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Culture within and culture about crime: The case of the “Rodney King Riots”

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Abstract

Does cultural criminology have a distinct intellectual mission? How might it be defined? I suggest analyzing three levels of social interaction. At the first level, the culture of crime used by those committing crimes and the process of creating representations of crime in the news, entertainment products, and political position statements proceed independently. At the second level, there is asymmetrical interaction between those creating images of crime and those committing crime: offenders use media images to create crime, but cultural representations of crime in the news, official statistics, and entertainment are developed without drawing on what offenders do when they commit crime, or vice versa. At a third level, we can find symmetrical, recursive interactions between the cultures used to do crime and cultures created by media, popular culture, and political expressions about crime. Using the “Rodney King Riots” as an example, I illustrate the looping interactions through which actors on the streets, law enforcement officials, and politicians and news media workers, by taking into account each other’s past and likely responses, develop an episode of anarchy through multiple identifiable stages and transformational contingencies.

Keywords

Cultural criminology, etiology, narrative criminology, riots, social interaction and crime

Does cultural criminology have a distinct intellectual mission? How might it be defined? In search of the simplest answer, I suggest a pair of distinctions. The first is between culture in crime and culture about crime. Culture in crime refers to the understandings employed by people as they commit crimes. These include folk narratives of how crimes occur, which are used by offenders to organize the social interaction required to commit crimes. Culture in crime also includes seductions of crime, the moral meanings and sensual experiences that animate transgression.

Culture about crime includes at least three major subtypes. There are descriptions of crime by those who, taking a posture as neutral observers, produce either official statistics, news media

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accounts, or academic studies, whether qualitative or quantitative. A second type of culture about crime is produced when self-defined offenders give post-hoc descriptions and explanations of why and how they became criminals. A third variety encompasses entertainment depictions, whether fictional, documentary, or ironical, the last including images of criminality used to evoke humor.

An analyst may treat the same material as a resource for a study of the culture in or the culture about crime. Interviews of offenders are sometimes the best available information on how and why crimes occurred; but if the analyst focuses on the situation of their production, "own stories," auto-biographies and auto-ethnographies may be analyzed as presentations of self which are made to shape the understanding of the interviewer, a parole board, a potential publisher, or academic colleagues. Similarly, an analyst may treat media accounts of crime as such, or read them for evidence on the matters they report. If they are to offer explanations of terrorist attacks, most academics will have no alternative but to rely on media reports as transparent windows on the behavior they purport to represent. Others will put quotation marks around news coverage on terrorism, treating it as a phenomenon to be studied in its own right. It is not the material itself but the analyst who determines whether the value of the material is best exploited as a resource for attempting to contribute to knowledge about culture in or culture about crime.

A second major distinction is among the various ways that culture in crime and culture about crime may or may not interact with each other. After clarifying the ways that processes of doing crime and processes of representing crime may relate to each other, I draw on the so-called "Rodney King Riots" to illustrate the empirical necessity of making these distinctions. An overriding objective is to demonstrate that the case for cultural criminology does not rest on post-modernism, structuralism, auto-ethnography, or any type of hermeneutic turn in social science, but on its utility for criminology's traditional quest to improve causal explanation. We focus on the interaction between the culture in and the culture about crime because that interaction sometimes is causally critical in the formation of criminal behavior and in the projection, to a mass public, of images of crime and criminals.

Level 1: Culture in crime and culture about crime, analyzed independently

In the most elementary understanding of cultural criminology, researchers study representations about crime that are made by the institutions of popular culture, i.e. in journalism, in policy making and political rhetoric, and in entertainment products. The study of culture in crime focuses on crime stories that criminals tell in situ as a casually critical means for committing crime. For example, robbers, in order to get victims to cooperate in helping effectuate the offense, must signal to their would-be victims something along the order of "a crime is in progress." When Woody Allen made *Take the Money and Run*, he not only made a comedy, he also conveyed something real about the minimal cultural competency for committing robbery. Playing the role of a robber, he handed a bank teller a demand note written with poor penmanship and then confronted a confused yet sympathetic teller who read "gub" for "gun." In order to commit robbery, it is not sufficient to have a weapon, intend to use it to compel a victim to hand over money, and find a victim with money. The offender also must perform as the director of a situational drama, effectively defining the situation as a crime by casting and guiding others to play the complementary roles that the successful production of a robbery requires.

Generally, to commit personal contact crimes and crimes involving collaborating partners, people must bring into social interaction a popularly understood folk sociology describing how crimes are done. Like all behavior, but as an extreme case because of its brief and pressured enactment, violent crime usually is, to use the phrase of the ethnomethodologists, highly indexical. Gestures are made, brief phrases are uttered, and robbers go into action on the understanding that the course of conduct they project will be intersubjectively understood by co-offenders, victims, and bystanders, such that all parties can coordinate their conduct to fit and to create the scenario of an unfolding crime. Crimes generally cannot occur without the people involved using narratives about crime—an understanding of the phases and transitions among phases—to make the crimes happen. In the history of criminology, the focus has been so overwhelmingly on background factors that might explain differences in crime patterns, and the ethnomethodological perspective has remained so elusive, that the rich potential in the narrative constitution of crime has barely been tapped (For some exceptions, see: Collins, 2007; Jackson-Jacobs, 2013; Katz, 1988).

Studies of culture *about* crime make up a great bulk of cultural criminology. This perspective appreciates that, as a cultural resource, crime is far too valuable to be left to criminals. Whether the area of research be the news media, political debate, or entertainment products ranging from mystery novels, murders in Shakespeare's plays, or Hollywood movies, the researcher here has the easiest task, at least with respect to data gathering. Without any methodological reflection, any undergraduate student can assemble a set of stories and analyze their content. Increasingly, students use search engines to locate, count, and find associations with representations of crime. Common questions are: What tropes are used? How does the representation of crime in one or another area of popular culture compare to (bias, distort) the reality of crime as indicated by data on crime patterns? If patterns in the commission of crime do not explain patterns in the representation of crime, what does? (On crime in the daily news, see Katz, 1987.)

