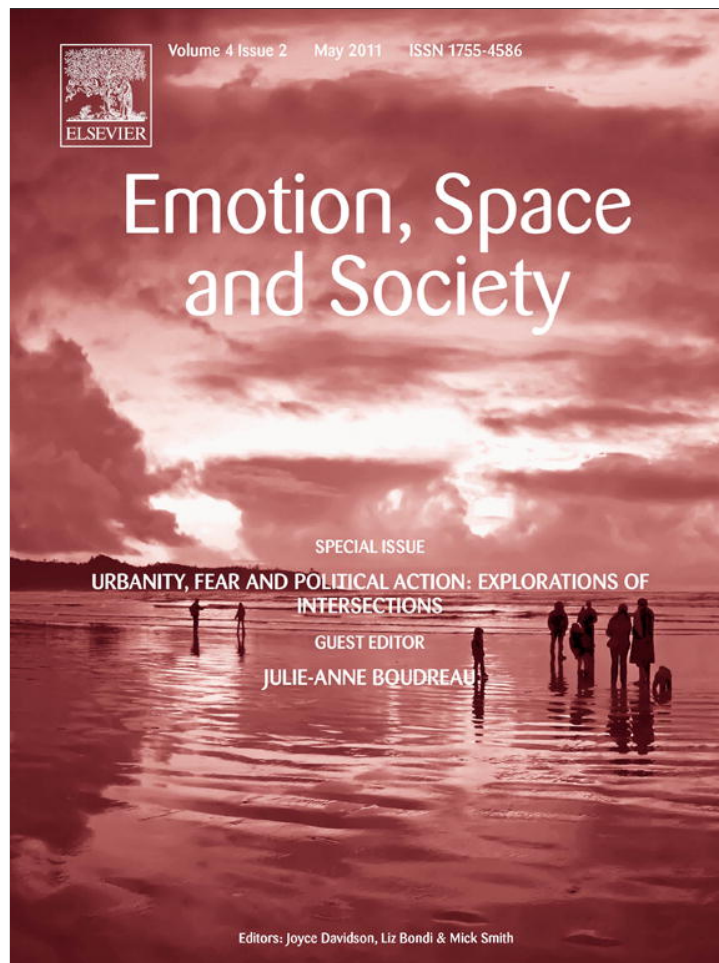


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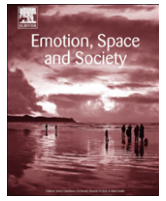
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## Asphalt bandits: Fear, insecurity, and uncertainty in the Latin American city

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the *malandro*, the bandit of Venezuela's poor neighborhoods, as a paradoxical and hybrid figure of the urban Caribbean, a virtuoso actor of the cultures of *emergency* and *Asphalt*. Threatened by global uncertainty, postcolonial Creole cities turn to black Saints from Africa, as well as to creole gangsters from the barrio's backstreets. *Malandros* are delinquent yet consummate actors of the urban scene. At the turn of the twenty-first century, *malandros* have been thrown out of the margins to the center of society, becoming simultaneously heroes and enemies of the people. *Malandros* are crafty, but their lives are violent and they die young. Yet, they embody the shape of things to come. If the barrio reflects the violence of postcolonial urbanization, the violence of the *malandro* reflects, in an inverted image, injustice in a globalized world. These injustices are what we ought to think through and destroy.

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## R É S U M É

Dans cet article, on cherchera à montrer que le *malandro*, bandit des quartiers populaires du Venezuela, est aussi une figure hybride et paradoxale des Caraïbes urbaines, acteur virtuose de la *culture d'urgence* et de *l'asphalte*. Menacées par l'incertitude globale, les villes créoles post-coloniales remettent leur destin aux Saints noirs venus d'Afrique et aux gangsters métis venus des ruelles du quartier, les *malandros*, délinquants mais acteurs de génie de la scène urbaine mondialisée. À la fois héros et ennemi du peuple, le *malandro* s'est retrouvé, au tournant du siècle, au cœur de la société et non plus dans la marge. Le *malandro* est un malin, mais sa vie est violente cependant et il meurt bien avant l'âge. Il porte pourtant « l'avenir de l'homme ». Car si le barrio reflète la violence de l'urbanisation post-coloniale, la violence du *malandro* reflète, en un motif inversé par son insoumission, toute l'injustice du monde globalisé. C'est celle-ci qu'il nous appartient de penser et de détruire.

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## 1. Fear of the bandit as urban feeling

For over 3000 years the city has been the target of fantasies, obsessions, and projections of all kinds. When looking at cities, neither the sociologist nor the geographer can evade the contradictory feeling at the foundation of their inquiry: the city is both seduction and fear. In fact the city seduces *because* it inspires fear. When specialists of urban space look at the question of fear in cities, or more precisely at the creation of an *urbanism of fear* (Pattaroni and Pedrazzini, 2010), they feel compelled to embody their thought in a familiar "figure," a political character (Jasper, *in press*: 31). This avatar of the city might be a place, a person or a character that roots ideas about cities and the story of city people. In this paper our figure,

both friendly and menacing, is the *malandro*, the (male) bandit of Venezuela's tropical asphalt. Looking at him,<sup>1</sup> we shall be able to reflect upon the new global urbanism, upon an urban discourse that transforms our urban fears into urban form, into an urban space of fear that is at times bluntly understandable, and ambivalent at others. This shall be our main purpose: the discursive production of urban fear and insecurity, and the *malandro's* role in envisioning an alternative brand of urbanity.

On a global scale, albeit with a variety of local meanings, an urban culture of fear has established a figure of "evil": the gang. Although this symbol has been haunting the North American imagination for nearly a century – from the Mafia-style gang of the 1920s and 1930s (Thrasher, 1927; Wirth, 1928; Wythe, 1943) to the

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ghetto gang of the 1990s (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Wacquant, 1992a) – it has nowadays found an “alter-modern” meaning that we may call the “tropical gang,” as seen in a few recent movies.<sup>2</sup>

The “gang” is, in our view, a gathering of teenagers and young adults that acts as a community, a support group mainly for the economic welfare, and also for the socialization of its members, for the economic exploitation of the scarce resources of disadvantaged neighborhoods, and for the protection of its members from mainstream institutions – mostly penal institutions, and also, to an extent, from family, low-end work, and church. But the gang is also an icon, a myth of urban life. Understood thus, the gang is as much a reality of our fragmented urban spaces as an emblematic figure of urban modernity, of urban fears of crime, the underclass, or inassimilable minorities. The gang embodies perceptions of the city through the prism of fear. Think for instance of the ascription of the male gender to gang members. The widely held view that (nearly all) gang members are male is more a manifestation of imagined meanings of gender, youth, community and family, meanings that are heaped upon poor, young, urban minority members. A youth gang with an all-female leadership would elicit a different reaction. Gangs are more readily *imaginable* as gatherings of predatory, unattached, disaffected young *males*.

