

‘The Terror and Scourge of the Barrio’: Representations of Youth Crime and Policing on Nicaraguan Television News

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Abstract. This paper explores the meanings that youth crime and policing acquire in the context of their mediated representation on the televised news in Nicaragua. In particular, it explores this question by juxtaposing the televised imagery of the apprehended juvenile delinquent with the discursive treatment of his person by both police and reporters on Nicaragua’s most watched news shows, *Acción 10* and *Crónica TN8*. The police are presented as heroic protagonists who serve and protect the barrio through ‘communitarian policing’ whilst the juvenile delinquent – the ‘*pinta*’ – is excluded and stigmatised. This turns such youths into socially expendable and ‘tainted, discounted’ outsiders who can be treated as such. In this way, through the news, *pintas* are targeted for ‘removal’ from the barrio, and their mediated arrests become ‘spectacular performances’ of community. A discrepancy appears, then, between the police’s communitarian discourse and its reactionary practice.

Keywords: media, youth crime, police, community, exclusion, Nicaragua

Introduction

A stern voice-over announces that ‘a 52-year-old man was shot and killed today in La Quintanina, a neighbourhood in Managua’s 4th District, after becoming involved in a street brawl defending his son, whose bicycle was robbed by *unos pintas*.’ We see the man’s son, Umberto, appear on the screen. He explains, ‘I wasn’t going to let them [rob me], so they wounded me with a machete (*me machetearon*).’ Then, ‘a fight erupted between the different neighbourhood “groups” resulting in the tragic homicide’, the

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voice-over explains. But ‘The police have now achieved the apprehension of one of the suspects.’ We see images of a scrawny-looking adolescent being chased down a dirt street by a group of angry neighbours, including Umberto. They are armed with sticks, stones and belts. When they corner the boy, one individual begins to hit him with a large wooden stick. The boy’s mother fruitlessly tries to intervene on his behalf as the police catch up and take charge, grabbing hold of the youth, and immediately throwing him into the back of their pick-up truck.¹

The above narrative is representative of the many scenes of violence, crime and policing that are televised daily on the Nicaraguan news. But it is a particularly striking one, insofar as it offers a series of crucial tropes that reinforce particular ideas about youth crime, policing and community in Nicaragua. Youth crime is presented through the objectified and stereotypical figure of the *pinta*,² who seems always to be filmed whilst being apprehended, and is subsequently displayed handcuffed in the back of a police pick-up truck, or lined up outside the nearest police jail. Such figures are very much interchangeable across news items and appear to be mere props for the representation of the institution implementing crime prevention – that is to say, the *Policía Nacional* (the Nicaraguan National Police, PN) – as the ‘heroic’ defenders of neighbourhood order. The reports, as such, foster a particular vision of the relationship between delinquency, youth, local *barrio* communities and the police. This paper explores the meanings that youth crime and crime prevention acquire in the context of their mediated representation.

In particular, I will juxtapose the televised imagery of the *pinta* detainee with the discursive treatment of both the person and his crimes by police and reporters on Nicaragua’s most watched television news shows. The *pinta* is routinely portrayed as particularly immoral as he is projected to be engaged in two allegedly interrelated, criminalised practices: substance abuse and ‘random’ ordinary violence in the public space. As this violence (exemplified by intimidation, robbery and assault on neighbours) is presented as the inherent result of substance abuse, it logically follows that the presence of substance-abusing youths in the public space of *barrio* communities must be reduced in order to restore order. News items may ‘serve to construct and incorporate a particular collective as citizens of the nation [but they] also serve to identify and exclude the foreign, the alien, the *non-incorporable* other’³ – in this case, the *pinta*. Generally, the imagery that the news mediates reveals ‘the values of

¹ *Acción 10*, 20 Nov. 2013.

² ‘*Pinta*’ is a stigmatising term for a *barrio* youth who ‘looks like’ a criminal, stemming from the shortening of ‘*tiene pinta de delincuente*’ (‘he looks like a delinquent’). I elaborate further on the term in the sections that follow. On its origin and use see for example ‘De pintas, chambrines y pichelas’, *La Briñula Semanal*, 25 Feb. 2009.

³ Daniel M. Goldstein, *The Spectacular City: Violence and Performance in Urban Bolivia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 18; my emphasis.

the collective order [...] particularly when [the depicted] behaviour is violent and harmful to others'.⁴ The moral order in question is represented by an idealised, especially Sandinista notion of barrio community, which the community policing model is envisioned to protect. The mediated representation of the apprehension and detention of the *pinta* transgressor becomes spectacular as these news items engage their television audience in a public spectacle of moral belonging – demonstrating clearly *who* belongs and who does *not* belong in the barrio community.⁵

In this article, I first contextualise these mediated politics of removal in relation to what might be termed the 'institutional evolution' of both youth gangs and the police,⁶ including in particular the latter's communitarian policing model and the moral order it projects. Second, I conceptualise crime prevention in relation to the media and regional discourses surrounding citizen security, building on the argument that the citizen security discourse, even when it is enacted through preventive rather than repressive measures, is productive of 'citizens that deserve protection and social groups from which they should be protected'.⁷ This deems the members of these social groups to be a type of 'non-citizens' to which citizen security does not apply. Third, I discuss the televised media outlets through which representations of crime are created and consumed in Nicaragua, in particular the popular, sensationalist *nota roja* news shows *Acción 10* and *Crónica TN8*. Subsequently, I introduce the *pinta* and the social imaginaries surrounding him. I then analyse, through the discussion of a selection of news items, the spectacular removal of the *pinta* in relation to the changing position of such youths in their communities, community policing and the current anti-drug policy Plan Coraza Popular (Plan Popular Armour). Particularly in relation to the latter and in defence of the moral community as portrayed in the news items, the *pinta*'s

⁴ Maggie O'Neill and Lizzie Seal, *Transgressive Imaginations: Crime, Deviance and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 5.

⁵ Following Goldstein, *Spectacular City*, p. 18, I consider a 'spectacle' to be 'a form of political action based on visual display, undertaken by specifically positioned social groups and actors attempting to stamp society with their own agenda'.

⁶ Dennis Rodgers has often described Nicaragua's gangs as alternative legitimising institutions with their own logics of protecting and 'policing' the barrio in the absence of the police in many poor Managuan barrios throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. See Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, Violence and Social Order in Urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38 (2006), pp. 267–92; 'The State as a Gang: Conceptualizing the Governmentality of Violence in Contemporary Nicaragua', *Critique of Anthropology*, 26: 3 (2006), pp. 315–30; Dennis Rodgers and Robert Muggah, 'Gangs as Non-State Armed Groups: The Central American Case', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30: 2 (2009), pp. 301–17.

⁷ Sebastian Huhn, Anika Oettler and Peter Peetz, 'Contemporary Discourses on Violence in Central American Newspapers', *The International Communication Gazette*, 71: 4 (2009), pp. 243–61.

exclusion is legitimised on the basis of his alleged involvement with drugs. While there is clearly scope for portraying these youths as victims, the spectacles of communitarian removal reflected daily on the popular news instead perpetuate the othering of particular sectors of marginalised youth.

Evolving Institutions and Community Moral Order

In Nicaragua, the community-based policing model was launched in 2010 by chief of police Aminta Granera after almost a decade of successful experimentation and implementation of various participatory community initiatives against street gangs and youth crime.⁸ Community-oriented policing is a widely adopted policing strategy based on close collaboration between the police, community residents and organisations active in the communities.⁹ Certainly, much – both positive and negative – has been said about the putative ‘uniqueness’ of Nicaragua’s model, especially in relation to other Central American countries.¹⁰ What is interesting in relation to the mediated representation of policing is that the ‘proactive communitarian policing model’ that Granera presented incorporated extensive ‘plans of visibility in the media’, and underlined the PN’s ‘excellent relations with the media’.¹¹ Herein the official, renewed police bulletin *Visión Policial* is posited as the vehicle through which the PN are to communicate their police programmes, campaigns and news. Accordingly, *Visión Policial* was expanded to include television and radio communications, being hosted on eight television spaces and

⁸ Such as the establishment of neighbourhood *Comités de Prevención Social del Delito* (Committees for the Social Prevention of Crime, CPSDs), the founding of the PN’s *Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles* (Office for Juvenile Affairs, DAJUV) in 2003, and the involvement of voluntary police in community crime prevention. See also Wim Savenije, *Persiguiendo seguridad: Acercamiento de la policía a las comunidades con problemas de inseguridad en Centroamérica* (San Salvador: FLACSO El Salvador, 2010).

⁹ Mark Ungar, ‘Policing Youth in Latin America’, in Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers (eds.), *Youth Violence in Latin America: Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 203–24.