In a more complex research design, the researcher studies historical changes in how crimes are represented by different institutions of popular culture or by the same institution over time. One might compare crime and criminals in *Dragnet*, a TV police show of the 1950s that was written from a police perspective; with *The Naked City*, a TV police show that ran about 10 years later and was written from a social work perspective; with crime and criminals in more recent police dramas, which use crime to avoid issues of race relations (casting villains as white), highlight social inequalities (*Columbo*, *Monk*: shabby or psychologically defective detectives bringing down the powerful), dramatize bureaucratic constraints on creative freedom (*Kojak* and virtually all police and detective heroes since), and celebrate state power as enhanced by technological sophistication (*Crime Scene Investigation*). Because crime will always be a major focus of popular culture, documenting change in the representation of crime in entertainment vehicles is a strategic focus for documenting changes in popular culture in general.

In a much more challenging research design, the researcher tries to explain how the content of stories is related to the social process of producing culture. A sociologist might link patterns in the culture about crime that an organization produces to how news rooms operate, to the dynamics of political campaigns, or to the patterns of collective action through which movies are made. And at an even more complex level, the researcher explains changes in the way crime is represented by linking them to changes in how the culture of crime is produced. Has the decline of the Studio system for making movies, and the rise of independent filmmakers, been responsible for making film portrayals of crime more realistic? Or has the cinematic representation of crime just become

distorted in new ways? Given the rapidly diminished role of metropolitan newspapers in how people learn about society, there are new challenges for the cultural criminology community. By what mechanisms is the popular understanding of crime currently formed? Internet sites and postings of information describe crimes and criminals at arrest; facilitate the production of ongoing, crowd-sourced portraits of individuals; and make convictions stick to individuals, for example, by offering employers easily searchable criminal records and offering anyone access to the mapped locations of adjudicated sex offenders. Digital crime news is creating a new world of social interaction among readers, alleged offenders, and social researchers of the lay and the professional sort. (And raising a host of new moral and policy issues: Lageson, 2015).

We can label studies as at Level 1 when they treat only the culture in crime or only the culture about crime, because they are relatively simple in their analytic character, even if, especially in the former case, acquiring and processing relevant data may be challenging. It is common for researchers of crime causation to neglect the literature on how crime is represented in journalism or law enforcement policy, except as a foil highlighting their own contributions. Likewise, researchers who address the institutional representation of crime can remain agnostic about issues of crime causation, even while contrasting patterns of criminal behavior with patterns of crime as implied by what is shown to news readers, political constituencies, and entertainment audiences. But even as Level 1 studies continue to dominate cultural criminology, it will be helpful for the research community to become more self-conscious when making presumptions of independence. From the start, the distinction has not been maintained systematically, although this may be changing. (Cf. the treatment of offenders' accounts as evidence about crime causation versus as a distinct culture about crime in Shaw and Burgess (1930) and Presser and Sandberg (2015)).

Level 2: Asymmetrical interactions between culture in and culture about crime

That people, when they are doing crime, take into account aspects of culture about crime is a familiar observation. The general point is captured by the irony of life imitating art. Young men adopt movie names to label their own gangs. (For examples from Congo-origin gang members in Brussels, an area new to gang research, see Hellemont, 2015). Offenders play off of movie and music video scenes when they hold guns sideways, which may look cool but is a poor choice if the primary consideration is accuracy. Yet if the theatrical gesture increases the chances of not having to shoot at all, the method has a logic: being successfully intimidating requires expressing oneself in a form that will terrify victims.

In a complementary way, the production of culture about crime increasingly uses as a resource the culture actually used in crime. Movie depictions of crime are today much more naturalistic than they were in the heyday of the big Hollywood Studios in the 1930s and 1940s. This change is part of a larger transformation. Actors now are likely to be known to the public with names they were given by their parents at birth; movie executives no longer insist on the Studios' standard policy of conferring de-ethnicized names on contract players. The contrast between the melodramatic gangster portrayals by Edward G. Robinson (né Emanuel Goldberg) in *Little Caesar* and *Key Largo* and the contra-stereotype, self-conflicted portrayals of gangsters in the movie *Goodfellas* and in the TV series *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, is striking. Contemporary entertainment production plays off of long term journalistic documentation (in the case of *Goodfellas*);

New Yorker-style, detailed prose writing (*In Cold Blood*); and ethnographic investigation, which introduces movie and TV audiences to local dialects, references, and styles.

Level 3: Symmetrical, iterative interactions between culture in and culture about crime

Cultural criminology has emphasized the loopy relationships between culture in crime and culture about crime: the “moral panics,” the essentialist labeling, and the biased selectivity by which mass culture represents crime. The problem is that the comparison is too easy. Comparing crime as represented by the media and patterns of crime as described in empirical research, researchers are virtually guaranteed to produce an informative and critical perspective.

Researchers face a longer and more obstacle-ridden research path when they try to investigate the looping relationship between how culture creators and criminals see and respond to each other. (The concept of “loops” was introduced in Ferrell, 2015: 154–156). Sometimes actors on each side—those engaged in shaping what they understand to be criminal activity and those shaping public understandings of criminal activity—form their behavior through taking into account how the other side takes account of them.

The tendency in cultural criminology to emphasize loopy relationships suggests that crime causation and the recognition of crime by media and law enforcement proceed on independent tracks. But this perspective, however productive, risks ignoring patterns of empirical interaction. For an initial example, I recall an informal writing in which Gerald Suttles (1978) observed that Chicago’s street gangs shaped their geographic claims and geography-based names in response to the organization of gang control units in the Chicago police department, which had organized gang control units by imagining that it was reflecting a pre-existing geographic reality. In a way, the attempted remedy produced the problem, or at least its social organization.

As of this writing, which was developed during the waves of protest that created a wake (in both senses of the word) following “Ferguson,” the culture about crime is rife with a burgeoning set of claims about interactive effects with the culture used in crime formation. The Ferguson event, and several subsequent killings characterized as a “white” policeman shooting a “black” man or boy, were widely denounced by protestors, media reporters, and academic commentators as evidence of the harmful results of “zero tolerance” or “broken windows” policing.¹ This policing policy was based on a criminological theory about how culture enters into the formation of criminal behavior. The presumption of “broken windows” theory is that would-be offenders are reading culture in public space (graffiti, trash, loitering, open contraband marketing) for signs of official indifference. Rigorous enforcement of laws against minor infractions, it follows, would change would-be offenders’ readings of street scenes, interrupting their criminal calculations.

