



On Urban Criminology Encounters: Gender, Race, and Class in Urban Contexts. An Interview with Jody Miller

Jody Miller. Interviewed by
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Jody Miller's expertise in urban criminology was shaped through her interdisciplinary background in Journalism (B.A.), Sociology (M.A.), and Women's Studies (M.A.), and her PhD in Sociology whereby she focused on Race & Ethnicity and Crime & Deviance. She has previously taught at the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri–St. Louis (UMSL), and since 2010 at the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University, where she has been employed as a Distinguished Professor since 2017. In 1999 she received a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award to conduct research on the sex trade in Sri Lanka. Miller's intersectional work on urban criminology, gender, and race is best known from her book *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence* (2008), which was honoured by her selection as a finalist for the C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 2008, and the 2010 Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Book Award from the American Sociological Association's Race, Gender, and Class Section. Moreover, in 2009 she received the Coramae Richey Mann Award from the Division on People of Colour and Crime of the American Society of Criminology.

Beyond *Getting Played*, Miller is best known for her groundbreaking work on girls and gang violence with *One of the Guys: Girls, Gangs and Gender* (2001), in which she studied girls and gang life in urban contexts (Columbus and St. Louis). She has published dozens of peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. One of her most important and frequently republished articles is "Up It Up: Gender and the Accomplishment of Street Robbery", which was published in 1998 by *Criminology*. More recently, in 2020, she published in *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* the article "Gender, Racial Threat, and Perceived Risk in an Urban University Setting", co-written with Shannon Jacobsen and Ntasha Bhardwaj.

Miller is also a highly activist scholar. She is co-director of the Racial Democracy, Crime and Justice Network¹ hosted by Rutgers University. Moreover, after the devastating tsunami in 2004, Miller set up a fundraising campaign, which grew out to an ongoing fund, the Rutgers Sri Lankan Educational Fund, which has supported Sri Lankans to build and run a Montessori school, a library, and a vocational training centre.

Originally the interview with Jody Miller was planned as a face-to-face interview in Leuven, where Jody would have been travelling for Ellen Van Damme's PhD jury meeting, but due to the pandemic, the trip was cancelled and the interview was held virtually.

Thank you very much for your time, Jody. I would like to start this interview by asking what was your first encounter with urban criminology and why did you decide to engage with urban criminology?

You know, it is really sort of serendipity. I was in a women's studies programme and getting my master's degree, but I was interested in combining it with crime in some way. When I was an undergraduate, I had done some volunteer work with delinquent girls. I went to the National Women's Studies Association conference as a grad student and went to hear the speaker, Margaret Prescod, who was an activist in Los Angeles, and she had formed this organisation at the time called "Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders". And she was talking about these cases in South Los Angeles, in what was then known as South Central Los Angeles, about a number of women involved in sex work who had been murdered, and it was pretty clear that there was a serial killer at work. Because it was mostly black women who were being killed, she described the police as basically saying "they don't matter", and also because they were involved in sex work. So she had created this organisation, this coalition, and I heard her really passionate talk at the conference. So, my first segue in urban criminology was that I decided to do my master's thesis on violence against street-level sex workers. So that was sort of my foray into I guess what you would call urban criminology, given where they were working was in Columbus, Ohio; I was at Ohio State at the time. They were working in urban sections of Columbus. And then I ended up doing, again sort of serendipity, gang scholarship. Mostly because I got into USC to get my PhD in sociology, and again wanting to combine gender and crime or delinquency. Barrie Thorne was at USC at the time and she was sort of the gender guru, and then Mac Klein was one of only two criminologists and he was well known as a gang scholar. And so then my work on gangs really came about mostly as a result of trying to figure out how to build a project that was relevant to him and relevant to his work. It ended up being quite fortuitous, but that was sort of how it came about. Not in a way of thinking of myself as an urban criminologist.

As you have already mentioned some researchers, which other urban criminologists did you encounter while conducting urban criminology research who were of inspiration to you?

I think as a qualitative person I was actually nevertheless quite inspired by quantitative scholars who were able to look at stratification, understand it on a more macro level, and especially in the ways in which it can help inform my understanding of context. So, I think it started with Bob Bursik, who sort of "reinvigorated" social disorganisation theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He and I were hired at the University of Missouri–St. Louis the same year – he of course as a senior scholar, me as a brand-new assistant. So his work, and the work of Ruth Peterson and Laurie Krivo on racial segrega-

¹ The Racial Democracy, Crime and Justice Network (RDCJN) is a network consisting of around 140 scholars who aim to conduct research with the goal of exploring "the implications of crime and justice processing for citizens' participation in a democracy". More information can be found on their website: <https://cjrc.osu.edu/rdcjn>.

tion. And Janet Lauritsen's work on victimisation. And then I guess in terms of qualitative folks, I was certainly helped by my colleagues at UMSL at the time: Richard Wright and Scott Decker, who were doing that – now I think of the label as quite problematic – “offenders on offending” work or “active offender research”.

