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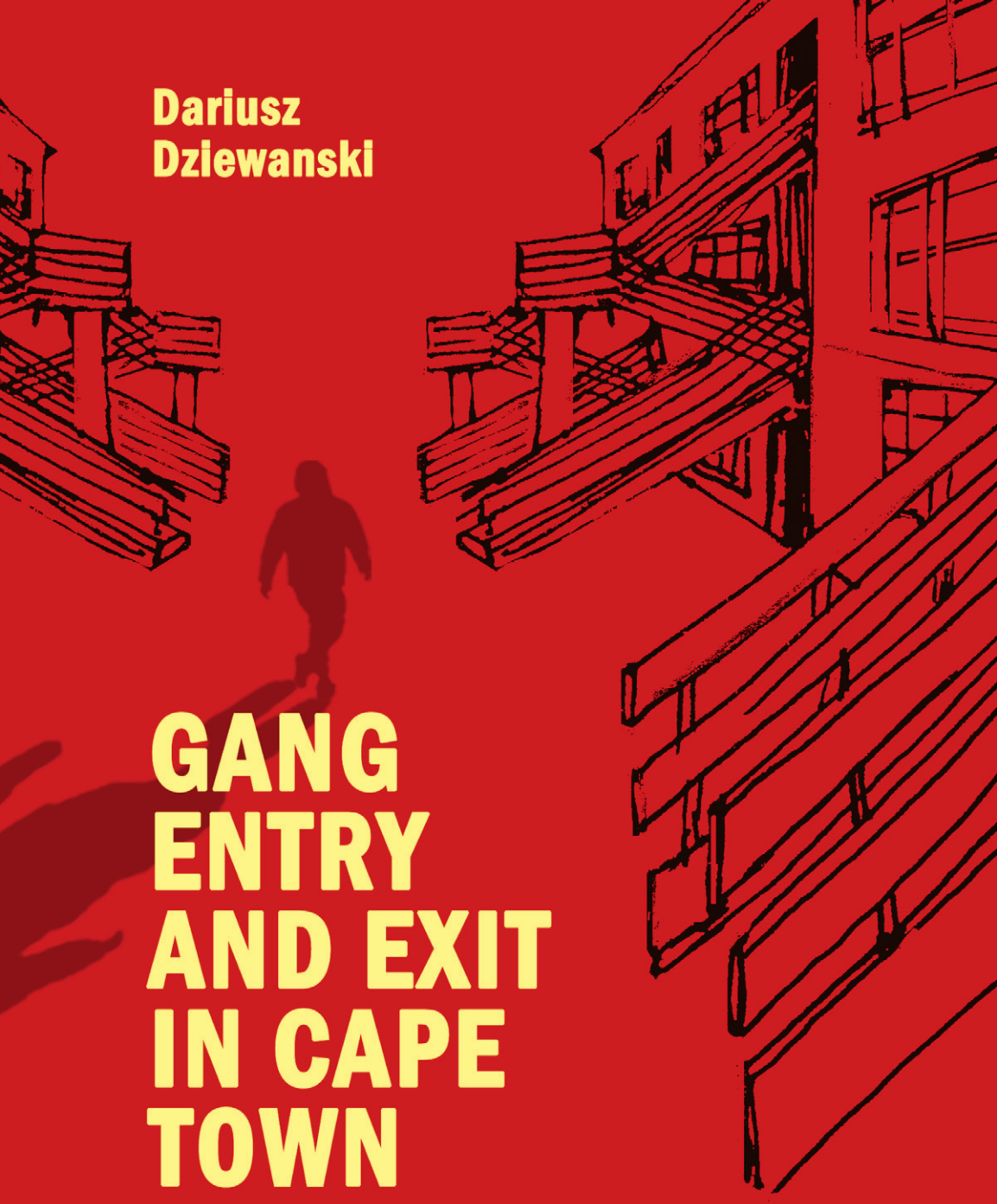

GANG ENTRY AND EXIT IN CAPE TOWN

Getting Beyond The Streets In Africa's Deadliest City

Gang Entry and Exit in Cape Town

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Gang Entry and Exit in Cape Town: Getting Beyond the Streets in Africa's Deadliest City

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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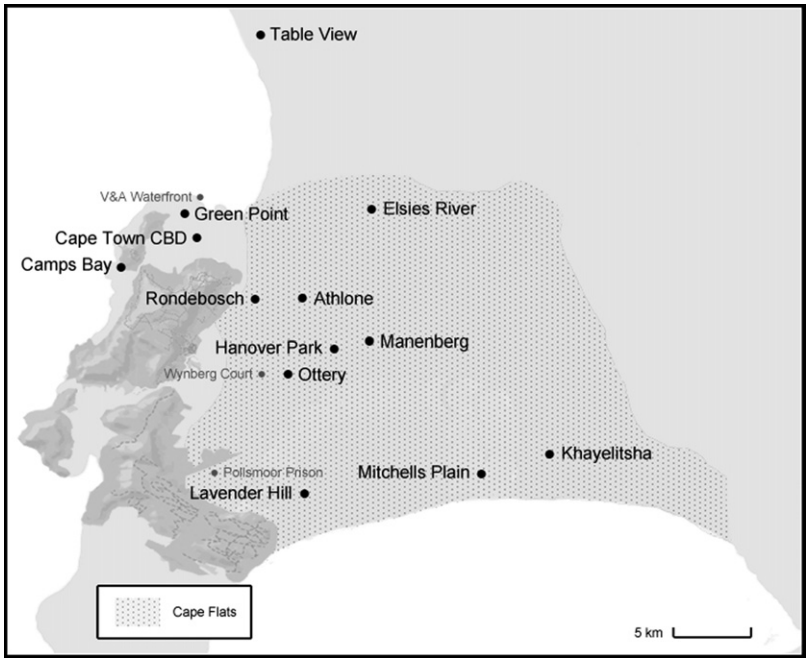
Map of Cape Town