After “Ferguson,” in a social movement that picked up the banner “Black Lives Matter,” the mass media became filled with images of intense protests against police violence, which often were triggered by zero tolerance policing, such as arrests for walking on a roadway or selling cigarettes one-by-one. Prominent law enforcement officials have claimed that, in response to the culture *about* crime and criminal justice projected by the protest movement, the police have become less willing to intervene aggressively and, as a result, the culture *in* crime has changed, such that offenders have increased their willingness to commit crime. This ongoing, swirling controversy is based on ideas of an evolving, looping relationship between the causation of crime and

the culture of mass protests, which attack not just police action in particular cases but the “zero tolerance” culture about crime.

One way that the research community can respond is to investigate independently each step of the claimed causal chain. Are police officers changing their behavior based on a change in the culture about crime and law enforcement? Are offenders changing their behavior in committing crimes based on a perception of the police as wary of becoming part of an episode in the mass narrative on crime and criminal justice? An alternative but not mutually exclusive approach is to preserve the natural integrity of the interaction process and trace its development as a coherent case. The looping relationships between the culture in and the culture about crime develop over stages, forming discrete historical episodes. If data sets of such episodes were created, they might be analyzed for developing and testing hypotheses on regularities in their natural histories. (Cf. Spector and Kitsuse, 2001).

In order to illustrate the research agenda that would follow, I will review the history of the “Rodney King Riots”. This case, which I characterize as an episode of anarchy, is unrepresentative of everyday crime in ways that make it strategically useful. The interaction between the causation of crime and the representation of crime was compact in time and space. Media representations were being read or viewed not only by the general public but by people who were contemplating committing crimes of arson, theft, and vandalism. And unlike most street crime, about which what is readily available is little more than the binary fact of occurrence or non-occurrence, we can make use of a variety of contemporaneous descriptions to trace the patterns of criminality in episodes of anarchy as they emerged, transformed, and disappeared, which enables us to isolate the stage-specific impact of news coverage on crime and of crime on news coverage. The concentration of episodes of anarchy in time and space, and the dramatic nature of the events, means that many people—journalists, social researchers, commissions investigating causes—can focus descriptive energies to a degree unmatched by any other form of criminal conduct. Almost by definition, riots or collective efforts at rebellion are especially likely to generate a recorded history.

In reviewing the “Rodney King” episode, I will focus only on those aspects which indicate interactions between the culture in and the culture about crime. Overall, two patterns will be emphasized. As to the culture in crime, those on the street shaped their participation in anarchic behavior, depending on their sense of their visibility to law enforcement and the media. But not in the usual way. Usually, we would expect would-be offenders to desist when they are aware that they have become visible to law enforcement. But at critical turning points within episodes of anarchy, would-be participants understand that the more visible they will be as a mass, the less vulnerable they will be to punishment as individuals, even though each is otherwise undisguised. An ironic “epiphany of invisibility” is at the causal heart of anarchy as collective behavior. (See Katz, 2015).

The second pattern is that law enforcement, media, and politicians shaped their depiction of participants based on their estimation of how participants were and would be perceiving them. The institutions that produce the culture of crime take account, in the investigative interventions they make, in the profiles they assume, and in the narratives they put out for public consumption, of how those participating in the anarchy are likely to perceive and respond to whether and how their anarchic behavior is socially constructed. The upshot of this looping relationship is that the very definition of criminality becomes a moving line.

The dynamic interaction between the anarchic actors on the streets and the culture creators in the news media, in politics, and in law enforcement, is at the unspoken heart of "riot management." Within episodes of anarchy, law enforcement cannot acknowledge the negotiated character of what will be treated as crime. While characterizing the events as a "riot," police and military forces adjust their techniques of control so as not to exacerbate the anarchy, but without announcing that they are deciding to let criminals off. The moving line only recently has been appreciated by academics. Usually the response of university researchers is to abjure describing participants as arsonists, looters, and vandals and to jump onto the side of the debate that defines the phenomenon wishfully as a "rebellion," typically by pointing to background factors (poverty, discrimination, unemployment, neo-liberal government policies), which cast the event as a crypto-protest. In a stroke, sociologists lose contact with the sociological nature of the phenomenon.

Considered as a distinct form of collective behavior, the political meaning of anarchy is inherently ambiguous, open ended, negotiated. An episode of anarchy is a duel between two competing efforts to interrelate the culture of and the culture about crime. On the anarchist side, the phenomenon is one in which, at Time 1, people self-consciously participate in criminal conduct on the understanding that, at Time 2, institutions of law enforcement will as a practical matter be blinded to crimes that are happening in plain sight; in the aspiration that, at Time 3, the volume of illegality that will have been enacted will be so great that the prospect of any individual offender being prosecuted will be miniscule. On the law enforcement side, anarchy is an event in which, at Time 1, those in power back off from treating behavior as criminal, in the aspiration of getting control over the streets at Time 2, such that at Time 3 some of those now committing crimes and some of those not previously apprehended as criminal can be caught and punished.

The critical moment sometimes comes in a shift from a "cat and mouse" game, when looters, arsonists, and vandals probe police capacities, disappearing from the reach of police positioned to isolate them, to the moment when a "crowd" is acting. That shift is often glossed by media accounts, which may describe the back-and-forth stage but then unreflectively pass over to describing the behavior of a collective noun. On the 2011 English riots:

Some of the group of around 200 young people "knocked down walls, and were smashing bricks into smaller pieces ... to make them easier to throw at police" (Guardian, 9/8/11: 4). What followed was a cat and mouse game with small groups roaming the streets 'looking for unguarded shops' (ibid). These groups "simply melted into the back streets at the first sign of police, only to regroup minutes later". This 'waiting' game continued until around 9 pm when "the crowd started moving on mass" (ibid), shops began to be broken into and looted, and rocks were thrown at the police. (Jefferson, 2015:7)

News coverage, and most sociological writing, passes without pause from descriptions of individual action to descriptions of a "crowd" acting, jumping over the most important interaction moments, which are those in which participants come to know they have become a crowd because they see their perception as a crowd incapacitating police responsiveness.