¹⁰ For an example of the positive, see Peter J. Meyer and Claire Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf> (last access 14 Feb. 2018). For an example of the negative, see Dennis Rodgers and José Luis Rocha, ‘Turning Points: Gang Evolution in Nicaragua’, in Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva), *Small Arms Survey Yearbook 2013: Everyday Dangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 46–73.

¹¹ Aminta Granera, ‘Modelo policial de Nicaragua 2010’, presentation, Panama, October 2010, available at <http://www.policia.gob.ni/cedoc/ModeloPolicialfc.pdf> (last access 14 Feb. 2018). A quarter of the presentation covers *Visión Policial* and positive visibility of policing in the media (pp. 22–35); all translations are mine.

21 radio air spaces across 12 of Nicaragua's 17 departments and autonomous regions.¹² According to the presentation, *Visión Policial* has four objectives:

- (a) to contribute to the bettering of the nation's perception of security through police information
- (b) to strengthen the image, credibility, trustworthiness and legitimacy of the PN
- (c) to strengthen respect towards police authority and the public recognition of its work
- (d) to manifest the political volition of the Government of National Reconciliation and Unity to strengthen the citizen security of the country.¹³

All objectives are geared towards the public representation of police work, but the final one is also clearly political. Since the insurrection against the Somoza dictatorship and their National Guard, culminating in the 1979 Sandinista Popular Revolution, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) has prided itself on creating a police force out of the grassroots. As of the FSLN's return to power with Daniel Ortega's 2006 electoral victory, the PN appear to have publicly and discursively re-embraced their communitarian and revolutionary origins.¹⁴ Arguably, the enactment of the communitarian policing model can be seen as part of the political realignment of the PN with the Sandinista party, as political struggle and power divisions within the PN marked the previous period of neoliberal government.¹⁵ In turn, it has been argued (critically) that the clear alignment of the PN with the current government has contributed to the institutionalisation of Sandinista power.¹⁶ The alliance between the PN

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Though the police force changed names and uniforms after the PN was founded out of the Sandinista police upon the 1990 electoral defeat of the FSLN, the (Sandinista-oriented) structure of command remained largely intact. See José Luis Rocha, 'Mapping the Labyrinth from Within: The Political Economy of Nicaraguan Youth Policy Concerning Violence', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 26: 4 (2007), pp. 533–49.

¹⁵ See *ibid.* for a thorough assessment of the political and power divisions within the PN under the previous administrations (1990–2006).

¹⁶ Ortega (FSLN) has been re-elected twice, in 2011 and 2016, with increasing support but under increasing national and international criticism. President Ortega is simultaneously general secretary of the FSLN, president of the republic, and *jefe supremo* (supreme chief) of police, which entails that the police fall under direct command of the presidency. However, when Granera was appointed chief of police in 2006, before the Sandinista electoral victory, she inherited a police force already struggling with issues of credibility and independence (e.g. William Grigsby, 'La Policía Nacional ante siete desafíos colosales', *Envío*, 293 [2006]; online journal available at <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3334>, last access 15 March 2018). Whereas internal strife seems to have been resolved under Granera's

and the media incorporated in the community-based policing model, however, is particularly revealing of the directed attempt to project and defend a specific, ideologically driven, moral order in the barrio communities.

The barrio community itself has seen different gang-like ‘defenders’, the sequence of which sheds light on the PN’s current (discursive) claim to replace them. For decades, Nicaraguan barrio security provision (or defence) was locally organised.¹⁷ Leading up to the 1979 revolution, the FSLN formed so-called *Comités de Defensa Civil* (Committees for Civil Defence, CDCs). These mostly served to provide first aid, protection and hide-outs for the urban guerrillas fighting dictator Somoza’s National Guard. After 1979, the revolutionary government turned these CDCs into *Comités de Defensa Sandinista* (Sandinista Defence Committees, CDSs), which served to help the Ministry of the Interior and Sandinista Police (precursor of the PN) to defend the ever-expanding cities by preventing counter-revolutionary activity from taking up residence in their barrios.¹⁸ When the civil war intensified in the 1980s many urban youths from the age of 16 were drafted into the Sandinista Popular Army. However, following the electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990 and subsequent peace negotiations to end the civil war between the Sandinistas and the *Contras*, 80 per cent of the army was demobilised. With the economy in ruins, the majority of these militarily trained youths ended back on their barrio streets unemployed. Some of these youths organised themselves into gangs with the onset of neoliberalism, mostly with the

command (at least from the outside), the apparently seamless alignment of the PN with the Sandinista government has been (heavily) criticised for its increasingly close relationship to the presidency and party politics (see e.g. Roberto Orozco, ‘La Policía Nacional se ha desnaturalizado para garantizar la seguridad del régimen’, *Envío*, 402 [2015]; online journal available at <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5074>, last access 15 March 2018).

¹⁷ For this overview I draw on Rocha, ‘Mapping the Labyrinth’; Rodgers and Rocha, ‘Turning Points’; Rocha and Rodgers, *Bróderes descubiertos y vagos alucinados: Una década con las pandillas nicaragüenses 1997–2007* (Managua: Envío, 2008); Rodgers, ‘Living in the Shadow of Death’; Rodgers, ‘When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Violence, and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua’, in David Pratten and Atreyee Sen (eds.), *Global Vigilantes* (London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 349–70; and Savenije, *Persiguiendo seguridad*.

¹⁸ It has been claimed that these organisations were used by disgruntled neighbours to initiate investigations of one another under the guise of ‘counter-intelligence collection’. Ericka Gertsch Romero, ‘De los CDS a los CPC’, *La Prensa*, 16 June 2010; available at <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2010/05/16/politica/24768-de-los-cds-a-los-cpc>, last access 15 March 2018. The *Consejos de Poder Ciudadano* (Councils for Citizens’ Power, CPCs) were established by the Sandinista government when they regained power in 2007, and were deemed reminiscent of the older CDSs and CDCs. Officially, they were created to promote direct participatory democracy, but they were criticised for being partisan and in effect pitching neighbours against one another. As of 2017 the CPCs are known as *Consejos de Familia* (Family Councils).

intention of fending for their families and neighbourhoods in the face of the economic and political instability of the early 1990s.

At the same time, the CDSs were officially dissolved but they were, in a way, replaced by the social organisation of young barrio men into nascent local *pan-dillas* (gangs) and their political organisation into the Juventud Sandinista (Sandinista Youth) – especially toward the latter half of the 1990s and 2000s. Participation in the one organisation did not exclude it in the other. In fact, during its 'government from below', the Sandinistas successfully mobilised *pandilleros* (gang members) to back city- and nation-wide strikes and student protests that would frequently paralyse the country.¹⁹ In this era, neighbourhood street gangs saw themselves (mainly) to be in charge of defending their barrio from rival gangs. Infrastructure in the barrios was generally very poor and the recently founded PN (struggling to become an institution of non-partisan, national scope) literally covered little ground and was understaffed and almost chronically under-resourced.²⁰

Starting in the early 2000s, the loose structure of the (often large) barrio *pandillas* began to fall apart as many of the older generation moved on and crack cocaine came in. Money-making for individual consumption, rather than neighbourhood defence, seemed to become the *pandilleros'* objective. As Rodgers and Rocha have discussed in depth elsewhere,²¹ this evolution of youth gang behaviour – now acting *against* their own barrios rather than defending them – rapidly made their presence unwanted. Whereas in the past *pandilleros* were able to hide out in other residents' homes during police raids, for example, these now reported them to the police instead.²² In the early 2000s, after the well-nigh failure of the 1999 Plan de Prevención de las Pandillas (Gang Prevention Plan), the police began institutionalising their communitarian policing strategies with the establishment of the DAJUV and the expansion of CPSDs.²³

Since the FSLN's return to power in 2006, barrio police substations (*pre-ventivas*) have been set up in particular neighbourhoods, and the force has

¹⁹ José Luis Rocha, 'Pandilleros: La mano que empuña el mortero', *Envío*, 216 (2000), pp. 17–25.

²⁰ Due to the civil war the Sandinista police had operated almost exclusively in the urban centres. Moreover, at the time, police work was not considered as important or prestigious as military service or a job with the Ministry of Interior's Inteligencia del Estado (State Intelligence) Department. While these institutions were preoccupied with issues of national security in the face of an armed counterinsurgency movement sponsored by the United States, the police had to deal with regular and 'petty' criminal activities such as domestic violence, drunken brawls and traffic management.

²¹ See note 17 above.

²² See Dennis Rodgers, 'The Moral Economy of Murder: Violence, Death and Social Order in Nicaragua', in Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (eds.), *Violence at the Urban Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 21–40.

