offices of a local aquaculture business (and now is of indeterminate use) and is extensively decorated with graffiti that covers part of the wall of the store.

The graffiti varies widely in style from pop/cartoon to expressionist to realist, and the subjects vary from simple, positive messages of “peace” and “community” to surrealist, drug-induced blends of color and indecipherable text. The tag of the gang is here too, the simple A.D.A. in black spray-paint along with the name of the leader of this Boca de Fumo – “Faíso.” ADA members on the street tended to favor colorful brand name clothing and sneakers, which was a code system in itself, different brands representing differing levels of status and gradations in statements of taste. Although some occasionally carried weapons openly, most weapons were cached nearby, easily accessible but out of sight. On any given day several members of the gang would be located at the boca de fumo, including a manager (gerente) who was always ready to call in his “boys” (caras). The gang owned at least two small residences in the neighborhood, although according to residents, most members were not originally from Baixa de Sapateiro. The gang’s organization was developed around the various tasks associated with drug trafficking, including lookouts, runners, sellers, soldiers and leaders. These roles were not obvious, as gang members spent most of the day hanging out,
chatting, smoking marijuana and drinking beer. The local *dono* (leader) stayed mostly out of sight during the course of the study, and according to residents, preferred not to be bothered with the day-to-day operations of selling drugs (Dowdney 2003).

The owner of the *Loja Ribeiro* building and the operator of the store is Gleidson Gomes, an Afro-Brazilian man from the Rio municipality of Madureira who recently turned 60 years old and who purchased the structure in 1984. Senhor Gomes used to operate a shoe store in the adjacent structure on Nova Jerusalém that is now an abandoned aquaculture business. Senhor Gomes acknowledges that he permitted some of the murals to be executed on his property. He claims he is not, however, opposed to the boys and young men who gather in and around his building.

*Field Journal, 10 March 08* ...today I went in to Senhor Gomes’ shop to see if he knew somewhere in the neighborhood to buy some sneakers. He has told me on numerous occasions how well he knows shoes. Two teenage boys that I have seen with the gang were lounging inside the store, one who I know as Breno and who has a learning disability and another boy. They are clearly observing me. Senhor Gomes came ponderously forward to the counter from the cadaverous back of the shop to talk to me. It’s tough to tell how old he is… He is stout but wrinkled and is missing most of his teeth. When I asked him where I could buy some sneakers he snorted derisively and launched into a diatribe about how long he had been in the shoe business and how all the shoes were too expensive now. As I was about to leave, having not gotten an answer, he called me back to the counter... “you just waiting around down the street?” I said I was. “You working with those kids up in the neighborhood?” I said I was. “Don’t worry about these guys on the street. They’re good-for-nothing punks, but they won’t hurt you...Ask your friends, they all grew up together.”
Over the course of several conversations such as the one above, Senhor Gomes, repeatedly invoked the leaders of the CMG as guarantors of personal safety. Interestingly, he connects the CMG leaders to the gang members, indicating that one of the legitimacy narratives of the CMG – *connectivity* – is performing its key function here in reducing violence by building associational relations. In actual fact, only Josinaldo grew up in Maré (Carlos is from the Zona Sul), and to my knowledge was never friendly with the gang leadership or core membership growing up but instead became acquainted with them only when he began to do work in the community. Here we can also see how the actual specifics of Josinaldo’s background matter less than the narrative of legitimacy he has created.

The group of teenage boys and young men who hang around talking, drinking and distributing drugs near *Loja Ribeiro* varies in size from two or three to as much as 20. On an average day however, the numbers are more like five to ten. Most are over 15 years of age and under 25. They are largely though not exclusively of Afro-Brazilian descent and live within a ten or twelve block radius. They eat snacks and drink a large variety of sugary and alcoholic beverages that they purchase from the Gomes family that operates the store. The group mostly, although not always, use their money communally to buy the provisions so as to equally distribute the limited supply among the members of the group. Their eating and drinking is done sitting in plastic chairs and on benches on the sidewalk area in the front of the *Loja Ribeiro* building and the adjacent residence on Rua do Serviçois.
This adjacent house, which is now in poor repair, belongs to Claudio. Claudio, who is a tall, soft-spoken single man about 30, does not drink with the group and keeps himself very busy operating an informal business repairing washing machines. Yet he tolerates and socializes with the group who are sitting partly on his property and who, rather than performing any constructive task, spend the entire day selling illegal intoxicants and who are at times in varying states of inebriation themselves. Claudio was reticent to speak with me, but after several weeks of seeing me around, he spoke briefly with me and mentioned the CMG as well as a local community leader as avenues of help that he could approach if he was having difficulty with the gang. Here we see the narrative of legitimacy in action that I call the mediator – Claudio was confident that he could access the CMG to convene an ‘official’ meeting to deal with grievances if he felt it was necessary. On the other hand, it was also clear from my observations that Claudio was expected to tolerate a good deal of destructive behavior without complaint, and evaluating when the cost-benefit analysis for him favored intersession was no straightforward calculation.\(^{90}\) It is very possible that reporting on gang activity could represent a zero-sum game type outcome for Claudio.

After an initial period of observation, it became apparent that, in the mind of residents, perhaps the lead role the CMG played relative to the narcotic sales hub was that of the narrative of legitimacy I refer to above: the mediator. In this narrative, according to one resident, the CMG can actually pressure the gang with the loss of support from the community residents.

\(^{90}\) Field Notes 7 April 2008
Field Journal, 21 March 08…Today I met Elbert Soárez for the first time…he owns and lives in a commercial/residential building down the street from Loja Ribeiro…he is 50, light-skinned and a small-scale developer who has a daughter in university. Senhor Soárez is slightly built, dark-haired, with an air of restless purpose. He made immediate reference to the guys across the street saying “when we can pay the police to come, they’ll be gone. Or dead.” Senhor Soárez gazed in frustration at the bottles and trash littering the other side of the street. “I try to clean it up sometimes, but it just keeps coming back…” He turns to me, suddenly intense… “Can you talk to your friends [the CMG]? Can you tell them to come down here and speak to these guys about not making such a mess all the time? They are pissing off the residents, tell them. I don’t want to hire police, because then there will be shooting, and more problems…”

One way in which violence can be curbed by CMGs is not just by dealing with the gangs’ propensity to violence, but also by placing some constraints on an individual (in this case a white business man) who would like nothing more than to involve the police or other disciplinary forces. Although a sort of minor plenipotentiary, rumored to have connections in the Mayor’s office, Elbert Soárez is constrained in his fierce desire to shut down this narcotics sales hub in part by unspoken potential neighborhood sanctions which are embodied in the CMG. This is the sense in which I use the narrative of the mediator – violence is constrained across multiple social roles because the CMG represents the capacity for mediation across multiple valences.

Marisa Barbosa is a 37-year-old Black woman who lives across the street and three doors East of Loja Ribeiro with her two school-age children. She was born in Maré and his lived in a favela for her entire life. Senhora Marisa is very widely known in the neighborhood and owns a small electrician business. She is constantly passing back and forth in front of the boca de fumo because she picks up
tools and materials in her apartment to perform electrical repairs for her clientele.

She decries the behavior of the group of men at Loja Ribeiro and openly berates them when she gets the chance, but she also tolerates their presence around the entrance to her home, even if they are drunk or stoned, which they tolerate with overall good humor. However, she tells me she is concerned about the children of the neighborhood, including her own, and it is this context that she brings up the CMG.

Field Journal, 01 April 08…One of the younger guys from the Loja came staggering over to where I sat today, watched from across the street by Senhora Marisa and one of her friends…Alceu seems to be in the advanced stages of severe drug addiction, physically emaciated, rambling incoherently about how tough he is…threatening me verbally with a beating (“uma enorme sova”) but hardly able to stay on his feet…Finally, when Alceu said something crude and abusive to a schoolgirl, Senhora Marisa (whose mobility is constrained) went into her apartment and came back with a broom and started thwacking Alceu with it, saying “sai agora!” Then she said to me “they [are] drinking and smoking every day. [They] Never stop. At least they are not alone…but I don’t want this for my kids.”

Field Journal, 06 April 08…Senhora Marisa explained today that it was the local children that worried her…she swept her hand to include the group smoking and drinking and awaiting the next sale…she said “this [behavior] is not good for anybody…but your friends, they are working, making movies, talking to people, maybe they [the neighborhood children who get involved with the CMG] can get a job…not this, this is not good for anyone, the kids here, they need something to do [that is not this], maybe they can find it with you guys…”

Senhora Marisa clearly believes that the benefits of the CMG can to some extent counter the destructiveness of the Loja Ribeiro group in the community at large. She definitely judges the young men who are involved with drug trafficking, invoking Evangelical Christian moral theology to condemn their choices, and
compares them unfavorably with the youth involved with the CMG. Here we see the fourth and final narrative of legitimacy I identify – *the good path*. In this narrative that helps to lessen neighborhood violence, the CMG is seen as normatively ‘on the side of the angels,’ in that it offers activities for youth which can be accepted by all social sectors as representing a more peaceful and perhaps more sustainable set of lifeways. By positioning itself as an organization that can provide opportunities for personal growth for ‘cool’ young people that do not involve violent practices, the CMG persistently lays claim to a legitimate and authentically youth-oriented space within the community. This positioning gives it the leverage to speak both *for* the youth in its organization and *to* the youth of the gang without being discounted as irrelevant or out of touch with the issues of the street.

Despite the fact that the rank-and-file of the traffickers at the *boca de fumo* spend most of their days consuming alcohol and drugs, frequently in the company of their established clientele, these young men are also friendly and communicative. Unlike some residents of Baixa do Sapateiro, the *Loja Ribeiro* group is not constrained in their interactions with me by differences in nationality, ethnicity or my intermediate Portuguese. They are very well-informed about neighborhood dynamics and gossip, they know personally or have heard of just about every member of the CMG, they know about fights between couples, coming parties or musical events, they have disagreements about business and local celebrities, and other day-to-day notable events that take place within their
spectrum. This openness makes it easy to discuss the role of the CMG in the community with them.

Field Journal, 4 April 08...Today for the first time I sat and drank beer with the Loja Ribeiro crew...their conversations are characterized by a constant teasing banter, in which past events are dramatized, general proclivities are shared and the favorite form of communication is jovial self-aggrandizement...Matheus, one of the leaders of the group, tells me that the Boca de Filme crew is alright, and he laughs about their name [which is a pun on the term for drug sales hub]. I ask him if he ever hangs out with them, and he says yes, he has played video games with Marco. “Those guys are cool,” he says, “but they can’t do what Coroa [then dono of most of Maré] does. He gives the kids here jobs and protects them from the TCP [Terceiro Comando Puro, a rival trafficking gang]. But they [the CMG] take the weaklings off our hands.

