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Ties that bind: Pentecostal churches, youth gangs, and the management of everyday life in the urban barrio

Brendan Jamal Thornton 

ABSTRACT

In this article, I juxtapose Pentecostal churches with youth gangs, two popular barrio institutions that at first glance appear to be irreconcilable but when considered together evince organic parallels that reveal important insights into contemporary life in urban poverty. Reflecting on ethnographic data from the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, I argue that due to an analogous ritualization of everyday life – through rigorous rules and clearly defined consequences for breaking them – both Pentecostal churches and youth gangs, despite their ostensible differences, afford a unique kind of freedom in constraint, and by providing reliable spaces of predictability, control, and mastery, have become popular stages for managing the precariousness of barrio life in late modernity.

KEYWORDS

Gangs; Christianity; rules; freedom in constraint; Pentecostalism; conversion; anthropology of Christianity; poverty

Introduction

Pentecostal churches and youth gangs have more in common than simply their increasing popularity in urban neighborhoods across Latin America and the Caribbean. Indeed, in a remarkably short period of time, these emergent institutions have become regular fixtures in the social and cultural life of urban communities throughout the region. Analyzing several noteworthy correspondences between them, below I consider these institutions, not as insurmountably distinct, but as similar and related, with two goals in mind: first, to reflect on the simultaneous popularity of two seemingly irreconcilably different institutions; and second, to probe what this shared popularity might say about contemporary social life in urban barrios today.

One needs to only consider the claims of an expanding humanities and social scientific literature on Pentecostal Christianity to confirm the impressive ways in which Pentecostal culture over the past 50 years has asserted itself as an important influence on and modifier of traditional culture in Latin America (see Willems 1967; d'Epinay 1969; Glazier 1980; Martin 1990, 2002; Stoll 1990; Burdick 1993, 1998; Mariz 1994; Brusco 1995; Cox 1995; Chesnut 1997; Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997; Boudewijnse, Droogers, and Kamsteeg 1998; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Smilde 2007; Steigenga and Cleary 2007; Lindhardt 2012; Offutt 2015). In my own work, I have explored several surprising areas where Pentecostal and evangelical Protestant culture have made considerable inroads in the Dominican Republic: namely, in shaping gender roles and performance, transforming local economies of prestige, and contesting traditional matrices of spiritual and moral authority (see Thornton 2016).

The scholarship on street and youth gangs in Latin America, although persistently fixated on violence and crime, has long noted the wide-ranging impact of gang culture on the region (see, for example, Rodgers and Baird's 2015 review essay and Rodgers's 1999 literature survey; for crime and gang violence in the Caribbean, see Seepersad and Bissessar 2013) – the impressive influence exercised by the *maras* on local communities in Central America is only one such example explored by researchers (e.g., Nuñez 1996; Cruz and Peña 1998; Hume 2007, 2009; Breneman 2012; Bryan 2013; Cruz 2014; Seelke 2014). Youth gangs are believed to be growing in numbers worldwide (not to mention transnationalizing and diversifying) and according to some observers, their proliferation has been particularly pronounced in Latin America over the past 30 years (Strocka 2006, 133).

I became interested in the popularity and overlap of church congregations and youth gangs having observed barrio life first hand as an anthropologist conducting fieldwork over several years in the town of Villa Altigracia, an impoverished municipality located 40 km northwest of the Dominican capital, Santo Domingo. There, youth gangs called *naciones*, or 'nations,' compete with Pentecostal churches for the loyalty and participation of young men.¹ Teenagers are courted by gangs like the Latin Kings (*los king*), Bloods (*los sangre*), and Trinitarios (*DPL*), who offer the appeal of the street and lure of *la fama* (fame or notoriety) to a largely poor, disenfranchised population. Contrastingly, Pentecostal churches, present in most neighborhoods and exerting considerable influence on the local community, ask that young men forsake the allure of the street, its associated values and trappings, and answer the call of the Lord, to join the universal brotherhood of Christ, and to take up a spiritual life free of sin. Many do just that, converting to neighborhood churches at tender ages. Others follow friends into street gangs that provide, much like the church, a surrogate network of familial support in the form of exclusive brotherhoods. Yet, despite the presence of other voluntary organizations, social clubs, and traditional religious groups – many much older and more established than these (and certainly less demanding of their members) – Pentecostal churches along with youth gangs like the *naciones* increasingly dominate the devotions of today's urban youth.

At first glance, these two institutions, different in their historical constitution, no less their cultural elaboration, seem imperfect bedfellows for analytic comparison. After all, popular images of the defiant capricious gang member contrast sharply with those of the sober, chaste Christian convert. The former tends to be perceived in terms of criminality and violence, the latter its antithesis. Despite their obvious differences, however, it has become increasingly evident that for those situated at the urban margins, Pentecostal churches and youth gangs are two of the more popular social organizations among young men and likely represent the most viable, transformative, and mobile elective identities

¹Although ongoing, the bulk of my ethnographic research in the Dominican Republic, conducted between 2007 and 2010, focused on members of a Pentecostal community from two small neighborhood churches in Villa Altigracia and is based on data collected through sustained participant-observation, structured and semi-structured interviews, informal interactions and conversations, and other anthropological research methods over time. A primary focus of my research to date has concerned Pentecostal Christianity and the intersecting themes of gender, cultural change, and the politics of religious authority in the context of urban poverty. As part of this research, I have interacted with, interviewed, and built friendly relationships with former gang members who had left *naciones* to join local churches. The discussion presented here draws primarily from these interactions and the cross-cultural literature cited throughout this article. All interviews and discussions with informants were conducted in Spanish and select quotes were translated into English at a later date for their inclusion here. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Religion* whose valuable insights and engaged feedback helped shape the development of this article in important ways.

available to poor residents in neighborhoods where they are active. Considering them together, reflecting on their overlooked commonalities instead of their apparent differences, allows us to do at least two things: (1) take seriously the status of local churches and youth gangs as important social institutions in many ways alike in structure as they are in function; and (2) acknowledge the similarities between ostensibly different but similarly formidable purveyors of ideology, personal expression, and sources of passionate devotion that are today powerful agents of social and cultural change at the local level.

To be sure, both entities provide an important platform for public participation and collective social action aimed at addressing issues germane to local concerns and the particular interests of the community and their respective memberships. But more than that, their structural similarities give way to overlapping functions, a correspondence implied by their shared popularity among barrio youth and their ubiquity in poor urban communities, not only in the Dominican Republic, but also throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Few other corporate social groups in recent decades have been as successful at consolidating young male solidarity and mobilizing the agency of disenfranchised urban youth as this curious pair of religious and secular sodalities. Respectively, church and gang membership offers the unique prospect of freedom in constraint – new potentialities of license and self-authorship engendered by a deliberate embrace of ‘un-freedom.’ Drawing examples from my fieldwork in the Dominican Republic and additional insight from related scholarship on the region, I argue that due to an analogous ritualization of everyday life – through rigorous rules and clearly defined consequences for breaking them – both Pentecostal churches and youth gangs provide reliable spaces of predictability, control, and mastery, and have therefore become popular stages for managing the precariousness of barrio life in late modernity.

Youth Gangs and Pentecostal Churches

‘Youth gang’ is a homogenizing term that conflates considerable diversity into a single concept. Many very different heterogeneous groups are commonly lumped into this category despite striking variation in terms of form and activities (Strocka 2006, 134; also see Ball and Curry 1995 and Esbensen et al. 2001). Youth gangs exist in a variety of configurations throughout Latin America from the *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, to the *bandas* in Colombia and Ecuador, *chimbos* and *manchas* in Peru, *pandillas* in Mexico and Nicaragua, *barras* in Argentina, *parchas* and *chapulines* in Costa Rica, and *quadrilhas* or *galerias cariocas* in Brazil (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011); not to mention *naciones* in Ecuador, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and their diasporas. The difficulty in conceptualizing youth gangs for the purposes of classification is fast apparent in the scholarly literature. It is common for observers to impose definitions based on pathology, criminality, and/or violence, without taking into account gang members’ own views of their group identity (Strocka 2006, 134). Strocka suggests that what distinguishes youth gangs from other youth groups, more than anything else, is that ‘society generally *perceives* the former to be collectively and inherently associated with illegal and violent activities’ (134). Scholars debate how best to define gangs and what social groups might usefully be included (or excluded) in such a category – that is, what exactly is the difference between street gangs, youth gangs, *maras*, *pandillas*, and *naciones* anyway, and to what degree do their differences matter comparatively?

