

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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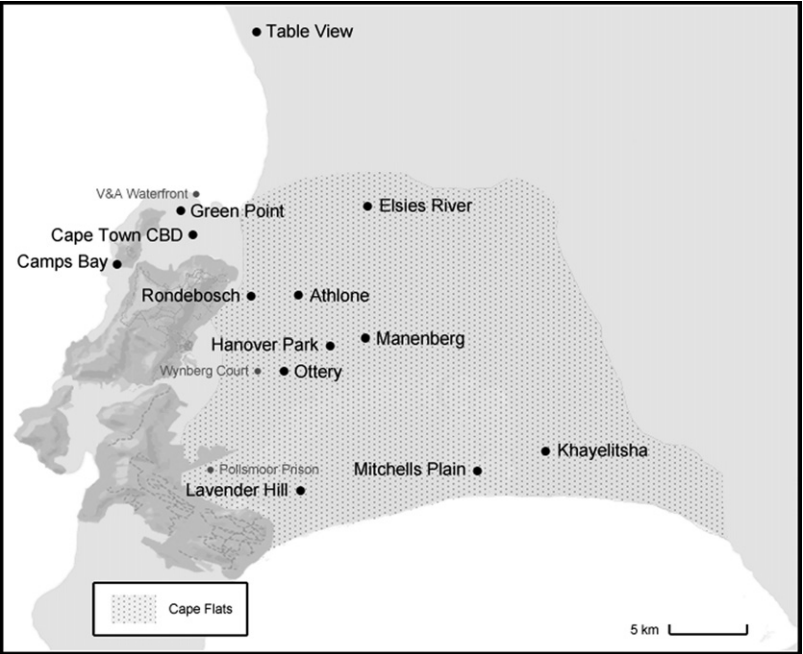
INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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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 for 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 ten-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

¹All 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 buttons³ 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

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

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

⁵An 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 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 of 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 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

⁶My 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.

⁷Something 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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