Field Journal, 10 May 2008...Pedro Henrique, one of the mid-level gang members, a young black male of about 17, approaches me privately...he wants to know if I will put in a good word for him with Josinaldo [the CMG leader]...he wants to make movies, he says, and shows me some cell phone pictures of him and his friends brandishing guns. “I heard those guys are making gangster movies,” he says. “I can do that. I need to take a break from this craziness.” Visibly scared, he tells me that the TCP is going to take over the neighborhoods around here, and they will kill members of the ADA. He complains that Faíso [the local gang leader] is disorganized and can’t control things. He says that the faction just sits around getting high and drunk and no one keeps track of their earnings.91

It seems clear from the journal entries selected above that several of the members of the Loja Ribeiro group view the CMG through the lens of narratives of legitimacy. Disparaging Matheus tells me, first, that the CMG is “alright,” implicitly acknowledging that they are authentically accepted by the neighborhood and by the gang itself. He goes on to imply that the CMG accepts young people

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91 9 months later, in early 2009, this prediction came true. The TCP expelled the ADA from most of the Complexo da Maré and seized their most lucrative drug sales franchises. At the time of writing, the ADA is pushing to retake this territory, while the UPP is preparing to press their beachhead further into the area, perhaps presaging further bloodshed.
who would be targeted for recruitment by the gang, except that they avoid resorting
to violence, and therefore are characterized as “weaklings.” The narratives at work
in the former entry are therefore connectivity and the good path – because the
CMG is identified as belonging to the neighborhood by the gang, who sees itself in
part as arbiter of local authenticity, and because although the choice to avoid
violence is disparaged, it is disparaged by a gangster who has embraced the role of
the ‘violent bad guy’, thus paradoxically reinforcing the choice’s ‘goodness.’ This
renunciation of violence on the part of Boca de Filme members also implies a
curbing effect on overall neighborhood violence on the part of the CMG because of
the lack of potential participants in conflict, an effect here indirectly acknowledged
by the gang member.

A month later, as the potential for violence increases for gang members due
to intensifying competition with a rival gang, another, younger gang member
named Pedro Henrique asks the researcher for help joining the CMG. When I ask
the CMG leaders about this they shake their heads – Boca de Filme cannot operate
explicitly as a haven for former members escaping from gangs, they tell me. This
would undermine their position in the community – I am told that by prior
agreement they can only bring someone into the CMG who has renounced the gang
on their own, and in this way they cannot be seen to be directly competing with
gangs for membership.  

In practice, the actual composition of their membership is
much more murky, with several members still maintaining connections and a sense
of loyalty to their former gang, as I show in the in-depth interviews below. But
here again we see the crucial role for the CMG of following the rules of the

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92 Field Journal, 6 June 2008
governing narratives in terms of maintaining legitimacy among neighborhood groups and individuals – the CMG must maintain both a closeness and distance relative to the gang, in order to claim the territory of both the connectivity and the mediator narratives.

The request by the young gang member Pedro Henrique illustrates the prominence of the mediator narrative for the CMG, and underpinning this request we can identify the assumed neutrality from conflict that defines this narrative of legitimacy. Pedro Henrique clearly believes that joining Boca de Filme will offer him some amount of real physical protection – that he will be safer behind the ‘shields of words’ erected by the CMG than he would be otherwise. Furthermore, he has reasoned that it makes some sense that he could join the CMG because the group is performing “gangster movies” (which is partly true – Boca de Filme produces some short films in which gangster tales play a role), and that as a former gang member, he will be able to fictionalize his own life in such a way that he can link narratives with the CMG. In other words, for this gang member, the CMG is both close enough to participate with, but far enough away to afford some protection from violence, meaning that it is perceived by gang members themselves to play a direct role in lessening violence in their lives.

One reoccurring topic in the conversation at the drug sales hub is directly related to the subject matter of this research project: gangster narratives and their place in the broader Brazilian culture. This creates an complex and dynamic relationship between fiction and reality, a circle of hermeneutics, as gang members debate the merits of various entertainment products and other narratives whose
subject is gangs and identify with, mimic, or criticize the characters embedded within these products. Over the course of this narrational process, they explicitly borrow tropes from these fictionalized tales and attempt to incorporate these elements into their lives. Complicating matters further is that many of these stories contain elements of ‘reality,’ in that writers of these fictions borrow from factual accounts of gangsters, and former gang members or street kids have historically been used as non-professional actors in certain productions. (Levine, 1997) This fictive process of identity construction has also been identified in the previous chapter on the Colombian fieldwork.

Field Journal, 28 May 2008…Discussion at the boca this afternoon centered on famous gangsters from the movies and TV, and how they compared to actual gangsters that the crew knew personally or had heard of. The gang members themselves were very deferential towards fictional gang leaders and the actors who portray them, as they would be towards actual gang leaders, and in fact, they saw fictional characters as existing on the same continuum with real gang leaders. Leandro is talking about two characters from a telenovela that aired last year called Vidas Opostas…they are two brothers, characters named Jéferson and Jackson da Silva…two gang leaders from a favela caught in a love triangle with a wealthy white guy and a girl from the neighborhood. “I would just take the girl and not mess around,” he says, “but I understand why he [Jéferson] is having some problems with Pé de Pato…some people do what they say they’re going to do, others are a bunch of liars, just like with us and Faiso.

In the conversation above, Leandro shows that he directly connects the behaviors of actors on screen to his life as a gang member, comparing the types of decisions he makes to those made by representations of gang members. This overlapping of representational realities underscores the prominent role played by narration in this
neighborhood, where reality can be influenced or even partly directed by changing representations in the media landscape. (Mayer, 2003a; Rêgo, 2014)

Boca de Filme and Narratives of Legitimacy

In January of 2008, Josinaldo Medeiro and Carlos Rodrigues reconstituted a defunct community filmmaking group called Boca de Filme with the assistance of several cultural and social actors, including the Observatório de Favelas, a large umbrella NGO which has an office in favela Mare. Boca de Filme’s stated mandate was to teach workshops in film production to adolescents and teenagers in an area of favela Mare under particularly strong gang control, specifically those youth who were identified by community leaders as being at risk of joining a trafficking gang, who previously joined a gang, or were currently a gang members and were expressing a desire to end membership. Having worked with a grass-roots film organization called Cinemaneiro in the past, as well as having developed contacts and friendships at the Observatório de Favelas through past projects, Josinaldo and Carlos were able to generate interest, support and six months funding for their project. Josinaldo is from favela Mare, and was personally familiar with two of the community leaders in Baixa do Sapateiro, one of whom had also worked on a project with Observatório de Favelas in the past, and this connection enabled Boca de Filme to have the use of the neighborhood’s community center for their workshops. The two obtained a number of small video cameras, audio equipment and two computers with rudimentary editing software from Cinemaneiro, which
they then arranged to have transported into the favela and stored in a locked room in the community center. The two aforementioned community leaders and the family members of the young *Boca de Filme* recruits were vital for Josinaldo and Carlos to reach their target group. It was only with the help of these community leaders and family members that *Boca de Filme* was able to corral 15 students, all of whom lived in Baixa do Sapateiro neighborhood, and several of which had been exposed to gang violence, to attend the workshops at least semi-regularly during the course of the study.

Beyond familiarizing their workshop students with basic filmmaking techniques, Carlos and Josinaldo also wanted to have the workshop produce a series of short, impressionistic docudramas or documentaries based on the lives of their students. This was important from a funding point of view, as it was necessary to provide their backers with a more-or-less finished product, but also from a philosophical point of view, in that they sought to interest their students in pursuing film or television production as university students and possibly as a career, and also to use the production of media as a healthy way to confront traumatic experiences in their lives. Both Carlos and Josinaldo believe that having a tangible product such as a composite DVD of short pieces would help the students stay out of the sphere of influence of trafficking gangs by stimulating a sense of accomplishment and raising self-esteem as well as by providing the students with a product they could show potential university entrance committees or potential employers.
The gang that controlled the Baixa do Sapateiro neighborhood (and most other neighborhoods in the Complexo do Mare) at the time of this study, is known as Amigos dos Amigos (friends of friends, ADA). The gang’s interests collided with those of Boca de Filme’s in two important ways. First, the gang was extremely sensitive to having its membership recorded on tape. The gang laid down highly stringent rules of where, when and under what circumstances Boca de Filme students would be permitted to film. These rules were not followed. Second, the ADA is a youth staffed and run operation, and they were in competition with Boca de Filme, and other, similar NGOs, for recruits. This competition for recruits was apparent in the Colombian case as well, and appears to have overlap with other Brazilian cultural entrepreneurs that possess significant overlap in terms of the sensibilities of membership with gangs, such as the group AfroReggae. (Neate and Platt 2010)

Boca de Filme’s sets of goals and underlying belief system can be seen as one example of an evolving cultural and political environment in which the changes in the methods of production and the increased participation made available by emerging technologies can be mobilized to counter the historical exclusion of particular social classes from media representation. (Holston 2008 242-47) Another view suggests that organizations like Boca de Filme are involved in an intimate dance with imagined observers in which they are performing poverty, violence and favela life through cultural production. (Williams 2008) According to a recent study (RIBEIRO, LÂNES and CARRANO), the use of
digital media has significantly changed both political and social engagement by favela residents, bringing theses spheres ever closer together.

Citizen participation in government decision-making was explicitly promoted by President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva (2003–2010), the long-time leader of a mass-based leftist political party (PT) linked to Brazilian social movements. Lula consciously sought to alter the way Brazilians understand doing politics (Rolnik 2011), encouraging citizens to engage and participate in the making of personal and national narratives. The Ministry of Culture, led by musician Gilberto Gil and later Juca Ferreira, began to enact these broad policies during Lula’s tenure as President by putting in place official organs and creating funding streams that sought to fertilize a series of grass-roots social, cultural and media groups. One of the most important of these newly-created official organs is called the Cultura Viva program, started in 2006, and it’s lead funding arm is called the Pontos de Cultura (Cultural Points). This program funds NGOs and organizations with a cultural mandate, creating conditions in which significant amounts of hybridized entrepreneurial labor is carried out by cultural producers. (García Canclini 2001)

Over-all funding of cultural initiatives grew under Gil-Ferreira partly because of the aggressive pursuit of private sector monies by the Ministry, made possible by the lei de incentivo (incentive law), through which private companies fund ministry-approved cultural projects in lieu of paying a particular tax, whether federal, state, or municipal. (Garland 2012) Petrobrás, the part-state-owned oil company, became the biggest contributor to cultural initiatives in Brazil in part because of this law (Garland 2012) and it indirectly funds the Boca de Filme
organization, which has successfully captured these resources through rhetorical and narrative strategies adopted by its leaders. These strategies include the adoption of government rhetoric about cultural programs, grant-writing skills, and social networking with Pontos de Cultura workers.

