

The Advancement of Thug Criminology: Towards the Decolonization of ‘Street/Gang’ Research and Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper presents a dialectical conversation between insider/outsider vs insider/insider gang (street) researchers, wherein a new strand of critical criminology is advanced – Thug Criminology. Challenging current disciplinary accounts, we make three key arguments. Firstly, ‘gang’ research has largely reinforced, maintained, and reified stereotypical views of ‘gangs’ and their behaviour. Secondly, the voices of insider/insider (formerly street- or gang-involved scholars who have obtained employment within academia) and insider/outsider gang researchers (formerly street or gang-involved academics working outside of academia) have not been privileged within academia. Thirdly, those posited as ‘expert’ gang scholars (insiders to academia and outsider to the streets, i.e., mainstream scholars without lived street or gang experience), whose knowledge is being accorded authority, are outsiders. As such, laws and practices, which negatively affect gang-involved populations and street-involved people more broadly, have been largely informed by an uncritical and unchallenged position of privilege. Thug Criminology seeks to create an academic space for insider ‘gang’ or ‘street’ scholars and their allies to contribute to knowledge, policies, and practices that are less harmful to those who are targeted and deemed a threat.

Keywords: thug criminology, decolonizing research/pedagogy, anti-colonial criminology, scholar-activism

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For more than a century, scientific disciplines such as criminology, sociology, anthropology, and psychology have sought to study those who deviate from social norms. Such research, which has its roots in classical and positivist thinking, has focused its efforts on understanding why youth and adults engage in crime and criminal behaviour. For decades, the study of 'the criminal' and, more specifically, delinquent youth and gangs has been framed through the eyes of privileged researchers who come to understand 'the streets' (i.e., gangs, sex and drug markets etc.) vis-a-vis the 'scientific method'. However, more recently critical scholars, i.e., feminist standpoint theorists and Convict, Black, and Latin-American criminologists, have argued that claims of objective knowledge or truth are a fallacy. Standpoint scholars such as Patricia Collins (1986) and Sandra Harding (2004) argue that mainstream scholars, devoid of lived experience, lack the cultural sensitivity and understanding of the social worlds they study. Subsequently, scholars who lack lived experience and operate within Eurocentric epistemologies are more likely to reproduce racist and colonial narratives about those they seek to understand. Further, there is deep concern that the current research paradigm embedded within the social sciences has been upheld by colonial and Eurocentric frameworks that continue to favour the standpoints of those from privilege. As such, the logic that follows is that much of what we know about 'the streets', including 'gangs' – and the drug and sex trade peripherally – has been created by mainstream researchers who draw on Eurocentric methods and methodologies that reiterate and perpetuate racist and positivist viewpoints about the criminal, thug, gang-member 'other'. More problematic is that, for over a century, few scholars have sought to challenge not only the research developed about 'the streets' but also the broader criminological enterprise that has justified these problematic discourses. That being said we do recognize that there has been significant scholarship on gangs/streets by critical scholars around the globe.

As a result, to challenge and disrupt the state of the art about gangs and gang members specifically, and the streets more generally, we embarked on a journey to develop an epistemological platform that seeks to disrupt, challenge, and transform how the streets in general, and gangs more specifically, are researched and subsequently written about. We dubbed this platform *Thug Criminology*. We use the term thug not as a pejorative, but rather as a mechanism to draw attention to and challenge mainstream



normative ideas about gang and street life (see Jeffries, 2011). In this respect, we draw on the late rapper Tupac Shakur's reconstruction and reclamation of the term thug to confront the normative viewpoints that have framed racialized and marginalized youth as a 'social problem'. For Tupac, the term thug is re-situated within an anti-Black and anti-colonial discourse which reframes marginalized youth, including those involved in gangs and streetlife, as survivors rather than mere perpetrators of crime – frames that challenge the mainstream narrative constructed by politicians, academics, law enforcement officials and media pundits. While a full analysis of Tupac's work is beyond the scope of this paper, we intend to build on the spirit of Tupac's thinking whereby 'we' (i.e., those working from a positionality of lived experience within the streets and our allies), seek to reclaim the colonial term 'thug' as a way to re-write how the mainstream world sees and views us.

Thug Crim, as we call it, emerged out of critical discussions between myself (Ellis – a former 'gang' member and a street-involved person turned academic) and my colleague (Marques – an academic who has worked with marginalized and criminalized people) about the knowledge and truths that have been produced about the streets. Inspired by Indigenous and feminist standpoint epistemologies (see Harding, 1991; Collins, 1986; hooks, 1984; Smith, 2021), we questioned who had the right to create knowledge about the streets, who is deemed the epistemic authority, and whether such research has not only informed and continued the perpetuation of punitive criminal justice policies as well as the extension of the colonial experiment but also how such policies have directly impacted those living at the margins.

