

# **Transcending the ‘Dys-Care’ of Doctoral Students: Assessing How Cultural Similarities Between the United States’ Black Gangster Class and Academia’s Elite Adversely Influence Student Agency and Relevance in Knowledge Production**

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## **Abstract**

This paper critically examines some cultural similarities that I contend exist between two unlikely social classes and contribute to what I am calling the ‘dys-care’ of doctoral students. One such social class comprises black gang leaders in the United States (US) known as O.G.s — Original Gangsters, the C.E.O. or Chief-Executive-Officer equivalent in urban communities. The other social class is a mostly white scholarly elite primarily situated in academic institutions within the Global North. I define the dys-care of PhD students as the impact of a street-gangster-like culture imposed by the academy on doctoral students that adversely impacts their agency and relevance in the production of knowledge. Further, this paper argues there is a dialectical relationship between black gangster culture and Eurocentric academic culture based on a shared social structure of dominance initially forged when colonial America was a British colony. This paper also explores transformative strategies for mitigating power relations between doctoral students and the academy. Antonio Gramsci’s theory of the formation of organic intellectuals across class boundaries serves as a theoretical framework for this paper. Additionally, I draw on insights and theorizing derived from thirty years of ethnographic research with street gang leaders (Crips and Bloods) in California and three years spent as a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. Plus, my time spent at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a doctoral student, and interviews with other graduate students who studied at Harvard University, University of California, Berkeley, Tufts University and other institutions of higher education are relied upon for this critique. The following questions serve as a frame for this analysis: In what ways are black gang leaders the organic intellectuals of the street? Conversely, in what ways are scholar elites the organic O.G.s of the academy? What strategies can students use for self-care, enabling them to transcend dys-care, to reimagine themselves and co-construct a horizontal rather than hierarchical — or vertical — relationship with the academy in seeking agency and relevance in their process of knowledge production?

**Keywords:** student self-advocacy, knowledge production, academic customs, black gang culture, organic intellectuals.

## **Introduction: Cultural Dominance, White Scholarship, and the Black Gangster Class**

Having spent thirty years researching black youth gangs in California and three years as a doctoral student writing a thesis about what I had learned from that ethnographic experience with the Crips and Bloods, I was also exposed to an unexpected insight: that there are cultural similarities between two unlikely social groups. One such group is comprised of black-street-gang leaders in the United States (US) known as O.G.s — Original Gangsters, the C.E.O. or Chief-Executive-Officer equivalent in urban communities — and the other group is comprised of academic elites, who are mostly white and located within the Global North. I use the word ‘elite’ here to express the importance of the role the academician plays in white-dominated societies. As theorized by Antonio Gramsci (1999), academic elites hold sway over an ‘ideological sector’, which he claims is the education sector, that teaches the standards which serve the ruling class. Yet, the special occupational role of academia, as argued by Gramsci, does not allow them to escape what I am arguing here: that the mostly white scholarly elite has cultural similarities to the black gangster class, which contribute to what I am calling the ‘dys-care’ of doctoral students.

The ‘dys’ in the label dys-care of doctoral students relates to its Greek meaning as something ‘bad’, ‘ill’, ‘impaired function’, such as how ‘dys’ is used in the word dysfunctional (Merriam-Webster 2022; Leder 1990, p. 84). In this instance, dys-care or bad care is prompted by a practice of gangster-type hegemony situated in the university’s long-held traditions involving knowledge production. These are traditions assumed by PhD students to be helpful but that prove harmful by diminishing their confidence and limiting opportunities for such students to freely engage in the creation of new ideas. These circumstances are discussed at length later in this paper. But it is in that violation of a student’s higher expectation for the traditions of the academy that philosopher and medical doctor Drew Leder’s phenomenological analysis of ‘dys-appearance’ informs this dys-care critique (ibid). With regards to what Leder calls the ‘principal of dys-appearance’ (p. 85) in *The Absent Body* (1990), the body and its normal functions are not routinely seen or noticed until some kind of ‘alien presencing’ (p. 82) interferes with the ‘ordinary mastery’ of the body (p. 87). As described by political scientist George Hajjar in his collection of protest essays on student grievances from the 1960s, *The University a Place of Slavery* (2015), that alien presencing is represented by the academy’s insistence on a student’s reproduction of ‘the thoughts, feelings, imagining and concerns’ of those who ostensibly know more, that is, academia’s elite (p. 163). Leder would describe alien presencing by the academy as ‘the hegemony of an occupying force’ (p. 82).

