

Book Review: The Culture and Politics of Street Gang Memoirs

by Blog Admin

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Josephine Metcalf's close examination of the emergence of three Los Angeles gangland autobiographies and their literary receptions focuses on an important social issue and is ultimately a daring read for the way it intellectualises an area most would assume is of little academic interest. Jo Taylor is most struck by the potential of gang memoirs to be used as educational tools, and discussions around the interconnected nature of crime, society, and education.



The Culture and Politics of Street Gang Memoirs. Josephine Metcalf. University Press of Mississippi. July 2012.

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[Josephine Metcalf](#) is not your typical academic. The (incorrect) stereotype of a dusty, awkward person disconnected from the world is not applicable in this case. Metcalf teaches American history and culture at the University of Hull, has written for the [Guardian](#) on the riots, and has penned some very interesting thoughts on [technology's place in civil unrest](#). The most interesting aspect of her work and interests though, is that her current academic focus is based upon the rapper Ice T!

The Culture and Politics of Street Gang Memoirs is an overview of a number of memoirs written by gang members across 30 years, in particular Sanyika Shakur's *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*, Luis J. Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, and Stanley "Tookie" Williams's *Blue Rage, Black Redemption*. Metcalf looks at how they were received at the time of writing, and how the public, social, and academic perception of them has changed over time. Due to space constraints I cannot wax lyrical about all of the book's sections so I have chosen to focus on two here.

A particularly interesting aspect of Metcalf's work is the debate on whether gang memoirs are an "empowering phenomenon" or not. Metcalf starts our consideration of this debate in the chapter "Homeboys between Hard Covers", and uses structuralist and culturalist concepts to explain how difficult it is to fully assess the merits of gang memoirs. Arguing for gang memoirs, Metcalf writes that they expand awareness on the plight of minorities, allow individuals from oppressed demographics to become known for their writing, and allow poor individuals to make money through the telling of terrible tales from their lives. Considering the opposite argument, Metcalf rightly questions the promotion of the lifestyle that gang memoirs represent. I was reminded of the [debates about the influence of urban music](#) where themes ran along similar lines: does it box young minorities into an exaggerated or unnatural role? If it does, and they can become successful, is this so bad? Does it promote the wrong things and negative role models? Is the role truly owned by the performers, or in this case the writers? Does the role create a glass ceiling? Does the act of rapping create an inescapable format for future rappers? It would have been very useful to read more of the author's views on these themes.

The "Brothers who could kill with words" section truly caught the attention of the teacher inside me. It looks at the place of the gang memoir as an educational tool and the education that the authors received. Metcalf contrasts the lack of formal learning that the authors experienced with the positive opportunity to demonstrate personal strength that this neglect provided them with later in life. For those readers who are



THE CULTURE AND POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY STREET GANG MEMOIRS Josephine Metcalf

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not educators or historians Metcalf provides the political context and educational policies which birthed these works. This allows readers to appreciate how easily political decisions can create radical situations such as organised crime and violence. Metcalf then uses the memoirs themselves to show how ex-gang members are struggling to educate their children in a society where the system is similar, and the respect for learning has not increased.

It was this provocative section which caused this reviewer to change his mind on how gang memoirs should be perceived. The way the educational struggle was presented as chronic and continuing invites us to think about extending the use of gang memoirs as educational tools in the future. Metcalf demonstrates the interconnected nature of crime, society, and education using content from the memoirs. This in itself supports their merits brilliantly.

A key question that arose when reading concerns the demographic from which Metcalf has sourced the original memoirs. I understand that her focus was memoirs from the US, but I am curious about why the memoirs discussed are exclusively based on Hispanic and African American backgrounds. Many other minority and non-minority groups in the US engage in organised crime, and have published memoirs and accounts of their exploits (for example the Irish and Italian components of the Mafia). Metcalf does talk about how African American accounts of organised crime were the most popularly received but she caveats each mention of Hispanic literature with the acknowledgment that it was not ever as widely read as other releases. Without a clear rationale Metcalf could be accused of ignoring the history of the issue she is writing on.

The Culture and Politics of Street Gang Memoirs focuses on an important social issue and is ultimately a daring read for the way it intellectualises an area most would assume is of little academic interest. The format of the book is pleasing and appealing, and Metcalf uses the format of separate sections well to evaluate the usefulness of the medium of gang memoirs. It would have made for interesting reading to see a wider range of gang memoirs from other demographics included. In the future I would be keen to read a meta-analysis from Metcalf which could include British memoirs too – perhaps this is not her field – but it would provide an interesting counter-balance to the confusing fish bowl of America.

Jo Taylor is a Teach First Ambassador, educational consultant and social entrepreneur. He teaches Psychology and Sociology A level, mentors and coaches adults and children, writes on education and social innovation and has an academic interest in using Psychology and technology to improve education. He is currently developing a pilot for a free educational website to reward students and increase social validation and parental involvement in education (walldisplay.org). [Read reviews by Jo](#).