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Preface

At the heart of it, ethnography is about stories. The ethnographic research this book is based on is a collection of personal histories from young people attempting to leave gangs and rebuild their lives in Cape Town, South Africa – one of the most segregated and deadliest cities in the world. Their stories connect to a more profound narrative about a country that itself is still attempting to recover after losing generations to the tyranny of racial persecution under apartheid. Anybody insisting that characters, setting, plot and conflict must necessarily find a satisfying resolution at the end of a story might find the following pages vexing. They are full of frustrated intentions and unresolved endings. Each person in this publication has left gangs, sure. But each is to this day in his or her own way wrestling with a familiar list of personal and social issues; the joblessness, racism, isolation and hopelessness that drove them into gangs in the first place, still to a large extent continue to define their lives as ex-members. That such difficulties persist even after exit makes their narratives no less compelling. One could argue persuasively, actually, that it is all the more necessary for this reason to give voice to stories like these. They serve as a lamentable reminder of the tragedy and bravery that define the existence of the majority of young men and women in Cape Town – both inside and outside of 'the streets'.

Let us recognise one person, in particular, whose story is central to this book. Gavin (Ottery male, 30 years)[1] had spent over half of his life in gangs when I met him. He was still, at that point, a prominent member of both the Mongrels street gang and the 28s prison gang. Our introduction came at a halfway house Gavin was released to after serving a 10-year murder sentence in the notorious Pollsmoor Prison, a maximum security penal facility that holds some of South Africa's most dangerous criminals. That was in 2013, shortly after I landed in Cape Town to begin this project. Our paths would proceed to intertwine over the next years in the labyrinth of sheet metal, distressed wood and dust that make up the patchwork of squatter camps – or *kampies*[2] – hidden in and around the Capetonian suburb of Ottery. The predominately poor and working-class neighbourhood is situated some 20 minutes by car southeast of downtown, and is the place where Gavin's gang, the Mongrels, have their headquarters. The Mongrels are one of

[1]All names have been changed.

[2]*Kampie* refers broadly to an informal settlement. But Gavin often uses the term in reference to the small Ottery settlement that he lives in.

the city's biggest and oldest gangs, tracing their origins back to Cape Town's historical District Six neighbourhood. Today, their 'MG' insignia claims walls, buildings and bodies in their stronghold of Ottery, just as the names of gangs like the Americans, Sexy Boys, Hard Livings, Junky Funky Kids, Laughing Boys and the Ghetto Kids dominate communities such as Hanover Park, Manenberg, Mitchells Plain and Delft. I would come to know many of these areas well, spending hundreds of hours talking to and hanging out with the men and women who live there. Our shared interactions offered a vivid view of the physical contexts and felt experiences of Cape Town's township communities, helping to dispel some of the preconceptions that inevitably arise when outsiders like me attempt to break into, comprehend and depict an unfamiliar moral universe.

One of my first entries into a township was with Gavin, in fact. I accompanied him on a trip to a *kampie* near Ottery, where he was controlling sales of *tik*, *unga*, *dagga* and buttons[3] for the Mongrels. It is a part of Cape Town where my white face was undoubtedly as unusual to the residents there as their community was to me. Gavin offered some words in preparation as we entered the settlement. 'Don't be scared [when we arrive]. You must be a motherfucker. You must just be like: I don't give a fuck; like, gangster bro', he declared with a laugh. 'You musn't show people you [have] fear… or they will take you for *poes*'.[4] I dismissed his advice as good-natured teasing, and did not give it much thought, preoccupied as I was with maintaining my footing as we snaked through the *kampie's* dim and uneven passages. I would later come to appreciate that Gavin was conveying to me a very important lesson: there are places in Cape Town where your security cannot be taken for granted, where you have to nonstop stand up for yourself or you risk being labelled vulnerable and being made into a victim. I do not mean to sensationalise our trip that night. It passed without trouble. Yet, it was also undeniably saturated with a series of small, spirited provocations. Most were projected through the haze of smoke, voices, bodies and beats of a *shebeen*,[5] where Gavin's gang brothers intermittently goaded me into fictitious quarrels and confrontations, trying to see if I would take up their theatrical displays of aggression. It was also in the *shebeen* where a group of women demanded that I show them 'how the white man dances', their insistence punctuated by laughter and suggestive gyrations. Another group of tipsy middle-aged men kept insisting that my foreignness – and presumed affluence – obligated that I buy them 'a bottle'. Underlying their jocularity seemed to be a hope that I would relent as the joke wore on. I almost did.

Others pushed and prodded in their own ways. Occasionally Gavin would interject protectively. Sometimes he would leave me to fend for myself, or would physically and verbally urge me towards the tumult, to the great delight of

[3]Colloquial terms for methamphetamine, heroin, marijuana and Mandrax, respectively; the last is a popular sedative medication also sold under international brand names Quaalude and Sopor.

[4]Literally a derogatory term denoting female genitalia; but also used against a person who is considered weak and disrespected.

[5]An illicit bar or club where excisable alcoholic beverages are sold without a licence.

onlookers. As the night progressed I started to suspect that what I was being pulled into was a type of trial, to ascertain if I could establish myself as 'a motherfucker' according to the logic Gavin outlined beforehand. This suspicion was confirmed when he later confessed at one point intentionally leaving me alone, when going to tend to some business matters in another part of the settlement. 'Yeah, I left [you], just to see how you handle it – see if you could be a motherfucker', he revealed with a smirk.