Ironically, this paper argues that a dialectical relationship exists between a black gangster hegemonic street culture and a hegemonic Eurocentric academic culture, given an historical entanglement. When colonial America was a British colony, slaves who revolted against the cruelty of enslavement and of the damning identities imposed upon them by a white-master society — criminal, immoral, inhuman — were viewed as outlaws by those white authorities, while labeled rebels by black people and abolitionists of any color (Douglass 1852; Aptheker 1943; Barnes 2017). Being subject to a dominant social structure taught that nation’s black populace the ways in which such a structure subjected others to domination. These days, one dialectical

outgrowth of what became a shared social structure of dominance is the parallel mini empires that O.G.s — today's black rebel-outlaw leaders — have constructed as enclaves within urban communities nationwide where *they*, the gangsters themselves, get to rule. My argument is that the street-gangster impulse to rule some aspect of their lives both mirrors their experience under a white-dominant society that still does rule them, given a mass incarceration policy that targets black men in the United States, but at the same time allows them to rebel within the confines of *their* territorial enclaves. The significance of this issue regarding the dys-care of doctoral students is discussed later in this paper. But for now, the irony is that the similarities across the two cultures — black street gangsters and the scholarly elite — are derivative but also originate from a Eurocentric-American colonial past that has been modeled in modern times by the black gangster class.

Though this work is about recognizing and then transcending the prescribed role of doctoral students in the production of knowledge, it begins with what I have learned about the black gangster class in the US. Since 1992, I have been privileged by Los Angeles' O.G.s, reigning over the Crips and Bloods, to be permitted to engage in an immersive ethnographic research project. For me, a middle-class African American, the goal was to understand street-gang culture and what motivated gang members to initiate sometimes very violent experiences. So, the phrase 'prescribed role of doctoral students in the production of knowledge', as mentioned above, refers to what is argued here as the doctoral-student role enforced by academia's elite in service to a long tradition of how knowledge is deemed to be properly created. That function of enforcement and the duty to comply with tradition as commonly practiced in academic institutions are, as contended in this paper, strongly related to a culture of dominance as commonly practiced by black gang leaders on the streets of urban communities in the US. This is where these gangsters have uncooperatively co-constructed their own measure of agency and identity where they get to be the rulers of urban mini empires. They have done so to protect themselves from a more dominant Eurocentric US society that has imposed for centuries derogatory identities upon black rebel-outlaws, or, in today's jargon, black male street gangsters.

What I argue here about the meaning of an uncooperative co-construction of agency and identity is that black gang leaders have reimagined their identity to defiantly define themselves within the boundaries set by a dominant white class that has criminalized them, starting from the days when black males led insurrections against their enslavement. Though a white ruling class did not willfully participate in the reconfigured black identity formation of a black rebel-outlaw and now the black gangster class, the identity boundaries that ruling class had long established remain part of the co-construction of the black gangster class's reimagined identity. Consequently, the white ruling class has played an unwitting and thus uncooperative role in the O.G.s' reimagination of themselves. Sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have conceptualized a 'projective' theory of agency that aligns with my idea of uncooperative co-construction of agency and identity for black street gangsters (1998, p. 971). With projective agency, a person's imagination is engaged to creatively reconfigure and thus thwart the harmful impact of an identity that a person anticipates will be projected onto her or him by a more powerful entity (*ibid*). In the case of the black gangster class, the reimagination of identity is not

about what is anticipated but about what is currently a lived experience. This practice of the black street gangster to uncooperatively reimagine himself relates to the knowledge-production process experienced by doctoral students, who, I argue later in this paper, will need to rely on their agency to reimagine the terms of their engagement with their PhD supervisors and with a hegemonic academy itself.