If we analyze participants as interacting with how they are seen, and if we appreciate the challenge on the side of the police as one of understanding how their perceptions of participants will be seen, we need not stray into a 21st century version of the 19th century analysis of crowd behavior

as irrational or non-rational. Nor do we need Stanley Cohen's 20th century "moral panic," which biting and ironically transferred irrationality to the media and its citizen readers. Nor must we commit to the 20th century's psychological portrait of rioters as "rational actors," as implied by the language used by economists and game theorists (See, for example, DiPasquale and Glaeser, 1998).

What happens in a flash takes many words to spell out, but in no instance does lightning strike interaction sensibilities dead. At the critical turning point, participants on the street understand that law enforcement officials will gloss their individual identities for their potential status as a crowd, and they are often right in the way that self-fulfilling prophecies become true. Police or military forces are constantly assessing whether participants on the street understand that they will be hidden under the posture of a crowd. Riot control is inherently a business of interaction guessing. No protocol can be used to train law enforcement personnel so that they do not make either the passive error of retreating before the participants have reached a widespread and irrevocable self-conception as a crowd, or the active error of charging to arrest individuals who have already come to understand that they are part of an irresistible collectivity.

I use the term "anarchy" in an attempt at precise sociological description. "Anarchy" keeps the analytic focus away from a final political labeling of the event at "riot" or "rebellion" and on the quickly evolving, hierarchically undisciplined, anti-Authority/anti-Establishment thrust of actions which are distinctive in being premised on an understanding by participants that the forces of order have suddenly vanished. The sort of event that clarifies that an episode of anarchy is in process is not a background of oppression, injustice, or group tension—which is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of anarchy—and not just looting mixed with slogan shouting, but indications that the aura of formally ruled social life has disappeared, giving way to an extraordinary freedom to innovate action. The analyst need not investigate or make claims about background injustices but knows that anarchy is going on when he or she sees cars driving on sidewalks to get around concentrations of people on the street, neighbors trading weapons for food, and the police standing aside as looters openly carry away goods.

A social history of the "Rodney King" anarchy

1. The pre-phase

In Los Angeles as in the US nationally, crime rates rose in the 1980s and 1990s, reaching an apex at about the time of the arrest of Rodney King, in 1991. In the year immediately prior to the peak crime level, leaders of the African-American population in South Central had joined with the mayor to support the police chief in engineering "gang sweeps." Behind the law enforcement policy, which was publicized by the LAPD as "Operation Hammer," was an understanding of widespread criminogenic potential among the area's black youth. This understanding was statistically expressed in a report by the area's top law enforcement official, which calculated that roughly half of the young men in the area were gang members (Reiner, 1992).

Operation Hammer implemented a crude version of zero tolerance: any manifestation of gang affiliation, as perceived by police officers, most of whom had not worked in the area, was a basis for arrest. In related efforts that resembled military checkpoints in war zones, the police blocked off streets and queried occupants of cars. As the police typically had no judicially presentable evidence to back up the arrests, the upshot of gang sweeps was that thousands of young men spent a day or several in jail and were then released. Even the local civil liberties union passed on condemnation.

The culture about crime represented by this repressive law enforcement policy was premised on assumptions about the culture used in committing crime. The "sweeps" responded to demands of black community leaders that law enforcement increase its presence in South Central, to the purpose of discouraging would-be offenders. What was effectively targeted was not in the first instance crime but symbols of gang affiliation. Culture about crime was deemed the cause of crime. Suppress the symbolic display of youth gang affiliation in public life and you would repress crime.

2. LA under siege

In the year between the arrest of Rodney King and the outcome of the trial against police officers who beat him, an ominous air came over Los Angeles. The anticipation of potential rioting was thick; dread became palpable, lived in countless moments of avoidance, apprehension, warning. Ironically, the counseling by political leaders, in particular by "the responsible leadership" of the African-American community (a phrase used by the city's African-American mayor), fed the dread. The upshot was to position those who would start the riot as "street people" expressing opposition to the "Establishment." This framing set up the outbreak of looting and arson as intra-black, class antagonism, and as an ambiguously political/criminal expression.

When the Simi Valley trial ended without a guilty verdict, it was read by people situated across the usual political divides as a shocking official authorization of police brutality against blacks. When the anarchy began, it was not necessary for those committing crimes to announce a political framing of their behavior. Because they came immediately after the trial's pronouncement of the official culture about crime, and because of the cross-partisan condemnation of the verdict, otherwise naked criminal behaviors of theft, arson, and violence against police and fire personnel were pre-framed as expressing a consensus protest.

In another, more subtle way, the verdict became an unwilling collaboration between the Establishment and the would-be anarchists. As with anarchy in general, the ability of people on the street to coordinate with each other was essential to the outbreak. Beyond the substantive contribution that the criminal justice system's case made by unifying a narrative of opposition against Authority, the trial outcome was causally critical to the outbreak of the anarchy in a distinctly processual way.

Anarchic action is not necessarily political. As Gary Marx (1970) observed decades ago, the causal process in "race riots" has many parallels in episodes of anarchy provoked by sports contests. Whatever the substantive narrative, starting an episode of anarchy requires overcoming a kind of prisoner's dilemma. A necessary condition is collective consciousness in a strong sense: the widespread understanding not only that "everyone" knows the same thing but a widespread understanding that "everyone," at the same time, knows that 'everyone' knows that "everyone" is focused upon the same matter. Particular mechanisms for establishing collective consciousness (judicial verdicts, sports competition finishes, word-of-mouth conveying news of police brutality) may be neither necessary nor sufficient, but some mechanism is essential.

Collective consciousness in this strong sense is extremely difficult to achieve. Opinion polls and elections can clarify that a substantive consensus existed at the time of polling, but not that there is a widespread experience of the same perspective at the same time. At most, polls and elections show what the consensus view was at the time of polling. Soon after the results are known, attentions have strayed along differentiated paths.