I offer this anecdote to contextualise this book, and to give readers a tangible example of the types of interpersonal exchanges that brought plotlines like Gavin's to life. It should come across already that research was participatory in nature, often involving significant interaction and time spent with subjects and settings. Embedded study of this sort tries to find and give voice through immersion, rather than trying to disguise its intentions 'behind the role of an invisible and omniscient third-person narrator' (Scheper-Hughes, 1993, p. 25). In enquiring into hidden topics like gangs, especially, one must necessarily go beyond sterile researcher–subject relationships, stepping into people's personal lives and, at times, walking the line that separates the author and the participant. It is only like this that one can hope to get any sense of how society functions in peripheral places like Cape Town's township areas, where people strain against one another, as each struggles in his or her own way against the structuring and socialising forces shaping informal living. The hope is that anthropological study, through its participant–observation methods and culturally relative awareness, 'can play an important role in fostering a public debate over the human cost of poverty and racism, as well as nefarious forms of violence that reproduce inequality' (Bourgois, 2011b, p. 307).

The staging of that first night I passed in the *kampie* with Gavin had a mischievous-but-comical tone to it, produced by the type of attention afforded the foreign friend of a well-known gangster. The average community resident would not be allowed equal leeway. For them, tests would be part of a very real competition to demarcate a place among their neighbours in a life characterised by stifling scarcity. I would later discover similar dynamics at play in other communities. I witnessed time and again how commonplace exchanges quickly escalated into hostile arguments between residents. As an outsider, I was an oddity and an object of benign interest, rather than a threat to be confronted, and was largely insulated from such dangers. I was not, however, shielded from an undercurrent of social friction created by people gesticulating, demanding, shouting, jostling, grabbing and relentlessly exerting pressure on one another in the way I described above. The subsequent township visits I made during my years of research frequently left me drained, my energy sapped by the need to rebuff the steady incursions into my personal space. This, of course, is not to misrepresent such neighbourhoods as unsympathetic or crass. Far from it. I cannot begin to describe the abundance of thoughtful, witty, sensitive, gracious and intimate interactions I had there. But there is no escaping the fact that township life has a certain unavoidable severity. It is easy to imagine how the long-term effects of this environment could produce in some a gruff and callused demeanour, providing the proverbial thick skin needed to live there.

While central Cape Town epitomises the well-contented urban centre, millions living on the city's outskirts compete for dignity and opportunity because they are denied livelihoods, housing, policing, sanitation, water and other necessities. As a visitor to the *kampie*, I can leave when I want to, retreating into comfort and calm. Equivalent options are not available to Gavin, his family, neighbours, Mongrel brothers or most of the people I write about. For them, being 'a motherfucker' is neither playful nor theatrical. It is a matter of survival:

> You need to be hard like this place to survive here. So that [others] can't make a carpet of you. So that they can't walk over you. If somebody raises their voice, you also will know how to raise your voice. You won't cry. You won't show emotions. You'll kill if you have to. Even if you are not a gangster, or somebody that goes through this life – you are just an ordinary person that stays in Ottery – but still you need to keep you hard… That's how they will understand you here. That is how they will respect you.

With my first-hand experiential connection to Gavin's life I better understand the overbearing weight of his words. He is a living testament to how someone can be rubbed raw over time by the systemic imbalances, racism and insecurity that envelop a community. What I am describing is a symptom of South African social hierarchies hundreds of years in the making, institutionally engrained over decades lost to apartheid and left unresolved in its aftermath. In 1948, the white supremacist National Party began a policy of 'separateness' that institutionalised racial division in South Africa, splitting by race who South Africans could marry, where they could reside, what work they could do and where they could go to school. They gave the white minority preferential treatment over other races in all social, economic and political areas. Apartheid officially came to an end in 1994, but racialised poverty, inequality, segregation and unrest remain abjectly ingrained in South African cities like Cape Town to date.

This book does not – and cannot – excuse the pernicious effects gangs have in Cape Town. What it does is acknowledge that gangs have a past, as well as contemporary causes and consequences that cannot be separated from a persistently unequal social system, which skews by race and by class who wins and loses among the city's inhabitants. By taking such a vantage point, we can more clearly see the perspective of young people like Gavin, and better appreciate what days and nights are like spent amid the circumstances in which they are socialised:

> You can see how the little kids grow up in the ghetto here, you know. Their parents grew up with the pain [of apartheid]. Now they take that kid – only 3–4 years old – going hard on that little kid… There's always swear words, there's always pain coming out. He don't understand the pain. But his mother or his father just pass the pain to him. Now when he gets thirteen or fourteen, now he releases the pain. But now his mother also wants to sit back and check: wow why's my son so dangerous? Why is he a killer?

> Because she did pass the pain on to him when he was young. He grew up with that mentality of: I only understand pain, I only understand this way of talking and acting – rough, rude, bad. This is the way my mother spoke to me. That is printed on my mentality.

Language and action are structured over the course of days, years and generations to harden youngsters, honing them into a repertoire of survival practices that offers the best chance at withstanding the pains they endure. Gangs are one such survival mechanism. One does not necessarily need to join a gang for protection. A tiny fraction of Capetonians become gangsters, about 100,000 (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2016) in a city of roughly four million people. But the gang member is unquestionably the foremost embodiment of defensiveness, toughness and truculence in the townships. It should not therefore be surprising that innumerable young men and women might be drawn to gangs for the social utility they offer.