Thus, black-gangster-class reimagination has led to the shared and dialectical social structure of dominance between the black gangster class and academia's elite that is explored in this paper.

In his classic book, *Silencing the Past* (1995), Michel-Rolph Trouillot brilliantly and tragically provides a critique of the disappearing of history, which could also be viewed, as framed by this paper, as the dys-appearance and the dys-care of history, and that impact on doctoral students in their quest to construct new knowledge on a reliable foundation. To illustrate, Trouillot discusses how the power imposed by academia's ruling class selects the history acknowledged and the historical experience ignored. He explains that this is what happens during the actual production of history:

This book [...] deals with the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production. The forces I will expose are less visible than gunfire, class property, or political crusades. I want to argue that they are no less powerful (1995, p. xxiii).

At the University of Edinburgh, I soon learned that Trouillot's analysis did not go far enough. His critique was largely restricted to the mere disappearing of history, though admittedly that is no small thing. However, as a newly minted PhD student, one of my early lessons in the craft of knowledge production was to discover an elaborate hierarchical structure of power relations and professional recognition in the academy to reckon with in the very acknowledgment of knowledge — any type of knowledge, not just history. This hegemonic culture of scholarship served as an arbiter for what was even permitted to be recognized and thus referenced by a PhD student as new knowledge. In other words, it was not just that what was understood to be knowledge could have significant gaps in the narrative or discourse of what constituted that knowledge. There was also the instruction a PhD student faced that a wide swath of already published knowledge was dismissed and thus disappeared by academia's elite with admonishments that such knowledge was not advised for use as a thesis reference.

An example of this practice occurred during what is called the Progression Board at the University of Edinburgh. The Progression Board is when a new doctoral student must meet face-to-face with an examiner within the first year of enrollment and defend what she or he proposes to accomplish with the PhD work. A twenty-page proposal must be submitted to the examiner before the verbal defense. Students who do not survive this encounter are terminated from the doctoral program. I was asked a question about one of the references in my proposal: a scholar

from a university in a southern state in the US, not an Ivy League college. When I answered the question substantively and without fault, my examiner moved on to critique the scholar himself. Ultimately, the put-down was that this examiner had never heard of this scholar, so I should seek other sources of knowledge. It was a dys-appearance of sorts of that cited scholar's knowledge.

This was the beginning of my journey to understand and eventually develop the strategies for resisting, when necessary, how academia determines the standards for knowledge creation — as well as what will not be seen, literally, as having achieved the appropriate academic standard. In other words, for those who have the power to do so, knowledge can be readily dys-appeared, at least as instructed for the doctoral student's use. Another example of the dys-appearance of knowledge provides a case of literal dys-appearance. When I was in a different doctoral program in economics many years ago at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, my statistics professor would write on a blackboard as rapidly as possible his formulas and explanations for solving quantitative problems, and then erase them before it was humanly possible to write them down. This was before the advent of cell phones, which would have at least allowed for a picture to be taken of the chalk-and-blackboard knowledge presented. But it was a befuddling experience: did he or did he not want us to know and learn what he already knew? This, therefore, was another method of a scholar's deliberate dys-appearance of knowledge.

This paper argues knowledge production is both a process *and* an aspect of a revered culture of the academy driven by gangster-like characteristics of dominance, which I recognized given my exposure to the culture of black gangsterism. I observed that black-gangster dominance was in part derived from Eurocentric dominance that had been detrimentally imposed upon them. In essence, what I witnessed was to a large extent black gangsters mimicking a white ruling class structure that had unwittingly trained them in social dominance. Those characteristics of social dominance include hegemony, territoriality, and a hierarchical structure that places a high value on reputation-enhancing achievements, however those achievements may be defined. Differences in what constitutes an achievement in academia versus the streets of urban communities in the US are discussed later in this paper.