Definitional issues are especially important to studies that look to find policy solutions to the ‘gang problem’ and for criminologists parsing important features for cross-cultural comparisons of gang affiliation and recruitment. In spite of the difficulty in generating all-inclusive terms applicable to the wide range of elective groups that might be classified as ‘gangs,’ observers, expert or otherwise, tend to view youth gangs as qualitatively different from other youth groups, with the gang literature as a whole treating them largely as different versions of the same genre: voluntary associations of disenfranchised youth favorably disposed toward (or generally associated with) crime and delinquency.²

Referring to youth gangs in the Dominican Republic, Bobea (2015, 90, n2 and 80–81) deploys the terms *naciones* and *pandillas* interchangeably, pointing out that *naciones* is a term that Dominican *pandillas* (or ‘street gangs’) have used to refer to themselves since they first appeared in the country several decades ago and that share a variety of characteristics often attributed to gangs in the literature such as an integrated system of loyalties, hierarchical organization, similar symbolism and rules of association, comparably ardent identity politics, shared public perception of violence, and similar demographic characteristics (membership is largely restricted to ages between ten and twenty years old). Bobea (2015, 80) reports that *naciones* in the Dominican Republic distinguish themselves from more corporate criminality groups in their focus on territorial control, identity, and self-protection and that individual *naciones* differ from one another in terms of their approach to or acceptance of violence and sanctioning of criminal activity. Many *naciones* are transnational in their profile (facilitated by the circular migration of their members) and much like youth gangs elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, members tend to come from communities that for decades have been marginalized from basic economic, social, and political institutions (81). Community perception of these groups is frequently ambivalent, running the gamut from romanticized protectors of the neighborhood to scorned violent menaces of the public at large. Whether perceived as saviors or scourges, *naciones* have inspired a recent generation of Dominican men (and some women) to claim new forms of agency and authority in opposition to social exclusion at the local level.

Rodgers (1999, 4) offers a useful starting point for a pragmatic (rather than essentialist) definition of youth gangs by defining such groups as

any discernible, self-formed group of socially recognized youths who: consider themselves to be a distinct group; are generally perceived as a specific social aggregation by the wider non-gang population; are bound together by shared values; are collectively associated with illegal and violent behavior, both in practice and in general perception.

He adds that ‘most gang members are male, fall between the ages of 7 and 25, and come from impoverished or socially excluded urban backgrounds’ (4). To these parameters, we might add that most youth gangs have a name and strong sense of identity, usually signified by clothing, hand signs, salutations, and other symbols unique to the group (see Seelke 2014, 2), and enforce a set of non-negotiable rules ensuring that membership is exclusive and primary to all others. Dominican *naciones*, for the most part, fit these criteria, distinguishing themselves from other voluntary organizations and youth clubs by way of unconditional loyalty, demanding terms of fraternity, and high stakes involvement in

²Klein and Maxson (2006, 4) provide one of the most concise definitions of street gangs to date – ‘any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity’ – followed by a succinct review of the definitional problem.

their exclusive memberships. It is with these structural characteristics that I am especially interested here since they are also the characteristics that youth gangs share in common with Pentecostal churches which, for their part, articulate a stern set of immutable rules that demand unwavering faithfulness as a path to secure the ultimate rewards of salvation.

Estimates of gang participation are notoriously unreliable since they tend to be based on considerable speculation. This is the case, not just because of definitional issues (who counts?), but also because gang members usually conceal their membership to outsiders. According to Hume (2007, 480) estimates of active gang membership in Central America alone, for example, range anywhere from 75 000 to 250 000. While there are no reliable estimates available for the number of gang members active in the Dominican Republic, according to Bobea (2015, 81), regionally, the Dominican Republic ranks among the highest in 'perception by its citizens of the presence of youth gangs in their neighborhoods.' Encountered in many areas of the country, *naciones* are especially active in economically depressed neighborhoods where they appeal to young men systematically denied social esteem and who have been marginalized from traditional institutions of power and authority. *Naciones* are perhaps most conspicuous in the metropolitan areas of the Dominican Republic's two largest cities, Santiago and Santo Domingo, where, on the word of an official interviewed by Bobea (81), there are approximately one hundred such active groups. Because of widespread unemployment and other disorders of poverty, the urban barrio is a particularly fertile milieu for breeding the kind of anomie and dissatisfaction integral to the success of these groups.

Contrasted with the *naciones* are abundant Pentecostal congregations that vie for barrio supremacy. Pentecostalism is a popular form of theologically conservative evangelical Christianity that emphasizes the direct experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit and reception of charismatic 'gifts.' Although Pentecostal Christianity everywhere shares characteristic features that make it recognizable around the world, small variations exist depending on local expressions (for a good discussion of methodological and definitional approaches to the study of global Pentecostalism, see Anderson 2010). Discussed here are those general features associated with 'classical' Pentecostalism and that are most salient in the Dominican context, above all an emphasis on moral transformation combined with an exacting moralism, emphatic fidelity to the gospels, and strict adherence to church doctrine and the dictates of membership (see Thornton 2016). Important differences obtain across the spectrum of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianities globally based on differing emphases on, for example, sin (Robbins 2004a), prophesy (Werbner 2011), miracles (Bialecki 2017), prosperity theology, charismatic gifts, etc. Nevertheless, anthropologists of Pentecostal Christianity have pointed to the distinct ways in which Pentecostalism ritualizes discontinuity through conversion, baptism, testimony, and other 'rituals of rupture' (e.g., Robbins 2004b) drawing attention to the ways in which born-again ritual constitutes a 'radical break' with the traditional culture all the while preserving that which it breaks from (see Burdick 1993; Meyer 1998). It is because of these as well as other shared characteristics that scholars have been able to discuss Pentecostal Christianity in terms of a 'global' religion (e.g., Anderson 2004; Hefner 2013; Coleman and Hackett 2015).

For the past several decades, it has been estimated that Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity more broadly has become the fastest growing form of Christianity worldwide, with the vast majority of conversions occurring among the poor and popular classes in the

'Global South' (Stoll 1990; Jenkins 2002; Martin 2002; Anderson 2004). According to the Pew Research Center (2014), nearly one-in-five adults in Latin America consider themselves Protestant, and of those, two-thirds identify as some form of Pentecostal Christian – the most popular version of Protestantism in the region. In the Dominican Republic, 23 percent of the population is classified as Protestant, and of those, 81 percent are Pentecostal by denomination or identity. Perhaps surprisingly, 52 percent of all practicing Catholics in the country identify as *carismático* or 'charismatic' (Pew Research Center 2014), Catholics who have incorporated elements of Pentecostalism into their worship by adopting the characteristic born-again spirituality of a 'personal relationship' with God and direct access to divine power through speaking-in-tongues, faith-healing, and other spiritual gifts (Csordas 2007, 296). The current religious profile of the Dominican Republic stands in stark contrast to only 50 years ago when a mere 1.6 percent of the country identified as Protestant.

In general, Pentecostal churches appeal most to the popular classes where their message of moral perfection and a life transformed, resonates with the discontented (Martin 2002; also see Chesnut 1997). Indeed, it is among the poorer depressed classes that Pentecostal churches in Villa Altigracia invest most of their proselytizing efforts. From large transnational organizations like Assemblies of God ministries to local independent charismatic Evangelical churches and congregations, Pentecostal culture exercises a powerful influence on barrio residents around the country, just as it has throughout Latin America for the past 30 years during which time local communities have found important spiritual, social, psychological, and other support through their engagement with fervent churchgoers and their impassioned theology of redemption and forgiveness.