Gangsterism's protective power became gravely evident as I witnessed Gavin's attempts to leave the Mongrels. He was shot at and almost killed three times, beaten and hospitalised twice, and stabbed once during his disengagement. Without the brotherhood to look out for him, Gavin was left alone and unguarded. Others seemed to sense it. His closest friends, not themselves gang members, persistently pestered him for being victimised as he was, suggesting that he deserved what he got because he did not fight back viciously and pitilessly enough. They were now labelling him as the exact same thing Gavin himself had previously warned me to avoid becoming – a *poes*. Despite Gavin's efforts to remain indifferent to the heckling and laughter, it became too much at times. On various occasions he would be pulled into fights with his friends – even stabbing two of them. He tried to walk away before one such altercation, but the man baiting him would not cease, causing Gavin to lash out. 'I had this little knife that I carry now, and I stabbed him… I snapped, you know. I just saw him taking me for a bitch bro. I couldn't let it go on', said Gavin. His targeted rage belied a less discriminate fury that was projected not at one individual, but at anybody who might try to hurt him in the future; stabbing somebody was a way of carving out a safe haven for himself within an environment he was trying to, but could not, escape from.

I would later watch Gavin and the man he stabbed struggle towards an uneasy rapprochement. Associations in small spaces inevitably overlap, squeezing people together in spite of themselves. They were forced into an edgy dialogue one day, following a few hours spent soaking up beer and sun on a grimy summer afternoon. The two men were hemmed in, stuck in the uncertainty of the moment, as the rest of us held our breath to see how it all would play out. As they talked, others chimed in. The conversation became brusque, charged and then antagonistic. Luckily, it settled again, and we finally managed to pull Gavin away. At various times I had observed tensions arising like this, unexpectedly, between friends, family and neighbours, coming to crescendo in an instance that might just as well lead to blows, as to reflection, reconciliation or further revelry. The day I just described finished up only in more merriment. For an instant, though, it teetered on a knife-edge. A single move the wrong way and it all could have ended terribly.

Insecurity is the reality for millions of people in the city; crime statistics will tell you that much. However, numbers cannot convey the palpable instability that well-off Capetonians are mostly isolated from. The vignettes described above offer some insight into the ways that society and culture are built up in township communities. They also glimpse behind the curtain of the fieldwork process connected to this book, to peer outside of the physical and symbolic borders that define the social landscape I surveyed and wrote about.

Notes from 'The Field'

Gavin's life history is just one of 24 collected for this book.[6] Each narrative is that of a former gang member who had successfully disengaged for at least one year – many were out for much longer. While the majority of the formal interviews with this group were carried out in the early stages of 2018, some in this sample were among the first people I met when I touched down in Cape Town in 2016. From that time, I had the opportunity to witness the lives of many interviewees outside of the confines of the interview process, in informal conversations and observations that were unencumbered by lists of questions, note-taking or recording devices. My exchanges with the main sample of 24 intermingled with numerous interviews and informal conversations with other gang members, as well as with discussions I had with parents, teachers, health professionals, social workers, civil society representatives, community campaigners, politicians and fellow researchers. It takes qualitative work of some breadth and depth to access the hidden or illegal aspects of our societies, by digging and scratching at the paradoxes and intricacies underneath relations in peripheral spaces. Even if the outputs of the broader study were not always penned directly into the pages of this book, it would be fair to say that its text is the cumulative product of research and writing on gangs in Cape Town for six-plus years.

The end result is a collage of snapshots from layered life histories, created around a biographical timeline that grew in relation to every interviewee's movements into and out of gangs. As Godfrey and Richardson rightly indicate, methodologies of this type provide 'a significant, theoretically dense, and diverse sub-set of historical and social-scientific enquiry' (2004, p. 144). Framing research as life history chooses awareness, elaboration and understanding, countering current trends in the criminological field to standardise and reduce the lives of gang members into sterile social categories to be broken down and mastered (Fraser, 2015). Allowing research subjects to situate themselves in their own narratives mitigates the stigma of savagery that is so often levelled at members of Cape Town's gangs. Their personal accounts also have the power to convey complicated ideas and difficult topics with humility and humanity, bringing the

[6]My initial engagement as a gang researcher in Cape Town relied heavily on gatekeepers from local civil society organisations. These first connections later snowballed into additional contacts within and between communities across the city, all of which were important in sourcing participants for this study.

study from the purely scientific into the realm of the personal, more amply representing lived realities. Much can be unearthed when mining the idiosyncrasies of a single life. In discussing him- or herself, individuals invariably make a narrative connection to the social, cultural, economic and political forces that influence people like them (Ojermark, 2007). Moreover, theory and data are represented below through a journalistic style of writing that seeks to animate interviewees' biographies. The intention is to provide access to the situational meaning of participants' statements, weaving context and dialogue into the fabric of their lives, in a way that humanises their experiences with street culture.

From all of the life histories considered below, Gavin's alone is presented as something resembling a biography, while aspects of other life histories are touched on sporadically in self-contained snippets throughout this publication, as they fit the topics presented. From our short introduction to Gavin's life we can already see the uncertain course members tread when leaving gangs. His uneasy transition embodies a conclusion without clarity, which is true of every character arc in this book. Its pages describe protagonists taking tentative steps forwards and backwards, moving away from gangs to indefinite endings, rather than by clear leaps towards better futures. It is fair to say that gang disengagement takes a 'zigzag path' (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 54)[7] that is ambiguous, irregular and unpredictable, trekked by social actors using available strategies, resources and opportunities to escape the deadly hold of the streets. Most people in this study organised their gang exits around generalisable behavioural schemas defined by some version of: family, work and religion. Of course, every transition had its own character and bearing, but domestic repertoires, workplace repertoires and religious repertoires provided ex-gangsters access to the type of non-gang social networks and cultural capital that gave them the best chance of getting out of gang life into normal life. The characters presented below might remain, for the most part, trapped in insecure lives and unstable livelihoods. Still, they offer incontestable examples that disengagement is possible, their journeys yielding insights that can inform efforts to attenuate gang violence – whether in Cape Town, or in other unequal and insecure cities around the world.

