



Gavin Weston on Superheroes, Lynching and Vigilantism

Allegra
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ALLEGRA: Gavin, Allegra is delighted to have you onboard as a contributor. Not only because you are a legal anthropologist (can we call you this way?) like us (and we are a rare species!) but also because you seem to be quite unorthodox in your approach of the discipline. Your first research project was about 'lynching' in Guatemala. What led you to study such a phenomenon?

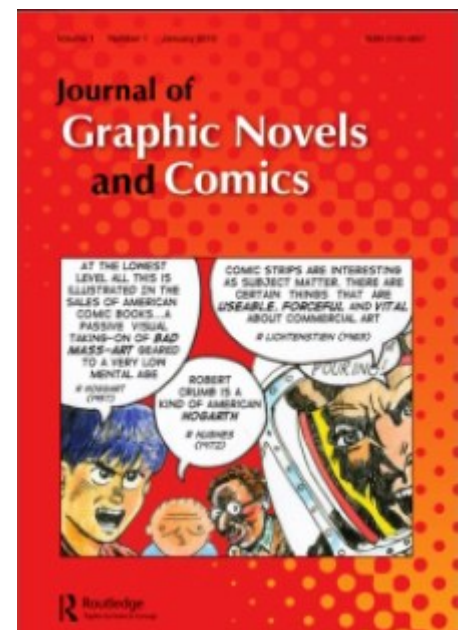


GAVIN: I chose to study Guatemalan lynchings as, at the time, they were being described as a new form of human rights abuse by the UN due to the lack of prosecutions. Due to it fitting with my regional interests, my interest in human rights and violence it was a new phenomenon emerging in the aftermath of the civil war that fitted perfectly with those things I wanted to study. In the end human rights became a more marginal concern in my research as rights organisations generally chose to turn a blind eye to lynchings as they were locally popular and were a pragmatic necessity for local populations who were receiving little or no police intervention against a backdrop of a massive increase in crime.

I guess I am on the fringes of legal anthropology. Vigilante acts, being about non-state actors carrying out justice-like practices, occupy an awkward space between crime and justice -occupying grey legal spaces and bumping into ideas of customary law.

My eclectic approach to anthropology does perhaps make me a little unusual. I think of myself as a two-tone anthropologist. The reason I look at violence is because it is the thing in the world I dislike the most. But my sanity demands that I look at other things - so that's where the slightly scatter-gun approach to looking at other things comes about. If I find it interesting to look and see something intellectually interesting I don't feel obliged to spend 100% of my time looking at vigilantism.

ALLEGRA: You are now a lecturer at Goldsmith and among your new research interests are Superheroes and Comic Book Vigilantes. Can you tell us a bit more about that?



GAVIN: It came about accidentally, but now is something I'm looking at more substantially. While trying to get the publications written that would allow me to get a lectureship, insomnia precluded me doing any writing after about 8pm. When the film [Kick Ass](#) came out I realised that the question it asked – 'why don't more people copy comic book superheroes?' actually touched upon a genuine question regarding the mimetic spread of vigilante violence. I also soon realised that as I started to think about these issues it was work I could do after my insomnia curfew without it impacting upon my ability to sleep. This intersectional area of anthropology, where comics meet anthropological theory occupied a different brain space for me. Once the [resulting article](#) came to fruition I sort of forgot about it and got on with other things. Then all of a sudden in light of events involving the intersection between superheroes and real life crime and vigilantism it became the writing I've had most academic and public inquiries and invitations resulting from. A couple of invited papers later and I've been forced to think about these ideas a bit more and now I'm starting to look at how this research fits more generally with the spread of images and archetypes of vigilantism through the media. So that's behind a current research proposal on the social processes that underlie the spread of vigilantism. So what started out as something annexed

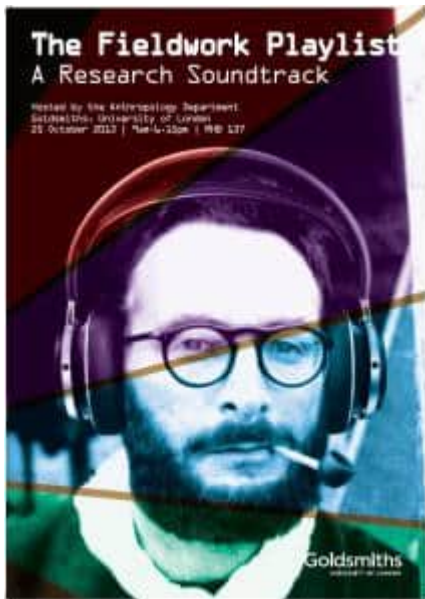


from my main research is now being enfolded back into it.