Pentecostal churches and youth gangs, although in many respects antithetical, share constitutive roles in the local community for barrio residents and are therefore analogous in ways that allow for them to be compared profitably. Marshaling this unconventional comparison affords new insight into the individual institutions themselves while drawing attention to several unexpected commonalities between them. I am particularly interested in how these respective corporate groups, as a matter of recognition, differentiate themselves in remarkably similar ways through identification with named cohorts tied to exclusive memberships while distinguishing themselves in kind through symbolic differentiation, the elaboration of behavioral guidelines, and acquiescence to burdensome rules and significant consequences for breaking them. To outline the myriad differences between gangs and churches here would be an extraneous exercise – any accounting of their obvious differences would garner little in the way of novel insight and would only reaffirm the importance of their similarities since the same individuals who find themselves drawn into gangs are often the very same people who are drawn into churches, in spite of their varied differences. It is precisely this state of affairs that justifies comparison and begs the question: what exactly do they share in common?

Similar, relatable, complementary

Their shared role as popular voluntary organizations in the barrio that recruit from the same neighborhoods and sub-sections of the population as seen in Villa Altigracia and other parts of the country implies an association more twin than twain. Characterized by deep structures of accountability, all-or-nothing rubrics of membership, and elaborate

initiation procedures, both Pentecostal churches and youth gangs are demanding agencies that set themselves apart from other local institutions by offering attractive – if at times taxing – alternatives to the status quo.

Specifically, both institutions sponsor projects of salvation that seek to uplift impoverished individuals at the social and political margins through discipline and self-re-creation. Both emphasize radical personal transformation through the adoption of an alternative worldview and ethos coupled with a conspicuous group identity. The church, for example, relies on the metaphor of rebirth to create converts anew as holy and saved representatives of God on earth. First conversion followed by baptism ritually marks the faithful as new beings born-again in Jesus Christ. Through ascetic self-denial and rigorous behavioral prohibitions, Pentecostal Christians claim moral supremacy and assert spiritual perfection, dubbing themselves saints on earth, free of sin. By emphasizing mastery over the Bible and granting spiritual gifts to the faithful, the church creates the possibility for often otherwise poor, lay believers to become spiritually potent, charismatic crusaders. As pastors, evangelists, deacons, healers, and prophets, they become titled moral elites walking among, but set apart from, the unprincipled masses as arbiters of Christian fidelity.

Elsewhere I have written about former gangsters who exchanged their violent and morally conflictual lives in the streets for spiritual authority and salvation in the church (see Thornton 2013, 2016; also see Machado 2014 for parallel observations in Brazil). The moral and behavioral framework of the church provides important conceptual scaffolding for converts to invent themselves anew as redeemed sinners. Through their testimonies of divine transformation and renewal, even the most wretched of the barrio can remake themselves into spiritual and moral leaders ('zeros to heroes' as it were). The testimony of Juan Carlos (pseudonym), someone I met back in 2008, is a good example of what has become a cliché storyline in the drama of urban barrio life: once a drug trafficking street enforcer, notorious for flinging acid on his enemies in the violent neighborhoods of Capotillo, he had developed a testimony of redemption that was so well regarded that he was sought after as an exemplary evangelist, reputedly a living example of God's transformative power for all to see. Machado (2014) has observed a similar dynamic in Brazil whereby *ex-bandidos* (former gangsters/thugs), through polyvalent testimonies distributed by the church via multi-media, can achieve a relative amount of fame according to the recognition they have earned in the community as a result of their miraculous transformations into missionary agents of God. Conversion allows the so-called rescued from death to reconfigure their lives of suffering into testimonies of triumph thanks to the flexible language of forgiveness and redemption furnished by the church (Machado 2014).

For their part, *naciones* in the Dominican Republic 'save' young men from the burdens of urban poverty through self-aggrandizement and rituals of grandeur such as dissipated behavior and ostentatious display alongside spectacles of power through violence and intimidation. Gang membership promises to make dependent, disempowered, and politically marginal young men into independent, admirable, proud commanders of the streets. The ranks within gang hierarchies enable members to claim emboldening titles such as *el jefe*, captain, first and second lieutenant, and so on. In joining a nation, in becoming a Latin King or Trinitario, gang members transform themselves from victims of the street into champions and, indeed, leaders of it. Considering data from Brazil, Machado (2014, 169) has made the smart observation that crime itself has its own version of 'testimony'

in that stories or reports of one's criminal activities can elevate the poor stranger from a place of anonymity to the status of 'famed gangster' – a fame or power for cruelty usually attributed to the exercise of power over life and death. After conversion, the *fama* or fame of the former thug is transformed into renown as an evangelist missionary making him a privileged mediator between crime and the church in the favelas (for a similar observation in the Dominican Republic see Thornton 2013, 127–128).

Both *naciones* and Pentecostal churches are the products of broader transnational and global processes driving social change throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.³ Functioning as surrogate kin for those who join them, through resilient networks of mutual aid and support, both groups offer attractive alternatives to unstable nuclear families, ineffectual local governments, and disaffected communities. Their relatively recent success regionally is likely indicative of emerging responses to the dislocations of political and economic marginalization, especially for those whom neoliberal democracy has patently failed – many if not most residents living in poverty. For the dispossessed, youth gangs and church membership represent ready opportunities for social communion, self-valorization, and autonomy from traditional modes of social control and expectation. Featured prominently in urban barrios throughout the Dominican Republic, both institutions represent two clearly lit paths for self-actualization at the local level.⁴

In the Dominican Republic, as in several other documented areas of Latin America, the relationship between street gangs and Pentecostal churches is interwoven and complementary.⁵ Recruited from the same neighborhoods, young men in their teenage years, not too different from one another, join churches and gangs at the bidding of peers and the impress of a life transformed. In Villa Altagracia, for example, young men are recruited into *naciones* off the street, while Pentecostals might be seen evangelizing right alongside them. Whether drawn to the church or the street corner, the pulpit or the rum bar, young men have found an organic analog between them. Scholars of Latin America have made the repeated observation that Christian conversion has become a central strategy of gang disaffiliation (see Wolseth 2008, 2011; O'Neill 2010; Brenneman 2012; also see Flores 2013 for a similar observation in the U.S.). According to the Altagracianos that I came to know, the only acceptable way to leave a *nación*, once one has joined, is to convert and to live as a faithful world-renouncing *evangélico*, forsaking the street in exchange for spiritual renewal in the gospel.

Wolseth (2008) has observed that Pentecostal youth in Honduras maintain an uneasy relationship with gang members in which they claim exemption from everyday violence because of their belief in being saved by the grace of God. Gang members assent to Pentecostal exceptionalism on the condition that converts demonstrate their Christianness.

³Several of the more popular *naciones* in the Dominican Republic such as the Latin Kings, Trinitarios, and Bloods, all trace their origins to the U.S. and maintain, in some cases, strategic relations with chapters abroad. Although calibrated to the local scene, the structural model is typically the same and many of the *naciones* locally are linked to a broader global network through these affiliations.

⁴The popularity of both, importantly, has also followed several decades of significant rural to urban migration throughout Latin America. For a discussion of Pentecostalism and urbanization in Brazil, see Passos (2000).

⁵Birman (2009, 325–326), considering Pentecostalism in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has suggested that in the context of Pentecostal discourse, criminalized groups like youth gangs become manifestations of satanic evil, further articulating gangs as sources of danger in society, but ultimately as redeemable. Correspondingly, the relationship between the church and the *naciones* in Villa Altagracia demonstrates a symbiosis of sorts: the gangs represent for the church an example of evil and moral decay which is reversible only through Christ, while the church offers members of a *nación* forgiveness along with a legitimate path to overcoming their transgressions no matter how sinful.