[7]Something also found in studies of exit from delinquency (Bushway et al., 2001), terrorism (Horgan, 2009), piracy and right-wing hate groups (Bjorgo, 2008) and drug trafficking (Campbell & Hansen, 2012).

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Acknowledgements

Sincere appreciation goes out to all who directly and indirectly participated in and supported this project. To begin with, thank you to Rotary International for so generously funding part of this study. I also cannot but express endless gratitude to my family, without whose love I would not have pressed on. Each of you, in your unique way, was a source of strength, comfort and motivation. This success is yours, as much as it is mine. But, above all, I would like to acknowledge those people who were selflessly and unabashedly willing to give voice to the tragedy and bravery that define life for many young Capetonians. The stories you shared stay with me as a testament to the beauty of the human spirit. I hope that I did those narratives justice, and in retelling them am able to – in some small way – contribute to our common aspiration of making a secure and fulfilling life a right enjoyed by each and every person living in Cape Town.

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Chapter 1

Blood In, Blood Out?

To the casual observer, Cape Town looks glossy and serene. With its picturesque panoramas of Table Mountain and its fashionable shops and restaurants, the city earned the distinction of World Design Capital in 2014, and is regularly ranked among the world's top tourist destinations. But it also consistently makes it to the global list of deadliest cities. In 2019, it had the highest murder rate in Africa, and the eighth highest worldwide (CCSPJP, 2020). No more than 20 minutes away from Cape Town's central 'City Bowl', fierce gun battles raged between competing gangs on the 'Cape Flats', the expansive, sandy outskirts where the city's townships are located. This is the other side of the so-called 'Mother City'[1], the part not presented on postcards or travel websites, where the vast majority of its shooting is concentrated (ISS, 2019). Murder rates in Cape Town have been rising since the turn of the decade, and are now much higher than in South Africa's other major urban centres (SACN, 2019). Police statistics indicate an average of more than two gangland murders every day in the Western Cape Province whose capital is Cape Town, about one-third of all killings there (SAPS, 2018).

Some estimates purport that there are around 130 gangs,[2] with up to 100,000 members, operating in Cape Town and its surrounds (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2016). Among these are a number of street gangs[3] of considerable size and permanence. There are also three prison gangs – known collectively as 'the number' – that have a long and arcane history of ritualised violence that has permeated the four corners of South Africa's correctional system (Steinberg, 2004a). While prison and street gangs have historically stayed separate, versions of the number gangs – the 26s, 27s and 28s – can now be found throughout Cape Town too. Towards the

[1]What is probably the most popular explanation for this nickname refers to the fact that Cape Town is the original site of colonial settlement in Africa.

[2]This estimate has been in circulation since at least the mid-2000s. But Standing comments that 'This number is not to be relied on, however, as the way in which gangs are counted is not methodologically rigorous; SAPS experts admit that the figure is a rough estimate' (2006, p. 103).

[3]Participants in this study belonged to some of the city's most feared gangs: Americans, Hard Livings, Mongrels, Ghetto Kids and Laughing Boys. Other prominent street gangs are: Terrible Josters, Junky Funky Kids, Jesters and Junior Cisko Yakkies. The 28s prison gang, and to a lesser extent the 27s and 26s, also continue to establish themselves independently on the streets.

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bottom end of the underworld pecking order is a latticework of smaller, turf-based proto-gangs that usually ally with more established street gangs (Pinnock, 2016). It is mainly in Cape Coloured townships that one finds institutionalised organised street groupings (Hagedorn, 2008), whereas gangs in Black townships are usually relatively small cliques and crews (Sefali, 2014). It is also Coloured street gangs that dominate news headlines, and are the gang category that will be this book's primary focus. They often span several communities, and can be made up of hundreds and thousands of members (Roloff, 2014). Because of the size of street gangs, their members do not operate together in a unified manner, but sustain the gang's unity via a combination of shared cultural practices like specific tattoos, dress codes and slang, as well as through a mutual animosity to outsiders and collective memories of the gang's past (Standing, 2003). The biggest of Cape Town's gangs – like the Americans and Hard Livings – have evolved into street syndicates, or super-gangs, which are highly organised and are franchised across the city (Goga, 2014b).

The Americans are reputed to be the largest gang, and one of the most violent. The 'American nation' is made up of many thousands of members who are organised around the red, white and blue of the United States flag, a symbol that they have imported from across the Atlantic and emblazoned onto clothes, graffiti and tattoos across Cape Town. The Americans are affiliated with smaller groups that might also fight under the US banner,[4] while retaining their own gang identities. Gangs like the Hard Livings, Mongrels, Laughing Boys and Ghetto Kids by contrast affiliate under the British flag, standing together as a measure against the dominance of their larger Amerophile adversaries. Of course, the frenzied nature of Capetonian gangsterism means that alliances are in flux all the time, shifting and splintering as gangs are born, grow and die off in the battle to control the city's illegal economies. The grasp of gangsters touches every aspect of life, reaching into pockets of crooked cops, corrupt politicians and frightened business owners (Shaw, 2017), and even into the core of the city. Throngs of foreign travellers stumbling through the lively din of Long Street's club scene remain largely oblivious to the fact that security and drugs along the strip are also swayed by gangs (Dolley, 2019).