I am sorry to interrupt, Jody, but what does “active offender research” actually mean?

So, they had gotten grants from I think the US National Institute of Justice, to interview individuals who were currently involved in criminal offending. And it led to a series – first together and then Richard and some younger folks – a series of projects. They used a fieldworker who then recruited people who were not incarcerated, but currently involved in [crime] – their first project was on burglary. Then they studied individuals involved in robbery, and in particular armed robberies. And so they located individuals who ... I can't remember the exact criteria, but within some window of time they had to have committed the offence and have done so a certain number of times within a time frame. And this was sort of based on the argument that they would learn something different by interviewing folks currently involved in criminal activities. And they were senior scholars, they were my senior colleagues, they were willing to provide me data. One of my first publications that had a lot of notice was a paper I published in *Criminology*, called “Up it Up”, and it was Richard's and Scott's data. When I walked through the doors, as an assistant professor, they said: “Hey, you're interested in gender, we've got some women in this sample.”

“And we're not doing anything with it!”

Yeah! So, you know, “why don't you?” And so that was the inspiration and generosity of senior colleagues.

That brings us to the next question. Given that your research has taken place in the US, do you think some of the issues you have studied can be transferred to Europe or other parts of the world?

Yeah, I think the issues can be transferred. I think the ways in which we understand them require sort of rigorous comparative work. For example, in Eurogang,² which you have participated in, it started in 1998 or 1999, and I was one of the founding members early on. And I think that those conversations in those early years were obviously frustrating for everybody at the table, but also really productive, and sort of thinking about definitional issues and what it means to do comparative work and what are the things that you have to think through about local context in order to be able to do work in different places. So I think yes, but I think the key is engaging local scholarship, engaging local scholars, and not being superficial in thinking about the ways in which local context matters.

Yeah, still trying to be open to new insights.

² The Eurogang Network is a group of American and European gang researchers that seek to conduct comparative multi-site and multi-method gang studies. The network organises yearly workshops and panels at conferences. More information can be found on their website: <https://eurogangproject.com/>.

Yeah, in ways that concepts can take on different meanings in different places. And I think also looking at – and I think you have done this in your work too – looking at the role of imperialism, local reality, and especially cultural imperialism too. I remember when I was at one of the early Eurogang meetings and Frank Van Gemert was talking about his work with a group, in maybe Rotterdam, who had basically read a book published by an American former gang member, and basically sort of adopted all of the symbolism, the name, everything. They had constructed a gang identity, which was in some parts based on what they had read. The sort of cultural diffusion also I think is interesting to look at.

Let me move on to a question that is more related to gender. How do you perceive the gendering of the field of urban criminology? As you said, it used to be mostly male dominated – do you feel that it is still largely male dominated? And how does this potentially influence the study of urban topics?

Yes, absolutely, I think it still is. I mean, I think that it has changed somewhat, and especially as the field has diversified, that's how it changed somewhat. But, yeah, I definitely think it is very gendered. I mean, again, using Eurogang as an example, it is a couple of things; it is folks not studying women or girls is one thing, but also just not paying attention to gendered processes – not thinking about gender in a complicated way, not thinking about men as gendered beings. I think all of those things are still very much at play in the field. But again, I do feel like it is changing, but it is a pretty slow process.

Exactly. I don't know if it's only limited to urban criminology, or criminology more broadly, but perhaps urban criminology is seen like "street research" and perceived as tougher, more dangerous, and hence a field that men should study.

Yeah, I think that that piece of it is still there, and then just not paying attention to gender really. You know, it seems like stuff I was writing 25 years ago is still... If you look at the gang field, for example, there isn't a whole lot that has changed, a couple of prominent people. Vanessa Panfil's work is really great, but you know, by and large it's mostly the same kind of stuff. And Vanessa's work has also, by the way, met some scepticism. I remember at Eurogang, the question was "how do we know those are gangs?" Even though she had applied the Eurogang definition to the groups, but it didn't match the perception of what a gang is. And I think the stuff with gender is still very much ...

It's still very isolated. It's like "gender, okay that's women, and women should study gender and men studying men should not worry about the gendered aspect in their research".

Yeah. So it's still very much tokenised I think.