According to Wolseth and his informants, conversion in Honduras provides gang members an acceptable means to escape widespread violence by claiming Christian sanctuary. Similarly, Brenneman (2012) has observed that gang youth or ‘homies’ in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras regularly become evangelical *hermanos* despite the ‘morgue rule’: the tenet that joining a youth gang is for life – that is, until you die. Pentecostal conversion guarantees a new life in Christ for former gang members regardless of their sordid pasts. Likewise, concerning El Salvador (and the United States), Gómez and Vásquez (2001) have argued that in response to the social fragmentation indicative of the transnational experiences of many Salvadoran migrants, evangelical churches have come to provide alternatives for young Salvadorans in diaspora to negotiate the dislocation and ‘multiple marginality’ (Vigil 1988) they once sought relief from in youth gangs. Gómez and Vásquez propose that the solidarity and intimacy young people experience as part of a gang is effectively replaced for the converted by the new intimate ties and supportive environment of church congregations.

During my fieldwork in Villa Altagracia, the conversion exception among the *naciones* was common place, so much so that the church became a retirement option of sorts for gang members aging out. I was assured by a young local gang leader by the name of Angel (pseudonym) that he would be *el jefe* or the boss ‘until death or until I want to be a Christian.’ A decision he figured to be within his five-year plan. In fact, every former gang member that I came to know insisted on the conversion exception and maintained further that not only did the *naciones* respect evangelical conversion as the only reasonable way out, but they also claimed to look after *evangélicos* in the streets, protecting them from harm and abuse. For the churches’ part, while condemning the illicit acts associated with local gangsterism, they rarely sat in judgment of individuals, preferring instead to offer forgiveness along with encouragement to reject sin and to accept Jesus Christ. Conversion offers gang members a new lease on life and an acceptable way to transcend personal history unlike any other alternative made available to them in the barrio. Furthermore, notions of ‘loyalty’ and ‘honor’ that are central to gang affiliation have functional equivalents in the church in the values of ‘fidelity’ and ‘righteousness’ which are easily translated from one context to the other. Secular terms like ‘respect’ in places like Villa Altagracia index local notions of distinction that apply to both churchgoers and gang members alike even if realized along differing moral registers (Thornton 2016).

Perhaps surprisingly then, in Villa Altagracia as elsewhere, Pentecostal Christianity and youth gangs fashion contrasting subjectivities that are not exclusively antagonistic but are in many instances remarkably complementary.

Well-defined directives

However uplifting or attractive the promise of a life as a *cristiano* or a gang member may be to some, neither path is easily trod. Pentecostal churches and youth gangs are demanding agencies that require more of members than just their passive allegiance. Both groups structure affiliation and belonging in terms of demonstrative commitment to vaunted group values, steadfast loyalty, and unwavering adherence to highly elaborated rules and expectations with clear-cut consequences for violating them. These rules tend to be all-encompassing and heavily circumscribe most aspects of public and private life for

members. Membership (and its rewards) is all-or-nothing and comes to represent the most important association members maintain outside their own families; this is evidenced by the time, resources, and emotional stock given over to these groups as well as the preeminence of their membership identities when compared to all others.⁶ As such, both the church and youth gangs are totalizing institutions for those who join them – they demand considerable investment and require unreserved commitment – conversion (especially baptism), no less than joining a gang, is in word if not in eventual deed, ostensibly for life.

The church as well as the gang, for example, demands that their respective members follow strict rules of comportment and dress and satisfy specific obligations to abide by behavioral prohibitions. In addition to prescribing the appropriate attire, countenance, and speech practices of its flock, Pentecostal churches prohibit a wide variety of behaviors the faithful associate with moral deficiency, such as cursing, premarital sex, alcohol consumption, and most behaviors connected with barrio or masculine street culture. They consider the Bible to be supreme inerrant law and follow closely what they determine to be its primary directives. Abiding by the rules of the faith, for a good many believers is at the very core of what it means to be a born-again Christian (Thornton 2016). As it was reiterated to me time and again by my Pentecostal friends and informants in Villa Altigracia, following the ‘rules of the gospel’ was necessary to live a sinless life and to ensure salvation. To not do so would be to put one’s soul at perilous risk, threatening his or her relationship with God, to say nothing of jeopardizing his or her reputation among fellow brothers and sisters in the faith. One church member put it this way:

Were it not for the laws and statutes within the church that prohibit us from doing certain things, it would not have been called the Evangelical Church and it would not have been called the Pentecostal Church. There are certain churches that do not prohibit anything – you do whatever you want. But here in the church, in this church, in the evangelical Pentecostal church, one is prohibited ... People who do not know God see it differently.

From the perspective of a young convert who I call Renato (pseudonym):

In the end they come to know that I am Christian because I inhibit myself many things that I know are bad; I restrict myself ... It is difficult [to follow the demands of the church], but one tries, because one has to try ... the gospel is a rule that you have to try to comply with because if you want to get to where you want to go, to the final stage, you have to try to do it.

‘[The rules]’ explains another, ‘are necessary to guide me where I have to go, [they show me] the correct path.’ It is through the satisfaction of rules that the faithful define a new approach to sociality and delineate an alternative course through life – a spiritual path, they say, guided by the Holy Spirit. The disciplined acts Pentecostal converts perform, set them apart from non-believers, and help establish their identities as born-again Christians, especially in places like Latin America where *crístianos* are known as much for what they *cannot* do (i.e., drink, swear, fornicate, etc.) as they are for their theology or any specific belief or practice.

⁶The totalizing nature of these identities precludes simultaneous involvement in both a *nación* and a Pentecostal church. According to informants, a person could be a member of a gang or a church, but never both at the same time. I explore the social mechanics of this proscription in detail here: (Thornton 2016).

Likewise, *naciones*, on the other hand, follow strict rules of association, referred to in the Dominican Republic as *la norma* (or, in an eyebrow-raising confluence of church and street law – *la biblia*): a rubric for how to conduct oneself as a member.⁷ In addition to outlining the guiding principles and unassailable rules of the gang, *la norma* prescribes how transgressions should be dealt with, elaborating exact punishments for those who fail to comply with them. Ultimately, gang members constitute themselves as admirable macho men of the streets (or *tiguerazos*) through the implementation and satisfactory execution of the law or *la norma*.

Angel, the local gang leader mentioned above, gave me a confidential sheet of paper one day in 2009 that outlined *la norma* governing the Trinitarios in Villa Altagracia, a list of 21 rules that structure affiliation and guide the membership. Every Trinitario must memorize all 21 rules or laws (*códigos*), some of them commandments to be loyal and to respect each other and to obey the supreme leader; others, instructions on maintaining good hygiene, recruiting other members, and being faithful to the laws of the Trinitario nation. Among the rules are also penalties to be levied for infractions. In all, the rules are relatively straightforward, with several overlapping. *La norma* represent not only directives to be followed by Trinitario members, but also function as an oath of allegiance, ensuring commitment to the gang (or ‘association’ as members refer to it) above all else, binding members of the brotherhood to a moral and behavioral code they revere and dare not violate.