In the table below we can trace the overall task environment of this network of different organizations and groups and their contribution to the filmmaking workshops of the media group. Since the context I describe here is notable in part because of the inherent dangers and obstacles to doing community media work, I felt it that, as in Chapter 5, it was necessary to show how the CMG is able to function in terms of its staffing, funding, and the contributions in the form of commitment that it receives from its network of supporters. One conclusion that immediately can be extracted from this chart is how tenuous a group like Boca de Filme is. Boca de Filme is a relatively fragile organization that is site-specific and is imprinted with the personalities of its leadership rather than carrying much ideological content. Yet it is likely this fragility was an asset from a tactical standpoint (in terms of operations) as a more vertically integrated, institutionally mature organization might have been perceived as a threat, or at the very least as too much of an outsider to negotiate with, from the perspective of the local armed actor. In fact, by virtue of their perceived weakness relative to the power of the gang to draw adherents, Boca de Filme at least nominally enlisted the gang itself in the project of keeping the workshop participants from reverting back to gang membership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Job Description</strong></th>
<th><strong>Financial</strong></th>
<th><strong>Commitment</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CMG: Boca do Filme</strong></td>
<td>TV producer, instructor, filmmaker, youth worker, technical aspects of production*</td>
<td>Shared a lump sum paid from total project grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20-30 hours/week, full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workshop participants (mostly minors)</strong></td>
<td>Writing, shooting video, rudimentary editing, w/ varying degrees of responsibility</td>
<td>Given lunch, excused from school for workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Families of workshop participants</strong></td>
<td>Responsible for attendance of participants</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other NGO favela workers</strong></td>
<td>Source of knowledge about neighborhood politics</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Large umbrella NGO: “Observatorio de Favelas”</strong></td>
<td>Oversees funding, writes reports on projects, network hub</td>
<td>Gathers and splits off funding streams for favela projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium-size Associated NGO: “Cinemaneiro”</strong></td>
<td>Technical expertise, equipment and advice, source of CMG leadership</td>
<td>Provides support network for workshop leaders at no cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gang: “Amigos do Amigos”</strong></td>
<td>Supposedly prevents workshop participants from engaging in gang activity, only did so when pressured</td>
<td>None**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Researcher volunteers in this capacity for study period
**Some signs of prior financial ties between workshop participants and gang, some evidence of continued financial ties
Ethnography of Boca de Filme Leaders

Carlos Rodrigues is a 26-year old freelance camera man from the Zona Sul, a more affluent section of Rio, and his partner, Josinaldo Medeiro, is a 23-year old part-time film student from a different (but relatively close) neighborhood in favela Mare. These two young men are the leaders and founders of the CMG Boca de Filme. Combined, they had 7 years experience working in favelas, and, in the past, had encountered resistance to their projects from trafficking gangs, many of which involved television or film in some capacity. Medeiro claimed that most problems arise because of a camera: “If someone [gang member] doesn’t like where we’re shooting, usually they come up in a friendly way [numa boa] to discuss it. If they’re respectful, then we should be respectful, and put away the camera.”\(^93\) However in practice, this rule was rarely followed.

Initially, according to Medeiro, the ADA in Baixa de Sapateiro had forbidden the group’s young members to be out in the street filming, but this rule had almost immediately been dropped. The researcher witnessed many incidents in which gang members were caught on film, sometimes conspicuously armed, and at other times while engaged in criminal activity. Every day that workshops were held, the author, Medeiro and Rodrigues rendezvoused at the barzinho at the central entrance to Baixa de Sapateiro, which was located 20 yards from the boca, and often Medeiro and Rodrigues would fool around with cameras while trafficking activity was underway. Twice, the author, Medeiro and Rodrigues were

\(^93\) Field Journal, April 10 2008
warned not to display camera equipment, and both times ignored the warning, while once Medeiro joked with the ADA member saying “What are you going to do? Give us a beating [surra]?"\textsuperscript{94}

On the other hand, relations between the gang and civil society workers could quickly degenerate. During the course of the study, a young aid worker who, like \textit{Boca de Filme}, was also engaged in working with at-risk youth was executed by the ADA in a neighborhood bordering Baixa de Sapateiro. The execution was done publicly, at approximately 2 PM, and was conducted in a spectacular fashion, with a shotgun inserted in the victim’s mouth. Medeiro and Rodrigues both became extremely agitated and suspended classes for several days, threatened to close the project down, and did not venture to the neighborhood during this time. Later, residents reported that the execution was over a past infraction committed while the aid worker had been a member of the ADA, and this information calmed Medeiro and Rodrigues, and they returned to work conducting classes. However, this incident placed a pall on the activities of \textit{Boca de Filme}, and Medeiro and Rodrigues became more vigilant about controlling the filming done by the youthful members of the group.\textsuperscript{95}

The group was often engaged in producing improvised dramatizations from the lives of its young participants. One young man, with the help of Medeiro and Rodrigues, wrote a script that was based on a cautionary story told to him by his older brother. It involved an ex-gang member who returned from prison intent on avoiding contact with his former gang, but through circumstances, found himself

\textsuperscript{94} Field Journal, April 21 2008
\textsuperscript{95} Field Journal, May 12-16
drawn back into gang activity and ultimately died in a shoot out with police. The group then acted, filmed and directed a short film based on this script, including some scenes in the streets of the neighborhood. Several of these scenes included violent gun battles staged with toy weapons, and members of the ADA (on one occasions, armed with a real weapon), as well as other residents would gather to watch the adolescents producing the short film. By staging scenes like this publicly, Rodrigues related to the researcher, the group was drawing the ADA into their project.

Field Journal, June 1 2008…It’s good for them [ADA] to see this, it lets them know what we are doing. They might defend their life in public, but they know it’s not a good life, it’s a dirty life [vida safardo] in which the future is death [futuro é morte]. I think if they see us working with these kids, then they think more highly of us, they come to respect us more, see that we are trying to help kids who are just like they were. And then we ask them something, maybe they will listen.

Here we see Rodrigues strongly invoking the narrative of legitimacy I call the good path, and in so doing, making a speculative argument about the psychological state of gang members who interact with the CMG. His argument here is that, despite their commitment to a life of violence and criminal activity, the gang members respect the CMG workers and recognize their work as having an overall positive effect on the neighborhood (including presumably the reduction of violence). Furthermore, according to Rodrigues, the gang’s respect for the narrative of the good path is such that they are even willing to make concessions to the CMG in arenas of conflict between the two groups based on this normative judgment. While Rodrigues did not provide evidence for this assertion, what

96 Field Journal, April 29, May 3, May 5, May 7, June 12 2008
emerges from this conversation is how aware he is of the importance of narratives of legitimacy in terms of gang-CMG relations, and that he is consciously engaged in the mobilization of these narratives.

Rodrigues was on particularly friendly terms with one mid-level ADA member who was often to be found at the boca. He engaged in banter and chats (papo) with the gang member on a daily basis. At the early stages of this research project, the researcher suspected that the CMG may have been partially co-opted by the gang – even the name of the group is a play on the term for a drug hub. However, it later became clear that the media organization cultivated somewhat close relations with some gang members in order to protect their own project as part of their narrative of connectivity. Furthermore, during the public activities of the Boca de Filme, residents and gang members mixed freely in a relaxed atmosphere. In keeping with the narratives of connectivity and the mediator, Medeiro and Rodrigues, avoided discussing gang activity or local political activity, and other than to express their contempt for corrupt police (along with many others), seemed to steer clear of subjects altogether that involved the gangs. One macro-level effect of the successful mobilization of these narratives by the CMG was a perception of decreased violence in the neighborhood. In surveys represented above, residents told the researcher that when the media organization was operating their overall environment felt safer and less likely to erupt into violence.

The other leader of Boca de Filme, Josinaldo Medeiro, also showed considerable grasp of the uses of narratives of legitimacy. As a community media facilitator and burgeoning filmmaker from Maré, Medeiro is interested in the
power of localized storytelling to promote meta-cognition among the CMG workshop participants and in the community at large. (Lathem, Reyes, & Qi, 2006) A key part of the capacity of these stories to produce self-reflection is that they are drawn explicitly from a sense of rootedness in the favela: as Ryan (2008, p. 64) writes, “the best storytellers…are those who use and maintain their backgrounds, incorporating these in their narrations. Even…after becoming well established or commercially successful, [they] must continue a vital connection to individuals and communities who shaped her or his narratives…or the quality of narration suffers.”

Medeiro told the researcher that he believed that trauma from violence is an important mechanism of cycles of violence perpetuation, and that narratives that focus on confronting hard truths or even tragedies can lead to a lessening of violent reactions through the creation of new possibilities of choice. As Jackson (2002, p. 132) writes in his book on narration and violence in the world of refugees: “the passivity and silence in which the trauma endlessly recapitulates itself gives way to an impulse to rework one’s experience and regain control over it…Storytelling is an empowering act that helps us move from being the worlds mere “matter” to an artificer of the world…” The process by which storytelling can transform powerlessness into empowerment occurs through the particular type of understanding that comes about from narration, perhaps even from a narrative of legitimacy – once the source of violence is understood on a deeper psychic level, the subject no longer feels powerless in the presence of violence.

The researcher witnessed a clear example of this process. Since Boca de Filme contained 7 female members and 8 male, the subject of gender relations

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97 Field Journal, 26 April 2008
within the context of gang membership and the social world of young favela residents organically emerged as a compelling narrative to explore within the context of their short films. Guided primarily by Medeiro and based explicitly on the experiences of some of the CMG members, the most committed young filmmakers in the group produced a 20-minute, *Othello*-like, revenge tale titled *Lotario* in which a young woman, the girlfriend of a gang leader, is falsely accused of sexual impropriety. This false accusation sets off a series of honor killings that end in tragedy. This was the most ambitious project undertaken by *Boca de Filme* during the research period, and it was a clear success.

Field Journal, 21 May 2008...*Lotario* finished shooting two days ago and Josinaldo [Medeiro] called a group discussion and a wrap party today (no alcohol). At the party I spoke with Cety and Thanyá [two female members of *Boca de Filme*] who told me that they understood better why their boyfriends had been violent with them in the past. “It’s because of the society, and they are trying to be a man, but they can’t, and it makes them act crazy,” said Thanyá. They both said understanding didn’t make it okay, instead, it [understanding] made them feel like they had the power not to put up with it [violence] ever again.

Not only did the individuals above report to the researcher a change in their views on violence after the film project, but also the entire group reported an increase in awareness about violence perpetrated against women in the group discussion. In this instance, the researcher witnessed a narrative of legitimacy mobilized to lessen violence in a manner different than those described above. This narrative claimed authenticity by being drawn directly from the lives of the CMG members – a version of the *connectivity* narrative described above – and it became part of the overall curbing effect on violence in the community by raising
consciousness and promoting empowerment within the group itself, several of whom had been victims and victimizers in the past. In other words, this was the creation of an *internal* narrative that was used to lessen violence, rather than a socio-political claim to legitimacy.

In an important postscript to this incident, shortly after the end of the research period, Medeiro went on to direct a segment of the five-part feature film *5x Favela – Agora por Nós Mesmos*, which was a return to themes and subjects explored in the Cinema Novo classic *Cinco Vezes Favela*, but whose segments were this time directed exclusively by young favela residents. Scholars have argued that this film is part of a shift in Brazil from representations in film and television of poor favela residents by white middle-class filmmakers to self-representation on the part of favela residents themselves. (Frey, 2014; Stam, 2013)

In Medeiro’s segment, called *Fonte de Renda* (“Source of Income”) a young favela-dweller is accepted into a prestigious university but finds himself unable to pay for books and other expenses. Unable to accept the blow to his pride that asking for help would entail, he turns to selling drugs to the middle-class students, only to have this choice produce a violent and tragic conclusion. In this film’s subject, we can see a continuation of Medeiro’s exploration through the CMG of how violence is reproduced through systemic economic disparity and the link between violence and a masculinized narrative of self-worth.

Alongside Medeiro’s focus on violence-curbing narratives that are created internally by the CMG, in one dramatic circumstance witnessed by the researcher Medeiro directly challenged the ADA using the narrative of legitimacy I call the
As this research period began to come to a close, the researcher arrived at the community center to discover both Medeiro and Rodrigues highly agitated. According to Medeiro, two women had come to the community center just prior to the researcher and reported that one of the boys who was a member of the group had been coerced to act as a drug runner that day, transporting narcotics from one location to another. One of the women was the boy’s aunt and was extremely fearful for his safety, as the gang was currently involved in a struggle with another gang (the TCP) over territory in which the boy was instructed to travel. This was extremely upsetting to Medeiro and Rodrigues, as they both had assumed that the principle of the protection of CMGs members from gang coercion was well established.