In our understanding of modernity, we provisionally take for granted that Western modernity, as defined in Europe and North America, is but one of many shapes of modernity – if a powerful one. In the social margins of the North and West, and in the South, local means of cultural resistance have been put into place. We also postulate that these cultural expressions have not grown outside of this modernity, but rather inside of it, so that they now stand as *alternate modernities*. Therefore we affirm that the gang partakes in these *alter-modernities* that have earned some attention lately,<sup>3</sup> and that gangs have a lot to teach us about the urban aspects of alternate modernisms.

This constellation of modernities might be labeled postmodern, but we choose to stick with “modern” – with *late modern*. Not only because Western modernity has shown its limitations (if only economically), but also because “post-modernity” is riddled with lacunae of its own, particularly in the social and cultural realms. It seems that modernity has not yet run its full course (Soja, 2000). Two conclusions arise from these caveats: the gang is a prominent figure of urban modernity; in Latin America, it is a figure of alter-modernity.

Our definition of representation includes *feelings*, understood as perceptions leading to subjective understandings. On the negative side, feelings of insecurity are based, in theory, on sensations such as fear, stress, the feeling of being threatened. Such feelings can also be associated with positive emotions, when insecurity induces the satisfaction of “living on the edge.” This emotion is craved by many bandits, who invoke it to put a silver lining on their dangerous existences.

Similarly, feelings of insecurity split the gang member into a double figure, good and evil: *malandros* are “bad guys,” authors of evil deeds. They also are do-gooders at the community level, *barrio* heroes – the *barrio* being understood as the self-built popular neighborhoods of Latin American cities. Precisely, this paper will proceed from a case study of the *malandro*, the bandit of Venezuela’s poor quarters, as one such double figure: a threat to public security and a *barrio* hero, mythified into a *Santeria* “Saint” with

many followers.<sup>4</sup> As with other case studies, context gives meaning to character: postcolonial Creole cities, threatened by globalized uncertainty, driven by an urgency that rhythms daily practices and transforms daily routine into street fighting, have entrusted their fate to black saints from Africa, traditional African deities merged with Catholic saints. And, when necessary, to creole gangsters from the alleyways – *malandros* – that, even though they are local actors of a local “scene” – that is, Venezuela’s cities – will be evoked here as producers of alternate modernity in the new globalized city.

Venezuela is famous for its near-inexhaustible oil reserves and for its President. Less known is the fact that this country may be one of the most urbanized; estimates vary, but the rate of urbanization of its population hovers between 85 and 90%. Caracas, the capital city that was a beacon of opulence from the 1940s to the 1980s, has become a fragmented metropolis where two thirds of the population live in “barrios,” poor, self-built neighborhoods, situated on hillsides overlooking the planned landscape of freeways and wealthier quarters. Caracas now stands as yet another archetypal figure of urban chaos. Much of its present-day fame stems from its “insecurity”: at around 200 murders per 100,000 residents in 2009, its homicide rate contrasts even with Bogota’s 23 and Sao Paulo’s 14 (in 2007, much less than Baltimore’s 44 or Washington DC’s 36).<sup>5</sup> Caracas now vies for the unenviable title of the Americas’ most dangerous city, alongside Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad Juarez, or El Salvador’s Soyapango. According to sociologist Roberto Briceño León, Venezuela saw 19,000 violent deaths in 2009.<sup>6</sup> While this grievous situation stems from persistent poverty, Venezuelan public opinion has traditionally blamed it on *malandros*, the *barrios*’ petty criminals, and to their inordinate craving for firearms. While this view is not entirely inaccurate, it tends to disempower *malandros*, to disregard their vast capabilities.

Consequently, we choose the *malandro* as our avatar of urbanity precisely because he conveys the double meaning of urban fear. The *malandro*, as a hybrid and paradoxical figure of the urban Caribbean, is a virtuoso in a culture of emergency and asphalt.<sup>7</sup> His split persona, his paradoxical figure as both a folk hero and “folk devil,” warrants a dual look at urbanity, as both “good” and “evil,” as both seducing and threatening.

As our understanding of late modern cities seems to unravel, one of the few analytical processes remaining is the analysis of emotions arising from the use of given urban spaces, and from the encounter of given urban characters – or merely their ghosts, haunting the scene long after they left.<sup>8</sup> Hero and public enemy, the *malandro* found himself, at the turn of the twenty-first century, thrown from the margins onto center stage. His *barrio* reflects the violence of post-colonial urbanization; *malandro* violence reflects, in reverse, the injustice of the global order. The *malandro* blurs the binary vision that we have of the city, of its poor neighborhoods and their residents; the *malandro* also blurs representations of late modern cities. We believe that this blur enables us to rethink the city, not merely because it is a departure from a previous state of

<sup>4</sup> In Venezuela, in a *Santeria* tradition similar to the Cuban *Orishas*, *malandros* are entitled to their “court” (*corte malandra*), a kind of dedicated, special section (Ferrándiz Martín, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Simon Romero, “Venezuela, More Deadly Than Iraq, Wonders Why,” *New York Times*, 22 August 2010; “High Crime Rates Make Venezuela One of the Most Violent Countries,” *El Universal*, 27 August 2010 ([www.eluniversal.com](http://www.eluniversal.com), retrieved September 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Data from Venezuela’s Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, chaired by Professor Briceño León, even surpass the United States, with a population ten times smaller!

<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, we have called *culture of emergency* the fast-paced urban culture of the Latin American metropolis (Pedrazzini and Sanchez, 1998), a concept which led us later to *Asphalt culture*.