Collective consciousness in real time is not a sufficient cause of riots. But by focusing analysis on this processual necessity, we can better understand the loose linkage to the social status of riot participants. Middle class, middle aged adults are often collectively attentive to historic events in real time yet they cannot expect that their middle class, middle aged associates will participate in anarchy. Also necessary for participation is a pre-established, ongoing affinity with the ways of violence and vandalism, whether that be acquired and sustained as familiar through “gang” life, street crime, bar brawls, interpersonal attacks in prison, property destruction in adolescent or college fraternal circles, the daily physical subjugation of children and females, participation in sports involving intense physical contact, etc.²

The Simi Valley court, by pre-announcing that the verdict would be released to the news media at a specific clock time, and the news media, as well as political and law enforcement officials, by using this schedule to specify warnings and to coordinate preparations for the possible outbreak of riots, collaborated in solving the problem of creating collective consciousness. In the LA area, a vast population knew that when the trial’s outcome would be revealed, “everyone” would know that everyone would know. The causal relevance of collective consciousness in the strong sense is not only an implication of theory. Leaders of the events that kicked off the anarchy have described how they used court-promulgated timing to coordinate their actions. (See PBS, 1993: segment with Michael Zinzun).

3. The multi-stage development of street-based narratives

Participants on the street interacted with the narrative proposed by the criminal justice system. The substantive theme of reversal of narratives was seized upon to create kickoff events for the anarchy. Protests and criminal actions emphasizing the emotions behind the protests initially focused on “Parker Center,” the local name for the LAPD’s downtown headquarters (Institute for Alternative Journalism, 1992: 35; Martínez, 1992: 31–32). This target was guaranteed to bring media attention.

Parker Center was also a strategic focus for actions that could overcome the prisoner’s dilemma. The reversal metaphor was implemented literally by turning over police cars in the very face of central law enforcement authority. The street action of attacking symbols of police control without resistance evoked an epiphany of invisibility. The more visible the participants were while they were committing conduct that was unqualifiedly criminal and defiant—defiant not only because police were visibly observing but also because both the participants and anyone viewing could see that the crimes were being recorded by live TV cameras—the more the participants were insulated against arrest.

These two themes, constructing an epiphany of invisibility and reversing the narrative of the verdict, were exploited as mutually supportive resources for moving the anarchy into its most intense, destructive stage. Arsonists, who started operating in South Central within hours of the announcement of the trial verdict, seized on what appeared to be the solid foundations of social order and created an intoxicating mix of metaphor and material. The fires they set turned retail shops and warehouses into clouds of smoke that soon transcended all social divisions in LA. In South Central, TV broadcasts showed residents consulting TV sets that had been hauled out to sidewalks simultaneously to watch street actions occurring a few feet away as well as those developing in other neighborhoods. When LAPD officers in South Central responded to a

confrontation with protestors in an area being looted, they were soon told by a commanding officer to abandon the scene. The order was generally known because that too was broadcast (*Los Angeles Times Staff*, 1992: 52).

As helicopter-borne television news cameras displayed the immunity of destructive action, they became resources promoting anarchy in two ways. Everyone could see that “everyone” could see crimes being committed with impunity. But also, helicopter-transmitted images dramatically reversed an LA-specific metaphor indicating the transcendent power of state control. Here entertainment culture about crime became a resource for propelling anarchistic behavior.

Helicopters had become icons of militaristic social control at least since Robert Altman used them to set scenes in his Korean-war era *M*A*S*H** movie (1970). When a TV series developed from the movie’s success, the trope was used to preface each episode. Director Francis Ford Coppola extended the imagery to the Vietnam War in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Helicopters also flew over domestic law-and-order scenes in numerous police dramas set in LA. In *Blue Thunder* (1983), the helicopter became the narrative’s protagonist, a kind of super-hero mechanical police force. In a movie released a year after the “Rodney King Riots,” Altman began his LA-focused movie, *Short Cuts* (1993) with a flock of helicopters spraying insecticide against medflies, which for cinephiles was a sardonic reference back to his great success in *M*A*S*H**: tiny insects in Los Angeles now represented the same threat, one no less invisible to the domestic population and no less anxiety provoking, as had communist armies in Asia.

Both the narrative inversion principle and the epiphany of invisibility were dramatically reinforced in the beating of a truck driver, Reginald Denny. Unaware of the verdict and the street actions in progress, Denny was traveling through South Central on the afternoon when the verdict was announced. When he was attacked, the event, in multiple ways, inverted the beating of Rodney King by the police a year earlier. In both attacks: the attack grew out of a forced stop of a motor vehicle; several assailants took turns beating the victim, playing to a larger audience of immediately local observers who were attending in an improvised amphitheater; and, whatever the motivations of the apparently sadistic individual attackers, the attack manifested to their peers a rejection of disrespect for their community. King had disregarded police orders to pull over, drawing up to a dozen law enforcement agents into a chase whose high speeds put them in danger. Denny had been oblivious to the community he was driving through: he treated the day as like any other, despite the announcement of the historic verdict. And in both cases the assaults were being recorded, although in the case of the serial attack on Denny, the attackers, unlike the police who attacked King, were aware of the recording, which was being effected by helicopters overhead. Watching the live broadcast of the attack on Denny, people across the city could see that overt criminality was effectively invisible to law enforcement.

In the second day of the anarchy, the substantive theme initially used to coordinate participants was transformed. A narrative transformation was necessary to sustain the epiphany of invisibility. In an analogy to fire, an analogy which helps explain the appeal of arson in riots and rebellions despite the self-destructive material consequences to participants’ neighborhoods, anarchy must grow lest it begin to die down. But because of population changes that had occurred in Los Angeles since the Watts riots of 1965, a race-themed narrative could not keep the fires burning.