Definitely. And that will continue being a struggle. When conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the urban spaces you studied, how were your encounters with people, the so-called research subjects whom you were studying?

I think in my case, most of my work was with adolescents, and that makes a difference. I think they were anyway in a transitional period where, you know, you are trying to gain sort of recognition in more adult-like spaces. I don't know, I just found them to be by and large – I mean as with any study [there are variations], right – but by and large I found them to be really open and engaged, and interested in talking about their lives and interested in the fact that somebody who didn't look quite like them, who was positionally different than them, actually cared about their lives. So by and large

I found them to be quite open and thoughtful. That's not always the case, obviously, you know you always have folks that are a bit more circumspect, but I think being young made some kind of difference in terms of ...

...of talking more openly about it?

Yeah, yeah.

And was it also maybe because, I mean the girls you studied for your first book, but also for your second book, some of them had been violated and some of them didn't even report, I think, the crimes to the police? Because they had the feeling they wouldn't do anything about it. So, was talking to you for them a way to voice their issues?

It could be, I mean... I don't know. With *Getting Played*, I actually didn't do the interviews for that project, I had gotten a Fulbright at the same time. I was doing the project with a colleague of mine, Norman White, and I was in Sri Lanka at the time. So, I developed the interview guides, reviewed the interviews and did all that, but I was actually not involved in the actual data collection. With *One of the Guys*, I mean I think just generally, having someone to take their perspective seriously makes a difference. And I suppose when I was doing that first project as an M.A. student, in that case I was interviewing adult women who were involved in sex work, and I was interviewing them about their experiences of violence. And I was interviewing them at the county jail, where they were spending a lot of time, because at the time in Columbus they worked in one of the areas where [the city was] gentrifying and they were trying to push sex workers out. So they were being arrested a lot and jailed a lot and kept for up to six months. I think it is having someone who is willing to listen and was interested. It was probably boredom too (laughs).

Beyond the people you worked with in the field or that were interviewed, how were your encounters with other people working in these spaces? Like social workers. You also worked in schools with teachers.

I don't remember the first project, the details of that, the one where I was in the county jail. I look back at it now and I can't believe, this was like 1990 and 1991, but I still can't believe I got permission, and I could use a tape recorder as well. I look back and think it is sort of shocking that they [allowed that], you know, maybe I looked pretty harmless, I guess, I don't know. So I don't remember, I wish I did, but generally, especially after coming to UMSL, in St. Louis, I think that the department had such well-established ties in the community, that mostly who I met to help facilitate that work were community folks, including teachers and social workers, who were already engaged with folks in my department. So I think that, you know, that gave me sort of credibility. So I had very smooth transitions into those spaces.

You didn't encounter any prejudices against academics then?

No, and again I think that's largely because of the ties that my colleagues had already formed.

Did you ever have any encounters with the police, and how did you experience police encounters?

No, I didn't, because I wasn't doing ethnography as such. So, as you say, I was interviewing usually either in schools or other kinds of institutional settings, and so no I didn't.

Your research, Jody, started about 25 years ago and focused on girls of colour being involved with gangs. One could argue that from the start you encountered an intersectional framework, whereby you look at gender, race, and class. You've been more actively researching those topics with Vanessa Panfil lately, but looking back at your early research, as you say in the early 90s, with girls of colour living in deprived neighbourhoods, how does this relate to current issues that have been put in the spotlight with, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement? How were your encounters with the daily struggles and injustices people of colour had to deal with, and how do you see these have changed over the past decades?

Right. Well, so I mean I would say, yeah, I tried to approach everything from the beginning from a more intersectional frame, and I think that is because of my background in women's studies and sociology, before I did PhD work, which was *One of the Guys*. My specialisation was in gender, crime, and deviance. I thought of those things in sort of more intersecting kinds of ways. Thinking about the work, I guess I would say this just feels like a story of continuity for me, rather than change. And even part of that, thinking about the work I did as a master's study, right. I mean, so many of the sex workers that I interviewed had had bad experiences with the police; had experienced both overpolicing and underpolicing; had experiences with police misconduct. So I think those who are most vulnerable, they are most prone to those experiences. And, you know, when we did *Getting Played*, half of the interviews were with young men of colour, and I did some work with my colleague Rod Brunson, actually based on just a couple of questions in the interview about their experiences with the police, but it was so salient then. So that's 20 years ago. There was enough data to build multiple papers in terms of analysing what they had to say based on a couple of questions in an interview primarily about other issues. And I think the concerns and experiences with this treatment are quite similar to what we see reflected today. I think it's continuity. And I think things are getting more frightening in the West, with white supremacy. And there has been evidence since I think 2005 from the Federal Bureau of Investigation that white supremacists have infiltrated law enforcement, and that hasn't got much public attention. But you know, this is an FBI report from 2005, with little action taken.

