Pacify

The emergence, the transformation, and the decline of a gang in New York City

In the mid 1990's in New York City, the gang Los Ñetas, a.k.a. La Asociación, *began an internal transformation process by abandoning gang wars and stopping violence. In this article, I intend to address the Ñetas' transformation and explain why they call it "pacification". I want to suggest here that regarding transformation and desistance literature, there is a need to make sense of Ñetas' collective disengagement from violence and understand alternatively their political re-engagement. I show that the transformation of the Ñetas resulted from several processes: the renegotiation of the space of the city; the rediscovery of the history of La Asociación; and a shifting framework of emotional repertoires. I conclude this piece by referring to the broader context of New York City, and the ways that during this period, it was marked by zero tolerance policies that aimed to "pacify" its streets.*
[Gang Transformation, Desistance, Pacification, New York Crime Drop]

> BEBO: We started to meet with all of the other leaders of street organizations or gangs. The Latin Kings, Zulu Nation, La Familia... All of that was under Giuliani, who was already New York's dictator. Under his regime, that was when our organization was best structured and we were the most active on multiple problems: violence at school, racial tensions in prisons, turf wars in neighborhoods.

On March 2012, in one of our long conversations about his life, Bebo[1] remembers the time at the beginning of the 1990's when he was a leader of the Ñetas. Once one of the major gang of New York City, the Ñetas decided in the mid 1990's however to pacify i.e. stop all gang wars, abandonment violence and re-politicize. Members of the gang refer today to this key transformation as their "pacification process".

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[1] I have changed all the names and I remain deliberately vague about the places and persons described, for ethical reasons.

In order to make sense of Ñetas pacification narrative, this article aims to address Ñetas' transformation and eventually their decline. As Hazen and Rodgers (2014) argue, much of the academic research on gangs has been too focused on the question of definition and classification, without paying attention to the evolutionary nature of these groups. For these authors, to truly understand gang dynamics, it is necessary to understand how such groups emerge, evolve or even decline (see also Ayling 2012 and Hagedorn 2008, in Hazen & Rodgers 2014, 7).

Two bodies of literature on gang transformation are on debate. On the one hand, existing literature in gang transformation focuses on the evolution of the gang structure regarding both its inscription within urban territories and its role within economic trades —mainly, drug market—. It is thus a collective process that is described. On the other hand, literature on desistance centers its explanation of gang transformation on individual members leaving the gang. It is thus an individual process that is described.

However, both literatures fall short in explaining how a gang itself claims to have pacified. This article aims to describe and analyze this process.

Indeed, in this article, I want to suggest that regarding gang' literature, there is a need to make sense of Ñetas collective disengagement from violence and the transformation of the self. My aim is to propose an anthropological re-conceptualization of pacification as it allow to understand gang transformation in a more holistic way. My main argument is that the systemic transformation of the gang, as a collective, and the transformation of the self, or the individual, are linked. But first, to situate Ñetas pacification within the scope of gang studies, I describe these to the debates (gang transformation and desistance) in order to show how they do not allow a full understanding of the Ñetas' story.

The existing literature on gangs' transformation (Densley 2016, Decker and al. 2014, Ayling 2011) [2] focuses mostly on the capacity of gangs to change into more organized criminal groups, according to the specificities of their urban, political and economic environment they evolve (with the exception of Brotherton's & Barrios' 2004 work on the politization of the Latin Kings in New York). For instance, Ayling (2011) attempts to provide an evolutionary framework to gangs' transformation, taking account processes of variation, selection and replication. This approach shows that gangs' evolution doesn't operate in neat sequential patterns (see also Rodgers 2016), but sometimes simultaneously and according to different types of opportunities (income, networking, exercise of power). Other authors have debated the transformation of gangs related to a formalization of its structure and an intensification of its criminal activity in context of drug trafficking (Hagedorn 2001, Decker 2001, Venkatesh 2006, Venkatesh and Coughlin 2003). The overall literature on gang transformation tends, thus, to identify a transition toward a more violent and criminalistic organization. Competition surrounding the drug trade and the transformation of gangs into businesses would have led to an increase in the use of violence to settle conflicts between gangs (see Pyrooz et al. 2014, Carson & Vecchio 2015, Decker et al. 2014). Even when gangs shy away from violence, research tends to view the criminal activities as the purpose of gang transformation. For instance, Hagedorn's (2015) description of the attempt of Chicagoan gangs to create a Spanish mafia is explicit about the goal of the gang reduction of violence. Pacifying their relations to have better control of drug trafficking. However, as noted by Hazen and Rodgers (2014, 15), even if much of the literature on gang transformation seems to suggest an underlying presumption that gangs evolve in a linear way from unorganized

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[2] See also for some more classical account, Spergel & Curry 1990, Moore 1991, Maxon & Klein 1995, Hagedorn 1998 or Sullivan 2006.

street gangs toward hierarchical super gangs, there is little evidence to support this hypothesis. In that respect, *Los Ñetas'* seems to be an interesting case, since their transformation was partly directed to end violence and criminal activities. Moreover, as I will show in this paper, the approaches listed above say little about the logics of political engagement at the core of Ñetas' transformation.

