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Comparative Analysis of Coloured Gangs in Cape Town and Indigenous Gangs on Canada's Prairies: Connecting Localized Opposition to Globalized Grievances Through Street Culture

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Abstract
This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Coloured gangs in Cape Town, South Africa, and Indigenous gangs in Canadian Prairie cities—Calgary, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and others—looking at how members of each engage in street culture. It finds that street cultural participation in both settings is largely a collective response to globally recognizable—yet locally articulated—experiences with joblessness, over-incarceration, racialized poverty, and other forms of structural oppression. The paper uses life history research that was conducted with a sample of 24 gang members in South Africa and with another 53 from cities in Canada. Overall research findings are focused through the individual stories of Gavin and Roddy—research participants from Cape Town and Winnipeg, respectively—to provide personal and contextualized representations of broader key street cultural concepts and processes in each setting. The paper adds to a growing body of gang literature that draws comparisons across national contexts to show how street cultures are similarly used in an attempt to counteract experiences with vulnerability, exclusion, and alienation within distinct cultural contexts, socioeconomic situations, and colonial legacies.

Introduction

Cape Town, South Africa, is consistently ranked as one of the world's deadliest cities (CCSPJP 2020). Police statistics estimate that gangland murders account for about one-quarter of all killings in the Western Cape Province where Cape Town is the capital.[1] The

[1] According to crime statistics from South Africa's national police force—the South African Police Service (SAPS)—for the first half of the financial year 2021/2022 indicated that there were 318 gang-related murders out of a total of 1,104 total murders in the Western Cape (SAPS 2022). Of course, given the fluid ways people associate with gangs (Standing 2003, 2006), determining what murders are and are not gang-related

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city's most powerful street gangs are found in Cape Coloured[2] communities (Dziewanski 2021; Hagedorn 2008), where gang membership can provide marginalized populations with income (Pinnock 2016), protection (Jensen 2006), and dignity (Jensen 2008) in the face of state failures to provide adequate community development and local governance (Samara 2011; Standing 2003, 2006). A world away, in the Canadian Prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, street gangs are also seen as primary contributors to homicide and other forms of violence. In that context it is Indigenous gangs that dominate, fighting it out in what are some of Canada's most violent cities.[3] Gang membership offers Indigenous youth protection and fast and relatively easy income (Buddle 2012; Comack et al. 2013; Henry 2019), as well as a way of gaining a sense of identity and purpose in the face of inequality, racism, discrimination, family dysfunction, substance abuse, and insecurity caused by colonization and colonialism (Comack et al. 2013; Sinclair and Grekul 2012).

Although they exist in different socioeconomic, historical, and geographical contexts, gangs from Cape Town and Prairie cities in Canada have key commonalities; both are subcultural groups seeking empowerment against structural oppression and exclusion (Hagedorn 2008; Hazlehurst and Hazlehurst 2018). Their members leverage street culture as a way of celebrating their social outsidership through a "complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society" (Bourgois 2002: 8). Gang researchers around the world have used a street cultural framework to demonstrate how crime and violence are reproduced in relation to structural oppression and lack of opportunity (Bourgois 2002; Fraser 2015; Harding 2014; Ilan 2015; Sandberg 2008; Shammas 2018). Some of the most compelling work of this type repurposes the social theory of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, using concepts such as "street field," "street capital," and "street habitus" (Harding 2014; Shammas 2018; Shammas and Sandberg 2016) to explain how sidelined populations experience and cope with exclusionary social structures, in a way that also accounts for the dynamic, contextualized, and agentic nature of street cultures across distinct gang localities (Fraser 2015; Ilan 2015). Bourdieusian criminology is a useful analytical tool for demonstrating the connections between social and spatial inequalities and cultural adaptation through the connections it makes between habits and habitat via habitus. People living in communities that are isolated spatially, economically, and racially from economic opportunities, mainstream social networks, and government services evolve cultural and social practices that help them survive there.

Gangs are an international phenomenon found around the world. Despite their international nature, the study of gangs often occurs within national silos. Comparative gang research can help highlight connections between seemingly disconnected locales to demonstrate how the presence of gangs and their associated street cultural practices are produced by global forces, which are locally expressed in rapidly urbanizing cities beset by

Footnote 1 (continued)

is a highly subjective process that does not necessarily capture the hidden dynamics and complex associations individuals have with gangs.