In addition to the Introduction, this paper has two sections and a Conclusion. Part One, 'Street Gangsters as Organic Intellectuals, Academia's Elite as Organic O.G.s', applies Antonio Gramsci's work on the formation of organic intellectuals across class boundaries to this paper's theorizing. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical tools of habitus (custom, tradition) (2008) and cultural capital (value, prestige) (1986), this section also establishes several key similarities between a hegemonic culture of scholarship in the academy and a hegemonic culture of black gang leadership. Part Two, 'Knowledge Production, Academic Hegemons, and the Subaltern Student', exposes and examines doctoral student dys-care via the impact on students' agency and relevance of being situated by scholarly tradition onto such a low institutional rung of the academy's hierarchical structure. This section also explores how a scholar-imposed hegemony on students could affect their quality of outputs — that is, the standard of student knowledge production itself. The Conclusion proposes some strategies for transcending doctoral student dys-care by strengthening the agency of students. It is argued here that such agency-strengthening could

help students to re-position themselves in the academy's hierarchy of knowledge production and support an attempt on their part to deconstruct patterns of hegemony long embedded in academic institutions. Finally, this section discusses the possibility of students co-constructing with the academy alternative paradigms of power — such as a horizontal relational structure — to ameliorate O.G.-type manifestations of dominance by scholar elites.

### **Part One: Street Gangsters as Organic Intellectuals, Academia's Elite as Organic O.G.s**

Is comparing the culture of the black gangster class to that of an elite class of intellectuals, while claiming some distinct similarities, an odd conjunction of cultures?

Perhaps. Still, I contend the comparison is valid and that the hegemonic behavior displayed by both classes of leadership — the O.G. and the scholar elite — is quite similar in certain instances. So, this is where I begin my critique, because of that query's relevance to some of the key arguments made in this paper. O.G.s are thought-innovators within their grassroots communities. The academy's leading scholars are also thought-innovators. This work seeks to understand the similarities in the cultures of two disparate groups (though that is a value judgment subject to a separate discussion) and how those similarities impact doctoral students in their quest to create new knowledge. Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual informs the unpacking of these issues.

'Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialized category of intellectuals?' Gramsci opens his essay 'The Formulation of the Intellectuals' (1999, p. 134) with this question. He answers it with an interesting critique that claims a category of organic intellectuals versus traditional intellectuals and distinguishes between the two categories with a complex analysis. But the essential difference for the purpose of this paper is that Gramsci identifies intellectuals as being divided into two primary categories. One category of traditional intellectuals is defined by its 'social function' or profession, such as scholar, scientist, or theorist (p. 140). Also, according to Gramsci, intellectuals are connected to a type of historical tradition that has always reflected some measure of power, privilege, and prestige (ibid). An interesting depiction of this latter part of Gramsci's description of traditional intellectuals is that they are often connected to history and tradition through an 'intellectual current' (Olsaretti 2014, p. 366) of other scholarly work that has sustained years, decades, or centuries of scrutiny. This could, for instance, be argued to reflect Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory of the power and role of custom in the lives of human beings (2008).

Gramsci's other category of intellectual is divorced from occupation, defined instead as those who provide innovative thought leadership in the environment or class from which they, as 'organic' intellectuals, have arisen (ibid). Hence, organic intellectuals emerge from their communities independent of a professional distinction, though in the case of black gang leaders their organic intellectual status is, in fact, a consequence of their special pariah occupation — that of O.G.s who often engage in violence. But there is historical context for the black gangster lifestyle. Again, there is some patterning of criminal brutality that has long been exercised against the black male in colonial America from the era of plantocracy to slave patrols and

lynching to the contemporary police killing of black suspects before they are even arrested and convicted of any crime, as was the case with George Floyd on 25 May 2020.

I have also learned from my ethnographic research that members of the black gangster class are exceptional grassroots innovators. O.G.s represent one category of key storytellers in their communities. But not in the way that is defined by the discipline of narrative criminology, for example. That discipline is mostly about offenders. Thus, it tends to frame gangsters' storytelling as being individually self-serving, a form of harm reduction to escape or minimize the consequences of their criminal behavior (Fleetwood et al., 2019). The black gangster storytelling to which I am referring takes place *before* they become offenders. It is storytelling involved in the reimagining of reality — particularly historical and race-based policies and practices with which they are forced to cope — to benefit the entire class of gangsters, which of course includes them as individuals. But it does not solely benefit them personally. It is in preparation for becoming offenders and not at all in defense of their potential crime. I call what they do inventive agency. With inventive agency, O.G.s are always intellectually innovating, reimagining their lives and environments to somehow embed a factor of upliftment into their perpetual struggle to survive in the US.