In contrast with process of gang transformation, the process of desistance is seen as leading a positive impact on crime reduction (Pyrooz *and al.* 2010). As Decker, Pyrooz and Moule (2014) note, conventional wisdom holds that gang members have great difficulty leaving their gang. Recent studies, however, delved into more detail regarding the 'desistance' process, which, in criminology, corresponds to the abandonment of a path of delinquency or criminality (Bushaw *et al.* 2001, Decker and Lauritsen 2002, Decker *and al.* 2014, Pyrooz *and al.* 2010) [3]. Age, work, reinsertion within peer and family networks (Spergel 1995, Vigil 2013), or even dramatic violence (Decker & Lauritsen 2002) appear to be factors that explain desistance processes. Anthropological perspective, such as the work of Laurence Ralph (2014) have shown the importance of injury in the recomposition of gang narrative and a potential way-out of the gang. Several patterns have also been distinguished by the literature. Two prime examples are "knifing-off" (Pyrooz and al 2014, Maruna and Roy 2007), implying a sudden and complete process, and "drifting away" (Deker and Lauritsen 2002) described as more gradual departure. In their study among 260 former gang members in different U.S. cities, Decker and al (2014) propose a transition framework highlighting different steps (first doubts, weighing alternative roles, turning points, postexit certification), generally intertwined, accounting for the

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[3] For more classical towork addressing this issue, see: Whyte 1955, Sanchez-Jankowski 1991.

process of exiting from gangs. The literature also acknowledged the zig-zag reality of those desistance trajectories and the persistent gray area where gang member retain social ties with other gang members and risk reengaging with the gang (Decker *and al* 2014, Bushway *and al.* 2001). Bebo's in-and-out journey within the Ñetas confirm these analyses. In 2012, when Bebo recounted the Ñetas pacification, he was already a non-active member of *La Asociación*. Bebo started to distance himself from the Ñetas after spending almost ten years within the gang, due to, amongst other things, some internal conflicts, the birth of his second child and access to his new job. This process was nevertheless never clear, and he returned several times to occupy positions of higher responsibility within *La Asociación*. Even today, he keeps some links with active members.

To conduct their transformative process, Ñetas produced a narrative and a discourse around pacification that combines collective and individual engagement. Indeed, I believe that this pacification narrative is central to the Ñetas particular transformation. However, Ñetas discourse about themselves neither corresponds to classic ideas about gang transformation or desistance. Regarding the two preceding bodies of literature, I suggest here that there is a need to understand both collective and individual transformation. To do so, I propose an anthropological re-conceptualization of pacification logics.

Pacification is generally used to refer to a state practice, whether externally, as a colonial tool, or internally, against urban margins. Indeed, the expression emerged in colonial history — in Brazil, as early as the 16th century, as a strategy of controlling, invading and occupying "rebel indigenous" land (Pacheco de Oliveira 2016); in the European military language in the 19th century, where it referred to a strategy for controlling and managing colonies (Özcan & Rigakos 2014)— before reappearing in the contemporary military

discourses — as a way to counteract the urban insurrections in Iraq (Mitchell 2011)—. It is reintroduced today as a strategy applied in the marginal urban environment (Graham 2010, Neocleous & al. 2013,Rigakos 2016, Kienscherf 2016, Machado 2016, McMichael 2015), targeting the portion of the population qualified as undesirable. Pacification strategy, whether in the past or in our present urban margins, thus produces or reproduces radical otherness (Agier & Lamotte 2016). Even if the literature refers to Pacification as a state strategy, three elements can be extracted to shed some light on the Ñeta pacification. First, pacification can be described as a mechanism that controls and occupies a territory. For instance, in Brazil, pacification corresponds to a strategy for maintaining order and occupying the favelas by the police. Within urban contexts, pacification identifies, targets, and occupies the territories of the "other." As Susan Philips indicates (2012) , anti-gang strategy policies in the US, such as the one applied in New York within the Zero Tolerance policies, can be compared to Brazil's social cleansing directed against youth. As for the Ñetas, we will see that paradoxically, Pacification induces a different relation to the turf, the territory of the gang, that can be qualified as diffusion or dilution.

Secondly, pacification can be defined as a logic that creates social order. Indeed, Pacification should be understood as a process that is simultaneously destructive and productive (Rigakos 2011): destructive in the use of violence to suppress any resistance; and productive in the way pacification builds a new social order and changes or redeploys new forms of sociability. As I will show, if pacification was accompanied by internal dispute and eventually a split within the Ñetas, it also provides the group with a new form of collective belonging.