[2] Whereas the term "Coloured" may be considered antiquated and offensive in places like the United States, Canada, and UK, in South Africa the vast majority of Coloured people still self-identify with this racial and cultural category, and it is one of South Africa's four official ethnic categories.

[3] According to Statistics Canada (2021) Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, and Edmonton were among the top-five deadliest cities in Canada in 2020, with 4.93, 4.54, 4.1, 3.19 murders per 100,000 people, respectively.

poverty, inequality, insufficient investment in infrastructure, and inadequate social services (Fraser 2015). Even in South Africa and Canada, with their vastly different median incomes, levels of inequality, and government spending per capita, one finds similar forms of street cultural expression. That this is the case belies disparities in aggregate measures of so-called development between the two nations to show how the continued effects of colonization, segregation, marginalization, and criminalization of racialized groups contributes to the organization around street cultural practices. This paper employs key ideas from street cultural criminology to analyze how Coloured gang members in South Africa and Indigenous gang members in Canada find agency in gangs as a response to the historically structured constraints facing them. Understanding gang membership in this way shows that are not the result of some sociopathic drive toward violence, but are instead an organizational form activated by their members in order to survive in similarly dire socioeconomic circumstances.

We will see below that gang membership in Cape Town and in Canadian Prairie cities has occurred in response to successive government initiatives aimed at the cultural erasure of Coloured and Indigenous presence and the destruction of communities and families through the institutionalized violence of the South African apartheid state (Pinnock 2016) and Canada's settler colonial state (Dorries et al. 2019; Razack 2015). Despite geographical and political differences, there are many parallels in how Coloured and Indigenous peoples are treated. For example, in South Africa, the term "Coloured" was produced through colonial efforts to coerce into a single racial classification communities of diverse geographical and cultural origins (Adhikari 1992). In Canada, the Indian Residential School systems was part of a larger project by the settler colonialist state to violently erase the culture and history of Indigenous peoples living in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).[4] The respective colonial histories of Coloured and Indigenous peoples are manifested in different ways. One of the most malicious is the overrepresentation of both groups among their national prison populations. South Africa's Coloured population represents only 9 percent of the South African population, but has historically made up about 18 percent of the national prison population, whereas Indigenous peoples comprise 37 percent of the prison population and just 4 percent of the Canadian population (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2021). In both South Africa and Canada, the traumas associated with their respective histories of state-sanctioned violence created the conditions for mass incarceration, based on persistent structural segregation, alienation, and oppression that continue even today, which Coloured and Indigenous peoples attempt to cope with by participating in gangs and street culture.

Contextualizing Coloured and Indigenous Gangs

While central Cape Town is celebrated for commerce and tourism, the peripheral Cape Flats are better known for joblessness (City of Cape Town 2018), violence (UCT Centre of Criminology 2015), and backlogs in housing, infrastructure, and basic services (Ehebrecht 2015). The "Flats," as they are referred to locally, is where the vast majority of Cape Town's Coloured and Black residents live and where most of the city's gangs are based.

[4] Recent excavations around the schools found massive unmarked graves, confirming residential school survivors' (possessive) narratives that half of the children who attended these state and church run schools died while in attendance.

Although smaller and less formal gangs exist in Black townships (Sefali 2014), it is mainly Cape Town's Coloured street gangs that have attained the highest levels of longevity, size, organization, and professionalism (Hagedorn 2008). It is impossible to understand Coloured gangs without further commenting on Coloured identity, and how it was exploited by systems of South African white supremacy. In 1950, South Africa's white supremacist apartheid[5] regime codified Coloured people as a racial group, one with an ambiguous identity stuck somewhere between being white and being Black (Adhikari 2005). Lacking a distinct sense of collective identity, Coloured people have had to improvise ways to generate social and cultural meaning. Forming gangs is one attempt at achieving this (Standing 2005). The white supremacist project also contributed to modern-day gang formation in Cape Town in other ways; between 1960 and 1980 non-white households and communities were violently torn apart to make space for white real estate in the city center (Western 1997). Lambrechts (2012) argues that the shredded fabric of Coloured social life encouraged the formation gangs, because these groups provided adrift youth with a sense of belonging, purpose, and empowerment. That these local gangs flourished after apartheid ended in 1994 (Kinnes 2000) is an indication that Cape Town's so-called gang problem is a product of historical failures started in during apartheid, which have been continued through the systematized racial segregation and persistent economic deprivation that still ravages people's lives today through what Pieterse calls "neo-apartheid" (2009: 13).