Drew Leder's work supports the inventive-agency conceptualization when he argues in favor of the human capacity to be relied upon to 'construct a life-world', a new life-world, that betters the circumstance, at least phenomenologically, that is, from the perspective of that human, particularly when compelled to survive in very constrained spaces, such as in a prison cell (2004, p. 52). An illustration is the black gangsters' response to a US policy of mass incarceration that targets them and other men of color. In this example, the black gangster class has turned their likelihood of being imprisoned into a cultural benefit or, as depicted by Bourdieu, into cultural capital (1986). Bourdieu's cultural capital concept is manifested as a way of exercising inventive agency for black gangsters to elevate themselves. Prisoner status is reimagined to represent reputational glory. To illustrate, prisons are gladiator schools in the black gangster reinvention of such facilities. They are places to go to learn — through violence and daily life-or-death jeopardy — how to become a man. Ending up on death row bestows an even higher status as an O.G. If a typical prison sentence can lead to a gangster proving he is a man, then being sent to death row for committing murder in a most dramatic fashion provides a gangster the opportunity to transform into a superman, a celebrity, at least reputationally in the urban territory he has ruled. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains this intellectually inventive thinking on the part of the black gangster class in a most succinct and gifted way: 'The people have always had to make something out of the things the system was trying to make of them' (Hall as cited by Grossberg 1986, p. 163).

Gramsci's analysis about the organic intellectual versus traditional intellectual provides yet another level of critique when hegemony — or what he titled 'social hegemony' (1999, p. 145) — is introduced into the discussion. Social hegemony is when institutions, such as schools, churches, and the media, and an 'elite leadership' (Bates 1975, p. 352) — traditional intellectuals relying on their prestige in society — indirectly promote to the masses the values, norms, and culture that undergird ideologies of dominance. In other words, ideas can serve as powerful tools to achieve domination over the masses, and, I would add, the doctoral student. The aim is to encourage the

masses' (and doctoral student's) consent to be dominated by those same values, norms, and cultures. However, the ideologies of dominance, presented as a benefit to all citizens, do not always serve all people equally — or, in some instances, at all. Meanwhile, Gramsci named traditional intellectuals the 'deputies' (p. 145) of the dominant culture, performing 'subaltern functions of social hegemony' (ibid). Another type of hegemony, as described by Gramsci, involves direct domination of the masses by government command, a coercive power, forcing obedience on those who refuse to consent to the ruling ideology's norms, values, rules, and practices (ibid).

O.G.s are hegemons. Traditional intellectuals are also hegemons. But they are hegemons in different ways, though their respective cultures from which their hegemony organically originates display certain elements of similarity. This paper, then, contests Gramsci's theory of social hegemony in one regard: that traditional intellectuals represent two hegemonic roles. They are, in fact, the deputies for the ruling class charged with imposing a certain cultural dominance on the masses. In that depiction, I agree with Gramsci. However, my contention is that traditional intellectuals have also moved beyond their role as deputies for the ruling class and have additionally conjured an organic role of leadership which serves them, as a sub-ruling class ever concerned with maintaining their own reputational currency and power. That sub-ruling-class role includes imposing power over a socially constructed group of sub-followers — that is, students, including doctoral students.

The concept of territoriality for gangsters, as compared to traditional intellectuals, offers an interesting examination of duality. At its core, territoriality furnishes the same basic value for O.G.s as it does for traditional intellectuals: there is a designated space over which the two categories of leaders are able to dominate other people also situated in that same space. However, the black gangster class and traditional intellectuals are impacted by different historical circumstances that have generated a different way of constructing territorial space.