To counter the colonial knowledge that has been constructed about the streets, and to disrupt the broader hegemonic research and pedagogical institutions that maintain Eurocentric ways of knowing, we developed Thug Crim as a mechanism to challenge the historic discourses constructed about the streets, including gangs; to validate decolonizing research methods and methodologies, including storytelling methods; to centralize the voices of researchers and teachers who have transitioned from streetlife to academia; to deem thug scholars as experts or authorities in the field; to explore how non-thug scholars and thug scholars can work in tandem to develop ethical knowledge about the streets; and to promote the research of thug scholars

as a means to inform policy and practices that have a direct impact on our communities.

Thus, what follows is a preliminary discussion between thug scholars regarding the tensions and epistemological and pedagogical considerations in developing a new critical criminology – *Thug Criminology*. We ask you to read the following article not as a complete project, but rather as a preliminary brainstorm or discussion of how this new criminology may be developed that is inclusive of the voices of those who have lived a street or gang life.

Our Stories Matter – A Letter to Academia

There was a time in my life when I wanted to die rather than live. I grew up in what many mainstream academics, politicians, and media pundits would call a ‘gang life’. I experienced the pressures of what I call urban colonialism, i.e., the occupation of communities by police, the targeting of youth in marginalized spaces as a means of social control, and the use of the criminal legal system as a mechanism to continue the project of colonialism, etc. My neighbourhood was a landing pad for new immigrants who were seeking to achieve the Canadian dream. For people like my parents, our neighbourhood became a space of survival where the underground markets served as a mechanism to counterbalance the power and resources that were taken away through the colonial experimentⁱ. As children – who were deemed the ‘other’, labelled as ‘thugs’ by society, and lived in a community that was criminalized – we sought to fight for our place in a society that had cast us into the shadows. As youth who had no place in society, we, unfortunately, viewed each other as a threat (i.e., enemies) to the minimal socio-economic resources that existed in our community, which led to what we viewed as street ‘war’. While the streets taught me about love, respect, and empathy, I also learned how to distance and numb myself as a way to survive, becoming a person I no longer knew. In the streets, I bore witness to the subsequent effects of the colonial experiment, including having directly or vicariously experienced poverty, racism, homelessness, drug and substance use, the sex trade and community and interpersonal violence, including homicide and suicides. What I learned during my street tenure was that our behaviours were not the result of some personal deficit – ideas perpetuated by Eurocentric understandings and media representations that have framed us as thugs, gangsters, offenders and criminals – but they were rather normal



responses to the traumatic effects of structural violence, oppression, and deep marginalization. These are ideas that disrupt the mainstream narrative about gang and street life.

After having spent approximately a decade in the streets, I (Ellis) found myself living in a drug house with the friends that I leaned on for my survival. I ended up living in a drug house not because I had some dream of being a drug dealer; rather, I followed some friends whose own experiences of trauma and marginalization led them into the drug economy as a means of survival. This drug economy, I must add, was largely controlled and operated by White street organizations. Middle-class drug dealers and users were also part of the underground economy; however, they were not targeted by state authorities in the same way as my racialized friends. At this point in my life, I could barely pay my rent, food was not guaranteed, and I was living in a basement apartment where mice would keep me awake at night as they burrowed through the drywall in an attempt to eat the money that we had stashed behind it. During this time, I also buried the only lifeline I have had – my mother. I tried to change things up, as I was able to find employment in factories in my local community. I worked long hours and came home covered in toxic glue from building plastic roofs for farmers who lived far away from the turmoil of ‘the block’ (the area or turf we occupied). I made minimum wage, which, after paying rent, left me with no money for food, a bus ticket, or going out with friends. My precarious income stood in stark contrast to the thousands of dollars my roomies were ‘banking’ from the middle-class drug market they tapped into, albeit their monetary accumulation was often short-lived due to police raids. But I knew I was not a drug dealer and I had to live with the consequences of that – being nothing in life and nothing in the streets. I was literally at a crossroads. Some nights I drank and all I could see in front of me was darkness. No hope, no happiness, just darkness. I thought a lot about not being on earth, because without my mother, without hope and any skills, I was done!

But deep inside something kept me going. Maybe it was my mother’s voice in my dreams telling me to keep it moving. Maybe it was thinking about the poster my mother gave me as a teen which read “don’t let your fears stand in the way of your dreams”. Maybe it was the darkness I discovered as a child and teenager that enabled me to transform pain and suffering into something manageable. Whatever it was, I lived day by day, step by step, and moment by moment. It was through happenstance – or perhaps

heavenly intervention if one believes in the spirit world – that I came across an ad for a community college. Coming from an immigrant family, which did not preface academics as a priority, I was merely guessing what school might involve and where it could take me. I think the thing that attracted me to school at this point in my life was the prospect of escaping where I lived, the people I was around, and the lifestyle that came with it. As a high school dropout, I was also intrigued by the idea that I could get into a college programme as a mature student and circumvent the extremely poor grades I got in elementary and high school. For the first time in my life, I saw a glimmer of light at the end of a very long tunnel. Although I had no idea how to register for school or how I was going to pay for this escape plan, I summoned the courage to just call – and the rest is history.