²³ This occurred especially under the Bolaños administration (2001–6). See also Savenije, *Persiguiendo seguridad*.

been steadily expanded in numbers, from 9,938 employees in 2008 to 14,009 in 2016.²⁴ The PN has moreover been supplied with vehicles and equipment, and improvements to infrastructure, such as the paving of streets, have allowed them to better patrol the barrios – a trend that had been initiated under previous governments. They now reportedly patrol even the most remote communities of Nicaragua’s interior, where many more *preventivas* have been built. Most importantly, however, police discourse and policy has become decidedly more communitarian – especially with the 2010 enactment of the community policing model.²⁵ Discursively, street gangs are no longer referred to as *pandillas*, but instead as *grupos delincuenciales* (‘delinquent groups’). This marks the discursive end of the figure of the *pandillero*, one-time barrio defender. Whereas the *pandillero* had a communitarian ring to his position so long as it was one of barrio defence, the terms now used to indicate youths organised in (small) groups engaging in particular legal and illegal activities are primarily moralist, derogatory, stigmatising and exclusionary. References to youths who might have been termed *pandilleros* in the past have been replaced by the synonyms (by no means equal in tone) *vago* (bum), *drogo* (drug addict), *lacra* (scum), *delincuente* (delinquent), *antisocial* and *pinta*.²⁶ By making the barrio community their direct social and political environment of engagement the police are now able to justify their claim that they speak ‘*from and with*’ the community and its moral realm. It could be argued, then, that over the past decade and a half the PN has successfully replaced other armed actors in the barrio (at least discursively) and positioned itself as the new moral entrepreneurs of the historically politicised arena of the barrio community.

Citizen Security and the Mediated Presentation of Crime Prevention

Much research has been conducted on crime-prevention policies, policing and the ‘illegal’ or non-state armed actors involved in Latin America’s criminal landscape, yet only a relatively small share of this research has focused on or included the mass-mediated representation of crime and crime prevention.²⁷

²⁴ Presupuesto General de la República de Nicaragua (General Budget of the Nicaraguan Republic), 2008 and 2016: see Ministerio de Hacienda, *Presupuesto General de la República* (Managua: Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 2008), p. 132 and Ministerio de Hacienda, *Presupuesto General de la República* (Managua: Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 2016), p. 338.

²⁵ Policía Nacional, *Sistematización del Modelo Policial Comunitario Proactivo de Nicaragua* (Managua: CEDOC, 2011).

²⁶ Most of these terms were also used to refer to *pandilleros*, most commonly the term ‘*vago*’ – the prime activity of the *pandillero* being ‘*vagar*’, i.e. not doing anything productive.

²⁷ Exceptions are German Rey on crime journalism, *El cuerpo del delito. Representación y narrativas mediáticas de la (in)seguridad ciudadana* (Bogotá: CIC-UCAB, 2005) and *Los relatos periodísticos del crimen. Cómo se cuenta el delito en la prensa escrita latinoamericana* (Bogotá: CIC-UCAB, 2007); Jesús Martín-Barbero’s exploration of the mediated relation between

This does not mean that the analysis of Latin American mass media and its representations of 'the deviant' is not feasible; the contrary is the case: the fact that crime prevention is intrinsically linked to the projection of social order in the neoliberal era (or 'late modernity') has been well researched.²⁸ Many social and political scientists have fruitfully researched the role that the mass media have played, for example, in the growth of the fear of crime, and in the elicitation of popular support for (often repressive) crime-fighting policies such as Plan Mérida (Mexico), Plan Mano Dura (Iron Fist) and Plan Super Mano Dura (El Salvador), and other such programmes and special units in Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala and Honduras.²⁹ In the Nicaraguan case, however, such research has rarely engaged with the mediated representation of community policing. Mark Ungar has stressed that 'the region's response to crime is stuck' between long-standing repressive and novel preventive approaches to policing, which 'leads to contradictory and overly ambitious policies that allow police structures and practices to continue to be based on identifying, separating out, and cracking down on social sectors and areas regarded as inherently criminal – above all, on youth and in the spaces they congregate'.³⁰ I believe that the mediated presentation of community policing, in its spectacular effectuation against this particular youthful transgressor (the *pinta*), is symptomatic of the way in which this contradiction reveals itself in Nicaragua.

Both news and policies engaging with citizen security tend to act on behalf of the security of certain groups of citizens at the expense of others. In their extensive analysis of the discourses surrounding crime and citizen security in the Central American print media and public policies, Peter Peetz and Sebastian Huhn note that 'it is not as much the actions of a person that

crime and fear 'The City: Between Fear and the Media', in Susana Rotker (ed.), *Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 25–35; Rocío Silva Santisteban's *El factor asco: Basurización simbólica y discursos autoritarios en el Perú contemporáneo* (Lima: Fondo Editorial Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2008), and studies that combine ethnographic methodologies with mass media research, such as Goldstein, *Spectacular City*; Alberto Guevara, *Performance, Theatre and Society in Contemporary Nicaragua: Spectacles of Gender, Sexuality and Marginality* (New York: Cambria Press, 2014); Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); and Robert Samet, 'Deadline: Crime, Journalism, and Fearful Citizenship in Caracas, Venezuela', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University online repository (2012), available at <https://purl.stanford.edu/dn875vt7129> (last access 5 May 2017).

²⁸ E.g. David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Many of the 'indices of change' that he explores are present in contemporary Latin American societies, including Nicaragua, and often accelerated through policy transfer and political pressures (such as those around the war on drugs).

²⁹ E.g. Rotker (ed.), *Citizens of Fear*; Caldeira, *City of Walls*.

³⁰ Ungar, 'Policing Youth', p. 203.

decide if he or she is part of the group of “non-citizens”, but the stereotyped attribution by others [...] it is about processes of stigmatisation’.³¹ Television crime-reporting appears to be a particularly available and spectacular vehicle for creating and reinforcing such imaginaries surrounding ‘non-citizens’, readily taking part in (if not shaping) processes of stigmatisation.³² Yet, as crime-reporting captures particularly *public* events (arrests of allegedly delinquent young men in the public space), it ‘make[s] certain things dramatically visible, [while it] also, by extension, [...] render[s] other things invisible’; it is always a prism through which reality is presented or distorted in a particular, spectacular way.³³ I use the adjective ‘spectacular’ to refer to the constructed and public nature of the processes in question. As I mentioned earlier, I consider a spectacle to be ‘a form of political action based on *visual display*, undertaken by specifically positioned social groups and actors attempting to stamp society with their own agenda’.³⁴ In his study of spectacles of marginality and power in Nicaragua, Alberto Guevara has underlined that ‘a key feature in this process is the *nonverbal* aspect of theatricalised power and its affects and effects through bodies and spaces’.³⁵ It is in this vein that we can understand news shows to display the (theatricalised) power – as carried out on the *pinta*’s body in the public space of the barrio community – of the PN and the political system it currently represents. The spectacular exclusion is (re)produced before the television audience (largely barrio residents themselves), and features the police (a particular political actor) publicly removing transgressive residents from the barrio community, through which they successfully stamp society with their own agenda. The news shows take part in this spectacle by providing a vehicle for putting on visual display those who (are pictured to) transgress the ideal of community, presenting them as the object of police intervention, and engaging in their ‘naming and shaming’.³⁶

The media’s intimate role in the stigmatisation of particular social groups has been extensively researched. Renowned sociologists Stanley Cohen and

³¹ Peter Peetz and Sebastian Huhn, ‘Violencia, seguridad y el Estado: Los fundamentos discursivos de las políticas de seguridad ciudadana en Centroamérica’, in Rivera Vélez, F. (ed.), *Seguridad multidimensional en América Latina* (Quito: FLACSO – Ministerio de Cultura del Ecuador, 2008), pp. 351–68, p. 365, available at <http://www.flacsoandes.edu.ec/agora/violencia-seguridad-y-el-estado-los-fundamentos-discursivos-de-las-politicas-de-seguridad> (last access 14 Feb. 2018).

³² E.g. for a discussion of the reinforcement of the ‘bandido’ imaginary through the news in Brazil, see Graham Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 74–9.

³³ Goldstein, *Spectacular City*, p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18; my emphasis.

³⁵ Guevara, *Performance, Theatre and Society*, p. 3; my emphasis.

³⁶ Robert Samet has stressed the media’s denunciatory role in Latin America, focusing on the Venezuelan case. See Samet, ‘Deadline’; Samet, ‘The Denouncers: Populism and the Press in Venezuela’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 49: 1 (2016), pp. 1–27.