<sup>8</sup> On ghosts in the city, see Steve Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, space, and the Phantasmagorias of city life* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For instance *Cidade de Deus* (released 2002), directed by F. Meirelles and K. Lund; *Tropas de elite* (2007), by J. Padilha, in Brazil; *La vida loca* (2009), directed by Christian Poveda (then murdered by the gang he filmed), in Salvador; and *Sin nombre* (2009), by Cary Fukunaga, in Central America and Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> Alter-modernity was the theme of the 2009 triennial exhibition at the Tate Gallery.

clarity, but because *chaos is the urban condition* (see Boudreau and de Alba in this issue). Much like the *barrio*, the *malandro* is a vernacular urban form, in the sense that his mores, his role, his ethos stem from a local cultural and spatial context.

## 2. In the Asphalt City

What, then, is this metaphorical “asphalt?”<sup>9</sup> In cities, asphalt, – both urban material and urban culture – reflects the human condition, its conflicts, hopes, and despairs. Asphalt also reflects the creation of new urban species: dwellers of poorer quarters, people hard-pressed by the grammar of free-market economics – survivors too, for whom street is not an exile, but a kingdom. “Asphalt” is our term for radically urban societies (Pedrazzini, 2001). Asphalt is a culture, a history, a territory. We also define asphalt in the popular and revolutionary sense evoked by Bertolt Brecht when he defined workers’ intelligence, what could be called nowadays the post-industrial intelligence. In a 1937 letter to Lion Feuchtwanger, the author of *In the Jungle of Cities* briefly outlines an “Asphalt Literature,” banned since 1933 by the Nazis, as the sum of cultural expressions by the proletariat of the great metropolises – intimately tied to the urban matter, and in a sense arising from it (Brecht, 1970: 57). The word “asphalt” and Brecht evoke the Berlin of the interwar years, when the city was a promise of freedom. What we seek is, therefore, a “culture of the asphalt.” This is how we call the new fast-paced urbanity – violent, blurred, and rapid – in great Latin American metropolises.<sup>10</sup> Its tone and style appear to be largely determined by the city dwellers formerly defined as outsiders if not outcasts: poor people, the precarious but resolute city dwellers. They are the beggars and bandits of the *Three-penny Opera*, of the *Jungle of Cities*, and *Baal*. Criminal, cruel, bad people, but no worse than bosses. What matters here is that they are city builders, producers of urbanity, perhaps more than other city dwellers (see also McGaw and Vance, 2008).

Those who, for hundreds of years, have created civilization through the tiny yet grandiose agency of their daily lives, have created the urbanity that we call *Asphalt culture*. They are not policymakers, but the outsiders who have moved to center stage. Indeed, the “real” city nowadays is essentially the work of its peripheral dwellers. They are repressed nonetheless: poor people, *barrio* and *ghetto* dwellers who survive by their creative capacity (sometimes illegally) are still said to threaten social order. In their midst are new “dangerous classes,” urban pariahs (Wacquant, 1992b), among which stands the gang, their most emblematic figure in spite of its marginal role. Our Times have the Signs that they deserve: the metropolis, as a socially constructed environment, undoubtedly not only “deserves” gangs, proponents of an asphalt culture with an ethos of toughness and resistance – but also a morality. What morality can there be in the *barrio* gang? Gangs stand for their turf and for their members. Their rootedness in local meanings of place and self departs from hegemonic metropolitan thinking. Gangs remind us of the complex temporal and spatial fabric of metropolises; gangs remind us of our fragmented cities. The metropolis *deserves* shantytowns and ghettos, as these times are urban times, the times of the self-built vernacular quarters, of the informal economy, of fragmented urbanity, of the relativity of rules, and of social and spatial apartheid.

In hopes of understanding spatial and social convulsions beyond the South, of seeing Detroit’s or Istanbul’s asphalt in ways similar to Rio’s or Mexico’s, we will analyze the asphalt as a social entity, as

a territory, trying to figure the particular role of the bandit and the gang in its “management.”

But let’s take a step back: before embodying the city itself, asphalt means the street. The ordinary street, the one that is open to marginal urban dwellers: where stuff is found and left behind, where people live, and sometimes sleep and fall. Streets are the scenes where outsider urban cultures, marginalized by the power and wealth of the educated classes, (partly) escape social control and find social connectedness, in degrees extending outward, from their neighborhoods to the rest of the world.

Asphalt is largely a departure from the dominant urban model, elaborated in reference to European cities since the Middle Ages. “*L’air de la ville rend libre*,” Weber’s, or other related definitions no longer allow to comprehend metropolises of the South, especially Latin American ones – neither their chaos nor violence, and certainly not the causes and means of their vitality. The largely informal solidarity and economic networks that are weaved in cities of the South are the real agents of their transformation.

Theoretical frames such as those prevalent in urban planning, frames that conflate practical thinking with notions of “order,” are of no use in understanding asphalt culture. Order is merely a part of urbanity, because the metropolis is paradoxical, because its dwellers have to negotiate between order and disorder, to “pursue one goal and its opposite simultaneously” (Barel, 1989). Yet disorder would also be a poor analytical tool. Rather, our analysis is rooted in the fact that the new experts of this new urbanity are the gang members themselves, persons who, in metropolises of the Americas, often are one of the few remaining “social producers” over a large portion of urban territory. Gangs can produce *territory* from the space of the *barrio* (or the *favela*, inner city, *cit  *...) – *territory* being understood here as a social and geographical space where local *actors* play a predominant role in its social production. Conversely, in the planned city the social production of space is farmed out to institutions whose agents are strangers to the urban spaces where they intervene. In the *barrio*, only gangs may succeed in preventing territorial production by external agents such as planners, promoters and the police. In *barrios* where dwellers produce their own space, gangs contribute to their spatial vernacular by participating, both as agents and figureheads, to the definition of collective practices, values and rules. These collectively-defined mores, together with the very process of defining them, are the elements that link people to each other, that generate social bonding – social capital, perhaps – between people otherwise busy with survival or egotism. Granted, this bond may involve violence. Gangs are both economic and social agents, the products of their neighborhood’s social context. Therefore, they deserve credit for some of the social creativity that defines these quarters. Our praise of the anonymous builders of social space must come with a social valuation of their culture by means of a positive, albeit critical approach of their iconic characters, such as the gang and *malandro*. Asphalt may, then, also be a political discourse.

## 3. Violence and the city

At an early age, *barrio* teenagers are confronted with the insoluble nature of their predicament. Around fifteen, most of them have understood that their economic survival – not to mention their “social success” – is played out in the street. *Barrio* youth are, since childhood, linked to the street and by the street: their vital social bonds are those of the peer group, bonds that are adaptable to asphalt’s movements.