The same issues, but do you think now, due to Black Lives Matter, such issues are getting more attention? And does getting more attention even change anything? Or will it in the future?

Yeah, I think those are the big questions, and we'll see. I mean, it's definitely getting more attention, it's in the spotlight as you said, and there's a lot of political enthusiasm, I think. Maybe not enthusiasm. There is a lot of passion, I think, now. And I think that social media and technology have helped to keep these issues in the spotlight, but whether it comes with any kind of meaningful change, I don't know. I mean, if you look at the history of policing in the US, there's lots of reasons to be cynical about it. I'm thinking about Joe Biden's platform, which is to give more money to the police to develop community engagement initiatives. And it reminds me of a colleague – actually he worked with Cheryl Maxson at UC Irvine – who is doing critical work looking at what community engagement actually means. Danny Gascón, he is now a faculty member at U-Mass Boston, and his new book (with Aaron Roussell) is called *The Limits of Community Policing*. It's a really critical take on what community policing looks like on the ground, in black and brown communities. Yeah, I don't know. And like I said, the other concern is worldwide nationalism, but in the US it obviously is so prominent, and white nationalism specifically, impacting these issues with regards to the police and justice system, and more broadly.

I think indeed as you say it is a worldwide issue. While in the US it's really coming into the

spotlight, in Belgium we're in denial: "Oh no, we don't have racism, we don't have these issues." Obviously, we don't have the same scale of the problems that the US has, but still, I think it's a matter of discussing it or not; eventually recognising it. What do you think are the challenges of doing ethnography in these topics, or just researching urban criminology topics more generally?

I think, when I look back at my earlier work, I think some of the questions that are emerging now, like "who should be doing this research?", are really critical. And I think they weren't so critically discussed when I was a younger scholar. The idea of who should be doing this kind of work and should I be the person doing this, you know what I mean? I think there wasn't much attention, in criminology especially, there wasn't much attention to that.

Like reflexivity, for example?

Yeah. And then just more generally the ethical, you know the ethics. So, it's less about sort of challenges of doing the actual work, but more about the ethics of doing the work. And your work in your dissertation, in sort of thinking about reflexivity; thinking about what is it being that I'm the person who decided to do this research, and speaking for a community, a place and people that I'm not a part of. And I think they are really big important questions that are getting more attention now, which I think is good. And I suppose Alice Goffman's publications helped spur this, but I think they were conversations that were brought to the forefront that are really important and need to be taken on.

You mention Alice Goffman; I don't know the whole case and the whole issue, but my sense is that she was being put out there like the black sheep, we would say. Whereas a lot of people are struggling with a lot of issues in those kinds of research topics, but there is a big fear about putting it out, like upfront, because we fear being judged. Whereas, indeed, there should be a more open debate about the ethics of doing fieldwork.

Yeah, rather than individual scapegoating. And her case in particular, I think. I do think having read the journal article versus the book, I mean it's really difficult, the nuances of the debate got lost by centring a personal focus on her. But she was a student, so where were her faculty advisers? Where was the university institutional structure? And then, looking at the publisher, how the book was framed and shaped. I mean, all those kinds of things, I think, thinking as a sociologist, thinking about this, it has gotten lost in that. So I think that's a big group of questions to have in conversations about it.

Instead of mentioning it as an exceptional case that should not be followed, and just ignoring it, I think indeed it should be more incorporated into the overall debate of research ethics. That brings us to the following question. Where do you see the field is developing currently, and what are the critical issues, what are the edges and innovations?

Well, let's see, I think from my perspective, what I feel like I have seen is it feels to me like ethnographic work is really sort of back on the rise. And it's really exciting to see really amazing young scholars, especially black and brown scholars, who are up and coming and sort of setting new terms about identifying and doing critical scholarship. So I think that's exciting. I think that there is definitely a greater push for scholarship that's combined with activism or scholarship for social change. Which is an important pushback to mainstream interpretations of what we should be doing as urban criminologists or as scholars generally. So I see those things definitely coming up. Because I, especially through the Racial Democracy, Crime, and Justice Network that I'm currently co-director of, so many young

scholars who are part of that network are really not willing to take the answer that you have to be scholars first and only scholars, whereby activism is something that you can do in your spare time or that you can do after you get tenure. So I think that's sort of cutting edge and innovation, that is, new or at least resurgent, probably new. And I think where the really cutting-edge work is being done is in the US, especially looking closely at carceral settings, carceral control; kind of looking more critically at criminal justice systems. And then also work on technology and technology's place in crime, justice, and why we should adapt some of that is innovative.