Similar to Coloured street gangs on Cape Town's Cape Flats, Indigenous street gangs on Canada's Prairies are mired in complex sociopolitical histories stemming from colonization and settler colonialism, which have fragmented Indigenous lifeworlds and created for gang culture and violence to take hold in economically marginalized neighborhoods (Buddle 2012; Comack et al. 2013; Henry 2019). Indigenous gangs are a relatively recent phenomenon, after they spread across Prairie communities from the streets of Winnipeg, Manitoba, where they were formed in the late 1980s (Buddle 2012; Comack et al. 2013). Contemporary Indigenous street gangs have a presence within the urban centers and across smaller rural communities on the Prairies (Comack et al. 2013; Henry 2019; Sinclair and Grekul 2012), and their proliferation has been linked to the fragmentation of families and identities, first through residential schools and now through child welfare policies (Gekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008; Sinclair and Grekul 2012; Stewart and La Berge 2019). Thus, continued settler colonialism has created spaces of racialized poverty (Comack et al. 2013) where Indigenous peoples are over-represented, forcing some to see the gang and the street lifestyle as a viable way of surviving their marginalization (Henry 2022).

Global Street Cultural Scholarship

None of what was written above is meant to imply that violence is inherent to any specific demography or geography. Indeed, most Cape Flats residents and Indigenous peoples on Canada's Prairies never join a gang or commit an act of violence. Still, research on gangs across the world has shown that joining a street gang is a way of obtaining a competitive advantage in poor and unstable communities (Brotherton 2015; Daniels and Adams 2010; Harding 2014). Gangs provide opportunities to those who are willing to partake and adhere to local gang codes as a mechanism of survival (Anderson 2000; Garot 2010). Street

[5] Apartheid was South Africa's social political system of institutionalized racism (1948–1994).

culture is not particular to gangs,[6] as anybody working in local street economies can turn to it (Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012). Indeed, even those living legitimately might adopt street cultural styles, symbols, language, and associations to navigate the insecurity and uncertainty of violent street spaces (Dziewanski 2020d; Lindegaard 2017). Street culture has been referred differently as a "code of the street" (Anderson 2000: 33), a "mindset of '*locura* [emphasis added]'" (Vigil 2003: 233–36), or a "defiant individualism" (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991: 23–28); but regardless of its particular formulation, street culture provides a frame for understanding how gangs and gang-related violence become subcultural modes of opposition available to individuals and groups living on the fringes of society (Fraser 2017).

From within the larger canon of street cultural writings, it is those influenced by Pierre Bourdieu (see: Shammas 2018; Shammas and Sandberg 2016) that avoid offering an analysis that is overly reductive or purely materialist, where close attention is paid to how violence and culture are underpinned by exclusionary societal and cultural structures. From this perspective, gang membership can be understood as an act of adaptive agency brought about by the unfair social conditions in which they are embedded (Harding 2014). Bourdieusian street cultural criminology posits that when people are impeded from obtaining other forms of cultural, social, and human capital, they find agency in toughness, hostility, and violence, which are street cultural competences and recognizably legitimate forms of authority—or "street capital"[7] (Sandberg 2008: 156)—in informal settings. Bourgois (2011), for example, showed that aggression earns a person respect and safety as part of a public performance that includes that individual's clothing, crowd, reputation, and a general demeanor—signaling to the world that he or she is not to be messed with.

With limited options, people actively orient themselves toward impulsive hypersensitivity, intense competition, and aggressive social conflict, fighting among each other for the limited opportunities and resources afforded to people in limited social position (Sandberg and Pedersen 2011). Extreme violence is an especially useful strategy for gaining the upper hand (Dziewanski 2020a). Let us note that street culture is not a hard-coded or fixed strategy, but can be changed and adapted (see Dziewanski 2020a, 2020c, 2020d). When the right incentives are offered, armed groups have been shown to proactively pursue collective peace rather than collective violence (Utas and Christensen 2016). Indeed, many gang members exit gangs and street culture altogether (Dziewanski 2020b; 2021; Henry 2015). But for those that remain in gangs, demonstrating a sufficient proficiency for bellicosity can earn rank and reputation that can then be traded for income, protection, and status in the "street field"; Shammas and Sandberg define "the streets" as "that continuum of actions and cultural practices that are centered around various forms of illegalities and crimes that can be understood through what they are not: they are not the crimes of… the state, corporations, and so on; instead, they are the crimes of the dominated" (2016: 207).