Indeed, in both cases, there are clear consequences laid out for not following the rules. The church relies heavily on self-policing and the threat of God’s will. Guilt and shame function as important structures of discipline within congregations as converts try their best to avoid sin and to garner approval from peers. The fear of backsliding into a life of sin should one become lax in his or her faith commitments is incentive enough to keep many converts on the straight and narrow. If informal mechanisms of discipline like these are not sufficient, institutionalized penalties may be implemented in order to ensure compliance. Several churches in Villa Altagracia, for instance, enforce rules through the authority of church leaders (deacons, pastors, etc.) who levy punishments like loss of privileges in the church, they may also withhold baptism until the parishioner can demonstrate contrition and atone for their missteps through repentance. Youth gangs enforce their rules through fear and intimidation. Gang code violations are met with swift, sometimes corporal punishment. By way of ritualized beatings, individuals can be disciplined for failing to comply with gang directives. Violators may also lose privileges or rank and, if the transgression is deemed severe enough, may even be sentenced to death for their breach of the law. A former Trinitario explained to me that if a member could not recite the *normas* from memory he could be beaten as punishment. Another explained that any Trinitario found to have forsaken his *nación*, after swearing his undying allegiance, could be killed or have an ‘X’ carved into his back – a poetic illustration of his offense having been found guilty for turning his back on his brothers. Not all punishments are necessarily violent, Angel explained to me that if someone were found to have committed a minor infraction, a fist full of rice might be thrown on the ground before him

⁷In some instances, one’s initiation into a *nación* is referred to as a ‘baptism’ (see Bobea 2010, 185). And in at least several areas of Central America, to be ‘jumped in’ to a gang, to be initiated, is to be ‘baptized’ (see Brenneman 2012, 15).

and the offender set to the tedious task of picking up every single grain, on his hands and knees, while asking for forgiveness.

Despite their clear differences, rigid and loosely policed conformity, strict elaboration of rules, and unambiguous consequences for violating them are remarkably striking characteristics shared by both Pentecostal churches and youth gangs like the *naciones*. For a good many people, voluntary discipline of this nature is not exactly an attractive alternative to the freedoms enjoyed outside the strictures imposed by these groups. Life in the church as well as in youth gangs is demanding and comes with a commitment to firm guidelines that prove too inflexible for most people. Staying faithful to the Church's many rules is probably as difficult as being in a gang is dangerous. I have heard from more than a few Dominican friends and acquaintances that while pursuing a spiritual life in the church might be a good thing, it is hardly worth the trouble. The difficulty of taking up the demanding lifestyle of born-again Christianity can be seen in the high incidence of backsliding or disaffiliation in evangelical churches globally (Gooren 2010, 124), especially among men (Bowen 1996, 73). And yet, droves of young men are undeterred by the demands and constraints of membership and, perhaps surprisingly, embrace discipline and restraint as necessary elements of purposive, worthwhile personal transformation. It is no less difficult to remain in a youth gang; life in the streets can be dangerous; those not imprisoned or worse eventually 'age out' through conversion, marriage, or migration. Seeing as both institutions have become popular among impoverished men at the urban margins *and* with roughly the same kinds of individuals – that is, people from the same neighborhoods who, not uncommonly, leave gangs to join churches – we are invited to ask what structure and restraint offer converts and gang members alike, particularly among young men in poor urban contexts who choose discipline and embrace authority seemingly in spite of themselves.⁸

Rules and consequences

The elaboration of well-defined rules in the church and in the gang has at least three important functions for structuring experience in the barrio: (1) Rules make everyday life relatively predictable for converts and gang members by way of crafting durable structures of expectation and obligation; (2) Directives organize meaning and simplify experience (or at least limit the range of interpretive possibilities applied to that experience); and, (3) the satisfaction of clear guidelines creates spaces of mastery and occasions for prestige. I will consider each of these propositions briefly in turn.

(1) *Rules for a stable, predictable tomorrow*

Rules structure experience and, to this end, make everyday life more predictable for those who choose to follow them. Rules provide a road map for day-to-day living by prescribing how one should respond to any specific situation. If I follow a given set of rules or directives, for example, I can reasonably expect this or that result to follow from my actions

⁸Especially interesting here too is the fact that in many ways joining one of these communities constitutes bucking obedience to traditional forms of authority – political, familial, and religious; embodied locally by the state, kinship, and Catholicism – only to assume new forms of self-discipline in many respects far more repressive than the familiar yokes from which they may be seeking emancipation in the first place.

(e.g., I am assured salvation if I can abstain from sinning). If I fail to adhere to these rules, I can be quite certain of the ensuing repercussions (e.g., if I fail to greet a fellow member of the Trinitarios with the appropriate salutation, I am sure to be duly punished as a consequence). Rules have as an artifact of their enforcement the expectation of compliance; the effective enforcement of rules, then, ensures a modicum of predictability. In effect, by acting out fabricated if/then statements, rules and consequences bring into being causal relationships over which the individual may exercise confident control. Rule followers know in advance what must be done when faced with specific conditions and understand what will likely follow as a result of their actions. In doing so, they cultivate what we might deem *manageable eventualities*. Thus, well-defined rules, and clear consequences for breaking them, organize experience in such a way as to make outcomes more expectable, and, therefore, more manageable. Whether one follows the commandments of the church in order to ensure his or her admittance to heaven or falls victim to temptation and fails, in any case, he or she knows what to expect and it is he or she alone who is responsible for the outcome.

Like many others, a convert named Flaco (pseudonym) understood his new life in Christ as a reorientation:

My life before [conversion] was disorganized ... when I entered the church my life was 'oriented' [*se orientó*]. With my school life and studies, as with my family life, my social life also changed, I got myself organized ... Man lives a very disorganized life ... but to be a Christian is something contrary to this. When you are a Christian you have to have an organized life ... Seventy-five percent of the youth in this church did not have a life plan, they didn't think about studying, they didn't think about reaching anywhere [in life], but now when they enter the church they learn that they have to get organized, this is something that is in the word of God.

And for Renato, who I referenced above, conversion entails the commencement of a 'new life project':

After I came to the path of the Lord I have been concerned with being someone in life, with having a life project ... Since being on this path I have had this life project, even though I have yet to achieve this life project, I am trying to achieve it.

Both Flaco and Renato have assumed a new accountability for their future thanks to the decisions they now make in accordance with the directives of the church. The order imposed on their lives by following the rules has given them new direction and a strategic plan: a detailed blueprint for achieving specific ends.

Elaborate rule structures ritualize everyday life and bring it under conscious control by focusing the attention of followers on contrived, goal-oriented tasks (i.e., the injunction against sinning; the directive to seek salvation or to find a job; etc.). When deployed in situations of insecurity, rules anchor actions to predictable re-actions, eliminating uncertainty by scripting individual responses to a vast range of scenarios tied to probable outcomes.⁹

Joel Robbins (2010) has made the observation that morally strict faiths like Pentecostalism, centered as they are on lists of rules to be followed and consequences for not

⁹Egerton (1985, 258–260) has made the important point that while rules obviously constrain people in some ways, they no less work to free them in others, an irony that he suggests is often lost in Western thought where the imagined antinomy between individual freedom and social constraint functions as a master metaphor (258).

following them, tend to thrive in settings where the future is unpredictable and chaotic. According to Robbins, regardless of the outcome of one's actions, a 'deontological security' obtains from having understood and intentionally followed the rules – which is usually enough to 'ensure that one is free of moral guilt' (124). This particular style of moral reasoning, he finds, flourishes today as a result of globalization where many people find that while they cannot predictably control the consequences of their actions, they can control whether they conform to a rule or set of rules (125). By extension, it seems reasonable to assume that for those involved in potentially dangerous youth gang careers, the rules of belonging to a *nación* provide dependable equilibrium in the volatile streets, a counterweight to the uncertainty of intractable times and places. To exercise control amid disorder is a boon. In Dominican barrios, where being in control is aspirational, to be '*el control*' (see below) is to be highly regarded, a moniker earned by those with the power to influence and direct the behavior of others – but above all, to be master of one's own destiny.

(2) *Rules organize meaning and simplify experience*

The division and regimentation of life into simple projects of right and wrong and the discipline of behavior characteristic of these rule-bound social groups reflects a sort of systemization of the everyday. In categorizing the minutia of daily life into orders of good and evil, right and wrong, for or against, the dualisms characteristic of both youth gangs and Pentecostal churches simplify for their memberships complex social worlds by making them easily comprehensible – rules bring the phenomenal world under the control of its beholder by eliminating ambiguity and articulating a set of prescribed behaviors for virtually any possible scenario.