Stuart Hall started documenting and writing about the relationship between the mass media and the stigmatisation of particular social groups in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁷ Coining the term 'moral panic', Cohen addressed how certain episodes of media attention focused on particular groups of 'deviants', most usually young men, who were cast as particularly immoral – as a threat to society's values and interests. The cycle of moral panic creates both clear protagonists and antagonists: the deviant group under scrutiny would be treated by the media as 'folk devils'. Emerging as the opposite of the 'folk devil' is the 'moral entrepreneur': the person or entity that will uphold society's values in the face of crisis.³⁸ With this in mind, criminologists Keith Hayward and Mike Presdee later noted that 'crime and the agencies and institutions of crime control [can be viewed] as cultural enterprises – [...] as richly symbolic endeavors created out of on-going human interaction and power relations [that] must be read in terms of the contested meanings they carry'.³⁹ The mediated presentation of the apprehension and detention of young urban delinquents by the police can thus be read as a symbolic and socio-cultural spectacle of control and transgression. In this spectacle the Nicaraguan PN is presented as the 'moral entrepreneur' charged with the task of defending the barrio community against the *pinta* 'folk devil'. The mediated presentation of *pinta* detainees then establishes them as stigmatised 'non-citizens' and their recurrent visual display serves as a physical description of a particular 'criminal type', lumping together all youths that fit the description. This logic fits with community-oriented policing's emphasis on crime *prevention*, pre-eminently pre-occupied with the singling out of 'delinquent elements' before they engage in crime.⁴⁰ It also makes the alliance between the mass media and *preventive* policing strategies highly effective, but potentially dangerous, as it contributes to the aggravated stigmatisation of citizens from already vulnerable social sectors.

Televised Media and Police in Nicaragua: Allies in Crime-Fighting

Before we proceed with the discussion of the mediated presentation of youth crime and crime prevention, something must be said about the nature and place of the news shows on which these items are aired. Nicaragua's most watched TV channel, Canal 10, also hosts the country's most watched news

³⁷ Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: Creation of Mods and Rockers* (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1972]). Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 [1978]).

³⁸ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.

³⁹ Keith J. Hayward and Mike Presdee (eds.), *Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 3.

⁴⁰ Peetz and Huhn, 'Violencia, seguridad y el Estado', p. 366.

show *Acción 10: Cara a Cara con la Noticia*, known simply as ‘*Acción 10*’. Both its noon and evening shows are watched by over 40 per cent of the country’s population, reaching a high of 56 per cent in the capital Managua.⁴¹ The hour-long main broadcasts at noon and 7 p.m. are supplemented by additional 20- to 30-minute broadcasts (*micronoticieros*) at 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. The broadcasts are generally anchored by three women and include a number of journalists operating in the capital as well as in Nicaragua’s different departments. These journalists report directly on events ranging from traffic accidents to drug raids, from murder to *fiestas patronales* (patron saint celebrations). *Acción 10* presents its approach to news as a ‘space for the poor, where we [*sic*] can express our needs’.⁴² Its reporters argue that ‘what the population wants is to be taken into account’. They also claim that their reporting is classified by its viewers as ‘professional’, ‘respectful’, ‘objective’ and ‘independent’.

Acción 10, however, mainly reports what is called *nota roja* news, also defined as the ‘yellow’ or sensationalist press, involving the presentation of the dead and wounded as a result of traffic accidents, murders, fights, robberies or domestic violence.⁴³ Following the logic of the *nota roja* style, the reporting of crime and accidents is presented as ‘full of adrenaline’ and, although the images are more often than not graphic, viewers support this journalistic style as ‘it depicts what’s real – what happens in life’.⁴⁴ Given its temporal-spatial immediacy, especially in Managua, staying tuned in to *Acción 10* is presented to be simply ‘our way to stay informed’.⁴⁵ Moreover, Canal 10, the channel on which *Acción 10* is hosted, can be received free by antenna in

⁴¹ According to the independent firm AMCHAM’s annual research over 2013, whose results were broadcast on *Acción 10* on 11 Sept. 2013, 89 per cent of Nicaraguans watch television daily, the rate rising to 90 per cent in Managua. The evening news programme *Acción 10* is the preferred news show of 56 per cent of the Managuan television audience and of 41 per cent of the rest of the country. In terms of ratings it beats its main competitors *Crónica TN8* and *Noticias 12* by more than 12 per cent, which is why I focus mainly on this news show for the purpose of this study.

⁴² This quote, and all those that follow – unless otherwise stated – are taken from *Acción 10*, 11 Sept. 2013.

⁴³ For a historical analysis of the *nota roja* in Mexico, but in general terms also applicable to Central America, see Pablo Picatto, ‘Murder of *nota roja*: Truth and Justice in Mexican Crime News’, *Past and Present*, 23: 1 (2014), pp. 195–231. Picatto states that, already by the mid-twentieth century, ‘*nota roja* reporters were always close to the police [...] and became the lowliest example of journalism’s ethical poverty’, noting furthermore that ‘cultural critics [...] see the *nota roja* simultaneously as a pornographic escape from everyday life and as a hyperrealist depiction of ordinary violence’ (pp. 198–9).

⁴⁴ *Acción 10*, 16 Sept. 2013. *Acción 10* is most loyally watched in poor urban barrios and markets, and its tone is set to cater to this large sector of the Nicaraguan population. As the channel’s further programming includes the most popular Mexican and Colombian *telenovelas* (soap operas) and Hollywood blockbuster movies, many market stalls and shops keep it on throughout the day and well into the night.

⁴⁵ *Acción 10*, 16 Sept. 2013.

almost all of Nicaragua.⁴⁶ Nicaraguans often eat their main meals seated in front of the television to watch the news, children and adults alike. *Acción 10*'s emphasis on direct coverage and graphic imagery is what sets news programmes like it apart from the printed press, which tends to look down on *nota roja* news.⁴⁷ Aware of the criticism of the *nota roja* style, *Acción 10*'s director Mauricio Madrigal has claimed, however, that the news show has matured and now 'respect[s] the people involved more than when we just started; we have more restraint and we'll keep getting better'.⁴⁸

The popularity of television news shows has not gone unnoticed by Nicaraguan politicians. Although president Ortega (FSLN) initially campaigned against the *nota roja* reporting style, his opposition has faded. In the meantime, the Ortega-Murillo family have reportedly become proprietors of about half of all telecommunication media in Nicaragua.⁴⁹ Arguably then, the popular *nota roja* news shows – supposedly now more restrained in their broadcasting of blood and violence – have become a vehicle for showcasing government action.⁵⁰ This includes perhaps most markedly the PN's crime-fighting activities. As I explained in the introduction, the mutually legitimising alliance between police and televised news is very much a deliberate one. Like many contemporary police forces across the globe the PN is aware that 'dramatic portrayals of police work, and of the nature of crime and criminal justice, perform an important symbolic function and help to perpetuate a "mythology

⁴⁶ Only two other channels have such good free reception: Canal 2, originally an independent channel, and Canal 6, which has been a Sandinista channel since the 80s. Other publicly broadcast channels include Telenica Canal 8, VosTV (Canal 14) and Canal 12, all of which host their own news shows.

⁴⁷ See for example: 'Tendencia de estudios sobre nota roja en Nicaragua', *El Nuevo Diario*, 21 Feb. 2013, and the special report 'Noticieros sangrientos', *La Prensa*, 3 April 2011. *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario* are Nicaragua's leading newspapers. Both aim for the same educated, middle-class public – albeit from two different ideological vantage points, one could argue. They often feature well-written editorials and opinion sections (see also Huhn *et al.*, 'Contemporary Discourses on Violence'). The smaller newspaper *Hoy* is the exception to this established trend and aims at a lower-class public, mostly market vendors, and often has similar content to the television news reports. Likewise it focuses on local news such as crime, traffic accidents, *fiestas patronales* and weekly price variations in staple food goods.

⁴⁸ 'Noticieros sangrientos'. To date this 'restraint' has meant blurring out the worst bits of the bloodiest messes and occasionally warning about (very) 'strong' images – e.g. bits of brain on the tarmac or severed limbs – though this is done haphazardly and often not very well (the blurring often appears later than the image itself, for example).

⁴⁹ The Ortega-Murillo influence over the Nicaraguan mediascape is often criticised in *La Prensa*, the country's largest newspaper – see for example 'Frenética entrega de frecuencias de radio y TV', *La Prensa*, 16 April 2011.