Fast-forward several years, I have come a long way from the mouse-infested house where I rested my head and the street corners that raised me. Today, and with humility, I have acquired a diploma in Criminal Justice, a BA in Criminology, a Masters in Immigration and Settlement Studies, and a PhD in Criminology and Sociolegal Studies. For people like me, for whom higher education is not even on the radar, the opportunity to do so was astronomical. While I did not know exactly what this new journey in my life entailed, I was excited about the prospect of being around people who could explain why my life and that of my friends had turned out the way it had. But what I quickly learned was that this place that I had put on a pedestal, that supposedly had knowledge about ‘me’ and those I grew up with, knew very little. I sat in classrooms and spent time around people who did not come from the circumstances I came from. I read books and journal articles about so-called ‘gangs’ from the standpoint of mainstream scholars – some of which were inspirational while others raised serious questions about their authenticity. I attended lectures within the protected hallowed halls of the lecture theatre, i.e., where doors, walls, gates, and security guards protect upper and middle-class students and teachers from the hardships that exist outside their gated community. Here, I listened to professors, who purported to be street or gang experts, perpetuate historical colonial narratives about the streets, including that we, i.e., racialized and marginalized youth, were some illusive population, different from those in society, and needed to be intervened upon by those deemed to be ‘normal’, righteous, and civil. That being said, at times, I did run into people from the communities I was raised in – other working-class students. But these students were the ones who



stood on the sidewalk, not in the streets. For ‘us’ in the streets, a distinction exists between those who live in marginalized communities and those who live a street or gang life – civilians and soldiers. Unfortunately, what I came to learn is that, through the seduction by mainstream non-street scholars, many of these students were easily co-opted into the colonial academic system where rather than challenging the system of knowledge produced about ‘us’, they enthralled themselves, uncritically, within the ‘pornography’ of the streets.

It was through having been exposed to the student body of criminology that I realized that this empire of knowledge was not created for people like me. Like producers scripting a movie, I learned that some of these knowledge brokers – through the power of research and pedagogy – have also created a script and narrative about social life that was attractive, sexy, and digestible for those they deemed to be like ‘them’ and who would be their greatest audience – those who come from privilege. I came to understand that this strange world of academia broadly and criminology specifically was never created to speak the truth about ‘us’, those they study like microbes under a microscope. Rather, what I found was that these so-called experts developed research and courses about the streets based on some distorted version of reality – their reality. I questioned how people who had never lived a street life, who visited our neighbourhoods for a short time or who had never even been in our communities at all could create such narratives. I questioned the ethics relating to how our stories, experiences, and memories could be co-opted so easily by ‘outsiders’. I questioned how ‘their’ truths could be validated, considering that very few scholars come from the street, and, as such, are rarely provided with the opportunity to be a part of the knowledge creation or mobilization process. As a person who survived ‘the block’, all of this felt like a fraud or to put it in street lingo ‘fugazi’. Something just did not feel right.

Some of the knowledge created in criminology and sociology resonated with me, e.g., the Chicago School; the scholarship by some critical, feminist, Convict, Black, and Latin-American criminologists, and the work of those with lived experience, e.g., Dr Rios, Dr Contreras, Dr Duran, Dr Weide, and Dr Gunter to name a few. However, the dearth of texts and journal articles about gangs and streetlife, often developed by mainstream academics with no lived experience in the streets, felt, at times, socially, emotionally, and culturally detached from the social reality that I knew. Thinking about this,

I realized that while academics have attempted to tell 'our' stories about the streets, and while some may have had good intentions in doing so, the reality is that much of who we are, where we live, and the complex nuances of our culture and communities have been chopped up, fragmented, bent, and misconstrued as a means to an end, i.e., to complete research projects and gain tenure. When I thought I had left the 'game' of the streets behind, i.e., the hustle, navigating enemies, circumventing police etc., I came to understand that academia was playing its own game, one that in its own right had even more devastating consequences to the communities and peoples who raised me. In this respect, I began to question whether academia, in being the so-called owner and curator of street knowledge, was responsible for some of the harm that I experienced growing up.

Having used academia to escape the streets, and being appreciative of the opportunity school has provided me with, I would not be 'keeping it real' if I did not speak my truth about some of the challenges I experienced. Within the matrix of criminology and the colonial education system at large, my voice was often silenced. When I asked questions or challenged mainstream knowledge about the streets, vis-a-vis my lived experience, I was told that my subjective story was an anecdote and not objective science. When I wanted to create research based on my lived experience, I was told that it was not scientific enough. When I spoke about my experiences with professors it was as if they had no place, they were invisible, and they had no relevance to scientific inquiry. When I spoke about the trauma that I had experienced, I could feel those in the protected world of academia brush it off as if my pain and suffering had no relevance. That being said, when it was convenient for professors and researchers to use my story for panels, conferences or personal brainstorming about papers and projects, my lived experience all of a sudden had merit.