The church, for example, divides the world into separate moral orders: this world (or *el mundo*), characterized by sin; and the other-worldly or spiritual realm, conceived of in terms of the gospel (*el evangelio*) or 'things of God.' This conceptual scheme permits followers to apply a relatively simple cognitive map that directs their actions and relations within the world, demarcating activities and behaviors associated with the spiritual and deemed 'of God' – things they *should* do – and the profane or sinful activities and behaviors of 'the world' – things they should *avoid* doing. A Pentecostal convert named Diego (pseudonym) explains that for Christian converts, there are two contrasting paths:

There are two paths, good and evil [*el bien y el mal*], you choose the one you think is right for you. If you choose evil, you assume the consequences, because you know that evil can lead to something bad happening to you and to others. Good is something that I can use to do favors [for others] or to favor myself. It's like fate, you choose which destiny you want. It depends on what you choose. If the destiny you choose is good, it is for the good; if you chose evil, is for evil.

The gangs too employ a basic dualism, though divide the world along squarely different moral axes. The *naciones* of Villa Altigracia recognize behaviors as being of two broad orders – that is, actions *for* or *against* the interests of the gang. Members are taught to put their own nation first and that all other action should follow from this primary directive. Gang members enjoy vast freedom outside of this and are permitted a long leash provided their behavior does not threaten the group or its individual associates. In practice,

this means they may at times exercise alarmingly deviant behavior which is accepted by other members so long as such behavior is sanctioned by their code of ethics. The Trinitarios have a saying, ‘*sangre de tu sangre, sangre de mi sangre, sangre que corre de la tuya, va corriendo de la mía,*’ which Angel explained enjoins members of his association to treat one another as one and the same; that if one person is cut, it is understood that it is everyone else in the *nación* who bleeds along with him. Your responsibility is to your family in the *nación*, first and foremost, to all others and the law of the land after that.

While the church demarcates what is good and evil, sacred and profane, so too the gang defines right and wrong, welcome and unwelcome, friend and foe. As British social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966, 5) observed long ago,

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.

Here, the division of social life into wieldy dichotomies like sacred and profane space, inside and outside, with or against, and ensuring their partition through meticulous rules and precise consequences, reflects a process by which system and order are imposed on that which is essentially chaotic and unpredictable – life in the barrio for those at the urban margins. Indeed, for these young men, exclusion from the formal labor market, widespread unemployment and lack of educational opportunities, absence of public utilities and social services, spatial confinement, excessive policing and surveillance, are all conditions characteristic of contemporary barrio life that produce the precariousness encountered in impoverished neighborhoods around the country.

The repetitive elaboration of systematicity, order, structure, and probability within the performative and disciplinary codes of these elective corporate groups enacts a counterbalance to the uncertain facts of day-to-day living in urban poverty. An appealing remedy to the distress of insecurity is a persistent reiteration of the knowable, observable, and repeatable. These are emphasized by way of unambiguous directives, exaggerated dualities, and through behavioral prohibitions and the consequences levied for failing to observe them. As practical antidotes to anxious uncertainty, both the church and youth gangs alike empower individuals to chart their own course through disorder and to locate their progress within it through a scripted worldview of basic oppositions. Even while their respective methods differ greatly, the grammar of constraint and the structure of discipline that lies beneath their transformative efficacy are demonstrably similar.

And finally (3) *The satisfaction of clear guidelines provides spaces of mastery and occasions for prestige*

By successfully observing rules, that is, through their very compliance, followers find mastery and satisfying personal accomplishment. Whether or not one arrives at a final goal (whether that be salvation or holiness for churchgoers; prestige or *la fama* for those in gangs), or even wealth, riches, or health, is of little importance since the very observance of the rules themselves becomes an end in itself. A person cannot, for example, control or ever truly know whether or not he or she has achieved salvation (or that his or her actions will, in the end, ever lead to such results), however, he or she

can be certain of his or her compliance with a set of rules that in turn afford tangible outcomes and observable rewards. Pentecostals see their reformed deeds and disciplined conduct as important genres of ethical behavior that elicit, among other things, *respect* – a product of inward changes inspired by God, but ultimately executed by the individual believer, where respect is experienced as renown in the community and prestige among one's peers (Thornton 2016, 193). For converts in Villa Altagracia, the tangible rewards of respect from others are cultivated by being faithful to the principles of the gospel and enacting a life of ascetic self-denial. It is in fact through the very process of following these rules (the 'rules of the gospel' as they are referred to) that converts are constituted as Christian subjects and through confirmable acts of fidelity to the gang that neophytes work their way up through the ranks and solidify their identities as Bloods, Latin Kings, or Trinitarios. Occasions for prestige and the chance to compete for offices and positions of esteem are priceless opportunities, especially in the context of urban poverty where prospects for social mobility are scarce.

In Villa Altagracia, the most successful converts are those who master the moral transformation required of them as born-again Christians. Those adept at preaching and evangelizing are rewarded with official posts as pastors, deacons, or evangelists. Churchgoers can earn renown by being effective healers or spiritual shepherds, they may even be sought after for advice or counseling. If they are blessed with gifts of the Holy Spirit they are able to wield eye-catching spiritual power alongside the authority they might gain from being leaders in the congregation or exceptional examples to others. Those who distinguish themselves as moral exemplars are held in high regard, not only in the church, but also in their local communities, particularly those who have exchanged a life of delinquency for a spiritual life in the church. For those converting from gangs, former criminals become a symbol of the welcome that the church offers every kind of sinner, no matter their transgressions (Machado 2014, 162). The church offers a space for advancement as one masters the faith, its doctrines and ritual practices, independent of achieved education, success at work or business, or any other standard measures of legitimacy. On the other side, youth gangs like the *naciones* enable young men to fill positions of authority such as '*el jefe supremo*' or gang leader, second lieutenant, sub-commanders, working their way up through a structured hierarchy according to their accomplishment of celebrated group ideals. Angel, like other gang leaders, was a self-made man, someone who lacked a secondary education but who by the age of 18 had been tapped to be a leader of the Trinitarios because, according to his estimation, he was able to prove himself most deserving and capable. His ability to exceed the expectations of his peers and to demonstrate his value to the association guaranteed his eventual promotion through the ranks. The *naciones* offer members opportunities for prestige through alternative ideals such as individualism, wit and cunning, hyperbolic machismo, and situational amorality, which are open to barrio residents by virtue of their value in the moral economy of the street. Danilo (pseudonym), a former gang leader of the Bloods who I have discussed in detail elsewhere, established a name in the streets as '*el control*' through fear and intimidation tactics, which earned him respect. He used his reputation for violence to work his way up through the gang, always willing to do just a bit more than his associates for the prestige in the streets that comes with imposing one's will and flaunting recklessness and indifference to authority. He was not alone, many other former gang members explained similar paths through the ranks of their *nación*, all of them recounting

their ascent as an accomplishment of sorts (if understood today as misguided from the perspective of the church, a product of demonic designs). Both youth gangs and Pentecostal churches set out clear guidelines that, reward followers accordingly when compliance is met. If rule followers master compliance they earn distinction, a social remuneration for their disciplined conduct.

Membership and participation in something greater

The popularity of both the church and street gangs with young disenfranchised barrio residents and the alternative scenarios of belonging and relatedness that both institutions sponsor warrant a comparative consideration. Proffering enticing narratives of social support and affiliation that extend above and beyond the local community and nation-state, these contemporary and increasingly popular social institutions reimagine traditional relationships of power and authority that present to their members provocative ‘new’ ways of being and acting-in-the-world in defiance of social marginalization, persistent poverty, and political exclusion. When viewed together as autonomous modes of collective social action, buttressed by rules and consequences, these distinct yet arguably constituent barrio institutions reflect an urban praxis of empowerment familiar to late modernity.