To understand how territoriality plays out differently among the two types of intellectuals — organic and traditional — I begin with some foundational theorizing on my part to explain the difference in the respective class formations of these two groups. In the case of the black gangster class, their categorization has been informed historically by unwanted and unfavorable racial bias, which mainstream society has projected onto this class of black men. In essence, street gangsters were put in a territorial silo because of historical discrimination and isolation caused by racism. On the other hand, the elite scholar class has also been informed by bias — that is, favorable bias — given the profession's association with the prestige of previous scholars and intellectual movements that have generally received societal approval and admiration. Thus, the black gangster class has been left with far fewer opportunities to lead and dominate anyone. That organic reality has led to the territorialization of urban communities by the black gangster class.

Black street gangs are organized around small territories — sometimes only two or three blocks in size. Each territory has a leader, an O.G. who claims the agency to oversee the activities, criminal and otherwise, of gang members who live there or who desire to belong to that gang. According to a 2014 report from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), US's premier law



enforcement agency, there are approximately thirty-three thousand street gangs in the United States (FBI 2014).[1] Each of those street gangs provides an opportunity for a gangster to become an O.G. Territories are required for gangsters to become O.G.s, so territories continue to be created. My argument is that the traditional intellectual mimics the territorial reasoning of the black gangster class with a practice of creating what I am calling silo specialties in their academic disciplines. I will discuss the topic in more detail in the next section of this paper. For now, my point is that academia's elite reduces the territory of knowledge into the smallest unit or silo for claiming an understanding of a topic. Even when interdisciplinarity is permitted, there is an expectation that the number of disciplines should be limited. As it was explained to me by a scholar who was attempting to be a mentor: 'A PhD is about knowing a whole lot about a small area of expertise. Limit your research to no more than three disciplines. Pick three'.

This allows traditional intellectuals plenty of opportunities to become the O.G.s of, to some extent, self-engineered areas of expertise. Scholar elites, therefore, get to set the parameters of their territory, their silos of knowledge production. Black gang leaders as organic intellectuals have had to settle for small territories or enclaves within the larger neighborhood. But even in those territorial sites of gangster dominance, a white ruling class has determined the broader discriminatory contours that tend to isolate urban black communities (Rothstein 2018).

### **Part Two: Knowledge Production. Academic Hegemons, and the Subaltern Student**

Doctoral students consent to enter a hegemonic culture of scholarship when they start a PhD program — and they are not the hegemons. In Jerry Farber's 1968 essay about the lowly status of college students he paints a stark picture: 'A student . . . is expected to know his place' (p. 2). Hajjar argues that this place at the bottom of academia's hierarchy occurs through an internalization process where the student acquiesces to what is seen as the 'dominant order', accepting that order as irrefutable reality (2015, p. 164). Hajjar describes such submission as a form of 'unilaterality' (ibid). Hajjar relies on Donald McCulloch to explain the process of unilaterality '[which comes] into being whenever two persons or groups come into sustained contact and potential conflict, perceive differences between themselves, [and] define these differences as inequalities', acceptable inequalities (ibid).

Having waited several decades to return to postgraduate school, first to earn a Master of Science Degree at the University of Edinburgh, and now to attain a PhD, I had long forgotten the vulnerable positioning of students and thus the likelihood of their dys-care. What soon became key questions were: How would I maintain my agency in this environment? Could I achieve alignment with what I would come to understand as the rules of relevance in knowledge production? My critique of those two questions starts with the last one. It does so because student agency is deeply entangled in the challenges associated with the confounding rules of

[1] On a national level, curiously, there is not more recent gang data issued by the FBI. In fact, the FBI suggests that queries of gang estimates should be forwarded to individual state and city jurisdictions.

relevance, as dictated by scholar elites in their representation of the academy's traditions of scholarship.

What is knowledge? This could be viewed as a philosophical question beyond the scope of this paper. But in a practical sense, I can attempt to answer that query through an examination of what I was taught about how to engage a well-worn process of knowledge creation. This traditional process is very much linked to the academy's rules of relevance, that is, what knowledge is recognized and whose knowledge ultimately counts.