⁵⁰ Canal 10 is officially owned by Ratsensa, an anonymous company that is said to be funded by the Mexican businessman Ángel González, who owns another significant proportion of Nicaragua's mediascape. Though he denies this, González is said to have agreed on the distribution of radio and television networks directly with Ortega. Canal 10 positions itself as apolitical and they indeed do little reporting on political issues. See *ibid.* and 'Minimiza Ratsensa relación con Ortega', *La Prensa*, 22 June 2011.

of policing”⁵¹. The 2010 presentation of the community policing model explicitly states that ‘the media transmit positive news items [of police work]’ as a contribution ‘to ameliorate citizen security’. The PN’s own monitoring of the presentation of their work in the different media (print, televised and radio press) points out that 81 per cent of the news items is positive about police work.⁵²

On *Acción 10* most news items that report on crime result directly from news crews tagging along with police patrols or special operatives, resulting in live imagery of apprehensions and other police activities, like raids and chases. *Nota roja* news shows depend both on their alliance with the police and on neighbourhood calls – they operate direct telephone hotlines available 24/7 – to cover news as it happens. They often draw extensively on police reports about major and petty crimes, utilising police photographs of seized illegal goods (drugs, weapons), arrested (alleged) perpetrators, and victims (dead or alive), which are commonplace in crime reports. *Acción 10* in particular additionally includes police press conferences and campaign launches in its news blocks. Specifically, the alliance between popular news shows and the PN helps two institutions that have a history of struggling for legitimacy to further their claims: the *nota roja* media’s claim to legitimate journalism, and the PN’s claim to legitimate community policing and crime prevention. The proximity of the news crews to the crime-fighting event benefits both. While the police are able to legitimise their operations with ample presence on prime-time TV, news shows such as *Acción 10* can back their claim to legitimate and ‘professional, truthful, and objective’ journalism through explicit institutional support.⁵³

In what follows I will highlight how the stigmatised representation of a particular delinquent (the *pinta*), and his physical apprehension and (symbolic) exclusion from the barrio community relates to the mediated portrayal of the PN’s community policing strategies, as well as to the previously described changing place of police and (allegedly) delinquent youths within the barrio community fabric. The following sections explore both routine and special-report news items in which the portrayal of the *pinta* and the police’s intervention in his person and his activities work to present a particular segment of barrio youth as ‘un-incorporable’ and herald the police as community ‘moral entrepreneurs’. Generally, a clear template can be discerned to these news items: (a) a crime is reported to have occurred, most likely an armed robbery or assault; (b) if possible, live footage of the apprehension of the alleged perpetrator (fitting the *pinta* profile) is shot; (c) the apprehended *pinta* is displayed handcuffed, either in a line-up outside a police jail or in

⁵¹ Yvonne Jewkes, *Media and Crime* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 147.

⁵² Granera, ‘Modelo policial’, p. 31.

⁵³ *Acción 10*, 16 Sept. 2013.

the back of a police pick-up truck. While on display, the camera focuses on those stereotypical attributes of the *pinta*'s physical appearance that link him to the delinquent realm (tattoos, scars, haircut, clothing style, handcuffs – elements that are never emphasised on witnesses or neighbours, even if they are present). Mostly, some reference is made to drug abuse, either because the detainee was under the influence while he (allegedly) committed the crime(s) that he has been arrested for, or because he has been tied to drugs in the news item through a police raid on an *expedio* (drug-dealing house) or by a special police operative. The detainee's full name is then provided, either by reporters or police, and a police statement is often taken to enhance this naming-and-shaming ritual, most usually leading to a request to the audience to file reports against the suspect, asking them whether they recognise him as their attacker from a previous incident (hinting at the recurrent nature of the *pinta*'s crimes). The declarations of those imprisoning the *pinta*, the imagery of his apprehension, and the display of his arrested body appear to suffice to charge the *pinta*, regardless of whether or not it can be proven that he has committed the crimes that he is being arrested for. In this way, the news items unequivocally present the *pinta* as non-incorporable and removable.

The news items included in this article were selected from a discourse analysis of *Acción 10* news items viewed on a weekly basis between March and November 2013 – a period during which I also conducted ethnographic research in a medium-sized regional penitentiary. With my background in research with prisoners and former prisoners, I was initially interested in how different types of crimes might be presented on the popular news, how the criminal justice system would be portrayed, and on what occasions the prison system itself would become newsworthy. As I took notes on every news item, it struck me that certain crimes were being disproportionately reported, and specific 'criminal types' were being repeatedly displayed in front of or inside police holding cells without ever being followed up or convicted.⁵⁴ These items seemed to be deployed to instil in the viewer a mixed

⁵⁴ I watched the news on 74 occasions, mostly tuning in to *Acción 10* (69 times) and occasionally to *Crónica TN8* (thrice) and *Noticias 12* (twice). I took notes on all items related to crime and crime prevention. I later classified these news items into six categories. These are by number (excluding international news): (a) assault and robbery by youths, youth violence and gang-related crime: 110 items; (b) homicide and murder (of men): 83 items; (c) femicide, rape, domestic violence and the reform of Ley 779 (Ley Integral contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres, Integral Law against Violence against Women): 70 items; (d) institutions of crime prevention, including presentations of new crime-fighting plans, items focusing on chief of police Aminta Granera and official police commemorations: 65 items; (e) fraud, assault and robbery by non-youths and/or organised crime: 64 items; (f) drug-related crime: 62 items. As might be expected of *nota roja* news shows, violent crime and murder take the lead with a key focus on the perpetrator of concern: the young *pinta*. What called my attention to the dynamic between youth crime, the media and the police, however, was the number of items centring on the PN.

sense of security and insecurity. While they demonstrate that the police are ‘on top of the situation’, what appeared to make these items newsworthy was the reported randomness of the *pinta*’s (alleged) crimes and ubiquity of the alleged perpetrators. This socially and historically links the *pinta* suspect to groups of other (allegedly) delinquent male youths, such as *pandilleros*, although – as discussed earlier – there are fundamental differences in their position within the community fabric. What was being underlined was that the suspects were engaged primarily in violence against their *fellow* community residents, with such violence being deemed characteristic of the particularly immoral ‘nature’ of these overwhelmingly poor, young, male and drug-abusing detainees.

Presenting the Pinta

The term *pinta* literally derives from ‘painted’ and is generally used to mean ‘look’ (e.g. *tiene buena pinta* – ‘he looks good’; *tiene pinta de campesino* – ‘he has a peasant look’, etc.). Yet, on its own, the term is mostly used as a shortened version of *tiene pinta de delincuente* (‘he has a delinquent look’), and is essentially derogatory. Upon usage no further description needs to be provided as there exists a clear ‘*pinta* imaginary’.⁵⁵ This imaginary is composed of marginalised, urban, male youths sporting a particular style of worn-out and baggy clothing, sneakers or flip-flops, tattoos, unkempt or partially shaved hair and possibly partially depilated eyebrows.⁵⁶ The baggy clothes are commonly believed to conceal potential weapons such as knives, *puñales* (daggers), *chuzos* (shanks), machetes or small firearms that the *pinta* might use to assault passers-by. The *pinta*’s worn-out clothing places him visually among the poorest echelons of the *barrio* community. The haircut, depilated eyebrows or (small) tattoos reveal a certain uniqueness that is often focused on in close-up shots so that individual *pinta* detainees may be recognised on television. Often, they are also presented as slang speakers with little formal education. Their body language, on occasions filmed *before* running away from police, seems menacing, predatory or intimidating, and many of the *pinta* detainees presented in news items display a clear disdain toward other residents or authorities present during the event of filming, especially while the arrest is being made.

The ‘look’ of the *pinta*, then, encompasses not only the physical appearance of the youth but also his body *language*, which together imply that the youth – before anything has been proven – is potentially involved in (armed) robbery, assault, intimidation, drug use or drug dealing. He is typically cast as the type of

⁵⁵ The PN and reporters often use the depersonalising terms *sujetos* (‘subjects’) or *elementos* (‘elements’) on news items.

⁵⁶ See also ‘De pintas, chambrines y pichelas’.

youth that one would cross the street to avoid so as not to risk being mugged. As such, much like the Venezuelan *malandro* or Brazilian *bandido*, *pintas* seem to be 'officially marked as incurable delinquents'.⁵⁷ On the news, the *pinta*'s physical appearance and his body language serve as 'identifications'⁵⁸ for the fellow barrio resident, passer-by or news-watcher. These identifications evoke an imaginary of imminent danger. Certainly, the majority of crime reports shot in or around barrio communities routinely present the *pinta* 'suspect type' in a way that makes him almost interchangeable across different news items. The identifications that make of the suspects *pintas*, after all, remain the same. As such, the *pinta* imaginary becomes a type of filter imposed on any barrio youth visually fitting the profile. Compare, for example, the *Acción 10* news report at the beginning of this article with the following:

'The police have detained three subjects (*sujetos*) aged 20 and 18 years', the voice-over intones, as the camera shows them handcuffed and lined up outside the police station of Managua's 5th District. We see three youths with half-shaven hair, wearing baggy jeans and sneakers and with bare torsos (thereby showing their tattoos). The cameraman focuses on the faces of each of the detainees in turn, and zooms in on their tattoos; the youths face the camera but cast their eyes downwards. 'These youths have been reported to be the terror and scourge of barrio 18 de Mayo', the voice-over explains. The three, handcuffed and with downcast gaze, don't appear to be as

⁵⁷ On the *malandro* see Francisco Ferrándiz, 'Malandros, María Llonza, and Masculinity in a Venezuelan Shantytown', in Matthew C. Gutmann (ed.), *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 115–33, specifically pp. 116 (source of 'incurable delinquents' quotation) and 121. On the *bandido* Denyer Willis, *Killing Consensus*, pp. 74–9. It must be underlined that these imaginaries are specifically gendered: in Latin America violence has frequently been ascribed to the reproduction of machismo as an intricate part of the performance of masculine gender identities (see for example Matthew C. Gutmann, 'Trafficking in Men: The Anthropology of Masculinity', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (2007), pp. 385–409). Previously, I have argued that 'machismo has a discursive embodiment so strong that *machista* ideals of pride and shame considered archaic by the current generation have in fact been translated to contemporary street culture': Weegels, 'The Prisoner's Body: Violence, Desire and Masculinities in a Nicaraguan Prison Theater Group', in Georg Frerks, Annelou Ypeij and Reinhilde Sotiria König (eds.), *Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices* (London: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 151–73, here pp. 155–6.

