

Are We Human? Edgework in Defiance of the Mundane and Measurable

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Published online: 28 November 2012
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Abstract Edgework can be a useful heuristic tool in producing counter-statements about Orthodox Criminology, where the measurable has arguably become more important than the meaningful. This paper focuses on the embodied experiential nexus of culture and crime in which criminology is taught, administered, and investigated. The Burkean framework of Dramatism is used to reveal how collective creative productions by students can provide insight into the political context of the contemporary criminology classroom. Through an analysis of instant ethnographies penned by participants of a flash mob I illustrate how the role of autonomy and responsibility are not resources that students readily draw upon to understand themselves in relation to the production of knowledge and social change. These observations support some of the concerns raised by Cultural Criminologist about the rise of administrative criminology. In the spirit of detournement, I argue that one way to facilitate student engagement with knowledge production differently is to invite them to experience moments of embodied transgressions.

... the idea of having the ability to stop traffic in its tracks with dancing and music makes me feel a bit like the Beatles. (ZRM)

As the end of the spring 2009 semester approached for my contemporary criminological theories class, our focus remained on critiquing the role of orthodox criminological methodologies in the production of crime knowledge. Incorporating ideas of detournement and edgework, I played a video of a flash mob in class. “We should do that” one student exclaimed. “That should be our final exam” another quickly added. The class burst into laughter over the absurdity of the idea, but within 20 min they had managed to devise a tentative plan for a flash mob final exam option. Preceding the Occupy Movement in North America (2011), the G20 protests in 2010 and the initial general acceptance of flash mobs into popular culture, students collaboratively created a meaningful moment of transgression. This paper draws upon this collaboration as a Burkean Dramatization about embodiment,

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the social construction of crime knowledge and responsibility. The analysis of this collective social production in the classroom reveals how some students explain identify themselves in relation to knowledge production and social change, an indication of the current state of criminological pedagogy.

Students who chose to participate in the flash mob were asked to answer open ended questions immediately before and after the event: a kind of instant ethnography. An alternative take on traditional long term ethnographic research, the instant nature of this method captures phenomenological insights in moments leading up to and following disorder (Kane 2004:142–143; Ferrell et al. 2008: 180); each instant ethnography offers up a peek through windows of those “fragile circumstances”, where participants are unsure of what will happen next (Manning 1995:249). There was a non-flash mob option for those students who were unable or unwilling to participate, of which there were only 16 out of 75.¹ Later in the week, a student offered to record our flash mob, which would be posted to the Facebook page group following the event. Students would meet in Confederation Square located a few blocks from Parliament Hill² and the university campus, a space that would later become the site of the Occupy Ottawa encampment in October 2011. The City of Ottawa has CCTV surveillance; given our proximity to state and municipal officials, I forewarned students that our actions, while certainly not illegal, might invite police presence. I created a Facebook group to announce exactly where and when the mob would happen. The song, ‘Are We Human’ by The Killers, would blare from a car enthusiastically offered up by one of the students. There was some debate as to whether driving the car into a public park might be a bylaw infraction (which, upon reflection, I suspect it was). I assured students I would pay any fines that might arise as a consequence, but could not prevent their images being captured on the CCTV system. I wanted them to ‘feel’ the surveillance that many of them expressed not really noticing in their day to day movement through the city.

Flash Mobs: Critiquing Culture with Culture

The purpose of this paper is not to inspire criminology instructors to use flash mobs in the classroom, although Duran has found the Garfinkle tradition of breaching experiments useful in teaching “social influence principles” to psychology students (2006:301). On this point, Duran and I may be in some agreement. This moment was an effective way to explore with students how they explained their participation in performing transgression collectively. The key difference in our approaches might be described more concisely this way: Duran’s students were encouraged to explore why individuals participate in transgressive behaviour, whereas I encouraged students to wonder ‘why doesn’t everyone’? By examining the explanations students offer about their engagement with deviance, I intend to trouble the institutional context of educating criminology and criminal justice students.