Creating new knowledge, for instance, meant you had to build on research that already existed. That practically translated into the following: if your thesis idea did not have a corresponding body of research that already examined some aspect or aspects of your original idea, then your thesis subject was not considered relevant. In that regard, knowledge, at least new knowledge, was defined by how related it was to what was already a part of the discipline. This poses a problem for doctoral students who are genuinely exploring original ideas that a discipline's literature has yet to produce or realize. Another challenge in this approach is that much research associated with my topic of the black gangster class, for example, is so Eurocentric and racially biased as to be nearly useless in the support of my theorizing. So, how is a student to gain knowledge-production relevancy from a Eurocentric academy faced with a dual historical circumstance: a discipline's literature deficits and the inclination of its gatekeepers (the intellectual hegemon) to protect a discipline's theoretical past?

One of the most long-term damaging examples of such scholarly malfeasance occurred in the interpretation of the 1890 US Census, as deconstructed brilliantly by Harvard University historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad. In his book, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (2019), Muhammad explains how white scholars of that time claimed no bias in their methods, but, in fact, registered great bias in the way crime data from the census was interpreted. Criminality committed by white immigrants, who often represented crime syndicates, was not publicly promoted, while black crime statistics were reported throughout the nation. This began an official criminalization of black people. W.E.B. Du Bois, the first black person awarded a PhD from Harvard, lobbied his white colleagues to reconsider their bias and to assess the damage to the nation's black citizenry that was likely to follow. Du Bois was only able to convince one white scholar to join his protest. One academician was not enough.

So, what is knowledge? Here I argue that new knowledge generally means incremental knowledge to the scholar class. What is expected by the tradition of knowledge production is for the doctoral student's research to contribute by finding some small incremental addition to the knowledge base of a discipline. I refer to this approach as an 'incrementalizing' of knowledge. In other words, the student with a big idea confronts a great deal of opposition from intellectual hegemon. Their argument primarily is how can you, a doctoral student, know so much more than the scholars who have dominated this discipline for many years? Big ideas, then, are not relevant ideas in this hegemonic culture of scholarship. Yet, the scholars who have become famous over generations are the scholars who, ironically, put forth complex, groundbreaking theoretical schema, such as Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Marx, Paulo Freire, and

others. They have proven that big ideas do matter.

Another issue regarding relevance in knowledge production involves the who, where, and when of scholarship. Concerning the *who*, it was made clear to me that the work of well-respected scholars, known by the academy's elite, was what would gain approval as my list of references were perused. This meant that my choices of theoretical support were limited to a relatively small coterie of scholars in any discipline. Further, *where* they were published also determined their relevance. Oxford University Press. Harvard University Press. Cambridge University Press. These and other highly rated publishers were considered worthy and thus met one of the rules of relevance: knowledge production needed to be affiliated with high-quality book publishers and professional journals. Finally, *when* a piece of research was published also mattered. The more recent the better, it was explained to me, because the discipline and its knowledge will likely change with time. I wondered, though, about the core value of most knowledge if in three-or-four-years academia's elite considered such knowledge of so little value it was not recommended for referencing in a PhD. How relevant, then, can any knowledge aspire to be if it could be devalued so quickly? Except, of course, the big knowledge-production ideas that did not follow the rules of relevance and became classic theories. These days, with those of us who have yet to achieve classic status, there is little room for compromise with the hegemon of the intellectual class.

Defining knowledge via the rules of relevance makes it hard to create original knowledge that has significant meaning to more than just a few members of a class of intellectual elites. In summary, those rules include a student being directed by the academy's hegemon to build on existing knowledge that may not adequately apply to a student's research project; to incorporate the concept of 'incrementalizing' knowledge, which reduces the impact of the idea the student seeks to develop; to restrict supporting research to a small number of approved scholar elites, who are recently published in the most respected book publishers or journals. But these are the rules of relevance imposed on doctoral students functioning as a subaltern class, making the culture of academic hegemon very similar to the black gangster class. When O.G.s impose the rules of street relevance — otherwise known as the code of the streets — on low-level gang members, O.G.s are known as shot-callers. A title of shot-caller, then, is simply another way to describe gangster leadership. Shot-callers are the men ruling the community, demanding that others in the urban enclave comply with their rules, with the codes of the street. Those who do not comply typically pay a high price for that noncompliance: death or expulsion from the gang and community. While some community members do not enjoy the role of subservience because of living in street-gang territory, the power of decades of gang tradition anchors such tradition in these communities and thus is largely accepted or at least goes unchallenged from the fear of retribution. Here I argue the cultural similarities between the gangster class and academic hegemon make it fair game to provide the academic elite with another moniker: the shot-callers, the O.G.s of subaltern students. Early on, then, I recognized the class of scholar elites as the organic O.G.s of the academy.