ALLEGRA: You are interested in violence, vigilantism, law and politics. What are the new 'fields' you are currently exploring?

GAVIN: Just recently I've become intrigued by the intersection between media and anthropology more generally. So while I'm still writing on vigilantism I'm also looking at fictional anthropologists in films, the role played by music as an evocative medium in fieldwork, the rise of 'comic book culture' among other things. But in regards to the violence and justice related research my interests are moving towards theorising the spread of violence in one strand. And in looking at the increasingly broad spectrum of non-state policing in another strand. The birth of Community Support Officers, the rise of large private security firms such as G4S or smaller ones like [Sparta Street Safe in Darlington](#), the prevalence of bouncers, security guards, Neighbourhood Watch, vigilante groups such as [Letzgo Hunting](#) and the online vigilante-esque acts of groups like [Anonymous](#) - this make for a very interesting spectrum of non-state actors carrying out overlapping or opposing activities.

ALLEGRA: Recently you organised at Goldsmith a conference under the title: '[fieldwork playlist](#)'. Why did you choose 'music' as an entry point into research encounters and experiences?



GAVIN: The idea had been floating around in the back of my consciousness since I'd read [Nick Hornby's 31 Songs](#) and just thought about how certain songs were evocative of fieldwork and the moments they were evocative of perhaps had something more profound to say about fieldwork as a practice. Once Dominique Santos and I turned it into a call for papers I realised that this was the case for many people - not just in anthropology but across the social sciences. So the Fieldwork Playlist involved each participant taking one song and explaining how it came to hold such significance in their research

experience.

ALLEGRA: In which ways can music help us unpack the social life of the field?

GAVIN: One thing that cropped up again and again, even from people who didn't submit a paper was that they would use specific pieces of music from their fieldwork experience while writing. That evocative power that music has is key. But the forms this takes is more diverse than I ever expected - we had songs that represented moments of epiphany, others, like mine that touched upon low-points (my song was an evangelical song that was played more or less continuously throughout the night - feeding my insomnia while a mouse I shared my room with tried to sit on my face), others that were resonant for quite specific reasons relating to performance, historical moments, understanding of authenticity or other aspects of fieldwork relations.

ALLEGRA: Were you surprised by the material you received from participants?



GAVIN: Yes. I was worried that the snappy 15 minute format would lead to cursory snapshots. What surprised me was how much this simple tool of evocation allows you to access and emotionally connect with experiences in a way that cuts straight to the person's experience.

ALLEGRA: Which stories will you keep in mind and what is the next step of this project?

GAVIN: From the first to the last paper there was interesting things coming up. Everything from virtual reality-based Japanese pop acts through to Mallorcan bagpipe music was heard and discussed. With such diversity it's hard to single out any one thing. With [Kieran Fenby-Hulse](#)'s end summary of the Playlist it did start to feel like the Playlist was a thing in and of itself.

I'm currently working it into a book proposal - so, fingers crossed. The abstracts and Youtube clips of the songs can be found over on our WordPress site for the conference (click [here](#))

ALLEGRA: If Allegra was to launch a 'fieldwork jukebox', would you like to be our DJ and teach us how to collect (and mix together) the best fieldwork tunes? What would be your advice?

GAVIN: I think the other thing that was recurrent across papers was how people use music as a form of mood-altering medication. But I think the music I use to self-medicate is very different from that others would choose, so I'm not sure



everybody would appreciate my DJing. But if it's a Jukebox aimed at Fieldworkers I would have this medicinal property in mind. I would break it down into sections - music to wallow in (for me [Ryan Adams' Come Pick Me Up](#) or anything by The Smiths), music to get you enthused ([Outkast - Hey Ya](#) did this for me in the field), music to make you feel less angry about X (Johnny Cash or early Manic Street Preachers do this for me), etc... Coming up with the right categories so that people can use it like this would be key to the Jukebox being an effective fieldwork tool.