Still, it is the Coloured communities of the Cape Flats that are the heartland of gangsterism in Cape Town. Gangs there run violent drug businesses and control protection, taxis and prostitution rackets. It is down the barrel of a firearm or with a knife's blade that they carve up Coloured communities, taking anything from a building, street or block, to large parts of entire townships. When gang leaders want to expand their empires, they send street soldiers out to shoot at competing gang members. Teenagers – or younger – frequently open fire on their enemies from down a residential street or across a school field, sending civilians ducking for cover and rival gangsters running to get their own hardware in retaliation.

[4]Groups like the Dollar Kids, Derwent Kids, Dixie Boys and Spoilt Brats might typically be aligned with the Americans. But alliances are localised and shifting. For instance, at the time of writing this the Spoilt Brats were fighting under the British flag in Hanover Park, but were aligned with the Americans in places like Tafelsig in Mitchells Plain.

Other gang-related violence is more targeted. The assassination of an adversary might be planned for days, weeks or months before.

Violence is central to the existence and functioning of gangs everywhere. International research has shown that gang participation generally amplifies rates of violent offending (Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013), as well as violent victimisation (Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). Most importantly, it underpins the drug economy (Plüddemann, Parry, Louw, & Burton, 2002). Gangs are a real estate business. More turf equals more drug sales, which buys more weaponry to capture yet more ground. Violent acts may also be incorporated into gang admission ceremonies. The head of a prominent Cape Flats gang prevention initiative stated that the act of 'taking blood' in initiation is a driver of gang-related violence; other key sources of conflict include: disputes over territory, fights over drugs, personal altercations, exit ceremonies and disagreements over females. Once in the gang, loyalty is proved through atrocity, putting an exclamation point on a process that separates recruits from community and family, bonding them to the gang through blood (Pinnock, 1997). Violence is also used punitively against anybody stepping outside the rules or alliances of a gang. Only the worst transgressions end in murder, however. Warm bodies are more useful, after all, than are cold ones. 'The Hard Livings will break your legs and pay for the hospital bill', a Manenberg-based community activist told me, when discussing how the gang punishes members who step out of line. Bruises and broken bones are inscribed upon the body of the transgressor, teaching hard lessons to all members about what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Gang punishments and disputes can also be directed at outsiders, usually opposing gangs, in violence aimed equally at expressing catharsis and domination. 'Sometimes me and my brothers we have an argument and we both fetch a gun and want to shoot each other... Then we go [shoot the enemy], because we don't want to shoot each other', said a member of the Laughing Boys.

If the shooting starts, it can be difficult to stop. Gang life is ruled by the notion of 'blood for blood', stipulating that when one person gets killed, another must soon die as payback. Every salvo of bullets is treated as an alibi for the next. Wars start with a single incident and spin out into cycles of revenge, as retaliatory assaults, stabbings and shootings swallow up entire communities for months at a time. One death cascades into another, and then another and another. Dozens may eventually die from a single gang war. In addition to the many lives senselessly lost, the price of violence can include: disrupted access to education and other services, restricted mobility, lost livelihoods and diverted public investments. There are tens of millions of rands spent yearly on efforts to quell gang-related violence in the city by different levels of government (Nyathi, 2018) – treating gunshot wounds alone costs up to about 25,000 rands per patient (Lindwa, 2019).[5]

[5]Around the time of writing one US dollar was worth almost 15 South African rands, and one British pound was valued at about 20 rands.

Like this, gangsterism is continually being woven into the very fabric of social life in Cape Town, giving the aberrant the veneer of the normal, as people try to carry on with family, work and friendships as best they can. In spite of the carnage, many Cape Flats residents are fascinated by gangs, succumbing to a structurally induced version of Stockholm syndrome that compels them to idolise their tormentors in an unconscious and desperate bid for self-preservation. Even those residents who oppose gangs have no option but to live with them. Workers commuting to and from jobs pass by open-air drug markets, while children entertain themselves under mosaics of drying clothes strung between apartment blocks that double as gang hideouts. All too frequently, such scenes are disrupted by gun blasts. After the last shot is spent, police and residents congregate to assess the damage done. Though daily life typically quickly resumes, each violent act lives on as residents discuss gang battles and their resultant arrests, injuries and killings. These spirited discussions can move seamlessly from the spectacular and macabre to more prosaic topics like who has a new job, a new relationship or a new haircut.

As violence disperses imperceptibly into the normal course of things, it becomes 'routinized' in an established 'part of a larger context of wholly expectable, indeed even anticipated, behavior' (Scheper-Hughes, 1993, pp. 229 and 272). Taking stock of who was injured and killed during any given week became normal procedure throughout this study. Many young people I met had their lives cut tragically short as a result of gang-related murders. Eighteen-year-old Charlie was slayed after successfully making it out of the Dollar Kids gang, shot execution-style for his past affiliations while working on a road construction project. Dillon – just 16 – also made it out, only to be dispatched by the Americans because his father was still a gang leader. Kyle was killed by fellow Laughing Boys member to settle a drug debt, leaving behind a wife and child after struggling to get away from the gang and out of a drug addiction. There were many more who I knew personally, as well as those who I did not, whose premature deaths were brought on senselessly by the pernicious and persistent menace of gang violence.