Finally, pacification logics provide new narrative for the collective subject but also new disciplinary mechanisms for the production of selves. These mechanisms produce social

categorizations and subjectifications according to which individuals become an "object/subject" (Foucault 1982; Balibar 2017). How do these situations also produce political subjects capable of a "revival of initiative" (Balandier 1970 [1955], 10) in cities characterized by violence and hostility toward individuals belonging to groups defined as "others" remains a question that I will discuss in the conclusion. Pacification has to be thought as a plurality of forms of violence. Indeed, peace is not the absence of violence. As I will show in this paper, if Ñetas stopped gang wars, this transformation entails a re-deployment and reconfiguration of violence within the gang.

This article is based on ethnographic research I started in 2011. In the fall of that year, I first met Bebo, through the Non-Profit in which he was employed at the time. My fieldwork with the Ñetas was facilitated by our friendship. If he did not participate in the daily activities of *La Asociación* when I met him, he had kept links with active members, to whom I was introduced and with whom I spent most of my time. In New York, I joined in the activities of members, including spiritual ceremonies to honour the death of Carlos *La Sombra*, the founder of *La Asociación*, private parties, meetings and public group activities including demonstrations against police violence and funeral gatherings on street corners where members had been killed. I also recorded several life stories and conducted formal and informal interviews[4]. As I began engaging with the Ñetas, members told me stories of how they pacified New York. Part of my work, along with describing their daily activity, was to understand their history, the meaning they attached to it, and the role it had in their contemporary experience.

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[4] I then went to Spain where I was introduced via reference letters from a handful of leaders of the New York Ñetas which opened doors to *La Asociación* in Europe. I spent two years there following the activities of several chapters and becoming one of its secretary. I briefly lived in the apartment of one of the local leaders and this allowed me to progressively integrate myself into the Barcelona Ñetas. From there I went to Guayaquil where I conducted brief fieldwork to contrast my data.

Therefore, in this article I discuss multiple factors that explain Ñetas' transformation process and could account for the pacification of the Ñetas. First, I describe how the group's territorial reorganization in New York resulted in an end to gang wars, but also in a crisis of meaning among the Ñetas. This crisis forced the group to look back on their history in the form of a collective biographical rewriting, allowing them to give new meaning to their commitment. Lastly, I describe how Ñeta transformations impacted a new practice of self-improvement.

1) The spatial and organizational transformation of the Ñetas

The history of the Ñetas, , alias *La Asociación*, started in the 1980s within the Puerto Rican prison system. According to what members recount, the founder of the group, Carlos "La Sombra", was a common law criminal who protected pro-independence political prisoners incarcerated at the same time as he was. Politically influenced by these prisoners, the Ñetas developed as an informal political prison organization whose goal was to fight against the conditions of incarceration and against other prison groups. In the early 1990s, *La Asociación* established itself in the New York prison system, before developing in the streets of New York and along the East Coast. At the time, the group consisted of several thousand members. It was during this period that *La Asociación* was categorized as a gang by the public authorities, the media, and by Ñetas members. However, during the mid-1990s, when Ñetas started becoming involved within the *United Family Coalition*, they were also initiating a radical internal transformation that Bebo referred to as "the pacification".

Bebo was around fifteen when the police in Puerto Rico arrested him. Following a fight, he was sent to a prison for minors. There he ran into Ñetas members for the first time, who told him about the movement and their rules. It was not until six years later however, when he returned to live in New York, that the Ñetas resurfaced in his life. His cousin, incarcerated at Rikers Island, was a member of *La Asociación* and persuaded him to open a Chapter, called "Chapter 74". At the time, in 1992, the Ñetas made a breakthrough on the streets of the city.

From 1995 however, the establishment of a *Junta Central*, an organizing nexus heading all Chapters in New York, profoundly impacted both the structure of community life and the internal ideological foundations of the Ñetas. The history of "Chapter 74" allows us to understand how, in New York, the centralization process played a role in a profound transformation of the group's relationship to the territory and to its identity.

The turf

Bebo opened his first Chapter in the Castle Hill neighborhood, on the far eastern side of the Bronx, in 1992. At the end of that year the group had around fifteen members. Bebo, then in his twenties, was the oldest, with the majority being between 16 and 18 years old. All of them lived in the neighborhood and meetings took place in the basement of Bebo's parents' house.

Multiple Chapters were created around the same time in the Bronx, so that by 1993, according to Bebo, the number of Chapters there had increased to 33, with between 500 and 700 members for the South Bronx alone. Scattered across the entire Bronx, the 33 Chapters gathered at the Bronx *Junta*, the organization that grouped together and headed

all of the Ñetas in the borough, and ensured the maintenance of contact between them. From 1990 to 1993, each Chapter was identified with a territory, whether this was a street corner, a subway station, a park, or even a neighborhood. The members lived in the zone of influence of the Chapter, which could extend across many blocks. The Chapter therefore 'held' a territory in which its members hung out with one another and organized their meetings.