A great deal has changed in 3 years. Since 2009, flash mobs have arguably gone the way of most popular fads, with some difference though. Bill Wasik, who claims to be the creator of the phenomena, intended the first flash mob in a Manhattan Department Store in

¹ In total there were 75 participants, 60 of whom were registered in my contemporary criminological theories lectures. I had put out an enthusiastic invitation to both of my first year criminology classes as well (about 300 students). It’s important to note that only a few of those students showed up.

² Ottawa is the capital city of Canada. As such, it hosts the federal administrative business of the country, as well as key state institutions such as the Supreme Court of Canada.

2003 to demonstrate the power of social media and collective action (Wasik 2006, 2009; Walker 2011). He defines flash mobs as: “gatherings of people somewhere in physical space that last for 10 min or less and they are brought together on the fly via text message or email and then everyone disperses and leaves no trace” (Wasik 2009: 1). Performances typically occur in public spaces where participants can easily blend without detection beforehand. There is a spectacle quality of flash mobs; most are photographically interesting events, so planned in the hopes that they become ‘viral’ on social mediums such as YouTube or Facebook. Wasik is keenly aware of the ways in which these performances disrupt taken for granted assumptions about public space. Certainly, the spectacular disruption of movement through typically banal spaces of consumption has caused ire for those in the business of surveillance and social control: “...when you get thousands of commuters trying to go home at a very busy station in the middle of rush-hour and then joined by thousands of people who want to dance that can then be a problem” (BBC 2009). A problem of social order and comfort, for sure. In the fall of 2011 the Canadian anti-consumption magazine *Adbusters* issued an online invitation to a kind of flash protest, to descend upon Zuccotti Park and effectively Occupy Wall Street. A current search of YouTube will reveal over 50,000 uploaded videos of public spectacle, suggesting that the flash mob have become a culturally familiar activity in North America for many purposes including ‘pranking’ others, raising awareness for fundraising organizations, or petty shoplifting. The flash mob, however, is clearly more than just freshman hijinx; it is performative resistance to power and governance (Walker 2011:3). Evidence of its potential threat to institutional powers can be found in responses to the trend since the rise of the Occupy Movement. San Francisco was among the first cities to attempt such bans, citing reasons such as inconvenience and clean up costs (Burkeman 2009). Increasingly, though, municipalities attempt to criminalize flash mobs, assuming that the activity ‘creates’ violence, purposely blurring flash mobs with illegal raves and riots (Urbina 2010; White 2006; Nicholson 2009). The City of Cleveland introduced ordinances to this effect, suggesting that flash mobs incite riots (Steer 2011). The City of Philadelphia proposed curfews, suggesting flash mobs consisted of “roving gangs of violent young men organized via cellphones and social networks—similar to those marauding through the streets of British cities” (Goodman 2011).

Of course the use of creative collective action to disrupt order is not a new idea. In 1869 Mathew Arnold’s ‘Culture and Anarchy’ spoke to the potential of culture as a tool for transcending the oppression of class structure for all people, regardless of their position in the social order: “to make all men [sic] live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely—nourished and not bound by them” (Arnold in Storey 2006:7). During the early 1920s the Industrial Workers of the World—the Wobblies—used music to articulate “the frustrations, hostilities, and humor of the homeless and the dispossessed” (Kornbluh 1964:131). Situationists incorporate detournement as a strategy of appropriating ‘everyday’ cultural items to disrupt meaning about social order in the 1950s (Debord 1956). Inspired by the Situationists, modern day Culture Jammers take aim at the corporate commodification of culture, appropriating the mediums through which these messages of consumption have become the white noise of everyday (billboards, stickers and other mediums popularly used in advertising). The goal of culture jamming is to “hijack, subvert and reclaim corporate media space” (2001 Sharpe). Flash mobs are unique in their organization; most people who participate are connected only through social media, typically unknown to each other outside these reorganizations of public space. Flash mob participants, the Situationists, Wobblies and Culture Jammers are connected in the use of culture to counter culture. If history is any indicator, the trend of flash mobs will most likely

fall out of fashion, however the production of counterstatements through culture will continue to reinvent itself through creative human productions.