Stories like these give the impression that gang membership is inevitably 'blood in and blood out'. This well-known Cape Flats adage is an ominous reference to the death warrant ostensibly signed for anybody trying to flee the streets. But to what extent are such dire depictions accurate? On some level, public fascination with sensational news stories leads to a disproportionate amount of attention being placed on the most extreme aspects of gang activity. After all, the media is governed by its own axioms, favouring reports that adhere to the saying: 'if it bleeds, it leads'. American gang researchers Decker and Lauritsen observed that gang members also have a stake in highlighting the bloodiest aspects of gangsterism, since 'the viability of their gang depends on the ability of active gang members to maintain the perception that quitting the gang is nearly impossible' (2002, p. 61). In the Capetonian context, Standing (2006) noted that the ubiquity of stories about gang members being murdered upon denouncing the gang leaves many afraid to attempt the same, although they might like to try. In our own way too, gang scholars focus on the most morbid

features of gang life. Most international criminological literature concentrates on participation in gang activities, with comparatively little being written about if, how and why people leave gangs. This also compounds the belief that the sole way out is in a body bag.

That is not to imply that no literature on exit exists. Research dating back to Fredric Thrasher's (1927) pioneering study of Chicago gangs almost a century ago found that members leave as they mature, get married and find employment. Subsequent studies also indicated that people are able to 'mature out' of gangs (Hagedorn, 1994; Hagedorn & Macon 1988; New York City Youth Board, 1960; Pyrooz, 2014; Suttles, 1968; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004). However, current disengagement literature is largely based in high-income settings like the United States (see: Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Sweeten et al., 2013; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003), so it remains unclear to what extent its lessons are transferable to lower-income contexts. It is reasonable to assume gang leaving might be affected by the relatively more severe levels of deprivation and insecurity found in South African townships.

To be sure, I have seen men and women depart gangs in Cape Town. As well, other local researchers have provided anecdotal evidence, usually as an adjunct to scholarship that concentrates on other gang topics. For instance, after revisiting the Heideveld township that had been the site of his ethnographic work on a small gang called the Homeboys, Jensen stated:

> It was with the greatest relief that I returned three years later to find that the Homeboys had ceased to exist as a group. Several had married and moved away. Two had become police officers! The rest either worked or studied. (Jensen, n.d. in Standing, 2006, p. 133)

Rodgers and Jensen (2015) also presented case studies of out-of-gang transitions in Cape Town, demonstrating that members can disengage via romantic relationships and religion. Other scholars, on the contrary, have expressed more pessimistic sentiments regarding members' potential to depart Cape gangs. Lindegaard (2017), for one, found that people's gang personas are largely durable across time, while Standing stated that: 'wandering into the gang and remaining an entrenched member can be seen as an unavoidable consequence of the social and economic contradictions of life on the [Cape] Flats' (2006, p. 135). In *The Number,* Steinberg also wrote forcefully about the struggles of a poor Coloured man scrambling to find the straight and narrow path, only to be repeatedly redirected into criminality, gangs and prison.

The numerous aborted attempts at disengagement I have personally witnessed further corroborate how difficult this is to do. Important obstacles to exit are: threats of violence, criminalisation by police, diminished social options and stigma that can follow gang membership (Feavel & Pyrooz, 2014). Another obvious impediment is that criminal records all but sink possibilities of staying financially afloat in an economy where the tide of unemployment is already so high (Standing, 2005). Hustling might be the solitary recourse an ex-gangster feels he or she has to make ends meet (Hagedorn, 1994). Somebody without the right social connections will find it especially difficult to land formal work

(Brotherton & Barrios, 2011). By contrast, gangs are looking to hire 24/7, and are the one place where being an ex-prisoner actually increases his or her chances of employment. As a result, many youngsters on the Cape Flats grow up thinking that becoming a gangster is the surest way to attain financial freedom, and that prison is a rite of passage that is required to enhance one's street credibility and move up the ranks of the gang (Samara, 2011).

The City Bowl offers preferable alternatives. Living there follows a line of thinking developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986), who believed that the well-to-do and well-connected have access to prestigious schools and elite networks that can be a big boost to their professional prospects. Not every job opportunity is posted on an employment site. Knowing the right person can help uncover these. Then knowing how to sell yourself properly can help you land the job. Growing up with a silver spoon, going to a top school and joining a swanky club teach one how to handle hoity-toity customs and conventions, which are advantageous to ascending the corporate ladder. Such 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 243–248) is slippery and elusive, and difficult to grasp for outsiders to high society. This makes it exclusive and valuable. Knowing the 'proper' way to enunciate a word, the latest fashion trend, when to laugh at a joke or even what people are laughing about conveys an intimate familiarity with upper-class circles, which in turn verifies one's belonging there. In fact, every social space has idiosyncrasies that draw a distinction between insiders and interlopers. Townships operate according to their own bits of cultural code, just like the city centre does. Think back to the lessons Gavin offered me in the preface as I entered the commotion of the *kampie*. That setting was as indiscernible to me as the stuffy ambiance of Cape Town's colonial Mount Nelson Hotel might have been to him. Whereas bluster and bellicosity would certainly get you booted from the Mount Nelson, being a wild, unshrinking and angry 'motherfucker' is important 'street capital' (Sandberg, 2008, p. 156) – a street cultural competence and recognisably legitimate form of authority in informal settings – for a gangster trying to preside over the drug market in a slum community.