Street cultural agency and structural oppression emerge in relation to each other through the "regulated improvisation" (Bourdieu 1990: 57) of street-based actions and practices enacted in opposition to the structural oppression faced by those with limited legitimate options. However, as Bourgois points out, street culture cannot rightfully be called a culture

[6] Let us also note that gangs are actually diverse and shifting organizations whose members participate variably in criminality (Thornberry et al. 2003), and that other social groupings—such as fraternities—may have many of the same features as gangs, but largely escape stigma and criminalization (Sanday 2007).

[7] Street capital adapts Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986, 47), and locates it to local cultural spaces framed within street contexts.

of resistance, because gang members ultimately only internalize their rage and desperation to "direct their brutality against themselves and their immediate community, rather than against their structural oppressors" (2011: 307). Thus, gang-related violence at once opposes and reproduces the marginalization (Shammas 2018). What begins as an adaptive response to disempowerment in time congeals into "street habitus" (Fraser 2015: 43–44), a concept illustrating how the repetition of street-based practices structurally attaches crime, violence, and poverty to people and places. Although opposition eventually reinforces oppression, it is still important to recognize the structural origins of gangs. Taking this perspective shows that rather than seeing gangs as a problem to be solved—or as a social "virus" (Standing 2006: 78) to be eradicated—it is instead society itself that needs to be problematized. If gangs and street culture are a symptom and reaction to social inequalities that impact one's quality of life, it is first the oppressive inequality of structural relations that need to be addressed—not the gang structures themselves—if street violence is to be reduced.

Mapping Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in both Cape Town, South Africa, and in cities in the Prairie Provinces of Canada. In South Africa, the foundation of the study is a sample of 24 life history interviews with men and women from predominately Coloured township communities in Cape Town. These interviews were embedded within a larger multi-year study that included other formal interviews with gang members, community, scholars, activists, and others, as well as hundreds of hours of personal communications and observations in research communities throughout the city. In Canada, life history and modified photovoice research was undertaken, with 53 male and female Indigenous gang members who were currently living in the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, from 2012 to 2019. The interviews were a part of three research projects that looked to examine Indigenous street gang experiences through a process of "survivance," survival, resistance, and resurgence (Vizenor 2008). Interviews undertaken in Cape Town were loosely structured, engaging each participant's: personal background, trajectory into gangs, motivations for membership, gang roles and experiences, and participation in criminal and violent behavior. In the Canadian sites, interviews followed a conversational approach (Kovach 2021) to examine how social systems impact one's understanding of self and how exclusion from such systems pushes some Indigenous youth to utilize violence, becoming involved with local Indigenous street gangs.

Before comparative analysis was undertaken, research data in each setting was given meaning through coding and content analysis to identify key commonalities in responses between interviews in relation to how street culture was manifested in both South Africa and Canada. Analysis focused on key concepts of street cultural criminology to consider and compare how street culture converges and differs across the research sites. Findings were ascertained as trends that were commonly present across interviews. Generalizable research findings are presented below through the personalized life stories of selected research participants—one in each setting—who serve as embodied representations of key street cultural concepts and processes. Rather, than developing a collective narrative of multiple actors within each geographical space, we focus on one specific individual—Gavin (South Africa) and Roddy (Canada)—to highlight similarities of involvement in street cultures found on the Cape Flats in Cape Town (see: Dziewanski 2020a,

2020c, 2020d, 2021) and in Canada's Prairie cities (Henry 2015, 2019, 2022). Focusing the paper's narrative through the eyes of its two protagonists allows the authors to present a more personalized and humanized representation of street culture in each research setting, which offers a counterpoint to the stigmatizing and criminalizing ways that gang members are often represented in media and research. Further, the study of life histories has emerged as a tool for recovering hitherto ignored accounts and has "developed into a significant, theoretically dense, and diverse sub-set of historical and social-scientific enquiry" (Godfrey and Richardson 2004: 144). Life histories offer a complexification of the research context and an understanding that provides thick, enriched awareness rather than reductionism (Dhunpath and Samuel 2009). Presenting data as life narratives helped the authors better depict the lived realities of the people and communities their work focuses on, offering readers access to the situational meaning of participants' statements, by weaving context and dialogue into interview data in a way that both contextualizes and humanizes research participants' experiences with street culture. With this in mind, let us appreciate that neither of the stories presented below are a representative archetype of what participation in street culture is—if such a thing even exists. The stories of Gavin and Roddy are rather illustrative examples of the types of street cultural modes, modalities, and motivations that are exhibited among gang members in Cape Town and on Canada's Prairies, respectively.