Bringing People and Culture Back In: Cultural Criminology and Kenneth Burke

This paper embraces the scholarship of Kenneth Burke, a rhetorical theorist with the rebel spirit of Cultural Criminology; both frameworks build and expand upon the works of Durkheim, CW Mills and Marx. Burke's heuristic approach known as Dramatism attends to the range of explanations that justify social order in collective communication. It is a theoretical framework that sensitizes social critics to the use of cultural productions in order to trouble social order claims. Similar to Mills, Burke assumes that any cultural artifact speaks about the culture and political context in which it has been created. This is as true for the criminology courses we teach as it is about a newspaper article about crime in the New York Times. Burke's Dramatism is a versatile framework that can be used to think about (and analyze) any produced cultural text, regardless of the medium. It is a dialectical approach that guides the cultural critic to identify explanatory frameworks. It is a process of investigation where ironic terminologies are used to create alternative readings that provide a fuller explanation of human action than what is presently offered in the cultural text under analysis (Overington 1977:139). Burke incorporates human autonomy and the possibility for social change through the production of counter statements. We can produce counterstatements to the expected aesthetics of the classroom, and criminology, by creating "moments that transcend structures of boredom" (Ferrell 2004: 298).

Despite his key contributions to sociology, Kenneth Burke's critical scholarship remains largely neglected by contemporary thinkers (Manheim and Overington 1987:1; Overington 1977:131; Overington 2001:94; Kenny 2008; Landry 2009). Nevertheless, he is referenced as a foundational thinker by Goffman (1959:194), C.W. Mills (1959: 215) and Duncan (1962:143–176; 1969). Criminologists might recognize the theoretical contributions of Burke's work (1931, 1935) in the conceptual foundation of Sykes & Matza's Techniques of (1957) by way of CW Mills' Vocabularies of Motives (1940). Dramatism moves beyond the application of theater metaphors and provides a framework that is sensitive to political and historical contexts that serve as the backdrop for the performances of the everyday (Manheim and Overington 1987:7; Burke 1973:293–304; Brummet 2006:179). It is a way for the social critic to uncover stories we tell ourselves about our place within social orders of power.

Social conflict makes social life complicated, and social revolutions are difficult to conceptualize concretely on a macro scale. Burke asserts that it is possible, however, to reduce human suffering: political orders 'can' change through the production of discursive counter statements. Discourse for Burke are cultural texts; they are 'any' production or performance that incorporates cooperative action. Objects that are produced (whether a book, museum installation, website, crime drama, course syllabus or flash mob) reflect institutional social orders (Brummet 2006: 184). I use Kenneth Burke's definition of discourse and rhetoric interchangeably in this paper. Burke's definition of rhetoric assumes that language motivates (or explains) human action (Burke 1969:45). These orders can be uncovered in vocabularies of motives, which necessarily omit a range of potential narratives. Editorial decisions are made regarding what explanations will not be included in cultural texts, and this is true for all communication. Irony is used to access alternative narratives about 'this or that' in key statements, revealing moral choices that 'make sense' for the time and place in which the discourse is produced.

Cultural Criminology builds upon the tradition of transgressing social constructions of order, directing attention to understanding the intersection of culture and criminalization. Dualities of good guys and bad guys are the kinds of dramatizations that cultural criminologists aim to demystify (Young 2003: 392). Likewise, Burke's conceptualization of culture fits with the main tenants of Cultural Criminology, which assumes that criminalization and culture are never separate (Hayward and Young 2004: 268; Milovanovic 2005): "Our job is to emphasize both structure and agency and trace how each constitutes each other" (Young 2003: 408). Culture functions institutionally and individually (Garland 2002; Hamm 2005; Presdee 2004; Ferrell 1999, 2009). The ways in which the academy, its students, professors and administrators perform criminology 'is' culture. Culture is 'acted', produced for others to read, hear, see and respond: it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is thickly—described (Geertz 1973:14).