Medeiro in particular was furious, and, after talking it over for several minutes, decided to go to one of the residences owned by the ADA to confront the local dono. Accompanied by the researcher and Rodrigues, the fuming Medeiro made his way to the structure and called to be let in. Both Medeiro and the researcher were let in, while Rodrigues waited outside ready to call the police if he heard gunfire, and eventually a mid-level gang member (not the dono) emerged and began to discuss the boy with Medeiro. Medeiro angrily demanded that the ADA release the boy from his obligation, and return him to his family. After arguing for 10 minutes or so, the gang member eventually became angry in turn, produced a pistol, and placed it upon the table between him and Medeiro. Medeiro swept the gun to the floor and after a moment of incredibly tense silence they resumed discussing the boy. Eventually, the gang member agreed to send the boy
home and not to employ any of the other members of *Boca de Filme* after being threatened multiple times by Medeiro with a loss of good will in the community. In this case, the primary narrative of legitimacy employed by the CMG to decrease the threat of violence in the community was *the mediator* – the CMG leader claimed the role of neutral negotiator between the community and the gang, and positioned the CMG outside of the matrix of violence, even when he himself came under direct threat of violence. Ultimately, the gang member tacitly acquiesced to this narrative frame, not out of guilt, but because he felt it was in the gang’s best interest to do so.

**Interview: Antônio**

Antônio is a 16-year-old who recently joined the CMG. Although still based out of Baixa do Sapatêiro, I first interviewed Antônio in downtown Rio, where he has recently reentered high school after not attending for two years (although he did receive some rudimentary instruction while in juvenile detention). He arrived with a group of male and female friends from his school to speak with me at a local chicken restaurant, and it quickly became apparent that I was going to have to get him alone in order for us to have a conversation, and that even then it was going to be difficult. Antônio was very fidgety, noticeably more so than his companions, and could not keep still for more than a few seconds. He twisted his fingers together in his lap while sitting, jiggled his leg, and jumped out of his chair repeatedly to pace, twist around and go hang on one of his compatriots. Some of

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98 *Field Journal, June 26 2008*
this could be attributed to his age and development or nervousness at the prospect of an interview about his life, but Antônio was clearly restless to the point of agitation or even “hyper-activity,” and when asked, several of his friends told me that he was like this all the time and was having problems in school because of this behavior.

Antônio was not formally a member of a trafficking gang, but had belonged to a group of youths who were engaged in petty theft and who were required to turn over a portion of their stolen merchandise or cash to a local gang representative. He is a gangly teenager with Afro-Brazilian skin coloring, and hands, feet, and a head that appear outsized for his skinny limbs. This is especially noticeable because he is head-and-shoulders taller than the group of friends he arrived with – which I later realized is due to the fact that he is several years older than his classmates. When talking about his time with his group of thieves, Antônio does not try to conceal his feelings of pride and bravado about the risks he ran, and revels in stories of how he outwitted and outran the police and his victims. When first talking to him, he seems to be an example of the Brazilian cultural tropes of Malandragem or the Jeitinho Brasileiro, of having a knack for and taking pleasure in circumventing or flouting social and structural rules. It is clear that he still values, and even romanticizes this ‘outlaw’ form of social navigation.

However, this turned out to be a superficial rendering of his experience and perspective. At our first meeting, I was skeptical of Antônio’s cocksure bravado, because it was apparent that the life of a petty thief on the streets of Rio was quite grueling, and because I was aware that he was very keen to produce a favorable
impression on both his accompanying friends and myself. After some negotiating (that involved the researcher procuring a gift certificate to a movie theatre), Antônio agreed to try the interview again and a week later the two of us meet at an ice cream shop and agreed to take the ice cream and sit on the steps of a staircase street at the eastern end of Baixa do Sapateiro.

Antônio is one of the few members of Boca de Filme whose father remains in the family home. However, in Antônio’s case this is not necessarily a positive factor in his development as, according to him, his father is extremely critical of him and of his choices and very indulgent of his younger sister, whom he resents. His mother, whom he describes with great affection, he portrays as diffident and retiring while at the same time extremely hard-working and self-sacrificing, a kind of Madonna maternal archetype common across many cultures. Antônio currently inhabits a contradictory position; he deeply respects and even romanticizes the “traditional” set of values he believes his family to represent, and yet he finds it impossible to imagine himself following their example.

The consequences of this sense of dislocation of values and his struggles with his father led to a break in the family that Antônio has difficulty talking about or even acknowledging. The CMG leaders have told me that Antônio has been expelled from his household and is currently living in a state sponsored transitional facility run by social work professionals, and has just recently been deemed fit to

99 Field Journal, 25 April 2008... Worthy of note was how powerful the narrative of the jeitinho can be; I found myself joining in with his friend group in signifying approval to Antônio for his rebelliousness, despite being 20 years older than him, a researcher, and aware of the fact that this dynamic was problematic.
return to high school, several years behind his age group. He seems unable to acknowledge how deeply fractured his family relationships remain, and talks instead about how despite trivial \textit{(de pouca importância)} misunderstandings, his family remains the most central and formational feature of his life. In contrast, Antônio views his life on the streets as aberrant, as a function of a series of misunderstandings with his father, which, interestingly, he blames himself for causing.

Despite Antônio’s protestations to the contrary, his personal history of a life lived on the street as a member of a gang of delinquent thieves remains central to his current sense of self. Squeezed between police and an urban militias on one side, and a trafficking gang on the other, Antônio clearly relishes his group’s brief independence and its ability to survive and operate on the streets, which he represents as a function of the street-smarts \textit{(jeitinho)} possessed by the groups’ members. As a junior member of a petty theft-gang, Antônio faced a number of extreme and self-induced hardships. He frequently used marijuana, crack cocaine, and the chemical agent in glue/apoxy (although now he claims to be drug free), and was beaten so badly that he was hospitalized on two occasions. I inquire about his nutritional intake, and it is clear from his flippant answers that regular meals were hardly a priority for him and his group – rather they ate whatever they could beg or steal.

Antônio’s group executed several sophisticated bait-and-switch scams in which they would create distractions and then steal from various merchants (a favorite target was cell phone kiosks). Another method of robbery they employed
was to swarm an individual they viewed as vulnerable and to be likely in possession of salable valuables (especially tourists he added to me while smirking) and strip them of watch, wallet, phone and sunglasses at very high speeds and then flee on foot. Many of these robberies relied on foot-speed, neighborhood knowledge and elusiveness to be successful, and so the group developed a series of pre-mapped escape routes and sought to orchestrate their robberies close to these escape routes to as to elude capture by their victims or by police. Antônio showed no remorse or regret for these actions, which he viewed as necessary for survival on the streets, and occasionally displayed pride in a particularly daring robbery.

The gang of thieves relied on a small group of fences in the criminal network in order to convert their stolen merchandise into cash, and Antônio evinced both scorn and admiration for these individuals, whom he called sinistro (meaning both “awesome” and “troublesome”). These fences made arbitrary decisions about what they bought, and sometimes the group would take extreme risks during a theft only to find no market for their stolen merchandise. Furthermore, sometimes the fence would pay a pittance for stolen credit cards (very common in Rio – twice my cards were stolen and copied while I was conducting research) and find a way to withdraw large sums of cash from these cards or purchase expensive consumer goods and generally go on a spending spree that the group of young thieves observed and envied in the extreme. Antônio is aware that his group was exploited by other criminal capitalists in the stolen commodity supply chain, and while he found this arrangement unjust, he also
accepted this injustice as a trade-off for the apparent freedom, comradeship and excitement that the lifeway of a street thief had to offer.

Antônio states unequivocally and convincingly that he will not return to thieving and living on the streets, not because it is morally wrong, but because the BDF leaders have convinced him that this pathway leads to jail or injury and death. I ask him about drug addiction and he shrugs, seemingly unconcerned about this outcome. But juvenile detention he found terrible (here again using the word sinistro but with a change in emphasis to indicate awfulness) and traumatizing and when he starts to describe it, tears begin to run down his face. His family was informed about his arrest and sentencing, but his father forbade his mother from visiting him, and only his aunt would come and bring him the food and petty cash that was necessary for survival during his institutionalization (according to Antônio, the food apportioned to him by the juvenile facility was usually stolen by other boys). Furthermore, he was captured independently of his gang and was incarcerated alone, and so was targeted for physical and mental abuse by other gangs of boys that had formed in the detention facility.

For Antônio, this period of his life led to profound emotional scarring, which might explain his jitteriness as a sign of internal anxieties. When I ask him what the worst part of juvenile detention was for him, he unhesitatingly answers loneliness (solidão), by which he means both the deprivation of his group of comrades and the continued rejection by his family. It is in this way that CMG seems to have had the strongest impact on his life; by offering him the narrative of connectivity. He says that recently a member of the trafficking gang had offered
him small amounts of cash to run errands approached him on two occasions, and he was tempted by the money and companionship that the gang offered. However, when he informed the CMG leaders about these inducements, they became angry on his behalf, and acted to protect him by insisting to a local gang leader that he be left alone, invoking the narrative of legitimacy of the mediator, and threatening to attack the gang’s legitimacy in the community. This protectiveness he found to be compelling because it was reminiscent to him of familial loyalty, and so appears to be a crucial factor in his decision to not resume gang activity.

Although Antônio finds the filmmaking exercises and training that the group engages in cool and interesting (maneiro), unlike some other CMG members he is not convinced that it might lead to professionalization or employment. He tells me about how he is currently working on a short film script about a boy in a juvenile facility who finds a talking Jesus statue buried in the exercise yard and tries to keep the statue from being discovered by the guards and the other boys. But the other boys find the statue and ritualistically destroy it. At this point in the interview I find myself emotionally affected by his account, because it somehow brings home to me all the suffering that was inflicted on Antônio while he was in detention. Antônio, on the other hand, is happy to talk about this because it means he no longer has to revisit his actual memories of imprisonment and torment.

It is apparent from the testimony of Antônio and others and through observing the activities of BDF that they are engaged in informal therapeutic activity by using personal-history storytelling and narration as a method for victims to face the source of their trauma. I am not qualified to judge the overall success or
failure of this enterprise, however I can observe that the BdFMs like Antônio feel capable of talking and sharing experiences that they would otherwise avoid because of their painful nature. No social stigma is attached to former criminal affiliations or activity because almost everyone in BDF has at one time engaged in these activities. The categorical directive issued by the group to refrain from gang activity seems to be followed for the most part. And BDF can credibly claim success in keeping their membership away from the trafficking gang, following the good path, in part because its leaders are able to successfully project and mobilize the narrative of legitimacy of the mediator and of connectivity to their membership, to the community at large, and even to the trafficking gang. All of these factors combined persuasively indicate that the presence of the CMG decreases incidents of violence in the community.

**Interview: Cety.** A key interview for this phase of this project was with a new member of Boca de Filme who joined after the research period commenced. Cety is 21 years old, pared down and intense, with a slightly indigenous bone structure and a plait of thick black hair. She is almost alarmingly thin, weighing perhaps under a hundred pounds and standing about 5’4”, but gives an impression of determined strength rather than frailty.

Cety entered the community of Baixa do Sapateiro through personal connections, as some members of her family live in the Complexo da Maré, and she was initially able to find shelter in a different favela within Maré, the name of which she requested I withhold. At first, her presence in Maré was objectionable to
some of the local gang members who saw her as tied to a rival gang. After some weeks however, she was able to go about her business unmolested by joining Boca de Filme (and through her own personal courage despite threats and verbal persecution), which used the specific narratives of legitimacy I call the mediator and the good path to protect her from violence, strongly asserting that by joining the CMG she was renouncing any former gang ties and joining a neutral organization. According to her, however, despite not fearing violence any longer, she was still discriminated against, as certain Maré residents were reluctant to employ her for fear of gang sanction.