Street Culture on the Cape Flats and the Canadian Prairies

The story of street culture in Cape Town told in this paper is presented through the life history of Gavin (male, 30 years),[8] a long-time member of one of the city's oldest and most notorious gangs—the Mongrels. Gavin grew up poor, spending his childhood bouncing around various Capetonian townships, before finally ending up in a small informal urban settlement in Ottery, a predominately poor and working-class neighborhood situated some twenty minutes southeast of central Cape Town. Ottery is where Gavin's gang the Mongrels have their headquarters, and where he spent much of his membership fighting other gangs and selling drugs to get by. He followed his brother into the gang, whose membership in the Mongrels demonstrated to Gavin that one could find power and income by becoming a gangster.

Indigenous street gangs are seen as a more recent phenomenon, where they formed on the streets of Winnipeg in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Early Indigenous gangs formed in response to "racialized poverty" (Comack et al. 2013) within urban neighborhoods, and focused on the protection of their neighborhoods from those who were seen to be outsiders (?) Even though the early street gangs were seen to protect their neighborhoods, their underlying activities were to control local underground economies that centered on the illegal drug trade. Despite being understood as unorganized, the Indian Posse was the first gang (biker or street) to reach coast-to-coast with the support of the Canadian justice system (Henry 2015). Within the Canadian Prairies (this includes the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta), the narrative of Roddy (First Nations, male, 32 years) is the empirical focus of this paper. Roddy was part of the Native Syndicate, one of the largest and oldest street gangs that formed in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but now has chapters in Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Roddy, as well as other Indigenous gang members

[8] Names have been changed.

from Winnipeg, state that there has always been a strong connection between Indigenous street gangs and biker gangs. The biker gangs had connections to global relations that brought in the drugs, while the Indigenous gangs had the local community connections. When Roddy was young, he moved back and forth between his First Nations reserve community and Winnipeg's notorious North End. It was through his familial and kinship connections to gangs and the street lifestyle that led him to join and become one of the youngest members of the Native Syndicate.

Despite them growing up on different sides of the world, there are evocative echoes between the life histories of Gavin and Roddy. The two lives depicted below exhibit commonalities found across research sites in each country. They are in various ways representative of the many other young men and women that came of age on the margins of their respective societies, experiencing hardships early on in life in the spaces their respective states created and sustained through a combination of aggression and apathy. Gavin, Roddy, and other research participants in this study—who are not explicitly referenced in this paper—were able to use their participation in gangs and street culture to gain some access to the basic amenities of life, countering the dearth of adequate governance systems and a lack of socioeconomic prospects. A broad finding from this study is that many young men and women—both Coloured and Indigenous—can turn to gangs and street culture to seize street capital—often by fighting, stabbing, shooting each other—even though it meant contributing to a street habitus that kept themselves and their communities locked into an insecure and precarious existence.

The life of every research subject is inherently specific and subjective, but is also connected to the overarching macro-processes that affect others that share their history, race, class, gender, and geography (Ojermark 2007). The subjects of this study are each examples of contemporary poverty and exclusion that connect to national histories of colonization and settler colonialism. By bringing to the fore Gavin and Roddy's personal experiences with street culture, the paper sheds light not only on their two lives, but also on the wider social, economic, and political spaces that individuals like them inhabit. The life histories of these two men are connected to the stories of South Africa's Coloured population and the Indigenous peoples of Canada as a whole, and their various ways of opposing the multiple marginalities facing them. Coloured and Indigenous peoples have both suffered systematic state-led campaigns of violence to destroy their cultures and communities through colonization and racial segregation; recall, for instance, that Canada's reserve system to control First Nations peoples famously inspired South African apartheid institutions (Cambre 2007). As we will see below, this is but one morbid detail that connects the stories of oppression and opposition found in each of the settings analyzed. Of course, different people adopt different strategies to counter their experiences with marginalization. The vast majority do not get into gangs, for instance, choosing instead to finding oppositional empowerment elsewhere. But those that do become gang members use their participation in street culture as a way of finding protection, income, and empowerment, as outlined below through the stories of Gavin and Roddy.