These bonds do not stem merely from poverty. Asphalt culture is not a culture of poverty in the sense proposed by Lewis (1966), nor a culture solely based on the emergency of survival. It is a state of

<sup>9</sup> Bertolt Brecht: “In the asphalt city, I’m at home” (“In der Asphaltstadt bin Ich daheim”), in: *Of Poor B.B. (Vom Armen B.B.)*, 1922.

<sup>10</sup> On the question of Latin American urbanity, see Baby-Collin, 2000, 2005.

urbanity where social outsiders have overcome their victimhood and become social agents, agents of cultural production. Agents of asphalt culture production contribute to a critique of the capitalist (free-market) urban space – without necessarily freeing themselves from it.

This grassroots urban knowledge is a blessing for urban studies, if only because the literature on urban outsiders has occasionally been way off the mark. About the 1965 Watts riots, Guy Debord wrote:

Los Angeles Blacks, like all Western urban youth, but more radically because they are part of a class wholly without future, from a segment of the proletariat that cannot expect any substantial chance of social integration and mobility, take modern capitalist propaganda, its advertised cornucopia, literally (our translation 1993: 15).

According to Debord, Watts looters take the mercantile ethos for granted, but transcend it by looting, by killing modernity's mercantilism, trying to free themselves from the paradox of consumption understood as compulsory socialization. To Debord and related commentators, many of them sympathetic to anti-globalization movements, the act of looting puts into a radically subversive light the pervasive, hegemonic power of consumerism. If consumerism is a common existential condition for all, then solidarity and empowerment can emerge by raising people's awareness of their common plight as consumers. As Debord famously wrote: "he who destroys goods shows his human superiority over goods".<sup>11</sup> (Debord, 1993: 18).

In the barrio, transcending consumerism might stand as a strategy to control life's precariousness, by forcing the very emergency of survival into social praxis (a praxis of asphalt), thereby (perhaps) strengthening an inclusive, *transverse*, and desegregationist subculture. But the Latin American barrio implies a different relation to consumption than Watts': in the barrio, "liberation" would not come from the destruction of stuff, but rather from the production of collective living spaces, popular housing autonomous from the orbit of mercantile exchange. Social revolution would nonetheless remain a remote possibility as gangs are, like most of their neighbors, stuck a consumerist brand of socialization that fosters submission to merchandise.

A proper understanding of social facts, and a critique of myths about poor people's misery may foster responsible and relevant political action. Are gangs really an avatar of the Situationist International? Is the fear of gangs, the insecurity that surrounds them, a consequence of their political radicalism? Alas, gangsters' daily struggles are not Robin Hood's, nor a kind of potlatch. For all of us, delinquents or not, life is essentially, primarily, necessarily about survival.

The social interactions and relations stemming from gang activity have yet another origin, in the trickery, in the "cool" know-how and ethos of *malandros*. This social bonding associated with barrio and ghetto life is one of the unheralded triumphs of asphalt culture, because it is hidden behind images of violence. Granted, ghetto violence is no less real: as it has become increasingly impossible to trick the system, violence, both as a means to circumvent the demands of mainstream institutions and to regulate illegitimate social and economic transactions, has generalized, progressively engulfing the (violent) neighborhoods in socio-spatial marginality, while the institutions invoke the same violence as a pretext to (violently) get rid of (or isolate) the problem.

This institutionalized relationship between gangs and *the law* impairs the ability of barrio dwellers to offer an alternative

urbanity, as their links to the outside world are limited by the merchandise-spectacle of violence. The gang, as a figurehead for "poor neighborhoods" in all cities, has become the cities' evil side. The gang bears the burden of social disconnectedness, even if the question remains of *who* chose to disconnect: gang members, oppressed communities, or the ruling classes? Who opts to stand apart from civil society? Gang members or the elite? Who makes the break, refuses dialogue, abandons the field? Not gangs to be sure; more often than not they remain the sole presence on an economically impoverished field. The political, cultural, industrial elites – leaders, administrators – flee the metropolis, leaving poor neighborhoods to rot in isolation. Gangs and *malandros* remain on that field, ruling over a few hundred square meters of alleyways.

Cities are seen as social producers of violence, just like they seem to produce segregation on the spatial level. Cities have other purposes, but it is widely admitted nowadays that violence is an ordinary attribute of big cities. So much so that "urban violence" is an inclusive label encompassing all kinds perpetrators, victims, incivility, criminality, or transgressions affecting the public good. Still, violence primarily affects residents of poor neighborhoods – they are violence's first victims, even as they are being defined as its producers. Is it not a fact that should encourage civic leaders to rethink the city on new foundations?

We do not aim to minimize the violence wielded by some residents in poor neighborhoods, in the fashion of our much-maligned "orgy of tolerance."<sup>12</sup> The statistical record may very well prove that these quarters are more violent than wealthier ones – which would merely show the limited repertoire of economic, judicial and political action available to their residents. Our point is that our understanding of urbanity shows that violence and insecurity, major problems in Latin America and the Caribbean, also arise in Africa, Central Europe and North America – similar problems emerging for similar reasons in different contexts.

Violence has dire consequences for urbanity, including asphalt. Pervasive insecurity means, for most of us urban dwellers, finding ourselves no longer able to read our mental city maps, the same maps that we once used to locate ourselves socially and spatially. We are no longer sure that we fit anywhere – may be we are nowhere. The mysterious world of our hometown, even the town where we were born, scares us because we can no longer locate ourselves *into it*, in a space known to us and others, collectively understood as *public* and *safe*. Residential space is still there, that fenced-in place where we still have an illusion of control. But outside of our houses we no longer feel at home in cities, because we believe that violence resides in them. On city maps, in all cities, residents and visitors read, scribbled in haste over street signs: "Violence lives here." Mapping violence can be a means to situate oneself in urban space, but recently, every city dweller has identified a different set of places with the violence of the other. Soon, with the exception of a few quiet, isolated spaces, all places became labeled as (at least) *potentially violent*. Everywhere is labeled with a sign saying "violence lives here." Some of these signposts come from residents of privileged neighborhoods, some from residents of "violent" quarters, some from State institutions. Lost somewhere around one of these potentially dangerous zones, not knowing too well what danger zone one is actually crossing, city dwellers end up believing that the city has become wholly violent, and that all of its territories are permeated by insecurity. Insecurity has become the last available means to fathom unknown territory. Then, all cities turn into "the Bronx," into urban chaos ruled by mobs.