I met Cety at a Boca de Filme group meeting, and she initially agreed to talk to me in an interview setting, but soon thereafter she began avoiding me. I was convinced that her individual experiences could form an important piece of this research project because she was in a position to directly relate how a narrative of legitimacy had protected her from violence, and so I determined to contact her. Ultimately, Cety agreed to be interviewed because of a request passed through my gatekeeper Carlos, and we arranged a preliminary meeting. That went well, so we agreed to record an interview on May 2, which was the earliest date she was available.

I chose as a location for the interview the home of an out-of-town friend in a middle class neighborhood, because it seems more neutral than my own rented house would be. It is private, and yet by setting the interview outdoors I hope to make it seem less claustrophobic or threatening. I set out sweetened iced tea and potato chips. Cety arrives 45 minutes late apologizing profusely, and I can tell by
her conflicted expression that she had been unsure if she was going to come at all. Her hands are shaking slightly but noticeably, her eyes avoid mine, which is unusual among the Brazilians I have met, and she begins to compulsively root through her bag in search of some lip product which she is never able to locate. It is unclear whether this anxiety is because she is reluctant to talk about her experiences, or whether she is nervous about meeting an unknown man alone in a strange place, but I think it is probably both.

Cety began by telling me how she came to be under threat of violence, which started with the story of her family. The story of the persecution of Cety’s family, while extremely harsh, is not unusual among residents of certain favelas in Rio de Janeiro, according to other community members I queried. Her family was moderately supportive of an urban-based gang in their neighborhood after it came to prominence during the 1980s, and although Cety claims that they were not actual gang members, she told me that her uncle, who was the most actively supportive member of the family, once hid a cache of the gang’s weapons in the ceiling of her parents’ store with their approval. Cety herself spent time at an informal gang youth camp (I was surprised to learn that the gangs had youth camps), organized by the gang’s local chapter, off-and-on for several years when she was eight, nine and ten years old. Despite deep disillusionment with the organization, she still evinces support for the gang’s stated goals of providing for and protecting her community. Her disillusionment with the gang closely parallels her disillusionment with Brazil as a country – the same thematic cycle reoccurs as she talks about these two subjects, extravagant promises and possibility followed
inevitably by the corruption of ideology, failure to affect change, betrayal, and the
ultimate immiseration of ordinary people.

In a significant segment of Rio’s favelas, especially those that remain
mostly beyond the reach of formal law enforcement, urban militias enforce their
will upon the population, levying taxes and meting out violent punishment as they
see fit. According to Cety, business owners and wealthy residents sometimes
establish a fund for social cleansing, paying these militias to slaughter or drive out
of the community suspected gang members. Former gang supporters are frequent
targets of these militias. While the gang in her neighborhood was a viable, armed,
broad-based organization, it provided some protection for its followers/backers, but
according to Cety, when the group devolved into purely a criminal organization
that existed only to sell narcotics to the community, that protection evaporated.
Cety’s parents were frequently harassed and forced to move apartments twice, and
her father was badly beaten several times. Their resources and options were
extremely limited, and so although they managed to keep ahead of their tormentors
for a while, Cety said that the feeling in the household was that their deaths were
destined.

Cety is the second oldest child of four, and although she occasionally
speaks to her oldest sister on the phone, she is not sure where her two youngest
siblings are. Talking about her family’s fragmentation clearly causes her great
pain. She states that she saw her youngest siblings as representing hope for her
family’s efforts to achieve stability, especially her youngest brother, for whom she
made great sacrifices (including dropping out of school herself in order to get a job
to help support him) in an effort to get him through high school. These sacrifices did not succeed and her brother struggled after their parents were killed. She heard from him once or twice after he stopped coming to their parents’ house, but no more after that.

Cety tells me that it was the death of her parents and the threats against her own life that induced her to leave her neighborhood. Her fragmented family and social network mobilized around her efforts to the extent they were able, and her uncle, now a taxi driver, the same one who once hid weapons in her parent’s store, leant her money as did her family members in Baixa do Sapateiro. Now in Maré, it appears that Cety is somewhat adrift, but nonetheless determined to forge forward. She has a very clear sense of how her participation in Boca de Filme has reduced the likelihood of being violently attacked. She describes how the CMG leaders interviewed her, how they asked about her interests, the extent of her gang affiliation, and what her life goals were. Once they established that she was genuinely interested in a community media project, and demonstrated seriousness, they introduced her to the community leader who informally sponsored the project and who agreed to permit the group to use part of the community center. The CMG leaders then brought her to a preliminary meeting at the Observatório de Favelas to meet with upper echelon civil society workers there.

I ask Cety whether the CMG leaders were signaling to the gang through this process of introductions that Cety now “belonged” to the sphere of civil society rather than belonging to the world of the gang, and she tells me that this is obvious. In other words, participation in the CMG began to shift the locus of
Cety’s group identity in the community, but only through a thorough performance of this change. I ask whether this change in status was sufficient to afford her sufficient protection from the gang, and she answered in the negative. It was only when they spoke to the gang directly, she tells me, while she stood there in silence, present but unacknowledged, that she felt that the eyes of the gang stopped seeing her. According to Cety, the gang members that the CMG leaders spoke with needed a lot of convincing about her change in group identification, how she had given up any gang affiliation, and how she had truly put her old life behind her and she was now embarking on the good path. I asked her whether she felt the Boca de Filme leaders had exaggerated her past gang affiliation somewhat in order to more clearly represent her turning a new leaf. She agreed that this was the case – that in order to convincingly persuade the gang leaders they were speaking with that Cety was a changed woman, the leaders narrated her past as more co-opted by rival gang affiliation.

**Interview: Thanyá.** Thanyá is a 22-year-old, former gang affiliate living in Baixa do Sapateiro with her older brother in a loteamento (rented or privately owned lot). She left school at 13 and came from an extremely impoverished background in Duque de Caixas. Her boyfriend was a member of the gang’s leadership cadre, and was shot and crippled in a dispute that Thanyá describes as “personal”, and Thanyá left her neighborhood shortly after because of fear of recrimination. Her relationship quickly dissolved after she moved and she has no contact with her former boyfriend. She informed me that she had misled Josinaldo
and Carlos, the two leaders of the CMG, about her past exposure to violence and the extent of her gang history, assuming that they would never admit her as a member if they found out the depth of her previous involvement.

Thanyá’s loyalty to the gang to which she belonged stemmed from financial rational self-interest and personal attachments more than loyalty to a locale or a sense of exclusion. She joined the group late in its arc in her neighborhood, after it had become entrenched in violent struggles with rivals and police. Thanyá was recruited while still in school, and fell in love with an older, charismatic member of the group while undertaking low-level tasks for the gang. She cohabitated with this man, and later brought her two younger brothers into the gang, both of whom have since been exposed to violence and life-threatening scenarios. Her younger brothers are still in her former neighborhood living off and on with their parents and extended family. Thanyá is considering whether or not to try and remove her brothers from her former neighborhood and bring them to Baixa do Sapateiro, as she feels they are coming under particular pressure, and she is particularly concerned for their safety.

However, it is clear that Thanyá is also conflicted about bringing her two brothers to live with her as she is still living a somewhat marginal existence, despite having acquired steady employment. She is the one who visits them since having moved, and she says she would be embarrassed for her brothers to see the cramped living conditions she shares with her older brother, and the substantially reduced purchasing power she possesses after leaving the gang. Thanyá states that

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she has a great deal of pride in herself, and admits that this is at least partly because she was encouraged to develop this by the gang to which she belonged. She believes that she has been downgraded in social status (her economic situation has appreciably worsened) since leaving the gang, and this complicates her desire to safeguard her younger brothers by bringing them to live with her. She has not yet determined what she will do.

Thanyá has not yet acculturated to non-gang life. Her interview is peppered with references to the current state of gang territorial competition, gang gossip, and hostile/cynical statements about community leaders, police and other state organizations – with the notable exception of the CMG, again indicating the successful mobilization of the narrative of legitimacy called connectivity. I asked her what she thought about committing to an organization whose specific goals are to disentangle its members from gang participation, and whether she was in affect contradicting herself when she stated that NGOs and community outreach programs were mostly opportunistic hustlers while belonging to one of these organizations herself. She responded that they were all the same to her, and angrily retorted that she could do whatever she wanted.101 But later in our conversation, she stated that she still thought a lot about what Josinaldo and Carlos were trying to achieve with BDF, and on the one hand admired their goals in terms of changing the lives of young people for the better – the good path. On the other hand, she continued, she sometimes felt she was betraying her former friends by focusing in discussions and projects on the negative attributes of gang membership, and she

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went on to say that she was not strictly against her former gang. Thanyá is in a nether region of transition; she has not fully disengaged from the gang, and nor has she fully conceived of what her new role is to be.

The subject of memory came up almost immediately in the interview and was clearly of the highest importance to Thanyá. She spoke of gang members as a group of people without a memory, yet somehow living in the past. As I went over the interview recordings at a later date, I realized she was making a distinction between the recollection of past happenings, and the ability to learn from those events. Memory for Thanyá meant properly interpreting events as opposed to just knowing that they have taken place. Thus, for Thanyá, her memories give rise to a kind of consciousness or awareness, both of the validity and strength of the social ties that gang membership offers, but also of the futility and stupidity of the violence with which they operate. Thanyá spoke with feeling about the plight of young people who join gangs, and as a woman with few resources, she says she felt forced by extremes of poverty to make similar choices. At one point she described how gang membership can be a kind of total experience of forgetfulness:

*Com su bando, tudo vai virar passado no futuro. Elo corta elo que ligava con sua familia. Entao, o felicidade é relaxar com os amigos na praia. A boa é se divertir - lançar mais um uzinho. Longe de toda os problemas e geral mandar no futuro no cu* (With the gang, there is neither past nor future. They cut your ties to your family. It’s fun to chill with your friends on the beach. It’s sweet to have fun – fire up another joint. You are far from your problems and the future goes out the
It is clear that Thanyá feels herself to be stranded by how successfully the gang inculcated a belief in the importance of living in the moment, and now she feels unable to truly commit to the difficult task of weaving herself into the tapestry of a new social existence that focuses on future outcomes.

Thanyá’s defining traumatic experience was the shooting of her boyfriend in which she was also lightly wounded. Unlike some of the other CMG members I spoke with, this experience was still very difficult for her to talk about. Thanyá still harbors feelings of guilt and remorse about her boyfriend’s crippling, believing that she could have prevented it with a slightly quicker reaction. Also, this one moment led to a dramatic reordering of her life, and the loss of a defining love relationship. As we first spoke about the incident, she became visibly upset, and in our second interview she told me that she had had no control over the images of blood that began to appear in front of her eyes. She explained the experience by saying that although she was looking at me, she could not see me, and that instead she was watching a movie of the past unfold in between us. I took this to mean that these memories had a power of their own that Thanyá could not rein in. I believe this power came from her belief that had she acted differently in the past, her present and her future would now be radically different, and, more precisely, happier. The moment of the shooting of her boyfriend has become the hinge of her personal history.