"Chapter 74" was one of the Chapters furthest to the east in the South Bronx. It was encircled by large gangs. To the west, Zulu Nation controlled all of Bronx River Avenue from the Cross Bronx Highway up to Sound View Park. Further south, La Familia claimed the 'Castle Houses' projects bordering Wetchester Creek. Territory wars were frequent between 1990 and 1994. The majority of members were young, some still in secondary school, and disputes that broke out at school continued in the neighborhood, leading to clashes between rival gangs. Between 1990 and 1995, Zulu, la Familia, the Ñetas, and the Latin Kings had violent fights in parks, buildings' halls, or school yards. Moreover, conflicts could break out in prison and find their resolution in the street or vice versa.

The Ñetas, at this specific point in their history, could correspond to W.F. Whyte's (1955) definition: street corner gangs, set within a particular location, protecting their territory, their *turf*, against other gangs. Each Chapter was independent and members reported only to their president.

From the Chapter to the Junta Central

The second period in the development of *La Asociación* took place in the mid-1990s. The Bronx *Junta* used "Chapter 74" as an example for its good organization. Indeed, the Chapter maintained detailed reports of its meetings, the number of participants, and the state of its *fondo*, the collective funds supplied by monthly fees paid by members. Bebo was promoted to a hierarchical position within the Junta. In 1994, his Chapters decided to unite with a neighboring Chapter, Chapter "Soundview", to expand its territory. The new Chapter meeting place moved further west, where one of the members of the Chapter was a building manager. At the time, the Ñetas organized their meetings in a cellar and then in an empty apartment.

In 1994 a *Junta Central* was created, grouping together the *Juntas* of the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. Called Tri State, it headed the entirety of the two thousand Ñetas in New York. Each member of the South Bronx *Junta* was present at meetings; however, only a dozen members had a position on the *comitiva ejecutiva*, the leadership including, among others, a president, a chief of discipline, a treasurer, and a secretary. The latter were elected by the majority of New York Chapters.

Starting in 1994, the *Junta Central* came to progressively impose itself on the landscape of New York Chapters by becoming directly involved in their organization and daily life. Bebo was elected to a hierarchical position, and following the success of his union with the Soundview Chapter, he proposed to reorganize and restructure all Chapters in the Bronx by grouping together the smallest ones. Between 1994 and 1995, the thirty-three Chapters turned into twenty-six and then twenty-one; finally they were reduced to no more than thirteen. Some of the smallest were closed and their members redirected to

other Chapters. The unification of the Chapters allowed, *inter alia*, for the leadership of the *Junta Central* to consolidate its control over members and their activities.

Within the timeframe of three or four years, "Chapter 74" became one of the most important Chapters in the South Bronx, in terms of both influence and membership. At the time, members came from all parts of the Bronx, far beyond its territory of origin, and Chapters no longer had neighborhood-based territorial affiliation. They were not restricted to one or multiple blocks any more and their activities became delocalized. The aim was no longer to represent or defend a territory, given that the *Junta Central* increasingly required Chapters to stop taking their name from their neighborhood.

> BEBO: They took away our territorial IDs. Because of our enemies and the government, who could find out where we came from and where we lived. Then, regional Chapters ceased to exist. It was no longer a question of turf but rather of movement. That was truly a change in state of mind.

In this unification and restructuring process, the majority of South Bronx Chapters lost their territorial identification. The *turf* that they had to defend from invaders was no more, which led to a transformation in identity, foreshadowing the peace between the large gangs of New York City. This centralization represented a fundamental shift in the history of the Ñetas in New York. It allowed for the transition from a street corner-type structure to a more centralized and hierarchical one.

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From an urban point of view, the pacification process and logics carried by the Ñetas are different from the ones carried by Giuliani's Zero Tolerance policy. Indeed, if the police pacify the city in a dynamic of territorial occupation, the action of Ñetas is part of a logic of dissemination, or dilution of their presence in city. The state occupy the territory, while the Ñetas pass from controlling the turf to a form of de-territorialization.

2) Reorientation of the Struggle

> SPADE: In 1992-1993, I was approached by a guy named Camillo, an ex-Young Lord. As of that day, the transformation of street Ñetas into this political force in New York started.

For Spade, one of the other leaders of the Junta, being a Ñeta meant above all fighting against abuse in all of its forms. However, at the emergence of the Ñetas in the 1990s, this aim was not clearly established.

> BEBO: There were three reasons behind the formation of the Ñetas on the streets from prison. There was a group of people who organized for support, others who organized for need, and last of all, others who organized to commit crimes. There are even people who say that in East Harlem, the reason why the Ñetas formed was strictly related to drugs. To such an extent that there were people who sold heroin with Ñetas signs on the bag...

It is within the *Junta Central*, that Bebo met Spade and Splinter. Spade joined the Ñetas in 1990, in Bushwick, a neighborhood of Brooklyn. His Chapter was composed of Puerto

Ricans who, upon being released from prison, decided to re-form a group. All of them had been Ñetas in Puerto Rico before immigrating to New York. He was nineteen at the time, and worked at a neighborhood organization in Manhattan. The former Ñetas decided to educate him by telling him the story of *La Asociación* in detail. It was primarily owing to this transfer of knowledge that he would subsequently become one of the first presidents of the *Junta Central*.