This is how it felt to be a criminalized student within the confusing and at times suffocating arms of criminology and sociology. This was one of the scariest places in my life. At least in the streets, I knew real from fake, I could see the punches and bullets and I could feel as well as navigate around the hate. But in this world, you cannot see anything because it was built for 'them' – for those who believe in an objective science about the criminal, thug, or gang member. It was not built for 'us'. While they used our stories and memories to build this world – often justified through the coercive narrative of the scientific method and the promise that 'they' would 'fix' our



communities and lives – they also distorted and twisted our truths as a way to garner student recruitment, increase interest in courses, and advance professional goals, all off the backs of our pain and suffering. Yet, as they gained professional advantage within the academic complex, those under study are rarely given the opportunity to come through the door. Although some scholars with lived experience have made it into the academic system in the US, this is not the case in Canada. This is what I have learned about this alternative world – the world that was supposed to give me ‘life’. Perhaps, the reason ‘we’ (those who have lived a street life) are rarely afforded a pathway into academia (and when we do our stories/research and pedagogy appear to hold less merit), and why ‘they’ (the mainstream ‘gatekeepers’ of academia) get to tell ‘our’ stories and truths, is because ‘they’ were following the mainstream script (i.e., being protected in their communities, going to safe schools, avoiding police contact), while ‘we’ were completely taken out of the equation. Instead of having the opportunity to progress our education, we were sidetracked as a result of having to fight oppression, arbitrary court cases and arrests, enemies who were trying to end our lives, poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, etc. Even after climbing out of the streets, having obtained the unattainable, I have learned that people like me, i.e., criminalized or street scholars, are still not fully welcome within the fold of academia – perhaps because people from the bottom are never supposed to make it ‘up here’. Perhaps, we are viewed as a threat to the research and pedagogical social order. Perhaps, our truths are too real and disrupt the historic scripts, for better or for worse, that have been written about us. Perhaps, and unfortunately, those who hold the power to recruit and hire within the ivory tower, while preaching diversity, inclusion, and acceptance, only define us by our pasts and not what we have survived and how we may contribute to ‘change’. But then again, maybe ‘they’ do not want to change. I have often asked colleagues: Why is there no one from a streetlife working as a professor in any of our top universities nor within departments that study the streets broadly or gangs in particular?

What I have also come to realize is that our lack of presence within the ivory tower has also led to a monopolization of power, by academics who claim to be experts about the streets, and who convince state governments that they are the ‘cure’ to our so-called problems. I have sat in several meetings regarding gang and gun violence with civil organizations, including the municipal government, and have listened to the out-of-touch research

and narratives that have been produced by mainstream academics, police, and policymakers who self-identify as experts about 'the streets'. For example, while mainstream scholars have developed vast research which has subsequently informed government policies, this work has primarily focused on the attitudes and behaviours of racialized youth on the margins; that being said 'we', those with lived experience, see the streets in a very different light. From our standpoint, we see that such research has kept not only the root causes, i.e., the history of colonialism, oppression, and structural violence, but also 'White crime', e.g., Euro-organized crime and middle-class illicit markets, invisible and hidden behind the state's mandate to 'fix' the gang, gun, and street 'problem'. To me, their misunderstanding of our communities and way of life has further exacerbated the colonial project that has set its eyes on 'fixing' us, the so-called downtrodden, sick and broken – the thugs. What is even scarier is the thought of these mainstream scholars reproducing such distortions and incomplete stories about the streets through pedagogy. Reflecting on the work of Freire (2000) and his concept of the banking system of education, my greatest fear is how these self-proclaimed experts then teach their students, most of whom also live privileged lives, the same distorted knowledge that then gets banked and passed onto the next generation of police, lawyers, social workers, policymakers, politicians etc. Is it any wonder then that our communities are still suffering?

But I ask how can we let the narrative about our lives go unchecked? How can we let strangers tell our stories? How can we have our memories ripped out of our communities? How can we stand by and let people profit from our pain and suffering? Why can they (researchers) just come into our communities and steal our stories? Who is standing up for us? Why is there rarely anyone from the streets in the universities' criminology and sociology departments? How have mainstream academics been able to monopolize the knowledge market? How can this harm our communities?

Building on the Past: Integrating Alternative Spaces of Criminological Scholarship

Following Howard Becker, scholars such as Liebling (2001) ask: Whose side are criminologists on? Who owns the discipline of criminology? Who polices its borders? Since the time of classical theorists such as Beccaria and Lombroso, the intellectual foundation of criminology has sought to



understand why crime occurs. Although criminology has developed several schools of thought to answer this question, early theorists were confronted by a 'new criminology' which challenges the knowledge that has been produced on crime and criminal behaviour. From its early genesis, criminology has been a space where White men of privilege have written about the criminal 'Other'. Theorists such as Merton (1938), Shaw and McKay (1942), and others, have produced a vast body of criminological knowledge that largely focused on the 'criminal behaviour' of lower-class minority youth. While these theorists have been celebrated for transforming our understanding of crime, including shifting intellectual ideas of criminal behaviour from that of individual pathology to environmental risk factors, the discourse of crime and more specifically youth delinquency has largely been framed from an ethnocentric viewpoint, i.e., by White, upper-class academics. While it was perhaps not the intention of these authors, their theories invariably informed policies and laws which sought to police and control specific groups in society.