Critical criminologists are on record raising concerns about the current state of crime knowledge production, which includes: militarization of education post 9/11, the problematic relationship between ethics review boards (IRBs) and research into deviant sub-cultures, the loss of 'book length' sociology, the shift from federal to private funding of academic research and criminalization. Many of these issues have contributed to changes in the field of criminology that belie the intent of early critical criminologists and sociologists (Adler and Adler 1998; Lyng 1998; Hamm 2005; Kane 2004; Presdee 2004; Giroux 2008; Ferrell 2004). Rationalistic strategies of crime knowledge production do little to challenge contemporary "cultures of control" (Garland 2002). Hayward and Young note a problematic shift away from criminology's critical roots of exploring social policy towards administrative research that meets the demands of ideological "'wars' against crime, drugs, terrorism, and now anti-social behaviour demands facts, numbers, quantitative incomes and outcomes—it does not demand debates as to the very nature of these battles" (2004: 262). The rhetorical strategies of rationalistic neo-liberal criminology rest on boiling down complex social interactions into antiseptic charts and statistical analysis (Presdee 2000; Young 2003; Ferrell et al. 2008).

Moreover, Cultural Criminologists remain unapologetic about privileging a critical focus on dehumanizing representations of people in such things as movies, mainstream news, public service ads and formal policing and surveillance strategies (Tunnell 2004; Hamm 2007; Boyd 2007; Brown 2009; Linnemann 2009). Cultural criminologists challenge the problematic argument that deviance or delinquency is due to a 'lack of culture', an assumption that runs throughout the work of orthodox criminology and is particularly apparent in social learning theories (Ferrell et al. 2008: 31). All collective human activity produces culture, although many times it is misunderstood and discounted by those invested in industries that benefit from not seeing it. Orthodox criminology privileges the measurable, regardless of whether it is meaningful; in response to this, cultural criminology attempts to bring back identity, action and vocabularies of motives into discussions about transgression (Hayward and Young 2004: 263).

Edgework is about pushing limits, attempting to discover one's physical boundaries by developing skills particularly attuned to "maintain[ing] control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable" (Lyng 1990:859). An early criticism leveled at the conceptualization of Edgework suggests that the contextual nature of risk taking meant that the term was only theoretically relevant to largely middle class white men (Miller 1991). While much of the Edgework literature initially centered on male dominated extreme sports such as skydiving and base jumping (Lyng and Snow 1986; Miller and Frey 1996; Ferrell et al. 2001; Natalier 2001; Donnelly 2004; Laurendeau 2006; Laurendeau and Van Brunschot 2006), others have explored the

embodied nature of anorexia (Gailey 2009), emotional management (Lois 2005) as well as occupational risk taking (Lyng 1998; Wexler 2010; Smith 2005; Hamm 2005; Sjoberg 2005). Burke would also remind us that we can access order by asking what is not explicitly stated. For example, by subverting actions that are presented as skilled, masculine and 'tough', by implication we are also revealing that which is not. Whether researchers choose to explicitly focus on the mystification of gender or race is not a limitation of the concept of Edgework.

A second tension centers on the paradox of Edgework, described as a form of escape from the "structural imperatives of late modernity" (Lyng 2005: 7) while at the same time being an expected competency of individuals working in a neoliberal economy marked by risk. The latter is particularly true in cases of risk taking behaviours associated with careers such as bond trading (Abolafia 1996) bicycle messengers (Finchman 2006; Kidder 2006) and rescue work (Lois 2005). Lyng addresses this by suggesting that people participate in risky activities on at least two levels:

...people may, on one level, seek a risk taking experience of personal determination and transcendence in an environment of over-regulation, whereas on another level they employ the human capital created by this experience to navigate the challenges of a risk society (2005:10).