Technology, also in the sense of including social media in urban criminology studies?

Yeah. So this is informing younger scholars' work. Two recent important examples are Forrest Stuart's *Ballad of the Bullet* and Sarah Lageson's *Digital Punishment*. I think technology has definitely changed the world and so I think most of the younger scholars, those of us who are older tend to be more tech phobic and not as nuanced. I think some of that work is that sort of innovative edge. But also keeping up with contemporary changes.

I would like to move on to something rather different, Jody. For some years now, you have encountered "ecotherapy". Is this a way to counterbalance the urban issues you have been studying for all these years and to re-encounter nature? How did it start?

Actually it didn't have to do with professional life, it was more personal. In 2017, my father passed from cancer and four months later my best friend passed from cancer. It was more to do with that, with personal rather than professional; just wanting to take time to find beauty in the world. So real connections with nature were more tied to that. Also partly because one of my former students had forced me to get an Instagram account.

(Laughs), she forced you, that's amazing.

She did. Heidi Grundetjern, who is at Villanova University, she's responsible for my Instagram account. And I think having sort of an outlet to – I mean, I sort of think of it as my personal place to post my own photo diary and for my mother also, and anyone else who enjoys it, but it's really mostly for us.

Well, it is an amazing Instagram page. You have daily feeds of all the birds passing by your bird feeder.

Yeah, and it's funny, because we went on this safari – I know this is completely off topic – but we went on this safari last month and I had too many pictures, and I realised I don't like posting old pictures. For me it's more like what can I discover today? That it's sort of like the daily affirmation of going out into the world and seeing and capturing beautiful things, rather than pictures for the pictures' sake.

We have come to the final question. What would be your advice to new and future urban criminologists?

Think about gender. Take that into consideration, whatever you are doing. And I think also – maybe it's coming from my history as a US scholar, the current events and history of the US – but I think, as you



say maybe even worldwide, I think in the US in particular criminology needs to start studying white people, and thinking about race in ways that aren't just about race as people of colour, in the same way that gender equals women, right? I think that actually some of the more interesting work is rural criminology, as opposed to urban criminology. It's not getting much attention, but if you think about it as a sociologist and thinking about organisational settings, it's a quite interesting comparison. And then I think, thinking about hate groups and hate crimes. In some ways these are all arguments that people, critical criminologists, for years have been talking about. For example, why do we apply a gang label in this way, but we don't study hate groups in the same way? So I think this is definitely a fertile moment for reconsidering what we study, who we study, and why. And of course, I don't do this work, but crimes of the powerful. That's not really addressing the question of urban criminology, other than like, maybe there are things more important than urban criminology. I don't know, you said the sort of gender thing of people get drawn to the urban criminology. It's sort of like edgy work, provocative, or a masculine sort of enterprise. The consequence is that it's overstudied and there are so many other important facets of issues that are understudied as a consequence. So I think that I'm happy to see all of this really good work coming up, that is looking critically at justice system processes. And again, I think we need more thinking about crimes of the powerful, but also thinking about whiteness and racism and what does that mean when you think about issues related to crime and justice. And then, like I said, hate groups and hate crime, and that sort of thing. So maybe the question is: why urban criminology?

It definitely makes sense. I think a lot of it has to do with what you said, it's seen as something very attractive to study, as opposed to other topics. But then again, we're repeating several myths attached to the things we study, so that's also not really helpful.

Yeah. But I think, when I look back, your work is just amazing, truly. I think the fact that you went and you figured out "the story that I [went in] to tell is not the story that needs to be told". Being able to make those decisions, right, that this isn't the story that needs to be told, but I need to tell this broader story, that's more systematic or more encompassing. I think that's important.

I think for young scholars it's difficult to detach from all the stories that have been told, because we're reading all the literature and obviously that's where we start from, that's the luggage we take into our own research. So I guess that's a challenge too, like really detach yourself: "Okay, but what if we take another look at it?"

Yeah, and you've done that really successfully. So I mean I have to say that most of the time for me, now being in my mid-fifties, doing a lot more administrative kind of work, it's just like I'm really excited by all of the young scholars, like yourself and others who I work with through the Racial Democracy Network and my students. Who are just a really exciting new generation of folks who are thinking in more critical ways, and hopefully pushing the field in ways that it needs to be pushed.

That's what we hope to do I guess, (laughs). Jody, thank you very much for your time!

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