As complex ideological spaces from whence to construct alternative identities and social philosophies apart from the established or hegemonic order, both Pentecostal Christianity and youth gangs establish creative social orders where members might reimagine themselves and their moral worlds in ways that give them agential control over important meaning-making values in their lives (albeit within the constraints of newly elected rules). By redefining individual goals and empowering members to realize those goals, both institutions are unique in advancing the *manageable eventualities* referred to above. Notwithstanding underemployment and severely limited opportunities for social and economic advancement, poor uneducated gang members may, at least within the gang itself, enact a symbolic inversion of the social order which, in the Dominican Republic, by virtue of their status as poor (often black) men, denies them normative means to secure prestige and social capital. Within the gang, however, disparaged young men become esteemed warriors, leaders with loyal associates, and businessmen who demand respect. Members see themselves as virtuous because they live according to a strict code of ethics and define success based on the alternative ambitions defined anew by the brotherhood. Likewise, the medium of conversion and membership in a Pentecostal congregation empowers the same disparaged young men to become church leaders, spiritual authorities, healers, moral consultants, and community exemplars who are regarded with respect from their peers. Both groups redefine for their members the rules of the game, so to speak, extending to the disadvantaged creative alternatives for the once victimized to become victors and to provide social spaces where the undervalued are valued despite their exclusion from the mainstream economy of respect.¹⁰

The gang leader I befriended in Villa Altagracia years ago was only 17 when he was entrusted to lead more than 40 Trinitarios. As *el jefe supremo* (‘the supreme leader’) he

¹⁰The argument here resembles those first put forward by the likes of Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), and Moore 1978 who, in their own ways, understood gang affiliation as strategies of empowerment deployed by the underclasses.

took on the name and title of ‘Duarte’ – founding father of the Dominican Republic and leader of the Trinitarian revolutionaries credited with liberating Santo Domingo from Haitian occupation in 1844. The young boss insisted that his gang was not about violence and drugs but about patriotism, self-determination, and defense of his local community from the deleterious influences of criminals, foreign gangs, and the abuses of state police.¹¹ *Dios, Patria, Libertad* – God, fatherland, freedom – the gang’s motto, as well as the country’s national slogan, was a symbol of totemic significance for him, a mantra with profound meaning which inspired the kind of zeal in him that the very same words stir for patriotic citizens’ love of country.

In this scenario, gang members play an important (if imaginary) role in the nation as a whole. Trinitarios take on the names and titles of national heroes claim to defend the local community from foreign and domestic threats, and trumpet the county’s *raison d’être* by adopting it as their own sacred mantra. Turning the social order on its head, young men in the barrio employ themselves in important offices and are responsible for making decisions of import for the *nación* as well as their local community. The street has its own social order, and it is here that the youth gangs declare their supremacy under a structure of governance they themselves define and within which they prevail. Cerbino and Rodríguez (2008) have submitted that in response to the marginality, exclusion, and oppression felt by urban youth throughout much of Latin America, it is no surprise young men wish to create in the form of gangs an alternative political order (within or on the margins of the dominant order) and to imagine a utopian ‘nation’ where they are the ones with political power and influence (also see Bobea 2015, 79–80, 90, n2). Youth gangs like the *naciones* in the Dominican Republic, just as perhaps elsewhere, fashion alternative social imaginaries that embolden the powerless and create, not unlike what Rodgers (2003, 24) has called, referring to *pandillerismo* (‘gangsterism’) in Nicaragua, ‘social sovereignties,’ within and beyond the nation-state.

Like the *naciones*, the churches might also be described as ‘social sovereignties’ insofar as they construct alternative social imaginaries above and beyond the local that invite members to participate in a transnational movement with its own norms and values. For this reason, similar churches elsewhere have been described as ‘nations within a nation’ (see Frazier 1974 (1963), 87; Simpson 1978, 239), separate social orders within but set apart from the dominant social frame. Besides advancing a worldview unique to the faith, churchgoers imagine themselves to be members of a transnational spiritual citizenship united in equality with like Christians around the world. This Christian identity trumps all other affiliations, including ascribed identities, and transcends political, national, and social boundaries (see, for example, Burdick 1998). Conversion for the faithful represents a rejection of the world (*el mundo*), a rebuttal of the rule of mankind they understand to be under the influence of demonic authorities, and a recasting of the world in terms of the gospels. Converts seek escape from the profane world of sin governed by man in favor of a spiritual life administered by God. Unreserved submission and exclusive fidelity to God are viewed as a small price to pay for the salvation of one’s soul. Martin (1994, 85–86) describes Pentecostalism as a ‘walkout’ from the hierarchical mediation

¹¹One of Bobea’s (2015, 80) informants, a former gang member from Santo Domingo, put it this way: ‘I was almost 100 percent proud to belong because most of the norms, rules and ideals of that *nación* were about putting an end to political corruption and discrimination.’

of wider society that ‘creates an enclave of a people seeking emotional release, personal empowerment, mutual support, and self-government.’ In the Pentecostal church, believers find a ‘restoration of scarred and fractured relationships, a repudiation of corruption, a discipline of life, an affirmation of personal worth, and a cancellation of guilt’ (Martin 1990, 83). This exceptional alternative world Pentecostals look to adopt – these ‘free social spaces’ or ‘protective social capsules’ where uplifting concepts of self and new models of initiative and voluntary organization are assimilated (Martin 1990, 284) – promotes a radical equality among followers in the face of a social order that favors hierarchy (Martin 1990). Austin-Broos (1997, 237), having studied converts in Jamaica, has keenly suggested that although Pentecostals cannot redefine in and of themselves the social order of which they are a part, they can sustain a critical view of it and at least realize to some extent their ideals within the church itself.

For disenfranchised groups frustrated by the discrepancy between culturally defined aims and available means, assuming an alternative value system wherein the possibility exists to earn prestige and to gain social status, conversion, no less joining a gang, represent expedient opportunities. Impoverished urbanites wish, for example, as others do, to be prosperous and to exercise self-determination (to choose their own alliances; to elect their own route to happiness), but because of their lack of social capital and their systematic exclusion from prestige granting institutions of education, political influence, and employment, they have few other established institutional methods for achieving these coveted goals. Relatively deprived, barrio residents, unsurprisingly, seek out alternative means to obtain that which they are denied.

It scarcely bears mentioning that the well-to-do rarely pursue millennial dreams of redemption via spiritual transformation in the church, much less chase reputation among peers by way of gangsterism in the streets. It has perhaps become a truism that youth gang involvement is highly correlated with class and socio-economic status as much as Pentecostalism has been observed as being most successful among the poor and popular classes.

Conclusion: finding traction in intractable worlds

Quite independently, scholarship on youth gangs and scholars studying Pentecostal Christianity have proposed surprisingly similar explanations for the growth and popularity of these institutions across Latin America; both, for example, have been argued to reflect contemporary responses to social and political estrangement, anomie, the loss of traditional family networks, as well as social marginalization and displacement (Thornton 2016, 163). This was especially the case for the early sociology of Pentecostalism in Latin America (see Willems 1967 and d’Epinay 1969), but no less true of contemporary Pentecostal studies; Robbins (2004b, 123–124) has pointed out that many works continue to draw on deprivation arguments like these, at least implicitly. The same can generally be said to hold for the gang literature as well, which frequently maintains that gang membership represents a pathology resulting from some form of social exclusion or impairment, economic or otherwise (see for example DeFleur 1970; Valenzuela 1984; Vigil 1988, 2003; Spergel 1990; Hagedorn 1998; Rodgers 1999, 2003; Gómez and Vásquez 2001 and early essays along these lines such as Shaw and McKay 1942 and Whyte 1943). A boilerplate example of this is Strocka (2006, 137) who argues that ‘a major causal factor underlying

the youth gang phenomenon [in Latin America] has been the general rise in injustice, inequality, and social exclusion across the region.’ Bobea (2010, 2015) credits the success of *naciones* among men in the Dominican Republic along similar lines. To be sure, these conditions have resulted from the travesty of neoliberal economic policies that have encumbered many across the globe with insecurity and little hope of transformative relief of any kind, much less escape through social mobility. Deprivation arguments like these are common among scholars because they connect wide-ranging economic and social transformations attending the late 20th and early 21st centuries with the concurrent growth of Pentecostal Christianity and youth gangs across the Americas at the same time (Thornton 2016, 163).