Drawing on the work of classical criminologists, and information provided by police departments, governments began to construct policies to combat the threat of an emerging non-White underclass (i.e., minority males) (Delaney, 2014). The narrative constructed about youth delinquency and gangs by early criminologists invariably perpetuated stereotypes about the so-called criminal, offender, thug, gangster, and hoodlum (Bergin, 2011). While this had detrimental effects on those who were being targeted by these punitive crime control measures, it was the script of administrative criminologists, state officials and media pundits who solidified these terms within the broader cultural vernacular. As such, the terms gang, gang members, thugs, and gangsters became synonymous with minority youth culture across time and space (Bergin, 2011). Today, the narrative on gangs remains unchanged and unproblematized. More importantly, few scholars have challenged the traditional viewpoint on gangs, including how they are defined and subsequently policed within society. While the knowledge of gangs and the streets more broadly has been problematic, other social phenomena studied under the guise of criminological scholarship highlight similar issues.

Recognizing the issues plaguing traditional criminology, one of the first groups to confront the impending status quo was women. While White men had originally dominated the space of criminology, White academic

women began to challenge the knowledge that had previously been constructed on crime and criminal behaviour in general (see Harding, 2004). Naffine (1996) argued that mainstream criminology was in effect *malestream*; suggesting that criminological scholarship fetishized male criminality and failed to acknowledge or understand the criminal behaviours of women. Feminist criminologists argued that the lack of scholarship on female criminality was a function of power and gender differentials that were transplanted from the broader patriarchal society to the halls of academia (Naffine, 1996). Building on this work, Feminist Standpoint theorists created a mechanism to explore and analyze the criminal behaviour of women by not only turning to women themselves for data but also recognizing them as 'experts' in the production of criminological scholarship. While feminist and standpoint epistemologies sought to centralize the voices and experiences of women within the male-dominated sciences of criminology and sociology, other scholars, including Black feminists demonstrated that even within such critical movements White mainstream knowledge continued to be privileged over that of racialized scholars. Black feminists, such as Collins (1986), fought to expose that the White mainstream intellectual landscape of academia continued to marginalize the voices of Black women – a context that Collins (1986) describes as the "outsider within". Collins (1986) argues that while Black women have been able to obtain positions within academia, including within criminology and sociology, their voices and research continue to be relegated to the margins. In this respect, the author advocates for a paradigm shift that centralizes the importance of ideas "produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women" (Collins as cited in Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 21).

Critical criminology also developed in response to the knowledge that had been produced by mainstream criminologists. To challenge these old views on crime, critical criminologists couched their knowledge production within the theoretical perspective of conflict-Marxism and social constructivism, challenging traditional criminological theories by broadening the scope of our understanding of crime to also include a discussion of capitalism and how it creates inequalities within society. Critical criminology theorists sought to develop a criminology that exposed not only the power inequities within society but also how those in power were able to manipulate state laws and policies to increase their socio-economic status. Critical criminologists utilized the space of criminology to



argue that those in power had a complacent stake in the development of social stressors (i.e., deindustrialization, marginalization, poverty) that were conducive to criminal behaviours among the poor. Further, these theorists also posited that the criminal justice system itself was a mechanism for the capitalist class to maintain its power in society. Hillyard and Tombs (2004, 2007) argue that 'crime' is a social construct and has been developed and perpetuated as a mechanism for dominant groups to maintain social power and inequality. Critical scholars contend that although those with power and wealth engage in more serious crimes, i.e., behaviours that cause more serious social harms, only the behaviours of the poor are defined as criminal and as such policed by the criminal justice system.

Although feminist and critical criminology have been able to carve out an intellectual and physical space within the contours of academia, it has been our experience that these arenas of criminological scholarship continue to be occupied by scholars who are not only insiders of the broader social fabric, i.e. middle-class White researchers, but who are also insiders of academia albeit some may find themselves working on the fringes of what is considered mainstream criminology. While the criminology of critical and feminist scholarship has sought to reinvent how crime is studied and articulated, these newly formed discursive projects continue to lack the voices of intellectual scholars from the margins, i.e., street scholars etc. (Miller & Brunson, 2011). In this respect, we argue that the field of criminology and the knowledge produced within its contours continues to be mainly articulated through the lens of 'privilege'. Although some scholars develop relationships with the communities and people they study, the knowledge produced through their research privileges their voice over those who have lived the experience. The scholar is the 'expert' and those who are being studied are often relegated to the status of 'spectacle', where their contributions to the research process become subsumed as the 'scholar-insider/street-outsider' researcher turns their stories of pain and suffering into field notes or emotionally detached surveys. As such, one must ask whether the knowledge being produced on social problems such as gangs, drug addiction, sex work, and violence is representative of those it seeks to speak of. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) argue that traditional scholarship on crime and criminality has become sterile as researchers are unable to tap into the more localized meanings, emotions, and issues that people face as a result of crime. To counter this methodological and theoretical crisis within

criminology some scholars have been able to traverse the boundaries between localized streetlife and academia. More specifically, some academics have come from the communities that are being studied or have directly been involved in the issues being explored.