At the beginning of the 1990s, at the age of eighteen, Splinter joined the Ñetas after running into a friend who had just been released from prison and who told him about *La Asociacións'* link with Puerto Rico. His Chapter brought together between one hundred and two hundred people, mainly former Ñetas from Puerto Rico who had just left prison. Splinter was one of the youngest to join the group. He quickly climbed up in the internal hierarchy until he was elected president of the Chapter, which in a few years would become one of the most important Chapters in Brooklyn.

   The influence of the Young Lords

Around 1993-1994, Spade was approached by Camillo and Ricardo, two former members of the Young Lords who participated in the Justice Committee (JC)[5], with which they organized marches against police brutality. Through the intermediary of Spade, Camillo and Ricardo were introduced at a meeting of the Bushwick Chapter, where they met Splinter. They told the Ñetas about their fight twenty years earlier, from 1969 to 1973: as members of the Young Lord Party, they organized free breakfasts, launched tuberculosis

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[5] The Justice Committee (JC) is a committee organized within the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights (NCPRR), an organization founded in 1981 composed of militants such as Ricardo and Camillo. The JC, which became an independent organization in 2005 (http://www.justicecommittee.org/#!jc-jobs/ciw3), primarily addresses police violence.

testing campaigns, handed out clothing, and taught Puerto Rican history classes in East Harlem and the South Bronx.

> SPLINTER: All of a sudden, Ricardo… I had to go to his office at least once or twice a week… and he made me read books on police responsibility, on the organization of social movements… it was like an education.

Through the intermediary of the two men, Spade and Splinter were introduced to social justice issues and the fight against police brutality. Starting in 1994, Spade was elected to the New York *Junta Central*, where he met Bebo. He pushed the Ñetas to get involved in the fight for social justice and to participate in annual marches against police brutality. The murder of Anthony Baez on December 22,1994 by police officer Francis Livoti gave the Ñetas their first opportunity to mobilize. Collaborating with the Latin Kings for the first time, they set up the security force for the Racial Justice Days, the protests organized by multiple New York associations against police violence.

Ricardo managed the feat of gathering at the same table, at the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights (NCPRR) for which he campaigned, the main 'street families'[6]: the Ñetas, Latin Kings, Zulu Nation, New Black Panthers and La Familia. This was the beginning of the *United Family Coalition* (UFC), where the leaders of the different families could resolve their conflicts together, but above all where they could seek ways of promoting the fight for social justice.

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[6] That is what Spade called them during our interview. See also Brotherton and Barrios (2004).

From that point on, the Ñetas underwent a radical transformation in their activity. As a result, they took action in schools, addressing the youngest Ñetas to decrease the violent conflicts that were starting. In Sunset Park, a neighborhood in Brooklyn where a Chapter had been formed at the beginning of the 1990s, the Ñetas were invited by high schools to get involved in after-school programs and ensure safety at school playground.

Pilgrimage and transmission

The involvement of *La Asociación* in movements against police brutality took place in parallel with the Ñetas' search for their political origins on the island of Puerto Rico. Ricardo and Camillo encouraged the Ñetas to make the link between the living conditions in poor neighborhoods and the political and racial history of Latinos, and more specifically Puerto Ricans, in New York. From then on, the Ñetas started to organize informal educational meetings in cellars, parks, and entrance halls, where they educated themselves regarding the political principles of the struggles of groups preceding them, such as the Young Lords: anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, socialism, direct democracy, and collective actions.

In "Chapter 74", Bebo initiated an attempt to rediscover the political fight of Carlos, the founder of *La Asociación*. With other Ñetas leaders, he organized multiple trips to Puerto Rico, which he called *pilgrimages*. The small group composed of the leaders of the *Junta* visited Carlos' grave, and in his former neighborhood, met with the people close to him and his lawyer. They attempted to reconstruct Carlos' past, asking questions of the people who had known him. Upon returning to New York, Bebo started to transcribe his research on Carlos' story so that he could circulate it to the other members. This 'return to the

essence' of the group, as the members call it, was accompanied by the writing of the narrative of Carlos' life and its dissemination to all Chapters, to serve as a curriculum for educational meetings. From then on, leaders insisted on education, and the transmission of this past. The educational dimension was present from the beginning of the establishment of the Ñetas in New York. It was "Chapter 74" that systematized the implication of president in the education of members. This consisted in teaching newcomers the history of Carlos as well as the colonial history of Puerto Rico.

This undertaking regarding their own history is related to the deterritorialization process that I describe above. This new relationship to the territory even transformed the *gang* identity of the group. Without a territory to defend, the possibility of wars between gangs was considerably – albeit not completely – reduced, and the resulting question of the very identity of the Ñetas arose. From that point on, the Ñetas had to redefine the reasons for their commitment and their group. Backed by its unification with two other Chapters, "Chapter 74" became, according to Bebo, a platform for informal education and "education of consciousness".

