

Book Review

– *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City*, by Anthony W. Fontes. University of California Press, 2018.

In this critical, well-researched, and well-written study, Anthony W. Fontes uses extensive ethnographic research in Guatemala City to argue that Guatemala's postwar social order is affected by the symbolic rendering of *maras* (transnational gangs). Fontes explains the importance of seeing past the charades and spectacles of transnational gangs to bring into visibility how “regimes of rumour” (p. 17) enmeshed with tangible acts of crime in postwar Guatemala turn transnational gangs into “a key site upon which competing projects to control, order, and dominate Guatemalan society are exposed in all their violent contradiction” (p. 14). Rather than assuming that transnational gangs are the only problem worth researching in Guatemala City, Fontes forces the reader, through a compilation of interviews with former gang members, members of gang rehabilitation programs, family members of gang members, journalists, etc. to challenge this assumption and instead investigate how the symbolic and the material give shape to ways of constructing/understanding the gang phenomenon and establishing a social order in time of uncertainty.

Fontes's book sheds light on two key areas that enrich gang literature: (1) awareness on engaging ethnographically with the material and imagined role of a *marero* (gangster), constructed and reproduced by both *marero* and society at large. The interplay between truth and rumour that informs the confusing and mortal social order. And (2) challenging the popular image of the *marero* as being inherently deviant and thus different from other humans. This awareness is also crucial to incorporate in studies because it can then challenge the dominant local and transnational symbolic image of gangs as irrationally violent groups who appear and exist as mere outcomes of civil wars and economic disparity. The author's ethnographical engagement with the material and imagined role of *marero* throughout the book substantiates his analysis.

Fontes recognizes while observing and analyzing his data that the symbolic and material forms of knowledge produce a sort of truth accepted by those who repeat that particular narrative. Fontes's ability to identify moments in which his informants are spewing fantasies to enrich their narratives, when they are

manipulating him, when stories are being altered or enhanced possibly using movie storylines, and/or when people are telling him rumours as if they were facts strengthen his study. Rather than taking the informant's version for granted, Fontes identifies the interplay between truth and rumour that creates a perceived truth based not on the veracity of an account but on the interpretation of those repeating or sharing the account. Fontes uses the example of *marero* Andy, a young man who "had become expert in playing the part of the 'real' marero, a patchwork figure sewn together from the facts, fears, and fictions swirling about criminal terror" (pp. 35-36). According to Fontes, Andy's courtroom testimonies merge fantasies with reality, which demonstrate the interplay at work. Andy performs the role of a gangster, perhaps to please the interviewer or the police. Debunking these performances helps to question similar gangster narratives in other studies.

Fontes recognizes his own subjectivity and his "oh-so-gringo hubris" at the start of his fieldwork (p. 15), when he becomes acutely aware of situations in which he is seduced by the spectacle of gangs, or moments when he recognizes that he is manipulating informants to get data for his book. This way, he discusses his own pre-conceived images of the "real" *marero* to question more generally the selection of "adequate" informants, and the strategic use of the selected informants to live up to that expectation by reinforcing the symbolism of transnational gangs and their identity as a "real" *marero* (pp. 38; 55). Fontes' own academic ambitions and his feelings of excitement, curiosity, and fascinated horror generated by his "dream to delve into the life of a 'real' marero" are relevant to his analysis of accepted imaginary and material narratives (pp. 38; 55). Fontes's accounts, although filled of details on crimes, death, and violence, are not sensationalists. Similar to the sensitivity present in the work by Ellen Moodie on the biospectacularity of gangs in El Salvador,¹ Fontes manages to be sensitive towards the subject and towards his informants, and he constantly reflects on his own participation in the recounting of certain events.

The writing style is clear, concise, and compelling. Fontes allows the reader to partake in his journey through Guatemala City and through the constant adjustments on methodology to protect informants and gather meaningful data. The book will encourage academics to problematize gang studies or the transnational gang phenomenon in new ways. A critical, nuanced research on transnational gangs is necessary to demystify these organizations that are often sensationalized by academics blinded by the spectacle. Furthermore, he challenges the reader to face her or his own participation in the production of knowledge that directly feeds this confusing and dangerous struggle for social order. Fontes writes: "It means acknowledging that all of us—victims and perpetrators, experts and laypeople, witnesses both distant and near—are also ensnared in the tangled skein out of which the maras emerge" (p. 250) ; a very hard, real, and necessary statement that could potentially change the way academics approach gang research.

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¹ Ellen Moodie, Seventeen Years, Seventeen Murders: Biospectacularity and the Production of Post-Cold War Knowledge in El Salvador, *Social Text* 99 (2009):77-103.