These issues were raised in the early 1990s as a group of researchers in criminology found it increasingly difficult to have a voice within the field. Specifically, ex-convicts studying criminology argued that mainstream criminology not only failed to reflect their voices in scholarship but also failed to provide an adequate critique of the criminal justice system, its operations, and how it harmed those who came into contact with the law. Convict criminology

is a diverse collection of individuals who believe that convict voices have been ignored, minimized, or misinterpreted in scholarly research on jails, prisons, convicts, correctional officers, and associated policies and practices that affect these individuals (Ross et al., 2016, p. 491).

Convict criminology is premised on insider/insider status and challenges the status quo by recognizing the unique experiences that ex-convicts bring to the knowledge construction on crime and justice issues. In this regard, convict criminologists advocate that academic insider/insiders or those with lived experience should be elevated to a higher status and recognized as experts in their field (Ross & Richards, 2003). They suggest that convict criminologists be recognized as a vulnerable group due to their 'invisible minority' status inside and outside of the academic world. Convict criminologists have recognized that vulnerable groups such as ex-convicts may be harmed or re-traumatized within the walls of academia. These harms may occur as a result of stigma and employment discrimination, systemic racism, and marginalization that occurs due to the insider/insider's status as a former convict. As such, ex-convicts have been able to successfully construct an intellectual space within criminology that is not only representative of their needs but also provides an alternative academic platform that challenges the status quo and the monopolization of power and knowledge.

More recently, critical scholars such as Agozino (2003), Smith (2021), Blagg and Anthony (2019), and Kitossa (2012) have all worked to decolonize mainstream criminology. For many of these authors, there is recognition



that the criminological enterprise specifically, and the university system more generally, is rooted in colonial epistemologies and ways of knowing. Such scholars have also identified that the research methods and methodologies, which have been used to capture the experiences and stories of those under study, including marginalized, racialized, and criminalized people, have, at times, been harmful. In this respect, the authors make a significant contribution to our understanding of ‘helicopter research’, whereby privileged scholars have entered communities of disadvantage, collected data under coercion, and used such data for personal advantage without making any significant contributions to those who have been researched. To this end, decolonizing scholars question who has the power to create knowledge, how this power is utilized to mobilize knowledge, and who this privileged knowledge serves. In her seminal text, Smith (2021) notes that decolonizing methods are about

forcing us to confront the Western academic canon in its entirety, in its philosophy, pedagogy, ethics, organizational practices, paradigms, methodologies, and discourses and, importantly, its self-generating arrogance, its origin mythologies and the stories that it tells to reinforce hegemony (p. xii).

Relating these ideas to our work on thug criminology, embracing a decolonizing approach means that we must disrupt and challenge the knowledge that has been constructed about the streets, critique the methods and methodologies that have been used to collect ‘scientific data’ from our communities, and stand in solidarity to push back against the policies and practices that emerge out of Eurocentric reasoning.

Although feminist, critical, convict, anti-colonial and decolonizing criminologies have been able to decentralize and challenge the power dynamics that exist within academic scholarship on crime and criminalized behaviour, unfortunately, these spaces are still relegated to the margins. For example, whereas a former sex worker turned academic may find a home within feminist scholarship and while ex-convicts may find union and solace within the space of convict criminology, one must question whether other groups such as ex-gang members or formerly street-involved people turned academics may also find a space where they can not only articulate their experiences but are recognized as experts. Moreover, while the above-noted

epistemologies have been framed as critical movements that seek to disrupt the status quo, it is not clear whether those who lead such endeavours are from the same privileged class which they critique. Thus, while we are inspired by such work we are compelled to question, at least within the criminology and sociology context, whether the discipline – while appearing to be critical, radical, and progressive – has made efforts to uplift and include the voices of those they study in a meaningful way, including those from the ‘streets’.

Moving Beyond: Thug Criminology as a Discursive Project

Gaventa (1993) writes:

Fundamental questions must be raised about what knowledge is produced, by whom, for whose interests, and toward what end. Such arguments begin to demand the creation of a new paradigm and organization of science – one that is not only for the people but is created with them and by them as well (p. 40).