<sup>12</sup> From the title of a play staged by Jan Fabre, created at the Festival d'Avignon in 2009. Paradoxically our society is simultaneously bloated with tolerance (good feelings, political correctness) and intolerance (as in "Zero tolerance").

<sup>11</sup> Our translation.

In this context, the challenge for city dwellers is to find alternate tags (or labels, posts, signs) for their living spaces, to take back their territory by rewriting mental maps of urban danger, starting with drawing circular zones that mean “I am here.” Regaining control over fragmented territories means overcoming their divisions, learning to re-weave the urban fabric. Thus, city dwellers may contain the spread of insecurity, by rejecting the negative social practices and the segregationist imagination that insecurity entails. In doing so, the city dweller mentally and emotionally restructures the dismembered metropolis: I am participating in the global urbanization as an actor, not an onlooker; I succeed in appropriating the violence of urbanization, in moving beyond it (Pedrazzini, 2005). I feel a new emotion: the city, with its violence and all, is mine. I am not afraid, even at night, even of bandits.

#### 4. (Emotional) Roles of urban insecurity

A specter is haunting our cities – the specter of insecurity. It transforms territories, separates rich enclaves from poor shantytowns. By creating new borderlines, insecurity heralds a new era of post-urbanity. Yet insecurity is less a measurable fact than a *feeling* whose propagation owes little to an increase in threats to personal and collective security. In fact the “rise in urban violence” that we have been hearing about for the past twenty years, in many places around the globe, has never been scientifically established. Some forms of violence rise while others wane. One such form, that seems to warrant recent fears, is those violent acts committed by armed minors from poor neighborhoods. This form of violence only threatens its direct or indirect “producers,” seldom outsiders or innocent bystanders. Gangsters are the first victims of urban insecurity.

But fear does not need the actual experience of violence to spread. Most of the time, the link between violence and perceived insecurity is indirect. Fear is existential to be sure, but genuine threats to city dwellers' existence and well-being are much less common than the feeling of fear. These threats are nonetheless granted immense visibility, often as a rationale for political mobilization, in a kind of Hollywood staging that illustrates our current Age of fear.<sup>13</sup> Given that most of life's uncertainty stems not from insecurity but from work, family, future expectations, it seems that insecurity has become a convenient tool for the social control of urban dwellers.

Against insecurity we demand “safer” cities, in hopes they will be less uncertain. Ultimately we believe – we have faith – that Planning may help achieve urban safety. Yet rapidly growing cities, North and South, evade the laws of planning. The changing metropolis is increasingly seen as chaotic, its intricately webbed internal dynamics increasingly unpredictable. And we end up living this transformation in fear. We experience spatial sickness: emotion no longer arises from the encounter, by chance or design, with violence as a fact or situation, but from the feeling that urban spaces are disquieting. They have become *uneasy*, and their uneasiness is transmitted to/through city dwellers. Even in countries apparently shielded from criminal or insurgent violence – Switzerland, Luxemburg, Iceland, Japan, Singapore, Costa Rica... – urban landscapes are becoming “secured.” Surveillance cameras watch a growing portion of behaviors that were, until recently, considered to be within the “private” realm.

This *securitization* wholly transforms urban territories. Reinforcing security becomes tantamount to urban planning and, with help from the police and an increasing number of social agents,

a “carceral city” emerges (Davis, 1990: 253–257). In this city, in this archipelago of isolates, nobody feels at ease. We suffocate, walking in circles. Every bit of shadow seems to hide some demons, robbers, or rapists. The cities' most common emotion becomes, in varying degrees, the feeling of “spatial” insecurity. Places, public ones mostly, are the new monsters. Because public spaces are symbolic receptacles of existential projections and values – socially, domestically, politically – the feeling of insecurity has become part of the city's collective cultural stock, both as a matrix of social mores and forms, and as a frame for identity, a kind of common ground that coalesces all city dwellers, rich and poor. We fear, therefore we are urbanites. Whatever happens to the empirical, demonstrable causes of violence, urban insecurity is better understood as a manifestation of, as much as a factor in, a profound upheaval of urban space, in terms of both urban morphology and the status of public space.

#### 5. Welcome to the age of fear

The culture of fear has little potential for social innovation. In this culture, individual practices dominate collective ones. In the still-accepted view of Oscar Lewis, persistent poverty creates and perpetrates an “alternate” value system that set poor people apart from mainstream behavior, ethics and values, thereby perpetuating their poverty over generations. In our view, poor people's culture also empowers most of them to survive in spite of misery, thanks to social networking (albeit in isolation from the mainstream) and precarious earnings – as welfare recipients, poor wage earners or laborers until the 1980s, nowadays as illegal migrants, limited-term contract workers, or in the *informal sector*. As city dwellers accept the culture of emergency, social and spatial practices dictated by emergency become part of the survival repertoire of the lower classes. But fear generally prevents the emergence of positive, socially bonding collective practices, even when dictated by emergency. The culture of fear only facilitates mistrust of others and the building of walls, real or symbolic, meant to keep these others at bay. Fear produces an insider's solidarity, a fragmented solidarity of enclosed islands... and gangs. Fear reinforces a culture of security and enclosure that is a culture of wealth, but one adopted by poor people who, when they are not engulfed by it in prison, lock themselves in precarious, segregated quarters with do-it-yourself, dangerous security systems.

Seen in this light, the notion of *culture of emergency* may lend itself to confusion. Coping with social emergency may induce tactics of withdrawal, divisiveness, mistrust. Living with feelings of emergency has not, in and of itself, fostered social movements. Since we identified this conceptual flaw, we have proposed the notion of a *culture of asphalt* to name the bottom-up urban innovation taking place in busy, threatening cities, as a reaction against busy-ness, against threats to security and social welfare, yet as practices of linearity and openness instead of enclosure. In the words of the social capital school: practices of inclusion and *bridging* with the other, instead of exclusion and *bonding* within one's inner circle (Putnam, 2001: 15–30). It is a street culture opposed to the culture of the *turf*, enclosed and guarded, embodied in the revered fetishes of the shopping mall and the gated community.