In South Central, and even more so in the surrounding neighborhoods that the anarchy would have to involve were it to continue after the looting and burning of the first neighborhoods attacked, African Americans were in a minority, the majority being composed of very low income

Latin American immigrants. Notably, the historic Mexican-origin population on the east side of Los Angeles did not join the anarchy, notwithstanding the heavy pressure that for decades the LAPD and the Sheriff's department had brought down on young men labeled as members of the area's youth gangs (Delk, 1995: 79). It was even less likely that appeals to grievances against police authority would inspire recently arrived Mexican and Central American residents to mobilize politically themed protests. Many Spanish-speaking residents were "illegals" vulnerable to deportation, and had not yet developed any public leaders to protest their treatment by local police. Since 1979, they had been significantly protected from police abuse of their vulnerability by Special Order 40, an LAPD order limiting inquiries into immigration status. Although living in proximity to African Americans, and often labeled "people of color" by university students and others seeking recognition of a demographically expansive Progressive coalition, my ethnographic research in Hollywood found that, at least until the end of the 20th century, Latino immigrants were socially distant from and often fearful of blacks in their everyday lives.

As the anarchy moved north of South Central and into Koreatown and Hollywood, there were dramatic instances of armed Korean merchants patrolling from the roofs of their stores and occasionally shooting at armed men on the street, but the dominant reality on the streets was of raids on stores by tens of thousands of Latinos, mixed with a proportion of blacks that diminished dramatically as the anarchy moved north. TV broadcasts showed reporters interviewing sometimes surprised but still unabashed looters as they came out of stores, incriminating evidence in hand. No thematic complaints of a moral or political nature were expressed by the thieves. Instead of the racial tension and police/minority citizen narrative that dominated the onset of the anarchy, the guiding motif was carnival (Bakhtin, 1984). When the looting reached Koreatown, the light, comic theme that guided the looters was highlighted by a juxtaposition with the shock and terror experienced by merchants whose families and family businesses were physically threatened (Abelmann and Lie, 1995: 41).

It was clear to all on the street that their very visibility as they engaged in theft was making the police impotent. Women hauling goods obviously looted from stores could be seen pushing policemen out of the way. A scene that can be taken to cap the atmosphere developed at the Sears department store, which stood at an epicenter of Hollywood-area commerce oriented to Latino immigrants. As hundreds of local residents looted the store, a man in a cowboy hat descended an internal, centrally located staircase while strumming a Rancharo melody on a guitar. In rhythmic relation to his playing, the instrument's price ticket fluttered. (Additional description in Katz, 2015).

4. Closure through a shift in the control of the dominant narrative

The episodic events usually referred to as "race riots" have usually run their course in three to five days (and in violent ethnic conflicts more generally; Horowitz, 2001). The decline has never been exploited for what it reveals about the responsible causal mechanisms. This neglect is one of the costs of the correlational approach that has dominated a social science literature preoccupied with background features that remain constant before, during, and after riots.

Typically, a state-level "national guard" or a federal militaristic force is deployed in mass numbers. The use of a show of massive government force continues the pattern in the history of European pogroms and in class-based rebellions. The replacement of the anarchic

street population by the forces of Authority shifts the dominant narrative and undermines the presumption of invisibility. In the “Rodney King” episode, mass arrests developed in the third day, after National Guard troops were deployed to assist local police. The arrests, facilitated by curfews imposed on the night of the second day, reached over 5000 by Friday night. Televised images, which previously had sustained a presumption of invisibility by showing reporters interviewing looters as they emerged from shops, now undermined that presumption as they showed streams of residents, mostly Latino immigrants, being corralled, held prone on the ground, and marched away by law enforcement authorities.

A tradeoff between enforcing the law and producing a visible image of law enforcement soon developed. Latino and black youth seen as “gangbangers” taunted the police and National Guardsmen, pointing guns, issuing threats nose-to-nose, shooting weapons in the air or at others, and challenging soldiers to show they had ammunition for their guns. The soldiers who witnessed these provocations and sustained these insults did so without attempting arrests (Delk, 1995). In contrast, Latino looters acted in an unthreatening, carnival atmosphere way, and they became the bulk of arrestees (Morrison and Lowry, 1994). The upshot was to generate an image of effective law enforcement while relinquishing the application of official power for the most egregious offenses.

Even before, however, a folk understanding that individual visibility was the critical causal contingency led more affluent residents to mobilize against looters coming into their neighborhoods. In the middle class area of western Hollywood, residents stood at a safe distance across the street from shops being looted and overtly took photographs of the individuals. People driving in to the area and stopping near looted shops could see that bystanders were taking photographs of the license plates of their cars. In the Hollywood hills, barricades were set up by volunteers who blocked passage into the area by insisting on the production of identification showing local residence. In these operations, residents exploited their ability to produce a double visibility, showing would be criminals that, even if they could not be stopped in the moment, they would be identifiable later, and showing their neighbors that there was collective strength on the side of repressing anarchy.

The police, who had given way to looting as it progressed northward through eastern Hollywood, assembled on the commercial streets of the foothills. In a pattern that continued the traditional responsiveness of the LAPD to the business interests in Hollywood, the police effectively made a last stand on Hollywood Boulevard, which was then a seedy stretch but still the area’s most frequented tourist destination. The northward progress of anarchy ended poetically at the doorstep of “Frederick’s of Hollywood”, a nationally famous erotic lingerie shop that, since the “pin up” culture of WWII, had served as a doubly faceted icon of entertainment and street level Hollywood.

5. The “Rodney King Riots” enters a series of post-anarchy narratives in popular culture

For years after the streets had returned to normal—“normal” in the sense that businesses reopened and looting and collective patterns of arson disappeared—the meaning of what had happened in the “Rodney King Riots” was revisited in popular culture. Those in the general public who had not already appreciated the fact, learned during the days of the anarchy that

the majority of residents in the close-in city were Latino immigrants. The image of the Latino population portrayed by media coverage of the "riots" was of looters. In contrast to the long-present Mexican descent population, the new immigrants had no well-known public figures to produce a respectable alternative to what the TV newscasts were showing.

Culture about the anarchy evolved through a series of elections for mayor and governor and in the public discussions leading up to state-wide plebiscites on several "Propositions." Consistently, the response was conservative. For the first time in decades, a Republican replaced the Democrat party's mayor in Los Angeles, and the symbol of an African American leading the city became part of the past. A Republican won re-election as the state's governor. His campaign began with a low approval rating, which was dramatically reversed after he linked himself to a Proposition restricting the rights of undocumented immigrants. It appeared on the 1994 ballot under the title, "Save our State."