Seeking the Streets

Informal living in South Africa is precarious. It offers little in the way of legitimate employment, making the street economy an appealing mode of moneymaking. "There's no jobs, right. It's the gangsters here that have the money. They put food on the table. They buy drinks. They do that. It's what I was attracted to," said Gavin. This explains why he

got into gangsterism at the age of thirteen, despite the dangers it posed in terms of being killed or arrested (Lindegaard and Zimmermann 2017). Because he grew up in an informal settlement, amid poverty, violence, and few basic services, joining the Mongrels gang was a way of trying to stay alive and get ahead. "It was more violent in the community than a usual community in downtown Cape Town. There was abuse, gangsterism, drugs, unemployment. It still is like this. I come from that life," he explained. "When I was a boy I was [physically] abused by my father, I was bullied on school, and that's the way I grew up—seeing the violent things. My big brothers were in the life of gangsterism and drugs." One brother, especially, was very influential. This sibling modeled a way of achieving success and self-assurance. "We stayed in a shack, but he always provided," Gavin recalled. "He used to stick up for me especially when it comes to older guys. But with people my age he encouraged me to fight them and not cry. He showed me how to get respect like he had."

Like Gavin, Roddy grew up in a home where violence and substance abuse were normalized. At a young age, he was looking out for his siblings while his mother had parties in the house. He would run away and be placed in foster homes and the child welfare system. It was through these experiences that Roddy began to watch and observe how others acted, and who had power and control. Through this observation, Roddy slowly began to become literate in localized street codes (Anderson 2000). As Roddy stated, "I got involved in the gang when I was on the reserve and moving back to the city. I wasn't a part of them, but I liked it. I was so inspired by the gangs…I liked it, I wanted to be one of those guys, and I think I was about eight then…It was always interesting to me, know what I mean? It always made me feel like I can be a part of something." As with Gavin, Roddy's family was involved in the street cultural lifestyle. However, they were involved with what would be a rival street gang, which made things more political as he grew into the gang life. "No water, no money, no brotherhood. All my cousins were like a brotherhood, but the identity of something [the gang] made you feel important," explained Roddy. "Like it was good for us, it was really good man. I felt so awesome when I joined the gang, I felt like: wow your problems are over. I didn't even know what I was getting into."

Interviewees sampled across both countries in this study broadly stated that joining gangs was a means of earning power and money in tough circumstances, echoing the experiences of Gavin and Roddy:

> I use to tell my brother I wanted to be like [him]... He told me: it's very dangerous. But I didn't give a damn. I also wanted money... And I saw how they were stabbing and shooting people. I saw [the gangsters] giving life to the kids. They were like role models to all the kids. Despite him telling me of the negativity, I still wanted to be like him. (Gavin)
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> It was just something I wanted 'cause it was power. To have power, every man wants it. When you have a bunch of guys with you feel like you can do anything. It's all about power. It's hard to explain. You have to feel it. It feels good. We started as a small group and we became something bigger, more powerful. Part of something that was national. In the life you have to observe in order to know your environment… It's about building your status. (Roddy)

Just like Gavin and Roddy, other interviewees in both research locales commonly were drawn to gangs looking for empowerment, respect, and financial uplift. They looked to emulate gang members that represented to them a "street repertoire" (Dziewanski 2021: 45): an embodied behavioral "tool kit" (Hannerz 1969: 186–88) or cultural "strategy" (Swidler 1986: 277) for accessing material power in the street field. Gangsters model to others tools and strategies for thriving amid racialized poverty, as invisible barriers to

mainstream society pit people against each other in an intense competition for the little space and few resources around them (Henry, 2015). While the focus of this paper is the stories of two young males, it is important to note that young women can take part in street culture for many of the same reasons that men do: protection, income, status, and so on (Dziewanski 2020c). Regardless of sex, gaining membership in gangs and participating in street culture earns a person respect in their community and differentiates them from others who are vulnerable and disempowered.