⁵⁸ Ralph Cintron, *Angel's Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and the Rhetorics of the Everyday* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 1997), pp. x–xi. In his research Cintron noted that 'not only uses of language but also a wide range of artefacts and bodily gestures became consistently mobilised during the making of disputes' and interpreted 'the surfaces of public culture [...] as performances, as rhetorical gestures emerging from the desire to persuade others of the propriety of certain identifications and, implicitly, of the impropriety of other identifications'. The indisputability of certain identifications – such as identification of the *pinta* with crime, or the *pinta*'s being imagined as always carrying some kind of weapon – is repeated on the news to such an extent that certain youths become imagined as *pintas*: *pinta* identifications are inscribed on to particular youths' bodies and into the TV viewer's imaginary.

menacing as the voice-over would have us believe. However, a policeman, interviewed in his office, confirms the reporter's statement, noting that 'they fight almost daily, creating public scandals that fuel insecurity among the local population'. The voice-over then calls for reports against the three, who are shown once again so that possible 'victims of mugging or armed robbery can recognise their assailants', indicating that reports can be filed at the local police station.⁵⁹

In this item, two elements are clearly repeated. First, the *pinta* suspect is presented *handcuffed* to the television audience, reaffirming that he has been apprehended and that, by extension, the threat that he poses has been adequately defused by the police. Second, and more importantly, the *pinta* suspects are presented to have acted *against* their communities: in this item, they are referred to as the 'terror and scourge' (*terror y azote*) of the neighbourhood. Remember that in the introductory item the apprehended *pinta* suspect was blamed for the murder of a presumably innocent *neighbour* after a robbery-gone-wrong against one of his *neighbours*. News items involving *pinta* suspects constantly remind the viewer that their hostile actions are largely directed at their fellow barrio residents, which underlines that their detrimental presence merits community police intervention:

'In Chinandega two little boys were wounded with a machete and robbed *even* of their sandals', an indignant voice-over reports. The mother of the boys, whom we see in the background, argues that 'delinquency increases daily'. Struck by the fact that the attack occurred whilst the boys were walking home from school, she explains 'now I'm afraid even to send my boys to school because they might be hurt (*que [...] me los vayan a joder*)'. The voice-over mentions that in the neighbourhood where the armed robbery occurred 'people live in daily fear of these *delincuentes*', and concludes by sternly assuring the viewers that 'the *sujetos* have already been arrested'.⁶⁰

The news item presented at the beginning of this article also offers a good exemplification of the way that the *pinta*'s apprehension highlights his exclusion from the barrio community owing to violence directed at his fellow residents. After the mob manages to corner the *pinta* suspect, hitting him with a wooden stick, and the police intervene, the murder victim's son, Umberto, leads the mob to destroy the youth's home. Allegedly it functioned as an *expendio*. This is important, as we will see that an intimate relation is projected to exist between the *pinta*, his involvement with drugs and his exclusion. The news programme then interviews Umberto, who is accompanied by a friend, outside the police station. They do this *across* the street from the police station rather than in front of it, hence visually disassociating the two from the jail space where we usually see the *pinta* detainee. Umberto explains that

⁵⁹ *Acción 10*, 6 Sept. 2013.

⁶⁰ *Acción 10*, 8 Aug. 2013.

'We were just hanging out when they came out to rob us, and I said: "But you're from my barrio!" And it seems they couldn't care less about that (*les valió verga*), and *that's* how it started.' Umberto and his friend were well into their 30s and dressed in sports clothes, tattooed, with their hair shaved off, sporting French beards. Yet *their* appearance was not visually emphasised. There were, for instance, no close-ups of their physical attributes (such as tattoos).

While Umberto and his friend speak, scenes of the pursuit and detention of the arrestee and the destruction of his home are re-run thrice, thereby legitimising these retaliatory actions, rendering exemplary the mob's enforcement of 'community'. By arguing 'But you're from my barrio!', Umberto was clearly referring to a certain 'code' that the youths had broken: one is not supposed to attack one's *fellow* barrio residents. His remark can be understood as a reference to the time when barrio youths, similarly engaged in a variety of illegal activities, did *not* attack their fellow community residents. It seems to be this action of aggression – robbing him, rather than the tragic murder of his father in the following commotion – that rendered the youths' actions unintelligible to Umberto and his friends.⁶¹ It made the arrestee excludable from the barrio community on the basis of the well-rooted understanding of community by residents themselves in which defending one another from (imagined) outside threat is key. The previously discussed evolutionary trajectory of Nicaraguan gangs, in the light of community organisation for security provision, thus provides something of a precursor template to the way that *pinta* youths have now become an index of exclusion from the localised moral community.

Stigmatisation and Spectacular Disqualification

Cast as an outsider due to his hostile actions against his community and made recognisable through a particular repetitive visual description, the *pinta* breaks the moral order of his community and becomes a person 'of a *less desirable* kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak' – a stigmatised person.⁶² News items portraying the arrests of barrio youths institutionalise this stigmatising process: as he stands before us on the television screen, we see that the *pinta* detainee possesses attributes –

⁶¹ When the *pinta* detainees are asked about their involvement in the murder of Umberto's father at the end of the news item, one of them attempts to defend the group to the camera: 'We went out with only stones and machetes [...] they were the ones with the gun or rifle', and a younger detainee seconds this. But their version of events is discredited directly after their declarations: 'Either way', the voice-over concludes, 'they will be questioned in respect of their crimes'.

⁶² Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), p. 3.

age, clothing, haircut, the use of a particular slang, a particular body language – that ‘make[s] him different from others’.⁶³ Based on his ‘delinquent look’ the *pinta* is presumed to have committed hostile actions by inference. These aforementioned identifications, and their implicit nature, ‘reduce[s the detainee] in our minds from a whole and usual person to a *tainted, discounted* one’,⁶⁴ to a *pinta* – one that must be removed from community. Following the logic of preventive policing, such elements should be removed from the community *before* they commit the violent acts they are projected to be capable of committing. Day after day, one item after another is televised of *pinta*-looking youths in the backs of police pick-up trucks and in front of police station cells. On the news, this process of legitimised stigmatisation and removal is taken a step further: *as* an excluded person the *pinta* often has no voice in the news items that deal with ‘his crimes’. When his view on events *is* displayed, it is often done so only to be disqualified by either the news reporter or the police shortly after.

A poignant example of the disqualification of the *pinta*’s narrative can be seen in the *Acción 10* special report of 8 January 2011, during which 33-year-old Francisco is requested to provide his view on the police shooting of a group of ‘*delincuentes*’ just moments earlier, after the group had allegedly held various church members at gunpoint.⁶⁵ First, the shooting is presented with live recorded footage, showing the police chasing three of the five suspects on foot, and then shooting at them. In slow motion – and enhanced with music and special graphics – we see the scene repeated five times over, in order to highlight how two of the fleeing suspects were hit, one in the leg, and the other in his side. The latter, who died from his wound, is repeatedly shown face-down on the ground, shirtless, wearing baggy shorts and no shoes, blood pooling under him. The youth shot in the leg is interviewed by a reporter while he is still lying on the ground and claims to have had nothing to do with the hold-up. Then Francisco is interviewed. He identifies himself as a worried resident and *former* gang member. Visibly upset about the shooting, he argues on behalf of the *suspects* that ‘*we* are not animals, we are human beings’, and explains that the police ‘killed him *sin mediar palabra* (without warning)’.

Francisco’s plea to humanise the suspects, however, is directly discredited by the voice-over and turned against him. ‘The *reality* is different’, the audience is assured, and the news report goes on to show two photographs of the group of five youths who attacked the church, taken by one of their victims. It then

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; my emphasis.