The framework of risk widely circulates as a justification for kinds of actions (such as ways of working or jumping out of planes). Explanations for why humans act differently in different instances are embedded in meaningful cultural frameworks. As C.W. Mills (1959) reminds us, one of the key purposes of the social critic should be to locate personal troubles in the context of public and political issues. Certainly my students did not privilege personal over institutional motivations in explaining their decision to seek out edgework until after their participation. Edgework (Lyng 1990, 1998, 2004) attends to the embodied experience of transgression and the broader socio-historical context in which many people voluntarily seek out performances of risk, a key idea that mobbers expressed a keen interest in for this exercise.

Moments on the Edge of a Classroom

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when asked why they wanted to participate in this activity, most mobbers expressed a need to feel 'something different' in the classroom. Almost all of the mobbers indicated that they wanted to participate because it was an "unorthodox way" (LZF) of ending a stressful semester. The search for unorthodox experience, however, was stubbornly explained in relation as a 'fun' way to perform orthodox research strategies. Most students claimed the purpose of their participation was to measure something about the lived experience of others, firmly presenting themselves as the objective observer of a breaching experiment. Many initially explained becoming mobbers as a way to collect data about the people who were reacting to the flash mob; they wanted to be the stimulus that would cause an effect they could document and analyze:

I hope to make people feel uncomfortable, for the purpose of latter analysis... (MMM)

... to deliberately make people feel uncomfortable, inconvenient and stressed... I think this activity will be fun and random and I am looking forward to the reaction of the bystanders. (LCF)

Students typically indicated a kind of disconnect between why they were getting involved and the social construction of knowledge about transgression: the edifying benefit of the scientific method took priority over the fact that it might also be fun and terrifying for them. Acknowledging the performance as an opportunity to experience those feelings that make transgression appealing to those who are criminalized seemed to be lost on almost all participants initially. Burke would explain that ideologies of science served as the backdrop (or Scene), against which most students chose to explain themselves. The Scene framed their role (as Agent): to simply gather others' experiences for later analysis. There is no room in the discourse of science to discuss the value of 'feeling scared' to learn about embodied social orders.

Numerous students offered institutional oppression as another justification for their interest in 'losing control' in a controlled way. For example, there was a public transit strike in our city through December and January of the same year. The strike lasted over 60 days. Many vulnerable populations were negatively impacted by the loss of this essential service at a time when temperatures plummeted to -37°C (-35°F). The federal government chose not to declare this an essential service, effectively privileging the conservative municipal government's right to delay negotiations with the transit union throughout the coldest months of the year. Some students were forced to withdraw from courses as getting to campus became impossible. Those who paid for cabs to and from school, home and work now faced oppressive debts. The experience of institutional social control was identified as a key source of stress, over which they felt they had no meaningful control:

This has been an extraordinary semester for me. The problems that I have incurred during the bus strike were much greater than most of my fellow students and the recent economic crisis has impacted my very home, my father was unemployed, simply needed a break from stressors. I am hoping this experiment [brings] me some relief and brief joy... (LZF)

Although I do not really know anyone in the class I definitely felt like we were all one big group of happy dancing people...something about dancing around in a park really seemed to bring out the friendly side of the student population that I don't otherwise feel around campus. (KMF)

Being from Afghanistan...not a lot of citizens from Afghanistan get an opportunity to be involved in something like this...(WOF)

I want to do something exciting before I leave university. I'm about to finish my third year [...], I am not sure if I will have any opportunities to do something like this [again]. (DTM)

Institutional orders were key explanations for why many mobbers experienced a lack of autonomy; while some institutions were certainly more oppressive (the gendered experience of life in China or Afghanistan, for example), all students looked to their experience in a flash mob to provide them with a brief reprieve from institutional orders and a chance to feel 'in the moment', something most did not anticipate having after graduation. They did not yet recognize themselves as being the producer of this reprieve.