While the discipline of criminology does allow space for marginalized voices, as noted in the above discussion on feminist, critical, and convict criminologyⁱⁱ, questions surrounding who is ‘expert’ and who is ‘spectacle’ persist. Even more so, questions persist about who belongs in those spaces. In historicizing the discipline of criminology, we have sought to advance the argument that while new and more critical criminologies have emerged as a counterpoint to traditional criminological frameworks, they still reiterate the unchallenged languages, perspectives, and positions of privilege, while simultaneously talking about being inclusive, intersectional, and liberating. In talking about ‘crime’, the ‘criminal’, and the ‘victim’, criminological frameworks still use the language and knowledge of the hegemony, the mainstream, and the status quo. Convict criminology has circumvented this positional dilemma by starting with the voices from within the penal system. However, while convict criminology is not an exclusive group, “encourage[ing] dialogue across the ex-con/non-con divide” (Ross et al., 2016), do scholars who have previously been in conflict with the law but have never been incarcerated, feel connected to a school of thought rooted in the understanding of effecting change in incarceration? In other words, is



incarceration necessarily the starting point for all insider-insider academics, especially for those who are street-involved?

In reinvigorating debates surrounding experts, expertise, the spectacle, and insider/outsider status, we found ourselves noting a gap within criminology – that which focused on the insider/insider and/or insider/outsider researcher (or former gang member turned academic who has been blocked out). Within this context, we argue that the space of traditional criminology (and in some respects critical criminology) has become problematic, as those who have the power to construct knowledge on crime and criminal behaviour continue to espouse the language of the ‘gangster’, ‘thug’, and ‘offender’. With specific reference to gangs, this is highly problematic as the rhetoric of the gang and gang member continues to satiate not only criminological scholarship but also reinforces the language that is used within broader society to pathologize and criminalize the experience of minorities and their communities. The discourse constructed and reinforced by gang scholars may also have detrimental effects outside the walls of academia, as punitive policies and laws are constructed to ‘fix’ the so-called gang problem. These ‘get tough’ approaches, which usually follow crime control agendas, invariably lead to the over-policing and hyper-incarceration of young minority males. Hence, one must question why liberal and conservative criminologists continue to support and use the terms gang and gang members in their writing and teaching. Why does every textbook on gangs allude to this outdated and police-informed language? What can be done to challenge and change these distorted perspectives? To address this issue, we have developed a new discursive space – Thug Criminology – where academic insiders/insiders and insider/outsiders may come together to challenge and disrupt these traditional perspectives on not only gangs and their behaviours, but also the streets more broadly. Thug Criminology is a space where formers-turned-academics can reclaim the thug label as a mechanism to disrupt, challenge, and transform how gangs specifically, and the streets more broadly are researched and understood by society. In doing so, we hope insider/insider (formerly street-involved persons who have become employed as professors), insider/outsiders to academia (formerly street-involved persons who are academics but have not been employed as professors) and insider/outsiders to the streets (professors with no lived experience in the streets but who seek to be allies) unite under the umbrella of Thug Criminology where they can

provide insight and expertise that supports the transformation of not only gang and other scholarship but also criminal justice policies that seek to control the so-called gang or street problem.

Why is a Thug Criminology necessary?

Looking back, as a Thug scholar (Ellis), I am concerned about how the discourse on gangs and their members has been constructed and whether criminology has been complacent in perpetuating stereotypes about the 'other' minority gangster/thug. While a large body of criminological literature exists on gangs, the knowledge produced has largely focused on the US, with very little research produced in Canada and elsewhere. More problematic is that Canadian and other non-US scholars who study gang phenomena rely on US data to inform their research on gangs and gang violence. This appears to have been detrimental to gang research as scholars continue to perpetuate a linear model of gangs and their behaviours. This is seen in the multiple attempts to define and conceptualize what a gang is within the criminological lexicon. These definitions speak to the bias and conservatism within gang research, as many scholars ascribe to the notion that gangs and their members are rational actors who 'choose' a gang life and whose primary motivations are to engage in criminal behaviour. However, we argue that gang research and street research more broadly, while fruitful in some respects, has lacked temporal and geographic clarity and cultural awareness. More importantly, we suggest that the current state of the literature on gangs may, in many respects, cause more harm than good. This can be seen in a recent case where so-called gang experts have come under fire by the criminal courts for providing false and misleading information about gangs and their behaviours.

The *Toronto Star* reported that a gang expert's testimonial was used to convict a Toronto man of first-degree murder. However, during the appeal, it was found that the so-called gang expert could not provide even basic information on gangs in the Toronto area, including who they were and where they resided (Powell, 2016). More problematic was that the gang expert's research focused largely on Aboriginal and rural gangs and it was therefore noted in the court documents that he had no background or understanding of gang culture in the Greater Toronto Area. We believe cases like this highlight the problems with gang research, specifically by those who deem themselves to be experts and have no connection to the communities



and groups they speak of. We contend that the knowledge produced on gangs, the repatriation of such knowledge by insider/outsider to the streets experts, and the mobilization of such knowledge outside the walls of academia are highly problematic and disconcerting. As an ex-gang member turned academic (Ellis), as an academic ally with tangential association, by way of relationships as well as previous employment, with ‘deviant’, ‘thug’, and criminalized persons (Marques) we are concerned with how gang knowledge has been constructed and who gets to access the ‘gang expert’ label. At least in the Canadian context, one must question how we can have academics claim that they are gang experts when there is no written history of gangs in Canada, nor are there any meaningful research projects which seek to understand the complexity and diversity of the gang phenomenon. One must also question how this fractured knowledge moves through public and private spaces and how this information may impact the lives of thousands of young men and women who live in what policymakers and state officials deem ‘at-risk’ communities.