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As this process of politicization shows, pacification logics imply a productive side in the way it builds a new social order and changes or redeploys new forms of sociability. Pacification provided the group with a new form of collective belonging, based on a new narrative for the identity of the gang, its history and its community.

3) Self control and self improvement

In 1995 while protesting against police brutality in the Bronx, before a huge audience and the police nearby, Splinter took up the microphone that Ricardo was holding out to him and declared:

> 'They [police] come into our neighborhoods and abuse us… the time will come when we will turn our weapons against them".

This was his first public appearance at one of the protests against police brutality in the mid-1990s where the Ñetas had been invited by Ricardo and Camillo. In front of the protesters and the police officers posted around them, Splinter launched into a direct denunciation of police violence in poor neighborhoods. Against the background of the heated audience's applause, Splinter put down the microphone, left the stage and joined Ricardo who was waiting for him, clearly upset. Until today, Splinter recalls Ricardo reaction: 'When you come to do stupid stuff like that, you have to tell us…'. Splinter had not fully understood his obligation vis-à-vis the new public image the Ñetas was becoming. 'Through that,' he says, 'I learned. I became more studious. I studied before acting, and I got better'. The public career of Splinter and the Ñetas was just starting at the time. However, before becoming a political force, the Ñetas had to undergo radical change.

A *Political anger?*

While the transformation of *La Asociación* in 1994-1995 took place through a process of territorial reorganization and the re-centring of their identity around political principles and collective actions, it also involved an accrued control of its members' expressions. The transition from a "gang" into a "political force", as Spade puts it, unfolded through the re-definition of what could be publicly expressed (at protests, committees, or reunions). During our meetings, Splinter discussed this transition at length, as well as the means that he used to encourage young members to change. According to another leader, Spade, the group was capable of linking the teachings of Carlos' life with the experiences of police and prison violence on Puerto Ricans in New York. The effort came from the leaders, who were able to re-politicize the denunciation of abuse to turn it into a vector for the denunciation of the oppressive present day system.

> SPADE: Members, for the most part, had a basic understanding of what *La Asociación* was in terms of the prison system: against abuse and against corrections officers who abuse you, against the government. So... we stepped into a middle ground: being angry at Giuliani, being angry at the current government, at the past governments who had carried out experiments on our people, who had killed our people...

According to Spade and Splinter, for *La Asociación* to become a political force or a social movement, its leaders had to make an effort to channel and transform members. They therefore attempted to transform individual and self-destructive anger into political anger against a coercive system such as Giuliani's zero tolerance and against the abuses of the prison administration. According to Splinter, Ricardo and Camillo were central figures in channeling this anger. By undertaking the political education of the leaders, they gave them the means to turn the Ñetas into a political force. With their past as activists in

19

the Young Lord Party, the two men knew what could be presented publicly. It was Ricardo who provided the leaders of *La Asociación* with a repertoire of action and a specific *emotional repertoire*[7] to which the Ñetas were not accustomed. An emotional norm was progressively defined, and the 'good Ñeta warrior' was identified as being he/she who knew how to control himself/herself and act with wisdom. Until today, the Chapter's president can intervene with regard to a member, asking him to be 'wiser' and to control himself during public protests. Members who are unable to do so are sidelined at public meetings, or even completely ostracized by the group due to this misbehavior judged to be too childish or harmful to the group. In some cases, anger nevertheless remains an adequate emotional response. Depending on the situation, it could either be justified or, on the contrary, condemned. The expression of anger during conflicts between Ñetas and other rival gangs or against abuse is valued as the sign of a 'valiant warrior'. Members are encouraged to take part in conversations and demonstrate what they were passionate about. To be a 'true warrior' was, and is still today, to be revolted by situations of abuse and power, and to oppose them.

Transformation and personal investment

However, this transformation involved deeper personal investment than just the expression of the right emotion in the right moment. From then on, presidents asked members to 'work on themselves', a task undertaken at the educational meetings that

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[7] My use of the term *emotional repertoire* is based on the concept of repertoire of action used by Tilly, which accounts for the fact that a group proceeds to selection within set of forms of action or expression accessible (see, Mathieu 2004). Here, emotional repertoire is used to describe the shaping of what constitutes morally acceptable affects.

they held at Chapters, and which favored the internalization of this new way of being and of controlling one's emotions.

This investment in themselves, which created the conditions of emotional control, is facilitated by the process of *convivencia*, the initiation that takes place over several months. To become a member, future members must be familiar with the history of *La Asociación* and Carlos. The figure of Carlos is the benchmark in terms of a model life, but it is above all his ability to change that is emphasized in the narrative on his life. The story goes that Carlos participated in multiple prison revolts, and that he became a major political leader, although he was only a common-law prisoner. The passage through prison is perceived not as the end of a life path but rather a potential renewal, like a transformative opening. Just as Carlos had transformed himself, transcending both his condition as a prisoner and his social condition, members have to undergo a self-betterment process and a personal transformation. In this sense, the interpretation of Carlos's story has a double effect: an in-depth knowledge of the life of Carlos; and knowledge of oneself enabling one to change.