⁶⁵ A video of this news item can be found on YouTube. It is, ironically, titled ‘La persecución – Una película de Managua, Nicaragua’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_ToKQO1s8E (an *Acción 10* news item published to YouTube on 8 Jan. 2011, last access on 17 Feb. 2018).

points out that Francisco's facial and arm tattoos, as well as his clothes, are very similar to those displayed by one of the young men in the picture, thereby visually designating him as 'one of them', that is to say a *pinta*, so as to discredit his narrative. The voice-over goes on to match the dead and injured youths' clothing with those of the youths in the pictures, thereby also identifying them as *pintas*, for whom 'there is no place' in the barrio community.

By framing the young man who was shot dead as a *pinta*, the above news item socially legitimises the police killing him. As viewers, we are confronted with the live imagery of police officers shooting at fleeing suspects from behind, killing one, and the police and news show jointly producing all of the evidence socially required to frame his death as inevitable. Close-ups of the hand-made weapon one of them supposedly tossed into the bushes and the testimony of a church-goer are deployed to underline the criminal intentions of the group, legitimising the death of one of its members. In this case, through the extraordinary, the dynamics of the ordinary, the routine, become discernible. Even though this news item is a crude example of the functioning of the *pinta* stigma (police killings of suspects do not occur all that often, much less on camera), we see that the same logics effectively render particular (allegedly) delinquent youths killable.

Defending the Moral Community

In this last section, I discuss a final aspect legitimising the *pinta*'s exclusion and one that is especially vilified: his relation to drugs.⁶⁶ In Nicaragua, drug abuse is considered particularly heinous as it supposedly 'pollutes the barrio community from within' and can lead to the most frighteningly immoral behaviour that is readily exploited in *nota roja* reporting. A typical example is the following *Crónica TN8* item:

'Messed-up kid wanted to kill his sister', the voice-over announces. A studio reporter continues, 'this evening a minor attempted to kill his sister and set the house on fire'. As we see images of the arrest, she continues, 'Family members say they can no longer bear the behaviour of their "Chucky" [psychopathic] child.' During the arrest the adolescent's mother explains that her son drinks and does drugs. As such, she argues, 'He's already an adult [...] he is rotten (*descompuesto*).'⁶⁷

The items that focus on the *pinta* detainee as a drug abuser have a strong exclusionary and moral rhetoric. The last item I discuss here is one that ties together all the aforementioned dynamics. It is ironically titled 'Arrested Barehanded

⁶⁶ Remember how the destruction of the home of the detained youth in the introductory news item was justified to the viewers by stating that it 'functioned as an *expedio*'.

⁶⁷ *Crónica TN8*, 1 April 2013.

for Running his Mouth'.⁶⁸ Again, it provides us with a series of tropes used to reinforce the spectacular (public and visual) removal of the *pinta* from the community by the police. In particular, it voices the police's anti-drug discourse, especially in the words used by the reporters to demonstrate the involvement of the young men and their actions.

A spectacular arrest is made by an officer of a youth who calls him out to fight after the police have arrested and placed his brother in a police car. Initially, a neighbouring woman had denounced the youth and called the police to the barrio. She explains that a 'drug-using youth' had thrown stones at her and threatened to burn her house down with her and her children in it. The most important event of the item, however, does not appear to be this denouncement, but the fact that one of the two young men (Edwin) is punched six times in the face by a police officer – an event that is shown three times. It occurs after Edwin challenged the officer:

We hear Edwin saying to someone inside, 'Don't stop him [the officer]', and then he calls out to the officer, who is standing by the patrol car that his brother was just put in, 'Come over here, son of a bitch (*métase hijuelamilputa*)! I don't give a shit about going to jail (*me vale turca caer preso*).' A lady from inside the house has apparently had enough of the situation and we hear her yelling at Edwin repeatedly: 'Fine, let them take you in!' The home's grille door is opened and Edwin comes out – shirtless, sporting baggy shorts and flip-flops, bandana pulled down to his eyes – ready to fight. The officer immediately jumps at him taking six good swings at his face, splitting Edwin's lip. Edwin stumbles to the ground, where four police officers pile up on him and struggle to handcuff him. On the ground, Edwin repeatedly tells the officer who took him down to 'look me in the eye, *hijueputa*'. Once the officers manage to handcuff him, they pick him up off the ground by his handcuffed arms and belt, and force him towards the police car. Edwin mumbles threats to the gathered onlookers and officers as they stuff him into the patrol car next to his brother. Inside the patrol car his brother hurls abuse at the onlookers as the police car drives off, specifically calling his neighbours '*peluches*' [gang slang for 'traitors'].

Throughout the item both the barrio and the police are portrayed as (literally) stronger than the arrested youths; they take a stand against 'crime' – personified by Edwin and his brother. After the arrest, however, it is explicitly suggested that it was the *drugs* that pushed these young men into violence (*estos jóvenes víctimas de la droga*). Apparently, drugs caused the state they were in during the initial violent act – the threatening of their neighbour's livelihood – and they were described by the victim as being 'under the effect of drugs' (*bajo los efectos de la droga*). Presented as being alienated from the community due to their

⁶⁸ A video of this news item too can be found on YouTube: 'Detenido a mano limpia por andar de rapidito': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trw52pXAk4c> (a *Crónica TN8* news item published to YouTube on 23 July 2012, last access on 17 Feb. 2018). I recommend watching this item as it provides visual clarification of my argument.

hostile actions resulting from drug abuse, the brothers are reported to cause a lot of trouble in the barrio. Hence, the voice-over emphasises that the youths are now being 'well looked after' locked up in the police station (*están bien guardados en las celdas del distrito seis*), and underlines that the barrio residents are *contentos* (satisfied) after the arrest. We see images of children cheering as the police car drives off and the voice-over assures us that the residents can now return to life 'in total tranquillity' (*una completa tranquilidad*) 'finally safe from victimisation by the Rat brothers, as they proudly called themselves in the delinquent world'.

Presenting the barrio community's 'normal' social order as tranquil, it is not surprising that the police's anti-drug discourse is explicitly stated in the above news item (especially as substance abuse is in fact quite 'normal' in the barrios). In a nutshell, this discourse holds that 'we [the police] will not rest until we eradicate and put behind bars *all* drug dealers who with their illicit activities *destroy our young people*'.⁶⁹ There are some interesting contradictions in this statement, however. Although there are overlaps between *pintas* and drug dealing, most of the former are consumers rather than dealers. This means that it could clearly be argued that *they* are the youths being destroyed by the drugs (as reported above by the voice-over: *estos jóvenes víctimas de la droga*). Preventing drugs from 'reaching the hands of the young' is however discursively tied in with preventing youth crime, and this means repressing the *pinta* himself as well. There is a clear circularity to the police's anti-drug plan, Plan Coraza Popular, which claims to focus on *preventing young people* from getting their hands on *drugs* in order to better *prevent young people* from falling into (youth) *crime*. As a result, however, while every young urban delinquent is a 'victim' of drugs, he is also a potential threat to citizen security as he may involve himself in (youth) *crime due to* his drug abuse. To this extent, although Plan Coraza promises to eradicate drug use, circulation and trafficking from the territory of Nicaragua, it is almost entirely geared at repressing young consumers – more so than suspected dealers – through organised crack-downs, raids and arrests, often indiscriminately arresting youths who happen to be 'in the wrong place at the wrong time'.⁷⁰

The current emphasis on youth prevention *through* drug prevention is strongly reminiscent of the 1999 Gang Prevention Plan. At that time youth

⁶⁹ *Acción 10*, 24 Jan. 2014. The officer speaking is the chief of police of San Juan del Sur.

⁷⁰ The latter causes frustration among residents, as many of these youths are argued to be innocent. A poignant example can be found on YouTube: 'Operativo policial en el Reparto Schick y Milagro de Dios' (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpOxZ_c4DjU (*Acción 10* news item uploaded on 9 Aug. 2011, last access 17 Feb. 2018)). Interestingly, we see the same dynamic of visual disqualification occurring even if the youths are innocent. While both the detainees and fellow residents argue their innocence, the cameras zoom in on those attributes that mark the former as potential delinquents.

crime prevention was equalled to gang prevention and, just like that previous plan, Plan Coraza ‘display[s] a paradoxical mix of highly tolerant rehabilitative rhetoric with a clear programme of repression’.⁷¹ In 1999, ‘Youth gangs were presented as a critical threat to Nicaraguan society that needed to be (literally) “removed”.’⁷² Today it is the drug-abusing *pinta* that is both literally and consistently removed from the barrios – spectacularly, for all the television audience to see, on a daily basis. Seen from this perspective, it can be argued that astonishingly little has changed on the discursive plain of youth ‘prevention’ in Nicaragua between the 1990s and today. Despite the inclusive rhetoric surrounding the communitarian policing model it is still the *same* (allegedly delinquent) male, urban youths who are targeted for removal from the barrio community. What has changed dramatically, however, appears to be the position of these young men within the community’s fabric. As explored above, *pandilleros* were once seen as the defenders of barrio community. Due to the directionality of the violence that the *pinta* uses, he is instead viewed as quite the opposite, leaving space for the police to project themselves as the barrio’s new moral entrepreneurs.