Thug Criminology is a way to disrupt and disentangle the knowledge that has been produced on gangs in particular and ‘the streets’ more broadly. We hope to reimagine not only how gangs and the streets are researched, but also how this information is shared through the education system, the media, and amongst policymakers. In its rawest form, Thug Criminology will provide former ‘gang’ members turned academics (i.e., insider/insiders), formerly street-involved people turned academics but who work outside of academia (i.e., insider/outside), mainstream academics (insider/outside to the streets) and currently street-involved youth and adults with an intellectual space to critically challenge and reshape the narrative that has been constructed about gangs and their behaviours. In part, Thug Criminology is driven by the frustration that ex-gang/formerly street-involved academics have experienced when engaging with the current knowledge on gangs. However, Thug Criminology is not only about gang members. Those with tangential experiences and who start from perspectives that challenge normative criminological, psychological, legal, and law enforcement boundaries surrounding ‘thug,’ ‘gang,’ and ‘gang member,’ also have an important space within Thug Criminology. In this respect, and while we seek to centralize the voices of those with lived experience, we also seek to ‘walk with’ and develop relationships with non-thug scholars as a way to not only bridge the university-community divide

but to also challenge and transform how the streets and gangs are researched and taught about. It is in this space that we can dismantle the language and discursive frameworks and spaces, which are currently being employed by crime and criminology experts to target and pathologize vulnerable groups. This includes the DSM (Diagnostic Statistical Manual), political and media buzzwords, as well as the encroachment of police and legal positional standpoints onto the discipline of criminology as a whole.

Fundamentally, Thug Criminology is concerned with:

1. How gangs (and other street groups) and their behaviours are defined.
2. How gang members (or in our lexicon street-involved people) are dehumanized within the rhetoric on gangs; failing to see them as victims of crimes rather than just 'criminals'.
3. The solutions and strategies that have been constructed to remedy the so-called gang or street problem.
4. The impact of these policies and strategies on those who have been labelled and identified as gang-involved; the impact of mass incarceration and net widening, e.g., probation, parole, extrajudicial measures etc.
5. The lack of non-criminal justice strategies to help gang members move away from a gang lifestyle; the lack of innovation and political will to see the 'gang issue' through a public health lens, albeit this must also be critically explored.
6. Reimagining the role of 'expertise' and how it is inscribed by the academic research process; acknowledging that the academic remains the 'expert' and authority on the subject while the people whose stories have provided the rich stream of knowledge are later forgotten and left to their previous lives without change.

As criminologists, we need to do a better job of underscoring whose voices are rendered invisible and why. We do acknowledge that most criminologists believe that their work serves to give voice to the "voiceless" (a concept that deserves to be thoroughly challenged), however, despite this, it is still insider/outsider to the streets 'expert' voices that are heard. When researching and writing about offenders, inmates, and ex-cons, for instance, it is still our normative, pro-social voices that are legitimized. Working with incarcerated women, I (Marques) recall conversations in which the women commented on how they were represented in the media or in reports written



by psychological experts, saying that the narratives espoused were not how they saw themselves or how they understood their crimes or situations. Despite our best intentions and intellectualizing, privileged normative analytic categories are those that are used to frame our language.

Thug Criminology is centred on commencing the analysis with the voices from 'below,' that is, from those with lived experiences. In doing so, Thug Criminology is attentive to how labels such as 'thug', 'gang member', 'gang', 'deviant', etc., are applied to the 'Other' and that these labels originate from and are representative of the language of privilege. While their personal backgrounds might not necessarily be described as such, academics occupy privileged spaces, and, through their work, vicariously invade marginalized spaces to unearth 'their' truth. Within the voyeuristic research and academic enterprise, research subjects – as *spectacles*, *outsiders*, and *others* – are afforded limited spaces to speak. They are called upon for their expertise but fail to be fully integrated as experts. Their lived experiences are re-written through the words and perspectives of the status quo, as 'thugs', 'gang members', and 'criminals' despite our best intentions, mainly because there are no other words. Thug Criminology seeks to provide a platform to start these discussions and understandings anew.

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ⁱ What we acknowledge as the states capacity to violently oppress and remove immigrants and racialized and criminalized groups and people from their communities and homes as a mechanism of not only social control, but also for capitalist gains.

ⁱⁱ To this, we can also add critical race and black criminologies, among other theoretical frames that have been developed.

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