During the immediate post-riots years, popular culture was repeatedly stimulated and crystallized by plebiscite votes against rights for "illegal aliens," against demands for greater academic and economic opportunities for African Americans, and for longer incarceration of adjudicated criminals. The voters decided against "affirmative action" and for a "Three Strikes" measure that mandated life time criminal punishment for a large class of repeat convicts. It is not possible to pin down exactly what role media coverage of the "riots" played in these elections. Academic researchers and left-leaning commentators argued against a "backlash" effect (Bobo, Zubrinsky and Johnson 1994; Lasleya, 1994), but their data did not cover the mobilization of sentiments in state-wide votes. Images of criminal action surrounding the police attack on King and the looting, arson, and black-on-white Denny attack were in the near background of the political campaigns that led to a consistently conservative/repressive mass voter action against undocumented immigrants, criminal defendants (who were disproportionately black and "Latino"), and affirmative action.

6. Twenty years later

The political meaning of the "Rodney King Riots" reversed again, now turning progressive. In the news coverage on the 20th anniversary of the events, the consistent theme was the historic struggle against LAPD brutality and the continuing vulnerability of Latino immigrants without legal residency status. No political or commenting voice used the events as a basis for more punitive policies toward the poor, blacks, or Latinos. The *Los Angeles Times* ran several weeks of stories on "The L.A. Riots: Twenty Years Later." The themes were of police department reform, improved community relations, a public sense of greater safety, continuing social problems despite the rebuilding of South Central, and, a month later, the death of Rodney King at age 47, accidentally drowned in his swimming pool as the result of what a coroner's report described as a "state of drug and alcohol-induced delirium".

Granularity, temporality, and interactions among narrative processes

The warrant for research in cultural criminology is that the narratives about crime that traditionally have been and for the most part continue to be proposed for explaining crime point to background factors, either ecological or biographical, and they do not work. Whether it is the failure to explain variations in the occurrence of "riots" or the dramatic ups and downs that street crime has shown over the last 50 years, the social research community's reliance on demographics and neighborhood

characteristics as constituting "the" story for understanding crime has been unsuccessful, and, given the expansion of academic research resources and government funding over this period, the failure has been on a grand scale. It is long overdue to refashion the approach to explaining crime by attending to the narratives created in the commission of crime itself. A criminology rooted in the culture used to commit crime inevitably becomes critical of the culture of crime that is created by the descriptors provided by government agencies.

The narrative criminology community will be happy to reject "positivist" explanations that rely on background factors, especially if background factors are measured quantitatively. But the more specific challenge for those who would understand the relationship of crime and culture is to appreciate that there is not just one meaning of a crime, and not just one meaning for each person studied. This is especially clear when we consider episodes of anarchy. It is not a question of whether a given event should be called a "riot" or a "rebellion," but a question of appreciating the distinctive interaction challenges that participants face in recognizing what the events mean to others and how, in the course of a few days, that challenge rapidly changes.

Granovetter (1978) facilitated a turn from correlational/synchronic approaches that rely on background factors to diachronic analysis that recognizes the changing meanings/motivations of collective events, including specifically riots, as the situation changes for interpreting what others-in-general will do. His model is now some 40 years old. Perhaps because it was delivered in the rhetoric of "game theory" and "rational choice," perhaps because it was offered as an anti-normative/cultural values explanation, Granovetter's approach has not been appreciated for the encouragement it offers to narrative criminology. (For an example of economists fantasizing a cost/benefit weighing actor, thus remaining blind to the phenomenology of behavior, in turn blocking the possibility for developing narrative criminology, see DiPasquale and Glaeser 1998). For those on the rioting streets, figuring out "what is going on" depends on reading indications of what "others" in a collective sense, "the crowd" and "the police," are doing and are likely to do. In other words, the progress of episodes of anarchy depends on the cultural criminology that participants develop in situ, as they interpret what others are trying to do and as they perceive the narrative understanding of events that is being used by law enforcement officials, who may see individuals committing crime or who, remaining in barracks or maintaining a military gaze into the middle distance, may blind themselves from effectively seeing individual participants.

"Narrative criminology" may be seen as more comprehensive than "cultural criminology" or the former may be seen as a sub-type of the latter, depending on how phenomenological one is inclined to go. Narratives are understandings of sequentially related phases of behavior with beginnings, endings, and turning points between phases. Offenders invoke narratives in order to commit crimes. Offenders also draw on and are taken by cultural tropes, images and aesthetic styles that are pregnant with meanings not necessarily spelled out as sequences. For example, on the way to a mass shooting, an adolescent may equip himself with various means of committing violence without having worked out how they will be used in tandem. Even if assembled chaotically, cultural fragments are often essential resources to individuals as they develop and sustain motivations to commit crimes. But cultural fragments are not necessarily separable from narratives. They may be appreciated as proto, inchoate, or indexical gestures to full blown narratives. A range of thinkers, including Kenneth Burke, Paul Ricoeur, and Harold Garfinkel, may be read for the argument that any subjectively meaningful act is part of a narrative, even if many meaningful acts are only narrative gestures, i.e. incipient narratives that are quickly abandoned.

To systematize the knowledge that narrative criminology can produce, we may wish to distinguish levels of granularity, temporalities, and interactions. As to the different scale of the phenomena involved, at the most micro level there is the narrative used by participants to commit crime. For crimes committed during episodes of anarchy, the distinctive, critical contingency in members' narrative construction is the epiphany of invisibility, which is an inherently fragile understanding that, because so many others are so visibly engaging in criminality, one's own participation will be effectively invisible.