Moments before the car entered the park signaling the start of the flash mob was palpable. When 'showtime' arrived, students caught in a moment of excitement and adrenaline, indicated they had forgot about the "experiment". The open ended questions that students filled out immediately after the event included substantially less justifications that called upon the authority of experimentation. Across the board, students expressed an intense intimacy with people they shared classes with for the last 3 years but never spoke

to. The following excerpts capture, in part, the excitement, camaraderie and anxiety that pulsed through those first few moments. The expressed anxieties remained centred on their ability to maintain control over chaos. The experience of chaos provided an alternative rhetorical framework through which students chose to self-identify differently. Whereas most participants initially presented themselves as students ‘pretending’ to be deviant for the benefit of watching how other’s react, afterwards they took ownership and embraced the strangeness of the moment:

Most [of us] seemed to greet the initial sound of music with relief, as prior to the rave many of my colleagues were in a state of panic, wondering when the car was going to arrive, or if they were in the right place... The sound of music for me, and many others, was the doorway into transgression, where for three minutes we left [social control] behind us [in] our heartbeats and rhythm. (MJM)

At first, when I saw the car pulling up, then [...] Landry jumping out of the car, I felt a little nervous but instantly began to laugh. I almost did not participate, but when I saw all the people run and gather around [...] the car I had to join in [...] I just wanted to join and experience the event. (TDF)

I was on the Mackenzie Bridge when the music started[...] so I saw everyone rush towards the car and my face was beaming! I smiled and laughed out loud! Then I picked up my pace and ran down the stairs, which was tricky because those steps were wet and slippery!!! I ran to join the crowd dancing by the car and it made me more excited just to be there! (JFF)

...moments after this struggle [deciding to participate], and after taking a quick glance at my fellow classmates who rapidly grouped and started dancing [...] I simply moved closer to the rave [...] I was now no longer an innocent bystander. (SECM)

Indeed, no longer innocent bystanders and no longer identifying with the feeling of helplessness bestowed by institutionalized alienation, students fostered a sense of intimacy with their fellow mobbers seemingly born of chaos. As the Scene changed into momentary disorder, students indicated that it was helpful to develop emotional relationships with people they never felt the need to talk to prior:

I spoke to a kid in the class I hadn’t ever spoke to before. We made eye contact from a good distance apart on the sidewalk [before the rave] and we both started laughing because we knew that we were both here to do this ridiculous thing... (ZRM)

Many of us were laughing and smiling at each other, and jumping together. I felt a form of togetherness, even with those classmates I had never spoken to. (MHF)

On the day of the ‘spontaneous rave’ I had spoken and interacted with classmates [...] whom I have never spoken before. (SNF)

I felt as though we had all something more in common than we did when the semester first started, we all had the unique experience of participating in the Flash Mob! (NJF)

...although I may not have known people in the mob, I was comfortable dancing with them, sharing smiles, and even high-fiving a few people. (LCF)

Most mobbers expressed feeling “too absorbed in the moment to notice anything else” (MVAF). Many were surprised that they forgot to gage other people’s reactions. No longer neutral observers, they wanted to interact positively with those who walked through our mob.