However, research participants noted that inclusion and respect could not be assumed or just wanted by individuals. Street accolades must be earned, as is made clear in these statements from Gavin and Roddy:

> On the streets, you become the gangster. It's not like you are [born] the gangster. You need build yourself up to get respect in the gang. Yes, you might get respect from [non-gangster] people [in the community], but if you want respect in the gang, you have to build yourself up. You need to be the top killer or make the money. But you must aim for the top of everything. (Gavin)
> Well when you're young like that and you're in jail already you kinda just want to better yourself 'cause you don't want to be a *stryker*[9] your whole life when you're young, right. That's the goal as a kid when you're in the gang is to try and get up there in the ranks 'cause I did not want to stay a stryker. I wanted to try and get ranks. I was always trying to impress the higher ranked members when I was young. By the time I was sixteen even fifteen before I went to youth centre for the armed robberies I was doing, I already impressed a lot of older guys. I was good at what I was doing. I didn't ask questions. They didn't have to babysit me or nothing. I just did it. That's how it was. (Roddy)

Gavin and Roddy highlight the reality that the street field contains subfields that are nested within each other (Fraser and Atkinson 2014), and within which individuals act or react to improve their circumstances. There is a pecking order in the gang, with members constantly jostling each other for position (Harding 2020). Violence becomes the surest way to work up the ranks, proffering respect—or infamy—and thus increases one's street capital. Violence is essential for getting respect, which is "crucial to [one's] professional credibility" (Bourgois 2011: 302) and "critical for staying out of harm's way" (Anderson 2000: 66). "The reason [gangsters] shoot constantly—that they do it every day—is they want to… make a statement and become famous—put their name out," stated Gavin. "Then he has the power, is like the man, and there's more money, drugs, girls, [more everything]." Similarly, Roddy also emphasized that involvement with Indigenous street gangs offers opportunities for those who are willing to do what is necessary for the gang. Status to Roddy was associated with what Vigil refers to as acting "loco" (2010: 61–63), or crazy; "at the time, being crazy gave you that status and people knew you," Roddy explained.

[9] Stryker is a term used to describe an individual who has not been brought into the gang, but is working their way in. Strykers are provided tasks to prove their loyalty to the gang and is a way for the gang to vet who is willing to do what it takes for the gang. The position of stryker is equivalent to that of a prospect within biker gang culture.

Street scholars use the metaphor of competition to point to rules and stakes of "the game"[10] that are firmly established and well-known to street players—or "playas"—all over the world (Harding 2014). As Gavin noted, the rules of the street game dictate that shrewdness, fearlessness, and craziness earn the most street capital, as demonstrated by those gangsters that are willing to pull the trigger again and again without showing any remorse:

> Some people are more outstanding. Like take it for instance like in football, there's hundreds of players all over the world but you only hear about two most of the time: Lionel Messi and [Cristiano] Ronaldo. Now that's how it happens in the gang… For me it's like the way you look at that guy, or how he plays in that field. If you look at a killer, he's committed in what he's doing. If he puts his mind to it, and he's going do it. If he says to you: I'm going go and kill that guy. Then he's going to go and do it in front of people. That makes people believe in him, because he's not scared to kill you, even in front of people.

It is this sort of merciless winner-take all mentality that eventually landed Gavin a 10-year prison sentence for murder. It was one of many acts of violence he committed as a Mongrel. "You know it's either you going to die after this, or you go to jail," said Gavin. "I'm just going to do it. But the other people, you know, are going to think twice."

When Roddy was fully engaged in the gang and held a position of power, he explained that he began to watch how others embraced violence. Eventually, he understood that local street codes excluded those who could not "cut it." For Roddy, it was not just anybody who could be a gangster. That person had to have a certain understanding, a stature that separated them from others in the community:

> It's something that you build through the years. It's not really one thing in particular… It was mostly my family that was younger than me that I'd be keeping an eye on. But if somebody came around when I was that young man… I would make sure they were from the North End or they knew at least the game. I'd make sure they knew something. I would just feel them out for a while. 'Cause back then you didn't just let anyone join… I just feel them out. I watch them hang out until everybody knew: don't fuck with him.