## Conclusion

Educational oppression is trickier to fight than racial oppression. If you're a black rebel, they can't exile you; they either have to intimidate you or kill you. But in . . . college, they can just bounce you out of the fold. And they do (Farber 1968, p. 7).

Farber's statement provides a lot to unpack. For this essay, however, I will simply disagree with his assessment of which situation is worse: educational oppression or racial oppression. They are not even the dichotomy Farber represents the two scenarios to be. There can be educational and racial oppression in the same university space. Also, his article was written before the Mass Incarceration Era in the United States began and to this day continues, where black men and other men of color are in fact exiled from society by being imprisoned for long periods at disproportional rates compared to their white male counterparts (Alexander 2012). Further, the way Farber, a college lecturer, has written the passage in question makes it sound as if being kicked out of a university was more troubling than the other punitive associations with race-based oppression: intimidation or murder. My emphasis here, though, is to argue that there are transformative strategies for strengthening the agency of doctoral students, given the willingness of doctoral students to reimagine themselves. Transcending hegemonic oppression, that is, doctoral student dys-care, could also be accomplished by students striving to co-construct a horizontal rather than hierarchical — or vertical — relationship with the academy. By so doing, doctoral students would have a chance to establish their understanding of relevance in the process of knowledge production.

A core strategy for strengthening my resolve to demonstrate agency in the knowledge-production process was to stay strongly connected to my research ideas and to the knowledge derived from my ethnographic practice with the black gangster class from whom I was permitted to learn so much. This positioning allowed me to transcend doctoral student dys-care that could have otherwise led to adverse impacts on my agency as well as my belief in the relevance of my research. My work, therefore, has been my intuitive compass, supporting my judgment and my agency. While I was open to good input and feedback from the scholar elites, I refused to allow my work or my theorizing to be marginalized or incrementalized. I defended it. I politely pushed back when I was being pressed to make it something that was other than my vision. I learned not to allow myself to be confused by too much input that, ironically, was not relevant. I was willing to challenge the racial bias found in certain disciplines, such as how criminology has evolved in the United States. I was even permitted to give a lecture in the School of Law at the University of Edinburgh on what I called the anti-black bias of the criminology discipline as developed in the United States. I would not back down from what I knew I had learned from the gangsters. I empowered myself. I was told doctoral students needed to learn how to manage their PhD Supervisors. I took that instruction to heart and treated them respectfully, but I behaved as if we were all in a horizontal organizational structure, as opposed to a hierarchical regime.

Even this paper is an attempt at a novel form of scholarship that includes critiques and citations common to traditional knowledge production, accompanied by insights and theorizing

comprised of my nearly three decades of ethnographic research with the black gangster class. I also include some storytelling of my own in this paper, utilizing one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory.

In short, I have become a student hegemon of sorts. But a new breed of hegemon. I have labored to achieve dominance over self. Dominance to generate a revivification of my agency. Dominance to at times contest as well as adapt the traditional rules of relevance. Dominance to stay true to my work, what I have learned from the black gangster class, and to push back on theory biased against the subjects of my research.

Many times, during my PhD work I have been informed that earning a PhD is being accepted into a special club, that the thesis itself is unimportant. I should expect it to be forgotten as soon as it is submitted and approved. In some ways, the hegemonic rules of relevance that I have critiqued in this paper could doom a PhD to obscurity. But student hegemon that I now am, I have not given up on producing something which the black gangster class *and* the traditional intellectual class can view as knowledge worth reading, as knowledge from which these two groups of O.G.s can learn something new.

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