The transformation of the Ñetas thus took place, not only through a territorial, identity and political reorganization, but also through the implementation of a policy of self-improvement. This transition into a political force was more than an abstract process of internalization; it also involved the shaping of appropriate (and reasonable) affects and education regarding the distribution of *justified* emotions. Yet this transformation did not take place without internal conflicts and resistance. Certain Chapters did not support the direction of the group, fearing that public spotlight from protest participation would harm the drug trade. Chapters from Queens in particular, under the direction of *La Madrina*,

refused to unite with those from Brooklyn and the Bronx. The Ñetas with whom I engaged in New York explained to me that *La Madrina* wanted to continue to sell drugs and weapons, whereas the Chapters from the Bronx and Brooklyn were trying to prohibit these practices. As a result, she, and the Chapters following her lead, were excluded. It is nevertheless very possible that this split was due to an internal fight for the monopolization of power, at a time of the creation of the *Junta Central*—whose powers would extend across all Chapters—. *La Madrina* was also one of the few influential women in New York, which, in many respects, could have created animosity.

In proposing a transformative narrative linked to Carlos story, Ñetas developed a founding story that reshaped the identity of the group at the time they decide to pacified their actions. This new narrative was used to determinate who would be a Ñeta and helped exclude *La Madrina* from *La Asociación*. Thereby, this discourse on pacification was a performative discourse that allowed the group to exist, yet it was also imposed internally, during the split in which dissident groups were described as gangsters. It was therefore a dominant narrative that nullified the power relations which had spawned the *Junta*, all the while legitimizing the central position of the new leaders. Moreover, pacification allowed for the leader to have more control over the members' lives.

<div align="center">*</div>

Bourgois (2012) reveals that biopolitical governmentality produces a form of self-control and self-discipline among the recipients of this violence through a subjectification process. Self improvement that started with the pacification of the gang is a form of subjection and reflexive control, carried out 'by the self on the self', in which members monitor one another and punish one another in all spheres of life —including that of emotions (Agier 2012, Potte-Bonneville 2010). In this specific case, tension was created

between the logic of working on oneself, and a very hierarchical organization that controls and punishes deviations. This self-control, therefore, involves a form of tension. It is both the process of taking possession of one's own means —whether individually or collectively— and of the control or even suffocation of political means.

A parallel can be made between the self-improvement discourse of the Ñetas and the religious discourse of rehabilitation or redemption some ex-gang members display. As Flores (2016) explains, a growing literature has begun to examine how religion facilitates exit from gang life (Brenneman 2011, Flores 2013). Following on O'Neil (2015) work on evangelical conversion of gang members in Guatemala, it can be argued that pacification logics display a social imaginary similar to Christianity in the way it articulates change. In this sense, pacification is a new mode of governance implying a self-improvement practice and personal investment close to a form of conversion described by O'Neil as Christianity piety. This is all the more relevant in the case of Bebo, Spade or Splinter, as they tend to convert members and to diffuse the discourse of pacification in the name of Carlos.

Conclusion: The Case for the Pacification of New York City

The transformation of the Ñetas resulted from the renegotiation of the space of the city, the taking into consideration of new political issues, as well as the new self-improvement standards demanded of the members. This transformation led to the pacification of the Ñetas, which in the 1990s was one of the largest gangs in New York, along with the Latin Kings and La Familia.

To understand Ñetas pacification, I argued that it is necessary to take into account both the evolution of the collective structure and the individual trajectories. These evolutions are linked by the narrative on pacification that the Ñetas produced. My argument in this article is that pacification cannot be reduced to a police mechanism and its potential militarization. There is a need to break free from a conception of social control and the maintaining of order that is solely linked to the state, and embodied by its police intermediaries. Some work has already looked at the way gangs or criminal groups are part of such pacification process. In the context of Brazilian prison gang, Graham Denyer Willis (2016), Karina Biondi (2016) or Feltran (2010) established a correlation between the reduction in crime in the Brazilian city and the organization of the Primeiro Comando da Capita. But in each of these cases, pacification is made by a violent group against other groups. In Ñeta context, it is the gang itself that transformed and "pacified" itself.

According to Bebo, Ñetas pacification led to the ending of territorial wars between gangs in the city, the reducing of violence in schools, and the decreasing of gangs' tensions at Rikers Island prison. For him, and for the Ñetas more generally, their transformation played a role in the more general pacification of New York City.

It is all the more paradoxical that the causes of New York's pacification in the 1990's remain a debate.