In application to isolated individual crimes, at a meso level there is the antecedent biography of the event, which includes streams of social life from which a given criminal project emerges. In episodes of anarchy, the subjectively relevant pre-stages can stretch over months or even years. In the case of the "Rodney King Riots," the year between the revealing of the videotaped beating and the trial verdict became a period that can, without exaggeration, be analogized to the plague that came over Thebes after Oedipus was unwittingly but inexorably led to committing a primordial transgression in the royal house. It is not just that both were, in different senses, attacks on Kings. In the Greek myth and in the myth-infused development of the 1992 Los Angeles episode of anarchy, there was a background of transgression (patricide and incest; police brutality), then a moment of revelation (when the mystery of the Sphinx was solved; when the video of King's beating was repeatedly played); then a period of dread, as an eerie awareness grew that corruption at the center of Authority had to bring disaster; then overt social chaos and communal destruction. In the viewing of the beating of King, and even more so in the revelation of the jury's verdict, there was a widespread sense of a shameless violation that would stir irresistible destructive forces. Nothing could better recommend the necessity of narrative criminology than a detailed, social interaction sensitive history of the making of the "Rodney King Riots", or perhaps of any episode of anarchy.

At a macro level, narrative analysis is equally essential, but in the nature of the case, more elusive. After a crime, or to continue with the example of this essay, an episode of anarchy, the meaning of the event enters multiple different narratives. What are the effects for offenders, and for others who only get involved after the fact, when gun violence transforms in biographies from a crime into multiple medical cases? (See Lee, 2012). What is the meaning of an episode of anarchy after the streets return to tranquility and popular culture picks up the events in a series of entertainment products and political events, each with its own narrative. In a movie or a political campaign, a historic episode of anarchy will often play a background or supporting role for a focus on personal character. Yet, as elusive as it may be, that is how an episode of anarchy most often lives an extended life: in a subterranean stream of images that play a diffuse and opaque role in setting the mood for understanding some other narrative on the front stage that is demanding an immediate emotional response. After the event, the crime is no longer important as a narrative project; but it will often be significant as a narrative resource for a larger project, such as a crime victim's struggle to work out a way to live life as disabled or a geographically bounded population's encounter with the challenge of figuring out what the event means for the nature of the community. Mass culture enters the creation of anarchy long before it breaks out, and mass cultural coverage of episodes continues to be used in the shaping of popular opinion for years after.

At each of these three levels—and three is arbitrary, a matter of convention—there are interactions between the culture used in committing crime and the culture used in generating interpretations about crime. At the extreme, the interactions become symmetric and recursive. People shape their conduct in committing crimes through taking account of how the mass media and law

enforcement will see them, while law enforcement officials strategize on interventions by taking account of how their actions will be covered by the media and regarded by potential offenders. The two way interactions continue in a looping relationship.

The critical causal contingency in episodes of anarchy is the emergence and decline of an epiphany of invisibility. The work of news media and of law enforcement or military agencies in describing and responding to crime is itself perceived by masses of individuals on public streets, and powerfully affects how they in turn initiate, develop, pause, re-create, and abort anarchic behavior. The media and the judicial system can inadvertently help people on the street solve the prisoner's dilemma that usually deters anarchy. Watching in real time as media organizations contemporaneously show events occurring on public streets to mass audiences, would-be participants can gain confidence that if they engage in behavior that usually would be treated as criminal, not only will they not be acting alone, they will be acting in a mass so large that they are unlikely to be singled out as criminals.

For their part, law enforcement agencies are increasingly sensitive to how their actions in response to anarchy are being picked up by media and responded to by people on the street. Research indicates that in the "riots" in the US in recent decades, a kind of negotiating process has informally developed. People on the street literally and metaphorically push against and through barriers of order. Many are keenly aware of the media images they are creating; indeed, their motivation to participate may be specifically to create such images. Some bystanders watch TV coverage and respond by intervening to protect their property, while others intervene to restrain involvement by people they know.³ The police surge and retreat in the boundaries of order they will enforce, based on their sense of how their actions will be seen and taken up by the people on the street who will determine the next phase of the anarchy's evolution.⁴

The looping relationship between the culture in and the culture about crime is at its extreme in episodes of anarchy. In the wake of "Ferguson" and its progeny in mass media stories, there has emerged in the US a widespread controversy over police/criminal interactions, especially in jurisdictions where arrests have declined and crime has risen. Some critics of the police argue that they are now restraining their intervention in street encounters with people they see as offenders, in protest against the public damnation of recorded and disseminated police actions in prior encounters. Some law enforcement officials have suggested that would-be offenders, perceiving or imagining a change in how police will respond, are becoming less concerned about apprehension and more aggressive. Cultural criminology has suddenly moved onto the front page. It is a good time to reflect on the analytical tools necessary to take advantage not only of this moment but of the ongoing dynamic interaction between the culture in and the culture about crime.

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Notes

1. I put the race labels in quotation marks to emphasize that the media played the story along racial lines, which is not inevitable. Indeed, in recent years news media have become wary of identifying the race of offenders as black, lest they be charged with contributing to racism. Historical change in such variations is an area now ripe for research.
2. Rosenfeld's (1997) analysis of the riots following the basketball championship victory of the Chicago Bulls in 1992 would have benefited from an explicit appreciation of the collective behavior dilemma that is a threshold condition for starting episodes of anarchy. Finding that virtually all participants were black and that commercial targets were not in fact ethnic others (in this case, Koreans and Arabs), he argues that the background of the "Rodney King Riots" and the welfare cuts in Illinois, which had been forcefully damned in the black news media, are grounds for considering the event as a "commodity" riot or uprising. While his argument would have had more force had he documented a lack of grievances in the background of the several other Bulls' victories which resulted in no or less intense riots, the association of episodes of anarchy with working or lower class and stigmatized minority ethnic status is clearly too strong to be dismissed as irrelevant to causal explanation but also clearly too weak to be considered sufficient.
3. Reginald Denny was saved from further injury by African-American residents of South Central who had witnessed his beating on TV. More recently, in what became a briefly famous incident in the street looting and violence that followed the death of Freddy Grey while in police custody in Baltimore in 2015, a widely disseminated video clip showed a mother slapping and retrieving her son, whom had she had seen participating while she was watching TV coverage of the event.
4. See McPhail, Schweingruber and McCarthy (1998). For a detailed investigation of several employment and race themed riots in the UK, and an argument that the police contribute to the outbreak and prolongation of anarchy by failing to treat overt criminality as effectively invisible, see Waddington, Jones and Critcher (1989). A similar argument has been advanced in the analysis of US prison riots by Useem and Kimball (1989).

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