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**Interview: Joselino.** Joselino is a 19-year-old emerging filmmaker and writer who currently lives outside of Baixa do Sapateiro and commutes to the community center to help with instruction for *Boca do Filme* and to work on his own projects. He left the neighborhood because of persecution two years ago and has been living close to Rio’s downtown in Favela Moreira Pinto. Joselino met Carlos during an earlier project by the latter, and they stayed in touch. Joselino states that he has been sympathetic to local traffickers’ stated goals, and that he was affiliated with a gang at a younger age, during which time he spent thirteen months in the infamous Padre Severino Youth Detention Center (decommissioned in 2012). Recently, however Joselino says that he has found himself on the side of residents who advocate for an end to trafficker control of Baixa do Sapateiro.

Driven by artistic and professional ambitions, starting at the age of 15, Joselino began to shoot and edit (initially by himself; later with Carlos’ help) short films containing impressionistic social and personal commentary. Following emerging and established filmmakers such as Daniel Ribeiro, Julia Bacha, and Jose Padilha, Joselino began writing and filming treatments that delve deeply into the personal lives of his fictional characters, but that also draw heavily on documentary and non-fiction styles in order to provide insight into a prevailing social configuration. For Joselino, there is little use in strictly demarcating the worlds of commerce and love, memory and politics, global or local problems. However, despite his capabilities and his ambitious reach, it should be said that Joselino at the time of this writing has not managed to gain admittance into the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro despite the existence of an overlapping filmmaking and animation
project sponsored by the University, nor has he at the time of this writing been able
to obtain an production assistant internship in the local film and television (such as
5x Favela, Agora por Nós Mesmos, the feature film of which Josinaldo Medeiro
directed a segment, mentioned above) notwithstanding the enthusiastic support of
the leaders of Boca do Filme. Nevertheless, he continues to write and produce and
hopes to find a way to advance his professional ambitions.

Some of Joselino’s film subjects that treat on the lives of youth enmeshed
in interactions with trafficking gangs echo those of other BdFMs. For example, he,
like Thanyá, believes that young gang members try to live in an eternal present –
“esquecem tudo e tentam-no viver em um presente eterno que seja igualmente
muito uma parte de seu caráter” – and that this state of being has been enforced
and encoded upon them by the gang’s leadership but also by conditions in the
communities in which they live. By explicitly creating the expectation that the
lifespan of a gang member will be short, the use of time as a stabilizing or
normalizing concept within in the world of trafficker gangs has effectively been
ignored or deferred, according to Joselino. But there is a creeping anxiety and
stress associated with this deferral, he notes. Joselino indicates that the sensation of
time passing is felt in the psyche as well as understood in the brain, and although
one can claim that the passage of time is irrelevant amidst the warp and weft of

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Field Journal, 6 May 2008. Time? What time? When you your life will end
from drugs, a gun, over a women or in prison at some point real soon you don’t
think about kids, a job, all that. You can’t. Or that’s what they tell you, anyway.
gang life, it becomes more and more difficult to hide one’s emotional reactions. Joselino, identifies a group deficiency of memory associated with trafficker gang membership, but unlike her, he also linked this deficiency to the volatility and explosive anger shown by some gang members.

When pressed, Joselino admitted that he recognized some perverse but powerful attraction connected to the repression of memory and the denial of a future. Joselino believes that in some ways membership in a gang shields young people from the stress of having to try to succeed in a socio-economic environment that contains enormous barriers to success. He also suggested that the drama of life as a gang member imparts importance to a life that otherwise can feel insignificant. As he continued explicating his views on life in a gang, I realized that Joselino is still very attached not just to the community that the gang represents, but also the common struggles shared by youth gang members that help to shape individuals into a collective. In some ways, as an emerging artist/documentarian, what Joselino misses most about the gang was not the community of people, which he recognizes can be dysfunctional, but a community of competing and transgressive narratives, an embodied tournament of stories playing out in the everyday lives of gang members. I saw that this in particular was what continued to inspire Joselino, and so it was natural that he linked gang membership to some of his own artistic and professional ambitions. However, he also makes it very clear during the interview that he will never be joining a gang again, and that he views himself as lucky to have survived his time in juvenile detention and the persecution that followed him upon his release.
As an aspiring intellectual/technician who is tall and physically imposing relative to other members of *Boca de Filme*, Joselino sometimes appears out of place in a group with the other students. Joselino tells me that the members who are not vocally anti-trafficker tend to maintain gang ties for economic reasons. Their goals, Joselino states, center on income and security, as well as their sense that the CMG leaves Baixa do Sapateiro, the trafficking gang will remain the only organization able to provide a viable hierarchical command structure that can dispense patronage. As for the leaders of the CMG, Carlos and Josinaldo, they strongly feel that anyone who is remotely ambivalent about the role of the gang – who does not feel that the gang is a purely destructive force in the neighborhood and in the lives of its youth – is anathema and an outlier, and should be not be a member of their community media group. This set of attitudes, Joselino feels, is a mistake in the context of the neighborhood. Despite appearing to be tracking on a different trajectory from some of the members of the group, Joselino sees himself as an outcast in the professional and scholastic worlds. Indeed, Joselino identifies with the sense of being stranded he ascribes to young people who maintain their gang ties – stranded not so much in the past, as in the eternal present, in a sort of timelessness of powerlessness. If the present is that thinnest of membranes where the past and the future touch, than it could be said that Joselino’s aspirant identity as a professional or a soon-to-be student feels to him as though it were gossamer. In trying to bridge those two identities, Joselino walks the tightrope of a version of the narrative of *connectivity* – he stays close to his roots, in part to tell stories that he can use to try to professionalize.
A traumatic past event that links Joselino to other members of *Boca de Filme* (as well as some of the gang members) is juvenile detention. Although he was imprisoned as a member of a trafficking gang, the experience of being imprisoned shamed him, and he was hurt by some of the other prisoners. He was very surprised to be arrested, Joselino told me, because despite his gang ties he was a good student for whom adults had predicted a bright future. Joselino sought to “game” his way through trafficking gang membership rather than be subsumed by it. He was more interested in the momentary advantages of status and financial rewards provided by the gang than in actively adopting gang members as a sort of family and defining himself in relation to this new family. Nor would he have, as he told me, resorted to any form of violence against civilians – although this claim is, of course, impossible to verify and certainly is apt to provoke skepticism, given how gangs rigorously socialize their members to behave violently. But his naturally curious and ambitious mind sought out the connections and advantages the gang could provide, which in turn led to his arrest.

Joselino’s trauma, although there were physical elements to it, affected him most on a psychic level. He felt fundamentally “desconhecido” – unknown, while in detention. He was invisible to the authorities, and the distinctions he made in his mind between himself and ‘true’ gang members made no difference to the security apparatus that had imprisoned him. When he foresaw that staying in the gang meant a choice between the elision of his own identity and a future of state harassment and fear, with perhaps more frequent visits to prison, Joselino decided to leave the gang. Joselino initially fled the neighborhood after some light
persecution and threats, and now feels safe returning only because of the actions and intermediation of *Boca de Filme* which once again used specific communication strategies of conferring or withholding legitimacy with the gang to allow Joselino to remain unmolested, in this case using the narrative of legitimacy I call *the good path*. However, in leaving the gang and the neighborhood, Joselino left behind a keystone of his identity, which could be seen as the narrative continuity between different states of time. Neither able to let go of his memories of a nostalgic yet painful past, nor fully able to embrace a new future, Joselino remains in a moment of vulnerability, attempting to narrate his way into the future.
Conclusions

In this final section of the research project, I will highlight what I see as the overall importance of my research to the scholarship on this subject. First, this research, in conjunction with the work of other scholars, tells us that legitimacy, as a political concept, can be present in informal institutions, and not just within nation states. This is significant because, on the one hand, it demonstrates these informal institutions can compete with nation states for the loyalty of citizenry, and on the other, it means that citizens and civil society groups can have access to the levers of accountability associated with legitimation, even in an environment where formal democratic mechanisms are weak. This research also indicates that the deployment of narratives can act as an effective means to access these levers of accountability, especially by groups that are particularly focused on narrative production, such as community media organizations.

This research helps us to examine the social significance of community media groups (CMGs) on a more granular level, and to assess their impact in their respective communities. The CMGs in these two case studies share some important similarities, and these similarities suggest areas of overlap that extend beyond these two cases. By exploring these areas of overlap, I will flesh out my conclusions about what overall role community media can play in per-urban communities. And by exploring the distinctions between these two groups, I will specifically assess
how they may have impacted levels of community violence. Finally, in an effort to bring these two perspectives together – the political and the social – I will claim that the broad picture of these communities presented by some scholars of democratization is flawed in that it does not adequately take into consideration how civil society groups positively impact levels of political and social engagement and contribute to a more democratic culture overall.

On the one hand, looking at opportunity structures present in their respective neighborhoods, and the task environments of these two grass-roots organizations, we can begin by concluding that they are both quite fragile and dependent on the commitment of a highly-motivated membership. Funding in particular is precarious and illustrates the importance of social networks – the CMG in Bogotá was dependent on a doubly discretionary revenue stream, that is to say foreign NGOs provided outside funding to municipal agencies that were themselves dependent for their staffing and budget on the political leanings of the mayoral administration. In the context of Colombian civic politics, a pro-business mayor would be unlikely to support an agency that provided funding to dozens of grass-roots media organizations. Without Francisco Cuellár’s social contacts with public officials, the CMG could not capture this funding.

The funding situation for the CMG in Rio was even more reliant on social networking. This CMG relied on strong relationships to capture funding for film and new media projects that a well-established NGO (Cinemaneiro) received as part of a larger government grant. Only social connections within Cinemaneiro enabled these two leaders to have discretionary power over this funding, and thus
launch their project with a minimum of troublesome delays, oversight or interference, but they still needed to leverage contacts with yet another NGO (Observatório de Favelas) in order to operate inside Favela Maré at all. The Rio CMG had to scrounge filmmaking and editing equipment (including from this researcher) in order to fulfill their basic mandate, arrange the free transfer of a valuable commodity in the form of community center space, and extract enough young people from precarious living situations to make the project viable.

Although social networks (which can be unstable) seems to be a crucial element for the survival of the CMGs, both groups happen to be endowed with leaders who were well-trained at managing this resource. Francisco Cuellár, Silvia Moreno (leader of the social media group in Colectivo El Gritón), Josinaldo Medeiro, and Carlos Rodrigues were comfortable within a resource environment in which social networking played a crucial role. Furthermore, their training techniques, their activism and their pedagogy all emphasized the role personal relationships played in accomplishing goals inside dangerous and hard-to-access peri-urban neighborhoods. Both CMGs made effective use of social networks, using them as transmission pathways for their narratives. Thus, in part due to their social networks, it is possible to characterize both these groups as resilient, technically sophisticated, and effective despite their evident fragility.

The technical skills sets and other human resources nourished by the CMGs proved to be resilient enough that they continue to bear fruit. Medeiro went on to direct a short film that deals directly with themes that emerged out of the CMG work depicted in this study (leaders are themselves participants in these groups and
can benefit from these groups do), and many of the media groups that began under the guidance of Francisco’s collective continue to flourish in Bogotá. As of this writing, at least three members of the social media protest group founded by Silvia Moreno have gone on to pursue communications-related studies at the same university program that Moreno attended. As per the last communication with the Rio CMG, an unspecified number of group members were on track to finish high school and were blogging and continuing to shoot video footage.