Jane Jacobs similarly defined the dichotomous urban culture of big-city dwellers and planners, between open and closed urban spaces, between inclusive and exclusive city planning and living. For Jacobs, safe, vibrant, pleasant city life emerges when streets and sidewalks are open to a great diversity of users, thanks to density, to the openness of individual streets and sidewalks to the wider urban grid, as well as to the diversity of urban functions within city blocks. On these busy, mixed-use, and “open” city streets, potentially

<sup>13</sup> Reference intended to Mike Davis' *Ecology of Fear* Davis, (1998). See also Pedrazzini and Boisteau (2006).

threatening users and situations can be controlled thanks to the many “eyes upon the street.” These eyes, belonging to street watchers and users, are most numerous on streets where uses, design, and culture encourage street use and street watching throughout the day. Watchers and users, drawn by the presence and diversity of street uses and users, partake in a vibrant, intricate “street ballet.” The result, partly unintended by street users, is a “safer” street (Jacobs, 1961).

To illustrate her views on street culture, Jane Jacobs depicted street life in her own Hudson Street neighborhood, in the west of Greenwich Village. But her writing of the *Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961 was motivated in opposition to another view of urban space, the one embraced by most American planners throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the one threatening Lower Manhattan's street life. To Jacobs, the death of great American cities occurs when city spaces become specialized and segregated by uses. As street uses and users can't support a “ballet,” or anything worth watching, streets become empty and threatening, and users remove themselves further from streets. To preserve a modicum of security allowing minimal street use, segregated city dwellers resort to a culture of “turf”: an exclusive, distrustful, enclosed definition of neighborhood, favoring social insiderness and discouraging interaction beyond a closely guarded inner circle of initiates and neighbors, trying to “live off the hostile truce of Turf in a blind-eyed city.”

Malandros' visibility and agency on barrio streets are in great part as a result of insecurity, a result of the potency of a culture of turf in precarious economic conditions. By understanding the way street bandits make sense and act upon insecurity, we believe that we offer a complementary view to Jacobs'; by looking at the barrio as *Hudson Street in reverse*, we pursue similar aims.

Street culture, asphalt culture cannot flourish in a climate of insecurity. Fear is the enemy of the asphalt which, in order to exist in a minimal sense, needs its dwellers to move freely through urban space. Fear is powerful: it is backed by a whole industry (Glassner, 2000). Fear weaves an oppressive web through urban space, immobilizing, enclosing people behind walls, turning their gazes inward, to television and computer screens, where they can play at being gangsters.<sup>14</sup>

Paradoxically, most attempts to evade fear reinforce our captivity. “Secure” behavior and security devices exclude city dwellers further from the real world, the street world. Each day we lose more leeway, and spend more time underground. We lose sight of the reasons why our cities were built *beautiful and electric*. Cities scare us, but we no longer seek reassurance. Instead we buy insurance, safety, security. It is in this state of not-so-splendid isolation that death finds us, by accident, by a failure in our protection system. Our life stories resemble low-budget disaster movies.

Out in the deserted streets, violence remains the poorest people's last hope – when avenues out of misery seem blocked. I am scared of my neighbors when I should be scared of the Water Conglomerate or similar public enemies who, privatizing everything, will deprive me of everything. It is much easier to fear the poor that we see on the street, the petty thief, the gypsy, the night owl, the rabble. The urge to protect ourselves, natural if egotistic, should be resisted, if only because protecting ourselves from an enemy designated by a third party is an act of submission with grave consequences. The genuine enemy awaits identification: the enemy is the feeling that pushes us to lock ourselves in, the feeling that we cannot walk at night in our cities. The antisocial enemy is the fear monger, not the malandro or the stranger.

The fear and segregation aimed at poor neighborhoods serve those who seek to control urban space. The myths surrounding “poor people's violence” have no other purpose. Even when and where poor people actually get involved in violent acts, “ghetto violence” is nothing more than a convenient fiction. Poor people must appear as scary, must appear as too close for comfort, driving up feelings of insecurity, to make security entrepreneurs wealthier, and to maintain the status quo for the remainder of the power elite.

## 6. Insecurity and the expectation of violence

Since the late 1980s and the beginning of the post-Cold War (or Neoliberal) Era, human societies live in uncertainty, immersing themselves in fantasies of absolute control to fight it off. This paradox, this dialectics of chaos and control is an aspect of globalization that draws its strength from the tension between the feared and the protected. The State has seen its ancient role as a protector of public order reinforced; this is the best it seems to be able to do – control, as closely as it can, the territories it can control. Yet the control of urban space has indeed become more elusive as the dictates of globalization demand a privatization of public services, and the deregulation of markets. As public spaces are abandoned by national governments, local ones struggle to maintain their grip, and to deal with a burden of poverty that they are unable to lighten with what little means they have left (police power, mostly). By applying vengeful repression on their poorest populations, uncertain local leaders concentrate their forces in highly visible actions, wars on the poor, lost battles against the uncertainty of the new human condition, still dotted with small victories against the poorest, youngest members of the rabble. Police forces, unable to address existential uncertainty, harass “petty producers” of insecurity: taggers, skaters, pot smokers, car burglars, sometimes a teenage bad guy, gang bosses in a Manila shantytown or a convenience store robber in a *cit e* outside Lyon. It does not prevent uncertainty, but it does not hurt the system either.

In the end “the social perception of threat becomes a function of the security mobilization itself, not crime rates” (Davis, 1990: 224): the militarization of democratic regimes confirms that our fear is justified, because it is not so much (the largely invisible) big-city violence that contributes to our anxiety, but the obvious violence of the means taken against it. This shift is inherent to our semi-private security system: citizens have to be scared to buy into security. The credibility of the system commands that all citizens experience fear, because security is a totalizing endeavor that cannot leave spaces out of control: everything is under control, the saying goes, or else security is undermined.

According to sociologist Bauman (1999): 176, we are witnessing an “anxiety transfer,” which has gained further saliency in the West since September 2001. Fear of military, terrorist or criminal attacks has become a new substitute for existential anxiety. Bauman argues that “allegedly distinct experiences, since they are demarcated by language, of safety, security, and certainty, now rest on a unity of feeling and behaviour” (1999: 176).<sup>15</sup> This “confusion” impacts cities. Territorial fragmentation, once a priority of urban planners, is becoming the admitted norm, the mantra of political actors from all sides. This consensus in favor of what Jane Jacobs would call “Turf urbanism” merely reinforces the segregation that allows gangs to thrive. In fact, spatial fragmentation is convenient for urban planners: turf planning is little else than a variant of bad modern planning, splitting cities in small chunks, easy to understand and

<sup>15</sup> Bauman notices that a sole German word – *Sicherheit* – depicts the three experiences, separate in English and in Latin languages, of security, safety, and certainty (1999: 172). This translation is ours.