They wanted the people walking around us to be ‘with’ us, not react ‘to’ us. Some pedestrians pretended we were not there but many others chose to play with us; these interactions both surprised and gave pause for many about their role in creating new social orders:

I noticed towards the end that people were slowing down to get a good look at what was going on, perhaps debating whether to join or not [...] there was one gentleman who actually started dancing his way through the group [...] he danced around the outer edges of the group and when he got to the other side he stopped dancing and just walked on his way as if nothing unusual had occurred [...] it makes me wonder about how easy it would be to change the norm of certain situations. (TDBF)

A few of the more adventurous students wanted to create something wilder, bigger, or scarier. Our crowd of approximately 75 people was simply too small of a gathering for these mobbers to consider our rave a ‘success’. Students expressed their frustrations as they attempted to gather more of their friends to get involved with our flash mob. This is an ongoing emotional reality for those working in criminological fields who witness the dehumanizing effects of incarceration and the seeming lack of will for social change. The activity felt “more organized and regulated” (ABU) than some had hoped. Burke would remind us that any cultural production, regardless of its value as a counter statement, is still an ordered statement. While the flash mob produced an ‘alternative’ social order, it reproduced a social order nonetheless. This was not missed by some mobbers: “In a matter of 3 min, we shifted from revolutionaries to a simple group of dancers conforming within a structure” (MJM). Furthermore, to address earlier criticisms raised about edgework research, the gendered and racialized context in which transgression unfolds was not missed by participants. In describing an exchange between himself and another student, both of whom are Black, one student debated the potential outcome with his friend: “I can see the police chasing us and ignoring the rest of the class” (HHM). Yet another student, who has arguably lived through more extreme social control than the average North American university student, had a somewhat different perspective: “If I could use one word to describe this event, that word would be fantastic! As an international student [...] from China, this event means fulfillment, creativity and [was] very memorable to me” (TLM). Most of the women were eager to participate in an edgy activity, but were clearly more comfortable with the dancing option as originally decided. Although the gender breakdown for attendees was half and half, many men were concerned with their ability to dance, initially explaining their participation “for the good of science!” (DMM). Another male student asserted notions about gender and heterosexuality to explain his participation: “it will be difficult not to hit on some of the ladies while trying to do my edgework” (AJM). These kinds of comments, while clearly intended to be humorous, stand as a commentary on what is sayable about knowledge production. It suggests an ordering where emotion and embodied experience are presented as feminine and less valuable than orthodox methodologies of data collection.

Much to my delight, though, most mobbers described their experience positively, in terms of feeling their ability to foster collective social action and change through transgression, but only after their participation in the mob. These types of comments were absent in their notes preceding the flash mob:

...I felt that if we went down, we would go down together. (WOF)

...we were in the middle of challenging something that in other situations I would never consider doing. (CMM)

...we were all working together to create something, rather than individually participating. (SMF)

Prior to their experience, students made no indication that they believed a reordering of public space would bring about any valuable insight about the experience of transgression unless it involved examining cause and effect experimentation, even though this method was critiqued throughout the course of the semester. Their understanding of criminological knowledge was initially expressed without human agency or responsibility. This was not the case after their participation in the flash mob. Most recognized the potential roles they could play as active creators of new orders.

Concluding Notes from the Edge of a Classroom

Upon further reflection, there are some things about this moment that I would have done differently. It was not a carefully planned out exercise. It is important to admit my lack of organizational skills during this point in my career; however, my experience would be a familiar reality for most new scholars in contemporary academia in North America: I was teaching six courses to pay the bills while completing a PhD dissertation, which was not conducive to my organizational achievements in the classroom. While recording the flash mob seems like it would have been an important consideration for those who chose to participate in the flash mob, the recording was done as an afterthought, as a way to accommodate a student who wanted to participate without dancing. As I stated earlier, a lot can change in 3 years, and this is particularly true of mass media. I have no information about who has seen the video, as none of us considered posting it on YouTube. It was shared on Facebook, but our flash mob pre-dates the Facebook technology that would allow us to track how many times it was shared.