Over the course of the research period, I observed clear indications of CMG effectiveness in terms of curbing the impact of violence on its members – both CMGs were able to provide some shelter for at-risk youth from the threat of violence, gang membership, criminal activity and/or other risk-intensive behaviors in neighborhoods where there are high incidents of violence, criminal rent-seeking, gang recruitment through coercion, and drug use. Alvaro Rojas, a key member of the Bogotá CMG, and some of the other young rappers he mentors, are good examples of this sheltering capacity in the Colombian case. When members of the Colombian social media group (SMG) were threatened as they built up a small protest movement in Juan Pablo II, the CMG was able to provide protection by intervening with the paramilitaries. In Rio, a number of CMG members interviewed for this project were sheltered from potential harm inflicted by the trafficking gang, including Cety, Antônio, and Thanyá. In a confrontation with a gang leader, one of the Rio CMG leaders was indirectly threatened with a firearm and was able to diffuse the situation.
In terms of the pedagogical and institutional goals of the two CMGs, both also demonstrated what I argue is considerable effectiveness over the research period. In an environment of scarcity and instability, the Colectivo El Gritón provided funding, training and mentorship to its many ancillary groups and members, including a grass-roots documentary unit, a network of interconnected blogs, radio broadcasters, a group of rappers producing music about neighborhood topics, and the social media protest group described in Chapter 5. The social media group achieved many of the goals specifically mentioned by Francisco Cuellár and Silvia Moreno in their general descriptions of what they saw as the core activities of community media; the SMG educated its members and raised consciousness about a vital community issue (violence, locally and nationally), it empowered young people by adding their voices to a national conversation using a media platform, it built solidarity with other like-minded groups, and it ultimately participated in a massive collective action. The SMG diffused after the protest marches of February 5, 2008, and did not demonstrate longevity or long-term political organizing capacity, but it clearly opened a space for its members to reflect on the way power worked within their neighborhood and develop responses.

In terms of the overall delivery on its mandate placed within the context of its challenges, the accomplishments of Boca de Filme are, if anything, even more impressive. With much less institutional support, this CMG was able to productively convene a group of young people who faced multiple obstacles to participation. These obstacles included precarious living situations such as semi-homelessness and family estrangement, in some cases long commutes and
peripheral connections to the neighborhood, variable or negligible employment, school problems, fear of violence from prior gang affiliation with rival gangs, as well as what was almost certainly psychological trauma. Despite these challenges, this group not only convened all-day or half-day workshops that were regularly attended, but almost immediately began developing workable scripts for short films, engaged participants in technical aspects of filmmaking such as shot angles, lighting, and sound, and quickly produced footage that could be collectively analyzed, critiqued and viewed as successful or not.

Some of the short films produced included the following: a parable about social anomie and devolution in which a delinquent youth sneers at a grandmother on a bus who asks to sit down, is shamed into allowing her his seat, and then discovers that she has stolen his backpack after it is too late to do anything about it; a comic take-off on drug use and the movie *Pulp Fiction* in which the film’s MacGuffin (a mysterious briefcase) is found to contain ham sandwiches instead of money or drugs; and a longer, darker piece about violence against women (that echoes *Othello*) in which the girlfriend of a drug dealer is falsely accused of infidelity and then murdered. In each of these short films (and in others not mentioned here), the Rio CMG leaders helped the participants adapt general observations about social mores or observed dynamics into workable scripts in which the emphasis was on action rather than dialogue. Through this process, the Rio CMG was able to open a space for members to reflect on power dynamics and the use of violence within their community.
The participatory process outlined above proved effective in that group members eagerly engaged in rap sessions about the world around them that revealed acute observational capacity, then translated this dialogue into skits that were acted out in the workshops (to great hilarity) which in turn were written up as shot-listed scripts, and finally brought cameras out into the streets to shoot in the world outside the workshops (most of the editing was done by one of the CMG leaders, group member Joselino, or the researcher). In other words, despite the daunting obstacles outlined above, *Boca de Filme* created a sort of nascent theatre/film company seemingly out of thin air, and they were able to generate high levels of engagement from their members by offering concrete pleasures and benefits from the media work. I argue that this research demonstrates the potential for the establishment of dynamic and successful community media groups even in communities where barriers to participation are very high.

Despite the necessary focus on media production, a key metric of success for both CMG groups was to keep their members from being exposed to violence and the threat of violence, because without this achievement, many of the activities described above simply could not go forward. Without some protection from violence, there would be little or no space for these groups to operate in these neighborhoods. In this way, the protection of its members from violence was ontologically significant to both CMGs, and as I describe above, both groups took risks in order to try and extend this protection to their members. Given the ethnographic data I gathered, I believe it is possible to claim that the CMGs limited
their communities’ exposure to violence at least to the extent that they shielded their membership, a point which adds one layer of support to my hypothesis.

However, I make additional claims here. I claim that these CMGs act as a check on power and violence employed by armed actors in similar ways. According to my research, the CMGs both used narratives of legitimacy to protect their members, and I have outlined three that I saw used. In the case of membership protection, the narrative most commonly employed was the good path — that is, a story about the young people involved in community media projects that emphasizes how, by belonging to this group, these youth are following a healthier, more productive life trajectory than if they were in a gang or on the street, and that they should therefore be afforded some protection from coercion or violence. This narrative relied on a shared set of normative assumptions about what constitutes “goodness” which at least some gang members appeared to possess despite their construction as a deviant group.

A related yet distinct narrative of legitimacy that the CMGs used to defend their members from threats of violence from the armed actors was the narrative of connectivity. This narrative is a calculated invocation of shared local identity. According to the narrative of connectivity, the armed actor, the CMG, and the individual member in question are all bound together in a web of local relationships, and this shared background should supersede any potential conflicts that lead to violence. A subtext to this narrative is that violence should be reserved for others, directed at those from other neighborhoods or belonging to rival groups, and that it may well be justified in these cases. An example of this is, in the
Colombian case, in order to protect the social media protest group from threats of violence, the CMG leader duplicitously allied the SMG with Anti-FARC political views held by the paramilitaries. This fictive narrative act implied that violence against FARC members or their presumptive allies was justified in the eyes of the community media group.

The third and final narrative of legitimacy I witnessed employed by the CMG to check violence or coercion on their members by the armed actor was the narrative of the mediator. Again, this narrative is related to the other two, but distinct. The leadership of the CMGs used this self-descriptive narrative to claim that they had the legitimate right to intercede for their members in the first place. 

As the mediators of local conflicts of interest, or what we could term de facto conflict negotiators, the leaders of both CMGs intervened with their respective armed actor and mobilized this narrative on behalf of their members. This narrative offered a level of protection to the leadership; they could disagree and even debate with the armed actors with lower levels of fear of violence than an average community member, because they claimed a position of authority and neutrality. It is important to mention here that this narrative appeared to be connected to broad notions of journalistic “objectivity” or fairness, which might help to explain the success of this narrative within its contexts.

As I describe above, the CMGs used the concept of legitimacy in two ways within these narrative frameworks. First, the CMGs sought to claim legitimacy for themselves, and therefore a measure of power and influence in the community, by validating the work they were doing and their local roots using the good path and
connectivity narratives. In developing “cozy” relations with gangs, as we saw when Francisco casually discusses community policing with paramilitaries or when Josinaldo pals around with gang figures, the CMGs were effectively claiming strongly shared local connections. The goal here was to place the CMG on a comparable (but not equal) level with the armed actor, to establish itself as an organization to be respected.

There was yet another, more rarely used, way in which the CMGs mobilized legitimacy to check violence on their members. When Bogotá CMG member Alvaro Rojas was fired on, leader Francisco threatened the paramilitaries with a loss of local legitimacy if they continued to menace his group member with violence. Joselino used the same threat of loss of local legitimacy when he entered the drug trafficking house to demand the gang discontinue its coercion of a young CMG member. Both leaders indicated to the armed actors a capacity and willingness to diminish their reputation for governance or community policing with neighborhood residents. The specific narrative of legitimacy employed to get this point across was the mediator – the CMG leadership claimed that, through its role as local mediator of conflicts and all-around strongly supported community organization, it had the power to confer or withdraw local legitimacy from the gang. Therefore, both the CMGs mobilized legitimacy multivalently – on the one hand, they sought to legitimate themselves to give themselves stronger hands to play in community power dynamics. On the other hand, they used the threat of community delegitimation as a specific tactic in negotiation with armed actors to defend their members from violence.
However, although both CMGs did succeed in shielding their members from violence to some extent and under certain circumstances, it is also clear from the data presented here that violence was still very much a part of the lives of the young people in these community media groups. Membership in a CMG *did not* make violence disappear. Members could be and were threatened, menaced, coerced, and in Alvaro’s case, shot at by armed actors. CMG members were frightened to speak about the armed actors with this researcher because they feared what the consequences might be. As the community mapping exercise undertaken by the SMG in Bogotá makes clear, these young people still lived in a landscape of fear. These social facts do not indicate that a violence-free force field of protection was magically extended to CMG members by mobilized narratives of legitimacy. Therefore, although I argue that violence was mitigated by the CMG, I do not suggest that CMG members operated free of the threat of violence.

A civil society worker was executed by the gang during the research period in an adjacent neighborhood to Baixa do Sapateiro, and the Rio CMG’s activities were suspended for days afterward. To me, this indicates that the gang, or particular members of the gang, was willing to risk the loss of legitimacy associated with killing a member of civil society when they felt the killing was justifiable. In Ciudad Bolivar, another civil society group member, a grassroots health care worker, had been assassinated just prior to the research period by the paramilitaries for advocating for the presence of government health care clinics in peri-urban neighborhoods including Juan Pablo II. When a new conflict over government presence in the neighborhood arose towards the end of the Colombian
case study, this time over a lunch program for elderly residents, yet another civil society worker was killed. Francisco Cuellár was very nervous about negotiating with the paramilitaries, and even at one point tried to enlist the researcher to try and provide some protection for him during his sit-down with the paras (I refused). Francisco ultimately succeeded in negotiating a compromise with the paramilitaries, partly by stating that the paras’ legitimacy would be degraded in the community if they did nothing, but his behavior around this issue indicated to me that he had serious concerns for his life. And in fact, after witnessing how tenuous this CMG leader’s safety could become when the paramilitaries perceived a real threat to their regime of neighborhood control, I decided to cut short the case study out of concern for my own safety, and because I felt I had sufficient data.

Clearly, levels of fear, coercion and violence in these neighborhoods remained high despite the presence of CMGs. But I do not argue here that CMGs dramatically reduce overall incidents of violent crime. Violence reduction is not one of their first or secondary functions – those would be the production of community media and the engagement of youth in these projects. Instead, I argue that, through their activities, CMGs have a curbing effect on violence, and that they can mediate power to some extent in neighborhoods known for gang rule through bigmanism, patrimonialism, and terror. It is also clear from the various projects I witnessed that community media participation opens these very constricted spaces for people to deliberate about power relations in the community and reflect on the role violence plays therein.
In this study, I also use survey data to support my hypothesis. These surveys do not demonstrate that CMGs statistically lower rates of violent crime in these neighborhoods. However, they do show that clear majorities of those surveyed believe that CMGs have a curbing effect on violence. If we combine the totals for the two neighborhoods, 107 individuals out of a total of 140 believe that the CMGs diminished violence in their neighborhoods. Even if we imagine that residents feel generally positive toward the CMGs given neighborhood pride or other factors, and therefore *some* are more likely to answer a question about these groups positively, this data is still suggestive of a widely held belief in CMG reduction of violence. But *why* does the community feel this way? Perhaps because in an environment where social control is exercised through clientelism and the fear of violence, any group that publicly resists this fear and operates openly and independently signifies possibilities for others to live their lives as they see fit without being subjected to violence. In other words, the “opening” function of the CMGs – opening a space for dialogue, journalistic activity and deliberation – seemed to play a role in determining how the broader community viewed the CMGs’ impact on violence.