Indeed, there is little disagreement concerning the fact that crime dropped drastically in New York City in the 1990's. As Karmen (2000) notes, in 1990 2,245 criminal homicides were recorded, whereas only 633 were recorded in 1998. However, reasons for such a phenomena remain unclear and are subject to an intense academic debate. Several answers have been put forth to resolve the "New York's Crime Drop Puzzle" (Rosenberg and al. 2014). Media and public officials have assigned credit to policing work

implemented at the beginning of the 1990s, which is largely debated among the academic literature (Eck and Maguire 2000, Zimring 2013). Guiliani's two terms in office appeared to end with a drastic reduction in crime and the pacification of New York City. But, it is not clear however whether the zero tolerance policy was at the origin of the drop of violence in New York. In fact, the reduction in the number of crimes had already been perceptible under the government of Giuliani's predecessor, David Dinkins. Furthermore, Eterno and Silverman (2012) point out that the statistics provided by the NYPD regarding the reduction in crime in New York must be deconstructed, if not challenged. A subject of fascination, this reduction remains partly mysterious (Maillard 2013), which does not help to dissipate the idea that the NYPD was the only actor of the pacification of the city. To nuance this "success story" other explanations have been proposed to account for the crime drop. Authors have argued that the stabilization of crack market during the 1990s explained a decrease in street violence (Bowling 1999, Joanes 2000, Levitt 2004, Blumstein and Wallman 2006). Crime drop has also been attributed to shifting economic conditions. This explanation suggests that increased employment opportunities and overall economic well being of the community reduces participation in illegal markets and potential criminal activity (Becker 1968, Raphael & Winter-Ebmer 2001, Rosenfeld 2009, Levitt 2004). Changing demographics, through immigration for instance, has been put forth as an explanation for the decline of violence (Sampson 2008, Stowell and al. 2009, Ousey and Kubrin 2010, Wadsworth 2010). As Sampson and al. (2005) assert, recent immigrants to the US are less likely to be involved in crime than natives and an increase of the population through immigration should then have an effect on the crime rate.

Within this debate, Ñetas' claim about their role in the drop of violence, seems counter-intuitive. It is beyond the scope of this article to bolster Ñetas' claims. What the notion of pacification allows us to see is the multiplicity of orders that compose urban order. When

speaking of the logic of pacification, there is a need to realize that actions are undertaken by various actors (police, municipalities, schools, churches or community organizations, or gangs, for example) who, while their projects differ, nonetheless participate in creating order out of marginal urban spaces. Pacification processes can thus be studied as diffuse *mechanisms*, made up of various actors, institutions, discourses, and practices that are both public and private (involving the police, the judiciary, as well as management and social control), which do not always cohere around a single project. The challenge is then to think of pacification as a "continuum" (McMichael 2015).

But, Ñetas' claim shed some light on one of the outcomes of the Ñetas transformation, i.e. their decline. As Evens and Handelman write, "practice is primarily in the saying" (2006: 7), this pacification narrative needs to be understood within its individual and collective context of elocution. As Bebo, Spade or even Splinter left the Ñetas, they engaged within the community organization sectors, more precisely in "stopping violence" type of programs. They thus had to redefine a new biographical identity, coherent with their new employment, but re-articulating their past as gang members. This narrative is part of the post exit validation phase of disengagement (Decker and al. 2014), where ex-gang members find validation into their new role. In this case, this validation is made through constructing a continuity of work toward drop of violence.

Nevertheless, this pacification narrative is also particularly important to apprehend the collective today. Coherent with their practice of self-improvement and introspection to create a better self, the pacification narrative aims to develop a new collective subject (Agier 2012). One can witness an effective change in the discourse between today and the street corner days. This is what we see when the Ñetas stopped describing themselves as 'gang banging' and used 'gang organizing'. Today, Ñetas claim about pacifying the streets

of New York is used as a biographical tool, a sort of re-writing of their collective history according to their present situation, while they are in decline. After filling the application documents for their incorporation process as a non-profit organization in New York, the remaining Ñetas members seemed to have vanished from the New York street scene. When I came back in 2018 to speak with Bebo, he insisted again on the "discipline of betterment". This reminded me of what Splinter had said a couple of years ago about Ñetas rules:

> SPLINTER: You live it, in every way… helping out, and in your work… As long as you can carry that living and apply in every day life, then you are a Ñeta from the heart, "de Corazon".

For Spade and Bebo, and most of the inactive members I have met, being a Ñeta is now an individual sense of belonging, equally linked to a collective history as it is to self-discipline. If it was part of a radical collective transformation, aiming at stopping gangs wars, imposing order and pacifying the soul, one can't help but ask if this process of self-improvement also paradoxically accompanies the decline of the Ñetas.

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Abstract:

In the mid 1990's in New York City, the gang Los Ñetas, a.k.a. La Asociación, *began an internal transformation process by abandoning gang wars and stopping violence. In this article, I intend to address the Ñetas' transformation and explain why they call it "pacification". I want to suggest here that regarding transformation and desistance literature, there is a need to make sense of Ñetas' collective disengagement from violence and understand alternatively their political re-engagement. I show that the transformation of the Ñetas resulted from several processes: the renegotiation of the space of the city; the rediscovery of the history of La Asociación; and a shifting framework of emotional repertoires. I conclude this piece by referring to the broader context of New York City, and*

the ways that during this period, it was marked by zero tolerance policies that aimed to "pacify" its streets.

[Gang Transformation, Desistance, Pacification, New York Crime Drop]