This mediated projection of the situation in the barrios is not perfect, however. At times the *pinta* detainees’ families or entire sections of barrios involve themselves *against* the apprehension of these youths to fight off the police. Though this is unusual, and mostly ignored on the news, the collective fighting-off of the police or resisting arrest can be understood as spectacular (counter-)performances of community too. These instances, however, are usually *not* televised as legitimate acts of resistance against (reactionary) police enforcement but rather are described by reporters as examples of ‘barrio frenzy’. For instance, when not all families or neighbours agree on the legitimacy of a raid during a televised rounding-up of various ‘delinquent elements’ in a single barrio, the news show will stretch the ‘common interest’ of the local community beyond that of the barrio to that of the district, the city, or even the country.⁷³ In general, the media will remain supportive of the police actions and, as such, the *pinta* stigma sticks – possibly contaminating the resisting family or even the entire barrio. After all, what is held to be at stake is the security of the Nicaraguan citizenry at large.

In a mutually legitimising, circular fashion, the different news shows thus disseminate the view of the police as the defenders of the barrio community, its new moral entrepreneurs. The blowing-up of the *pinta* stigma by over-

⁷¹ Rocha, ‘Mapping the Labyrinth’, p. 542.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ See for a clear example the Canal 2 news excerpt ‘Operativo contra delinquentes en Nicaragua’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVPuYxlapWk>, published to YouTube on 10 Aug. 2008, last access 15 Feb. 2018). Note that this item is from before the enactment of the communitarian policing model.

representing youth crime in the media can be seen then as a strategy that justifies repressive policing against particular suspected offenders under the guise of 'prevention' whilst simultaneously campaigning for 'community values'. As the police 'project a sense of insecurity [for intervention to be justified], yet, at the same time, also a sense that they have the security situation under control',⁷⁴ these news items serve to demonstrate that they are capable of placing the polluted body of the young urban delinquent *outside* of the barrio community. In this light, the *pinta*'s 'removal' from society – his apprehension and exclusion in front of the barrio audience – becomes a spectacular performance of the idealised notion of 'community'.

Conclusion

In this article I followed the premise that '[c]rime and deviance are culturally embedded both in the imagination and in material practices'.⁷⁵ In this vein I attempted to understand and analyse the mediated representation of both the Nicaraguan young urban delinquent (the *pinta*) and the communitarian policing model. By examining closely the representation of the most commonly presented detainee on Nicaragua's most popular news shows we can see in the rhetorical manipulation of particular spaces and bodies the exclusionary workings of power.⁷⁶ Essential to crime reporting involving this particular (alleged) perpetrator is that he appears to acquire newsworthiness through his presentation as both ubiquitous and volatile. He (unequivocally male) is presented as a threat to barrio community, a type of 'non-citizen' that must be 'proactively and preventively' acted upon to ensure the safety of the citizenry. His crimes are always reported to target both 'random' and 'innocent' fellow barrio residents or passers-by; the volatility of his 'outbursts' means that 'no one is safe'. The suspect's relationship to drugs and the directionality of the violence he uses appear sufficient to justify his removal. Yet while he is presented as a threat, he is also embedded in the barrio community by residence and kinship. Still, the newsworthiness of the *pinta* hinges not on him as an *individual*, or on the particular crimes an individual can commit, but on his presence as a *phenomenon*, and the crimes that this 'phenomenon' produces. In this way he is severed from the ties that bind him to the local community, and his removal is justified in the light of his de-personification.

The problem is that, while this is discursively effective, the spectacle of his removal does little if nothing in the way of addressing or solving any structural issues underlying street or youth crime. Instead, as the *pintas*' voices are omitted or disqualified, little to no space is left for the critical discussion of

⁷⁴ Rocha, 'Mapping the Labyrinth', p. 544.

⁷⁵ O'Neill and Seal, *Transgressive Imaginations*, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Guevara, *Performance, Theatre and Society*, p. 3.

these underlying issues. This is by no means unique to Nicaragua; all over the world we see examples of mediated stigmatisations justifying (violent) police intervention without addressing underlying problems.⁷⁷ Similarly, it has been pointed out that the discursive confluence of the logics behind ‘friendly’ and repressive policing strategies, lack of trust for the building of police–community relations, and varying degrees of implementation and state support are regional challenges facing community-oriented policing in Latin America.⁷⁸ What the mediated presentation of community policing in Nicaragua appears to serve to project, however, is not only a negative stereotype of (allegedly) delinquent youth, but the notion that the days of the *pandilla* as a barrio ordering social institution are over *due to* the emergence of the PN as defenders and enforcers of the community ideal. The intimate, mediated association of the *pinta* with police intervention presents us a spectacular performance of idealised barrio community every time that he is publicly, visually and physically removed from the community by this particular uniformed actor. What such a spectacle does not address, and perhaps even serves to hide, is the governing elite’s continued lack of structural action against the underlying issues surrounding juvenile delinquency and drug abuse in the barrios – including inequality, high unemployment and extreme poverty. The current alliance between the PN and the *nota roja* media instead perpetuates the othering of particular barrio youths, reinforcing the stereotyped imaginary through the recurrent spectacle of his removal.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo explora el significado que adquieren la delincuencia juvenil y la policía en el contexto de su representación mediática en los noticieros televisivos en Nicaragua. En particular, explora esta cuestión a través de la yuxtaposición entre el imaginario televisado de los delincuentes juveniles apresados con el tratamiento discursivo tanto de la policía como de los reporteros de los noticieros nicaragüenses más vistos, *Acción 10* y *Crónica TN8*. La policía es representada como protagonista heroico que sirve y protege al barrio a través de ‘la policía comunitaria’, mientras que el delincuente juvenil – el ‘*pinta*’ – es excluido y estigmatizado. Esto retrata a dichos jóvenes como socialmente desechables, forasteros ‘contaminados y descartados’, que pueden ser tratados como tales. De esta forma, a través de las noticias, el

⁷⁷ See for example Denyer Willis, *Killing Consensus*, or Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013). Cf. Dennis Rodgers, ‘Slum Wars of the 21st Century: Gangs, *Mano Dura* and the New Urban Geography of Conflict in Central America’, *Development and Change*, 40: 5 (2009), pp. 949–76.

⁷⁸ Ungar, ‘Policing Youth’; Ungar and Enrique Desmond Arias, ‘Reassessing Community-Oriented Policing in Latin America’, *Policing and Society*, 22: 1 (2012), pp. 1–13; Ungar and Leticia Salomón, ‘Community Policing in Honduras: Local Impacts of a National Programme’, *Policing and Society*, 22: 1 (2012), pp. 28–42; J. C. Ruiz Vásquez, ‘Community Police in Colombia: An Idle Process’, *Policing and Society*, 22: 1 (2012), pp. 43–56.

'*pinta*' está sujeto a ser 'excluído' del barrio y su arresto mediático se convierte en un 'performance espectacular' de la comunidad. Aparece una discrepancia, entonces, entre el discurso comunitario de la policía y su práctica reaccionaria.

Spanish keywords: media, delincuencia juvenil, policía, comunidad, exclusión, Nicaragua

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo explora os significados que adquirem o crime juvenil e o policiamento em sua representação mediada nos programas de notícia televisionados na Nicarágua. Em particular, explora esta questão através da justaposição do imaginário televisionado do delinquente juvenil apreendido com o tratamento discursivo desse indivíduo pela polícia e por repórteres nos programas de notícias mais populares da Nicarágua, o *Acción 10* e o *Crónica TNS*. A polícia é apresentada como os protagonistas heróicos que servem e protegem o '*barrio*' através de 'policiamento comunitário' enquanto o delinquente juvenil – o '*pinta*' – é excluído e estigmatizado. Isto representa tais jovens como socialmente descartáveis, intrusos 'manchados e desconsiderados' que podem ser tratados como tal. Desta maneira, através dos programas de notícias, os '*pintas*' estão sujeitos a serem 'excluídos' do '*barrio*' e suas prisões mediadas se tornam performances 'espetaculares' na comunidade. Surge então uma discrepância entre o discurso comunitário da polícia e sua prática reacionária.

Portuguese keywords: mídia, delinquência juvenil, polícia, comunidade, exclusão, Nicarágua