While both CMGs had an impact on levels of violence, and both employed similar narratives of legitimacy, they did so in differing ways and to different extents. Both groups used the narratives of *the good path* and *connectivity* to defend their activities and their membership – these narratives send the dual message that even if the activities of the CMG members are bothersome they are for a good cause and that neighborhood loyalty bonds should be honored. The Rio
CMG used the mediator narrative in order to freely shoot video footage in the street – an activity the gang strongly disapproved of. A Rio CMG leader used this narrative again when extracting a member from coerced service with the gang. In both these circumstances, the Rio CMG threatened to damage the gang’s legitimacy with the community if the gang did not alter course.

However, in the Colombian case there were several more clear and substantive instances in which the CMG used leverage against the armed actor’s legitimacy to further its goals and mitigate violence. First, stories condemning violence occasionally appeared in the various organs associated with Colectivo El Gritón. Local residents sourced these stories, and Francisco Cuellár told this researcher that he was able to protect these sources from the wrath of the paramilitaries by invoking a threat to their local legitimacy. Second, the Bogotá CMG quietly investigated the killing of a popular grassroots health care worker, and was only able to do so through the strength of its position vis-à-vis the paras. Third, the CMG successfully advocated for a mobile soup kitchen that was initially resisted by the paramilitaries. Fourth, in an interview Francisco convincingly described the mechanism through which legitimacy conferral or withdrawal works. Fifth, in the tense conflict around the permanent establishment of a government office from which a lunch program for the elderly was to be run, after some deliberation, Francisco ultimately did push the paramilitaries to make some concessions. And sixth, when the social media protest group was threatened with violence, part of Francisco’s technique in speaking to the armed actor was to imply that if these kids were hurt, the paras would lose local levels of legitimacy.
What might account for the differences in the ways these groups used narratives of legitimacy to mitigate violence, defend community projects, or open up spaces for discourse that were free of fear? I believe there are two main reasons for these differences. First, in the Colombian case, both the CMG and the paramilitaries were much more deeply entrenched than in Rio. Francisco had been working in the area as a community journalist since 1994 and had built up a strong network of colleagues, contacts and social connections that garnered him significant cultural and social capital. Some of these contacts necessarily included members of the paramilitaries. The paramilitary group was part of a collusionary national network that had controlled the neighborhood since the mid-1990s, and its members included individuals who had been trained by the state and retained their contacts in the military. In contrast, the Rio CMG was project-based and had a discrete funding and time limit. Although the neighborhood did show high levels of NGO participation, community media was not as well as established in Baixa do Sapateiro as in Juan Pablo II. And the local gang, the Amigos dos Amigos, was more recently established, more fragmented and isolated, and was on the verge of being pushed out of the neighborhood by a rival gang or smashed by state security forces.

The second main reason for the differences between CMGs is related to the first. In the survey data, significantly fewer residents in the Rio de Janeiro case than in Bogotá reported deemed the armed actor as possessing the potential for legitimacy. Many more Rio survey respondents saw the gang as mere criminals. This may well be because of the precariousness of the gang’s control in Baixa do
Sapateiro noted above. But less potential for local legitimacy means less leverage for the CMG to work with, which might explain the Rio leaders’ apparent coziness with gang members – personal relationships would be even more important for maneuvering if the gang was less susceptible to political pressures because of its relative isolation from the community. By contrast, the armed actor in Juan Pablo II owned a large, “legitimate” business concern close by, probably operated a major transshipment hub for illegal goods in the area, maintained a drop for the collection and accounting of extortion monies in the neighborhood, and had invested approximately 14 years at consolidating its position in the community, all of which suggests that obtaining local legitimacy would be in the interest of this organization.

Given the data presented here, I think it is safe to conclude several things about community media groups operating in peri-urban neighborhoods where levels of violence are high and state presence is weak or a non-factor. First, CMGs can be effective at opening spaces for open, reflective discourse, meaningful participatory activity, and the discussion of the nature of power in the community. Second, they can play a role in the mitigation of violence and fear in the lived experience of their members, and possibly, in the community more broadly. And third, in places where an armed actor or an informal institution seeks to establish political legitimacy for its own interests, a community media group can be effective at leveraging this legitimacy to help the community and protect its members.
Community Media and Low-Intensity Citizenship

During the 1980s and 90s, multiple states in Latin America (as well as several in Eastern Europe and Spain and Portugal in Western Europe) transitioned from authoritarian to democratic governments. Political scientist Guillermo O’Donnell, had already begun work on this subject, having successfully predicted this transition. Democratization in Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter's groundbreaking work *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (1986) understands the transition from bureaucratic authoritarianism to democracy as a historical process of discrete sequences, repetitions, and junctures. Democratization is not a static concept with a delimited beginning and end, but rather a scale or a spectrum. Furthermore, the process of democratic consolidating is itself unwieldy, and appears to have wildly different outcomes in differing environments. This variance in outcomes is in large part due to the citizens of these new democracies, who O’Donnell suggests, are prone to supporting “a ceaseristic, plebiscitarian executive that once elected sees itself as empowered to govern the country as it deems fit.” (1996, p. 44)

The ambivalence towards the populace of these new democracies is born out in an analytic model proposed by O’Donnell to attempt to capture some of the complexity of these new regimes. O'Donnell saw that these new democracies display profound differences in the breadth of democratic rights and the establishment of the rule of law. To account for these inconsistencies, O’Donnell proposed a spatial or geographic color-coded taxonomy of emerging democracies.
“Blue areas,” where the state enjoys a strong presence and has established legitimacy through effective bureaucracy and the rule of law; "green areas," where the state effectively controls the territory but provides little in the way of delivery of social services or political goods, and "brown areas," where the state has failed or is very weak in both indices.

In brown areas, O'Donnell argues, the state's "components of democratic legality, and hence, of publicness and citizenship, fade away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations", and therefore, these regions are characterized by "low-intensity citizenship." (1993, p. 1361) Although one might find within these brown zones that the vertical electoral mechanisms of accountability may be in place and functioning, horizontal ones will probably be very weak or absent. In such a situation, the population of those “brown” areas might find themselves at the mercy of violent authority figures, whether those sponsored by the state or local armed actors. Yet while certain aspects of the analysis above contains some important observations, my research supports Holston (2008) and others that the concept of “low-intensity citizenship” does not sufficiently capture the approach of many citizens of these lightly-governed spaces, nor does it adequately explain the sets of socio-political relations that occur within their communities. I contend that the people living in these brown areas and the armed actors who control these zones are not sufficiently disaggregated in O’Donnell’s analysis.

The conceptual vagueness or unwillingness to identify different forces at work within these brown areas seems to me connected to O’Donnell’s suspicion of
mass mobilization from the ‘populace,’ and its potential to destabilize fragile democracies, as well as his apparent skepticism regarding the democratic quality of Latin American political culture. Furthermore, if it is not O’Donnell’s intention to presume that an undemocratic culture exists among the marginalized citizens living in these brown areas, if he instead considers these citizens to be entirely coerced by the armed actors which control these brown areas, than this is also problematic from the point of view of political agency. The findings of this research project support a more nuanced conclusion about these informal communities; that despite a prevalence of violence and other social ills, there appears to be a vibrantly democratic culture within these neighborhoods, and that is in fact the very citizens who once belonged to antidemocratic groups that make up these new civil society groups.

First, O’Donnell’s wariness of mobilized civil society and informal rules in relation to democratization is limited in that it does not take into account the ways in which these two forces can act democratically. Second, the citizens living in ‘brown areas’ should be carefully extricated from an analysis which either lumps them together with undemocratic, violently coercive actors or which denies them agency to act in democratic ways even within the context of an undemocratic sociopolitical environment. And it is very difficult to disaggregate this population from these highly negative associations when they are by definition delimited to this unit of analysis (the color of which also, it must be said, may have some unpleasant connotations).
The historian Carlos Forment (2013) suggests that the ambivalence about the populace that is illustrated in O'Donnell’s work has its roots in historical antecedents in the political culture of Latin America. O'Donnell, he argues, swings inconsistently between a statist and an antistatist conception of democracy, vacillations which are reminiscent “of the intellectual and political swings one finds in the writings of nineteenth century Latin American intellectuals. Their unswerving belief in the power of laws and institutions to usher in democracy was shattered time and again by the seemingly irrational practices of the citizenry itself.” (2013, p. 8) Regardless of its roots, O'Donnell's theory accurately points out that conflicts between elites can have a outsized impact on the consolidation of democracy, but in my view it overemphasizes the arena of the elites, and neglects to sufficiently theorize the emergence of an independent civil society and forms of renewal at the societal level. (Alvarez, 1990; Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998; Jelin & Hershberg, 1996; McAdam, 1982)

Informal urban neighborhoods, satellite cities and peri-urban communities, segregated and subjected to structural violence by the state have been identified as zones where non-state actors can consolidate political power and operate with impunity by maintaining neoclientilistic political relationships with residents while enforcing rules that are both arbitrary and violent (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006; Martha Knisely Huggins, 1991) What strategies resident groups, neighborhood associations, and civil society organizations such as development non-governmental organizations, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, and social movements employ in order to protect and empower themselves between the
hammer of violent actors and the anvil of the state have been examined in depth by a host of excellent scholarship. (Eckstein & Merino, 2001; Escobar & Alvarez, 1992; Foweraker, 1995; Scott, 2008) This scholarship and other work illustrates that marginalized groups are not without certain recourse to political techniques that can enable such groups to push back against forces arrayed against them.

My conclusions from the research presented here supports this basic outlook. The most serious problem associated with the failure to understand how associational groups function within these communities may be the tendency of the Latin American middle class and elites in Brazil and Colombia (and elites globally) to continue to mistrust their poorest communities and construct the people in them as essentially undemocratic – a problem to be corrected by any means necessary. My research suggests that despite the withdrawal of the state apparatus and thus of formal democracy in “brown areas”, neighborhood associations like community media groups (CMGs) operate with a complex political culture and are able to provide some political and social goods to their members and to some residents despite enormous obstacles. These CMGs are able to function and even flourish in a context of tremendous fear and violence. Broad characterizations about undemocratic cultures fail to provide for these complexities, and gloss over the achievements of neighborhood associations like the CMGs studied here. These communities may be places of hardship and predation, but there are also small yet tenacious forces at work that provide shelter, give opportunity, and nourish hope. These forces can be encouraged and propagated, or they can be ignored and left
unsupported – which one of these options a society chooses may configure these communities for generations to come.
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Biography

Gray Miles graduated with an Honors BA in Contemporary Studies at the University of King’s College in Halifax, Canada in 1998 and an MA in Journalism and Creative Writing from the University of British Colombia in Vancouver, Canada in 2001. As a journalist, Miles covered the prosecution of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1998 for the Associated Press, co-produced the award-winning two-part CBC documentary about the 9/11 attacks *When The Towers Fell* in 2001, wrote and produced print, television pieces and the documentary film *Cruel Courage* about the civil conflict in Colombia from 2001-2003, and covered Hurricane Katrina for The Globe and Mail in 2005. Since completing all-but dissertation degree requirements for a PhD in Latin American Studies from Tulane University in 2010, Miles has been teaching full-time in the Humanities Department at Dawson College in Montreal, Canada.