<sup>14</sup> For instance *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004).

manage, in hopes to minimize the margin of freedom of trouble-makers with the predictability of walls and fences. Instead of making the city safer, this way of thinking makes it more uncertain as it becomes socially absurd and safer only in a limited, technical sense, in a small number of isolated places. Professional expertise may solve a fair number of local problems, but it largely fails to produce a critical vision of urbanization and urban insecurity. Uncertainty, insecurity, and “unsafety” remain blurred beyond any hope of analysis. Yet a space-sensitive critique would be welcome amidst the security drift of our urban societies. Such a critique would allow a political understanding of this “urbanism of fear” (Pedrazzini and Boisteau, 2006), the spatial and social product of a territorial analysis exclusively in terms of security, powerless to make urban space any safer.

But the practice of security urbanism does not improve the safety of the city or region. It leads to two-tiered security apparatus (one in the rich and the institutional neighborhoods, the other in the more modest quarters), itself leading to new forms of territorial segregation. In a regime governed by a security fetish, the city moves closer to a planning abstraction as security becomes its main structuring motif.

In spite of the rifts it creates, this carceral-urban system works, both technically and morally. Because the city has identified an enemy, an evil figure who focuses the fascinated and frightened gazes of its dwellers, a figure evoking this ambiguous feeling that stems from the fear of (nearly) everything, and from the unshakable faith that nothing truly dangerous will ever reach us. This evil figure is a new avatar of the public enemy.

Against this divisive, law-and-order urbanism an “urbanism of the oppressed,” where urban and (semi)judicial powers are wielded locally, may rise. The struggle between both schools of city planning, between the urbanism of oppression and security and the urbanism of the oppressed and “dangerous classes,” may shape the new social and spatial morphology of cities.

## 7. Malandros, outsiders of urban culture

We believe that there are very direct links between the violence of security planning and the violence of some residents in peripheral neighborhoods. May be only because the latter is the unhappy consequence of the former. Violence is a reaction to the uncertainty resulting from the demise of integrated, open urban societies. Violence gains a newfound relevance for people who fail to understand their future – as they no longer understand the city, they no longer expect much good from a globalizing economy. But city violence is not the violence of its inhabitants, no more than it is the violence of a category of its inhabitants: the gang, the malandro, and “their” violence are part of the metropolitan system. Paradoxically they are never totally excluded from customary channels of violence, even while they are perceived as strangers if not pariahs – gangs do *belong* to neighborhoods, however pathologically (Wacquant, 2006). Recursively, the exclusion of poverty-stricken petty criminals will keep fostering violence. Social bonding and social exclusion are linked by definition, each side being a kind of mirror image of the other: social bonding fosters insidedness, the social exclusion of the ones-outside-the-bond. Together, exclusion and inclusion raise the question of power: who decides? Who links or integrates, who secedes or excludes? In Caracas, where the state has grown illegitimate, one can see how barrio gangs have come to reject, in an almost-political stance, a purely law-and-order state that merely accentuates social divisions. Malandros, proud social bandits of the barrio, ignore state power and its representatives; they have understood how to nurture a vital, vibrant social bond in the de-structured barrio and metropolis.

Nonetheless the ghetto paradox remains. By their use of violence, malandros show their vital connection to the barrio and the city, *and* they vindicate those who seek to eliminate them. Meanwhile American-styled gangs, in a different manner than malandros, demonstrate that the small, shifting and terrible power that they acquire comes down the barrel of a gun, in a context where status stems from violence and where *coca* is the most stable investment value.

In such a context, to see beyond the “bad guy” hypothesis, one has to reinterpret gang values and practices in light of the asphalt culture. To understand their inventiveness, their cultural models and the perspective shift they inspire, as well as the new understanding of power they propose. One has to look at the question of gangs from the standpoint of the creation of new social models that impact not only the barrio, but the whole metropolis. Gangs pragmatically define new labor agreements, new values, a new social contract, a new social bond, new solidarities and a new quality of life.

Yet one must avoid all whitewashing and be reminded that, with the rise of such dangerous figures – whatever our urge to redefine their place in society –, a new struggle of “spatial classes” may have just begun in the shantytowns of Latin America. These classes are spatial in the sense that their definition stems from their relationship to (and through) space, not (really) from their place in the dominant economic mode of production. Spatial classes can be defined as belonging in a given space, rich or poor for instance. (Urban) space frames social relations, and each class is defined by its mode of spatial appropriation, and by its mode of expression in public spaces. In other words each urban “species” is determined by its relation to space, and in relation to other species, all belonging to a given “urban ecosystem,” however segregated. The fact that Venezuela’s barrios have lately imposed to their power elite a “popular” and “revolutionary” president is not a precedent-setting historical watershed, but rather a battle among others, part of an ongoing struggle where most losers are, and have always been, the young, the poor, the starving, the marginal... That is why figures of fear remain the same in spite of revolution, and in spite of an occasional refinement in the scholarly analysis of urban poverty. In other words it matters little to the culture of fear if the *lumpenproletariat* has become obsolete in the face of the new categories of the *urban pariah*, the *underclass*, or similar outcasts (Wacquant, 2006).

It is nonetheless necessary, even urgent, to recognize that things have largely changed since the early twentieth century and the foundation of Metropolis, the great capitalist city. A century later, petty bandits cannot be simply understood as pesky local delinquents profiting from the externalities of the late modern economy. Struggling with a world offering little else but pain, they have managed, by associating, to survive in an urban environment that is as much socially constructed as it is (socially) ravaged. What is more, they succeed in making these unwanted neighborhoods into habitats for our times. Habitats are convenient for their “uncivilized” practices. This convenience is context-dependent, much like late-nineteenth century bourgeois housing might have fitted, for a spell, a society in the throes of a certain type of modernization. The malandro inhabits and appropriates a world ripped apart by the urbanization and globalization of inequality, and succeeds in making it inhabitable, even as violence and insecurity lurk. Malandros’ level of thought is in the realm of ruse and practical intelligence embodied in the ancient Greek deity *Métis*, Zeus’ equal and consort, mother of children (including Athena) so wise they would threaten their progenitors. At their own level of modernity and fragmentation, malandros creatively address urban problems, urban chaos, and urban insecurity.