Intensification of poverty, estrangement from the political process, and alienation from the labor force, particularly for young men, are major issues facing the urban poor in cities throughout the western hemisphere. Youth in these contexts find themselves in challenging circumstances with few opportunities or resources to better their situations. In Villa Altigracia, the fall of sugar prices in the 1980s ravaged a local economy that export manufacturing in the form of free trade zones has yet to rectify with any appreciable success. These as well as other neoliberal economic reforms have instead exacerbated conditions of poverty by magnifying inequality and effectively excluding large portions of the population from the labor market – mainly low-skilled, undereducated young males. The failure of citizenship and other rights-based discourses to guarantee stability or to secure basic rights and freedoms to everyone, especially the poor, is a story that is neither new nor unique to the Dominican context: citizenship here as elsewhere promises little, not the least jobs, money, security, or peace of mind.

In the town of Villa Altigracia, for instance, where the church and gangs have established a robust presence, young men are infrequently employed, often jobless, and prospects for future flourishing are slim when it comes to housing, employment, marriage, and other cultural ideals they wish to realize but ultimately find difficult to attain.¹² Similar stories abound throughout the Americas, especially in the over-populated urban periphery of cities from Bogotá and Caracas, to São Paulo and Guatemala City.

We might suppose that for many poor barrio residents, structure and predictability are welcome alternatives to the otherwise volatile and uncertain reality of urban poverty. Life from day-to-day is precarious for many if not most impoverished barrio residents who are as under-employed as they often are unemployed and are frequently at the mercy of inflation and contracting economic forces that make the price of rice and transportation any given week as unpredictable as the hurricanes and tropical storms that wreak havoc on local communities annually. Most poor residents are unable to make significant plans for the near future because of the profound instability that accompanies barrio life. Both Pentecostalism and youth gangs provide reliable spaces of predictability and control – through structured directives, rules, and explicit consequences – in a social world where both are conspicuously absent. Well-defined rules provide for clear expectations, a manufactured

¹²I have not concerned my analysis here with the question of gender or, in particular, masculinity. I have dealt more specifically with those issues here (Thornton 2013), here (Thornton 2016), and here (Thornton 2018). There is, of course, an excellent and expanding literature on Pentecostal gender dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean as it relates to men and masculinity (see, for example, Machado 2005; Smilde 2007; Lindhardt 2012). It is worth mentioning that Pentecostalism articulates a very different masculine ideal from that advanced by youth gangs (see Machado 2005); so different in fact, it poses a unique challenge for young men who convert to these churches from *naciones* (see Thornton 2013).

stability, and in many cases, moral certainty that one is on the right path as compliance is rewarded with just deserts in the form of prestige and achieved social status, if not immediate mastery and personal satisfaction.

These need not be considered reasons for why people join nor viewed exclusively as compensatory motives for signing up; rather, I have tried to reflect on the areas where these diverse institutions intersect, why such different institutions would share such broad appeal in contexts like Villa Altagracia, and what their correspondences might reveal about those who choose to follow them. The church and the gang offer emphatically different products but offer them to roughly the same constituency for approximately the same price of admission: absolute fidelity and exhaustive discipline. Contracts like these appeal, ironically, to the modern individualist who, rather than find them confining, instead are liberated by the freedom of re-creation and transformation they facilitate, discovering within strict rules a more valuable freedom from insecurity and uncertainty (cf. Edgerton 1985, 259).¹³

Pentecostal churches and youth gangs, therefore, can be shown to foster a unique kind of freedom in constraint, a counterintuitive ‘freedom in un-freedom’ familiar to members of both groups. Independence from the strictures of the dominant social order springs forth from dependence on the strictures of an elected order within the group. Just as the church affords converts a spiritual escape from the oppression of the everyday and the ostensible preordination of their lot in life, membership in a *nación* allows recruits the freedom of self-authorship and affords them license to act as they wish beyond the constraints of the legal order. Pentecostals regularly construe their spiritual transformation in the church as freeing or escaping from the shackles of sin (or *el mundo*), even as this freedom, granted by the grace of God, attends a list of immutable rules and regulations. Pentecostal churches advertise conversion as the ‘only way out’ of drug and alcohol addiction, faith proclaimed the only remedy for unhappiness, emptiness, immorality, the only route out of damnation. The gang affords a hedonistic autonomy, a freedom from the discipline of normative moral restraints, empowering members to transgress the ‘acceptable’ through an alternative moral order endorsed by their peers and buttressed by the rule of the streets. In this way, gang members reject the moralism of society, the mainstream system or status quo, and revel in its disruptive (and often violent) subversion. And yet, in their new found ‘freedom’ both converts and gang members alike are reluctant to interpret the rigid constraints into which they step as limiting or confining. At least insofar as many Pentecostals in Villa Altagracia are concerned, it is precisely these constraints that activate the freedoms and liberation converts seek.

For the cynical observer, these elections may appear to reflect entrepreneurial strategies typical of the contemporary neoliberal moment; symptoms of a growing generation governed by new market logics and a reality shaped by alternative configurations of production and consumption, with the church and the youth gangs dispassionately churning out paradigmatic examples of the modern neoliberal subject in their wake.

¹³Psychoanalysts, most prominent among them Erich Fromm (1941), have recognized an important appeal of un-freedom – that of being an undifferentiated member of the collective. According to this view, to sign on to rules and regulations, to elect un-freedom, serves the function of abating feelings of emptiness and anxiety associated with freedom, the freedom Fromm likens to the developmental individuation of children from the nurturing relationship with their mother. Here, it is in the participatory, communal integration with the group that members find cathartic redress.

Personal enterprise now an ethos of self-valorization, young men and women today are rewarded by neoliberal technologies of self that produce subjectivities suited to excel in the ides of late-capitalism. Elective self-discipline and internal governance for more than a discernable few have become the ironic binding ties required to unlock success and to ensure survival in today's increasingly intractable, and for those at the social margins, undeniably predatory and antagonistic, globalized world.

I have considered here the systematic engagement with rules and constraints that are characteristic of two simultaneously popular but decidedly different institutions in urban neighborhoods of the Dominican Republic as a way of asking what rules, consequences, uncertainty/insecurity, gangs, and churches all have in common in today's urban barrio.

It is possible, as I have attempted here, to consider youth gangs and Pentecostal churches comparatively according to their structure and not their moral valence. Asking unconventional comparative questions and reading across diverse comparative literatures can furnish fresh interdisciplinary perspectives on diverse or contrasting social phenomena and reveal novel insights into enduring subjects of anthropological interest if only we permit ourselves leeway to explore unexpected equivalences, even between the oddest of couplings.

The conclusions drawn here should be read as partial and provisional and should not be understood as an exhaustive account of either youth gangs, Pentecostal faith, or their many complex similarities and divergences. I have intended for my remarks here to be thought-provoking. There is, of course, so much more to be explored within this topic and the ideas put forward in the preceding pages will hopefully invite further reflection and additional ethnographic investigation. I have been more concerned in this essay with the question of voluntary discipline and with the structural influence of rules and consequences than I have with more traditional interrogations of 'religion' or 'gangsterism;' with 'conversion' or 'crime;' or with a comprehensive appraisal of the moral entanglements, conflicting values, or diverse 'beliefs' of gangsters and churchgoers. I have instead focused on the implications of their structural similarities as voluntary groups that are ostensibly open to anyone, but require a certain kind of discipline to participate, and sustained fidelity to remain a member. Accordingly, I have neither attempted here to provide an all-encompassing explanation for why people convert, nor ventured to outline a definitive account for why they join gangs. Instead, I have proposed some tentative thoughts on why these institutions, despite their complex and obvious differences, endure in specific milieus, recruit from the same social bases, and inspire the same kind of enthusiastic participation and voluntary compliance with rules that make even the most unusual comparison a worthy endeavor.

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