Furthermore, the timing of our mob was not ideal; it would have been nice to have another class together in which we could discuss and share our experiences of that day, watch the video that was created, and invite those who chose not to participate to comment or reflect with us. I would have liked them to talk more about what it means to be performers in “dangerous little everyday theaters” (Ferrell et al. 2008: 181). This conversation could have better served those planning to work with criminalized populations, who might hear from those accused of breaking the law similar justifications to what the students offered up for participating in collective transgression. Just maybe they might recognize the emotional, embodied and cultural aspect of transgression, which might humanize those actors in a way that is mystified through quantification, risk assessments and statistical analyses.

Overall, though, understanding the complexities of transgression as a manifestation of the complex relationship between people and institutional power is certainly a narrative worth re-creating and experiencing in (or outside) the classroom. Creative chaos is a useful tool to trouble those good guy/bad guy narratives. Many mobbers from that class would go on to register in my senior qualitative research methods seminar and graduate seminar on crime, space and urban culture. We continue to draw on this moment of cultural production to create an appreciation for the value of ethnographic research and creating counter-discourses with our research. It is an important issue, given the changing political landscape where young people—including our criminology students—are increasingly confronted with the complex relationships between security, public space, social control and social change.

Perhaps it is unsurprising to most social scientists that a keen sense of camaraderie were born in the spontaneity of that moment. Furthermore, rationalizing a flash mob into a regularly

expected activity in my class would defeat the purpose of trying to create counter-discourses. However, it is important to note that through meaningful transgression, students met the challenge to re-evaluate their own claims about the future criminologists they wanted to be. This production also reflects something concerning about the changing nature of post secondary criminology and criminal justice education. The limited time frame in which we were able to organize and execute this exam is a reflection of the shrinking time teaching criminologists have to develop spontaneous meaningful experiences in our classes. Universities are increasingly choosing to adopt programs of study that rely on single semester classes, or put a heavy emphasis on online courses devoid of human interactions but easily packaged. As such, precious year long classes that allow for more in depth discussions about the social construction of knowledge and our responsibility as those who actively produce it, slip away. The condensed learning times, on the other hand, do accommodate orthodox research methods effortlessly. This should concern all social scientists, but especially those criminologists who wish to encourage the next generation of criminologists to think critically about the criminal justice programs and legislations they produce.

The instant ethnographies and flash mob highlighted in this paper indicate, in a Burkean sense, what is sayable about being a contemporary criminologist in North America: many students indicate a concerning disconnect from the process of knowledge production. It is a common theme I struggle with in all my research methods and theory courses. Inviting students to participate in something scary provoked a shift in how students explained their roles as criminologists. The students indicated they saw potential in thinking about knowledge production in terms of responsibility, an emotional tool that would serve future criminological research well. Disrupting the expected aesthetics of the classroom has been an effective way to introduce some students to the potential in meaningful and exciting moments of transgression (Lyng 2004; Katz 1998). Presdee (2000) and Young (2003) suggest a vacant commonality of boredom among criminals, criminologists and cultural consumers and producers alike: a shared pursuit of “[e]xcitement, engagement, illicit kicks and explosive possibilities, all thrown up against the relentless machinery of modern boredom” (Ferrell 2004: 294). Most criminology students intend to work within the criminal justice system; therefore, humanizing the experience of transgression is worth the professional risk that might come with teaching at the edge of a classroom.

Hamm (2005), Sjoberg (2005) and Ferrell (2004) are just a few contemporary voices among a growing body of critical theorists urging a change in how we perform criminology. The ways in which we create knowledge shapes our (and, by implication, our students’) perceptions of what kind of criminology is meaningful. It might be appropriate to allow students to plan a flash mob. Alternatively, students might produce other kinds of interesting cultural responses to orthodox criminology. Burke’s theoretical framework aligns nicely with the thrust of Cultural Criminology as it invites the social critic to be reflexive about their own role in the cultural productions of crime knowledge and how else our narratives about crime might be produced in an effort to change this order. It is my hope that this paper contributes to this provocation, by encouraging a disciplinary willingness to ironize the criminology classroom and the everyday dramatizations of crime knowledge.

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