Gang researchers writing on 'street culture' (Bourgois, 2002; Fraser, 2015; Ilan, 2015; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011) have built on Bourdieu's theories and concepts – cultural capital, along with 'social field' (1993, pp. 30–31) and 'habitus' (1988, p. 782) – to show how young people everywhere in the world who are born into the pressure cooker of urban vulnerability might turn to gangs as a rational response to irrational social circumstances. Rather than accepting trifling wages, inhumane working conditions and racial prejudice, youngsters instead celebrate their marginality as a badge of honour, drawing pride and power in what the privileged classes would find shocking and shameful. What is broadly referred to as street culture in academic literature is popularly called 'gangsterism' (Standing, 2005, p. 12) in Capetonian street vernacular; it is an observable set of social practices – drug use, profligacy, hedonism, risk-taking, hypersensitivity, intimidation and aggression – that pitches loyalty to gangs against commitment to polite society. For its adherents, gangsterism promises protection (Jensen, 2006), dignity (Jensen, 2008) and income (Pinnock, 2016), in a context where equal economic opportunity (Crankshaw, 2012), active and responsive policing (O'Regan & Pikoli,

2014) and accessible criminal justice (Gould, 2014) are generally unavailable. The 'structural power' (Wolf, 1990, p. 587) of economic inequality, community deprivation and racial division hits Coloured communities in Cape Town hard, putting the balance of probabilities against the people who live there. So people make do, out of a desire to catalyse something from nothing. Gangs are made up of tough, poorly educated young men and women who have nowhere to go, and whose greatest resource is their indomitable will to live and die on their own terms. What might otherwise be judged by some as the moral failing of somebody simply opting to behave badly or criminally, is anything but.

Make no mistake, though, street culture is a self-defeating strategy in the long run. It is the already-excluded clashing with each other in order to not be the one who is left depressed, destitute, disfigured or dead, in an attempt to rise above their circumstances by pulling down those around them. Too much time spent cheating, stealing and fighting sooner or later attaches itself to them as a socialising and organising principle of how life ought to be lived – in competition, in confrontation and in constant conflict. Violence becomes culturally internalised in ways that compound the conditions that originally caused it. Whereas a preparatory school, a top university and an office job lead to mainstream cultural participation, a long-term commitment to street culture imprints gang tattoos, street slang, puffed-up personas and erratic demeanours onto hitmen, drug merchants, thieves, pimps and the other usual suspects found in lawless localities around the world (Shammas, 2018). The consequence is a 'locking-in effect' (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016, p. 209) into a sociological straightjacket that holds captive whole neighbourhoods to volatility and violence, with what seems like no way out.

There is great analytical value – and moral power – in demonstrating how crime and violence are reproduced in relation to structural oppression and lack of opportunity, especially in refuting criminological arguments depicting gang members as sociopaths (Yablonsky, 1959, 1970). But over-representing the potency of street culture's socially reproductive power presents its own problems. Reading street cultural literature can leave one feeling hopeless sometimes, giving off the impression that getting out of the grip of gangs and escaping the streets is unimaginable. In this regard, street culturalists tend to mirror the shortcomings of the Bourdieusian social theory their work is based on. Bourdieu was criticised for his partiality towards the structuring aspects of society, leaving little space for the ways that personal agency can change culture or the ways that societal relations might be restructured (Evens, 1999; Giroux, 2001). For their part, Bourdieusian criminologists emphasise the rigid reproductive effects of crime, gangs and violence, while taking not enough notice of how street culture can be shaken up, or how gang members and other criminal actors might be able to shake free from the streets.

This book focuses on personal transformation as a counterweight to the prominence of social reproduction in street cultural writings. It brings Bourdieusian criminology into conversation with international literature on gang disengagement and publications on gangs in Cape Town, showing that gang members there can break from street culture when exiting gangs. The disengagement narratives of Gavin and 23 other ex-gangsters are used to illuminate available pathways out of gangs, sparking a light at the end of the tunnel for anybody wanting to

follow in their footsteps. Family life, work life and religious life serve as beacons for the rehabilitated, as they reorient themselves in a new world. For any cynics left wondering if the 'ex' is all an act – and sceptics are many – domesticity, professionalism and faith provided evidence that their redemption narrative is for real. Taken together, these are the three quintessential elements that encapsulate what many interviewees referred to as the 'normal life'. That everybody in this book managed to find some semblance of normal and legitimate living proves that gang members can start anew. Their experiences should be a source of inspiration to gang members also wishing to disengage, as well as a valuable source of information for anybody looking to offer a hand to help them do so.

1.1 A History of Violence

But before forging ahead into personal stories of gang disengagement, it is important to first situate these in the historical and social context that they take place in. To start, one cannot speak at length about Coloured street gangs in the city without first commenting on the history, place and identity of South Africa's Coloured population. Whereas the term 'Coloured' may be considered antiquated and offensive in places like the United States and United Kingdom, in South Africa many people self-identify with this racial and cultural category. This is not to imply that the label does not carry considerable historical baggage. It is a social classification associated with violent European coercion into a single racial categorisation phenotypically varied communities of highly diverse geographical and cultural origins (Adhikari, 1992). Apartheid codified Coloured people as one of South Africa's official racial categories.[6] The country's Coloured population was given a 'higher status' than the Black population, but a lower one than whites. Their middleness has meant that Coloured people have always occupied an ambiguous social position. They have a relatively smaller population and lower political representation than Blacks, and less economic power than whites. The following quote from Marike de Klerk, former First Lady of South Africa, is indicative of the limbo Coloureds find themselves living in. She described Coloured people as 'a negative group… a no-person. They are the leftovers. They are the people that were left after the nations were sorted out. They are the rest' (Adhikari, 2005, p. 13). Lacking a distinct identity, Coloured people had to find ways to generate meaningful participation in society. Joining gangs is one attempt at achieving this. 'If you want to know why we coloureds have gangs', one commentator told gang researcher Andŕe Standing, 'the problem is that we coloureds wish we were white… we don't know who we are or where we came from'. (2005, p. 14)

[6]South Africa's official ethnic categories are: Black African, Coloured, Indian/Asian and white.