They make a living amidst these urban phenomena, when they are not making a living out of them. For that reason, some



malandros take on a social role, legitimacy in the barrio, that hinges on their mastery of asphalt culture. Hence, experienced malandros may become *malandros viejos* – elders, wise men – public heroes and public enemies, good and bad clowns. The malandro, by virtue of his double public persona, is a *trickster* type, who found himself thrown out of the margins, into the core of the advanced modern urban society. The *relevance* of the malandro character makes him a likely candidate for mythification. Both as a hero of the barrio and as a figure of urban criminality, the malandro-as-myth is more a clever swindler than a violent sociopath. In this guise, malandros are an avatar of the trickster characters found in African, Aboriginal, and African-American folklore. In these folk stories, the trickster is embodied as a clever, resourceful small animal (fox, rabbit, monkey, crow) who outwits larger, stronger animals. In the United States, the likes of the Signifying Monkey, Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox, play a role similar to the mythologized malandro (or Robin Hood), in acting as champions for the powerless, in showing the power of the weak and the weaknesses of the powerful.

Even when they manage to become the stuff of legends, malandros' biological life is nonetheless short. They have chosen their models, no doubt, somewhere between their embrace of an "American-style" gang model – teenagers who wield weapons for the respect they inspire – on one side, and on the other the successful dope dealer with his flashy display of wealth and all it can bring to a hungry young man, a diamond earring, sexy girls, a Chinese, Indian, or even Japanese motorcycle. Cocaine for your brothers, who some day will carry your casket, on shoulders bearing clumsy tattoos made in prison with ink from a school-children's pen. The malandro will be gone. A life no less useful than another's. More violent to be sure, but not thoroughly violent. Given that the barrio is the focus of the peculiar violence of urbanization, the violence of the malandro is a reflection, in a reversed image because of his disobedience, of the world's injustice. Arguably useful after all.

The malandro – even a fifteen-year-old neighborhood brat, devious and miserable – is paradoxically *righteous* in a corrupt world. By ruse or violence, depending on the situation, the malandro injects a little balance in the social and spatial realms: he helps foster the demise of the ancient world of planning, clearing the way for the new world of improvisation. The fact that the malandro figure is becoming a liminal character standing on the threshold between innocence and barbarism, shows how tough big cities have become. Without malandros, innocence, understood as the self-conscious construction of the urban economy and sociability, would evade the remainder of city dwellers, because no one would stand between them and barbarism – the violence of our version of urbanization. The malandro stands as a levee, a rampart against city violence and violence within the city, a consequence of our current mode of production of capitalist urban space. By his radical choices, the malandro speaks the truth. His moral code is obvious and clear while the city has become immoral. His morality will help him survive in the context of a barrio that has given him his culture and his (minimally economic) legitimacy; the city's immorality will assure its perennity. In the dark side of the Earth, one needs a moral beacon. The malandro has one, and it stands against the violence of globalization. In this too, the malandro is a rampart.

## 8. A plea for Asphalt bandits

Rioting may become, over the next ten years or so, an alternative practice of urban management, by the (poor) people, perhaps for their own economic welfare, most certainly because mainstream urban governance will be as violent as rioting is. Urban policy will be, and has already become in some places, framed by order and

domination. In these circumstances, not only the heroic bandit, but also the trickster bandit, will be hard-pressed to keep his community (and livelihood) from collapse, all the while standing as a foil for those who aim to plan lower-class culture out of existence.

In the planner's future metropolis, in the *certain* city, where will the joy of living in cities come from? Not from a government, and not from insurrection. Where will we see happening an urban culture that puts respect and connectedness back into the urban? In those neighborhoods where *malandraje* will be a means to wield power, no better than another, and certainly no more innocent, but maybe more moral, as we suggested, because its intentions are more honestly put. Malandraje as a lifestyle aims to outlast as much as possible, with neighbors participating in the process and reaping (some of) the rewards. But nobody is a dreamer for more than three days in a row. One has to earn a living – and illusions in this realm are counterproductive.

Thus, when thinking about the city, one has to look beyond the most visible barrio-makers – vernacular builders and architects – to look at losers, gangs, malandros, street children, the "extreme figures of emergency." The Latin American metropolis, all chaos and fragments, lives and breathes thanks to hybridity, asphalt, and creole character (Pedrazzini, 1995). Those who create it are hybrids too. Half-saints, half-demons, figures of fear and hope, malandros are agents of urbanization.

Inspired by the paradoxical emotions experienced in their midst, we are moved into thinking that somehow they are right to lead their dangerous life in a city that is probably not as dangerous as they are. We also think that somehow they are wrong, if only because they die young and violently, and seldom by accident. Unless we look at them philosophically, considering the contingent character of existence – this is what the barrio bandit of Caracas does when he finds time to think, sitting in a flight of stairs. Not for long; minutes later it is time for survival again – fleeing enemies, losing your friends, working hard at earning a living, throwing back a baseball to kids playing on the barrio's dirt alleys – remaining, for one more day, King of Life.

The malandro is undoubtedly a criminal, for without crime he would be nobody. But he is not a homogenous bandit. His creole background – he is of mixed ancestry after all – makes him a typically Caribbean bandit, the end result of a violent history. He is also a "being-for-the-metropolis," in the sense that Pierre Clastres used "beings-for-war" when depicting Guarani aboriginals (Clastres, 1977): the malandro is the Latin American metropolis, its most infamous figure, because of his individual practice of asphalt culture and because of his place in the collective imagination.

In our globalizing times where global space seems to have shrunk enough to be surveyable from an airport hall in New York or Dubai, the malandro restores the value of space to the neighborhood, the street corner, the alley; he restores the value of people called poor only because of the minuteness of their belongings. The malandro shows us, by a serene movement of the head, the true core of the Earth: the heart of the great Third World city, the sidewalk where his adventure will end. He makes this clear: *South of no North*,<sup>16</sup> between Tijuana and Dakar, bandits invent, on a daily basis, the urban alter-modernity. Of this they can be proud.

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<sup>16</sup> Bukowski, 1973.

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