Others we spoke to also understood gangsterism as a "game," a "sport," or "competition." Regardless of the specific descriptors used, it was agreed that reputations, respect, and street capital are accrued through violent competition with others. Social action in any field—whether figurative or metaphorical—is guided by a practical sense of what is appropriate in any given situation, by a gangsters "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1988: 782), where fields have certain rules and requirements that define the terms of play for cultural, social, symbolic, and material "prizes and profits" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). It is what sets apart supporting players from those who manage to become infamous—"to put their name out." In fact, some Capetonian "street virtuosos"[11] (Dziewanski 2020a, 14)

[10] This notion of the "the game" in street culture was imprinted into popular culture by *The Wire's* Omar Little, a fictitious Baltimore stick-up man making a living robbing street-level drug dealers, perpetrating crimes not pursuable or prosecutable in any extrajudicial system because "it's all in the game" (Anderson 2010).

[11] This application of virtuosity is a play on Bourdieu's own outline of the objective limits of objectivism (Bourdieu 1977). In pushing the boundaries of what is possible in the street field, they are able to source street capital from places others would not even consider.

have mastered the street field through exceptional displays of violence that challenges the accepted rationale of gangsterism—declaring fealty to one gang, taking a tattoo, defending turf—to stand alone as mercenaries among the city's one hundred or so gangs. On the Prairies, individuals can throw up an "IWA"—meaning: I walk alone—to indicate that they are not affiliated to one gang, but may have connections to multiple gangs because of their reputations and familial connections. IWAs are able to move through neighborhoods and are respected because of their status, playing the game on their own terms, as long as they do not break the street codes where they are seen as a rat or a snitch from one gang to another.

Actions taken in the streets can seem anti-social—or senseless—from the perspective of the outside observer. But somebody who is protected by social status, who has a house within a safe community with private security, and who feels that police are trusted actors in their community is buffered from the game being played within the street field (see: Harding 2014). Their norms and laws offer little meaningful insight into situations where insecurity reigns and where reliable criminal justice is largely absent (Jacobs and Wright 2006). So, consequences be damned, a gangster will do what he or she must do—even kill, if it is deemed necessary—to get ahead in the game. Thus are the ethical relativities that policy-makers and public alike must consider when speaking about gang prevention in settings where taking dangerous risks and openly seeking violent confrontation provide sizeable social and material payoffs. If they are at all considerate of such a context, they have to realize that deterrence-based approaches will not work. Stricter legal regulations or tougher law enforcement are unlikely to succeed in a game like this, because the street field cares little for the laws and norms of polite society—indeed, it is set up in direct opposition to them.

Perpetuating Cycles of Violence?

When Gavin joined the Mongrels, an older cadre of gangsters who were, more than happy to add a new recruit welcomed him. Instead of recoiling from the perils of gangsterism, which had already cost his brother his life, Gavin strode brazenly toward danger. "I grew up my life in it… I knew too much and I said to myself I understand [gang life] because I witnessed it and it was the easiest way [to survive]," he said. Like others in this study, he had already had many years of conditioning into the streets by the point he joined a gang. Facing death as a possible consequence of gang membership was just part of "the process of *street habituation* [emphasis in original], in which a deep-seated relationship between self and space is learned and embedded, in the context of limited spatial autonomy" (Fraser 2015: 116). It is also another example of the dangerous choices that people like Gavin make when joining gangs. At that point, he was just a 13-year-old boy whose family history and community environment had instilled in him a fatalistic sense of what it his life could be. "No danger came through my mind. I witnessed danger. So I was used to it, and thought: why must I be scared of it? I knew we all must die," he said.

Street culture is structured over the course of days, years, and generations to harden youngsters, honing them into a repertoire of survival strategies that offers the best chance of withstanding the slings and arrows they endure throughout their lives. "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," said Gavin. "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?" Intergenerational traumas are

conveyed not just through feelings and emotions, but are passed down through the street-based practices that define how to survive the disenfranchisement, segregation, and state neglect of "neo-apartheid" Cape Town (Pieterse 2009: 13).

Although young people often join gangs for survival and self-protection (Jensen 2006), gangsterism makes it more likely that somebody like Gavin will come into contact with violent offence and victimization (Lindegaard and Zimmermann 2017). Rather than fighting the structural forces that normalize violence in their communities, gang members fight each other, further trapping themselves and their communities in insecurity, disorder, and criminality (Bourgois 2011). Each respondent in the main study sample in Cape Town had been both a victim and perpetrator of violence. All had come into contact with the law. Many were addicted to drugs and struggling with poverty. Such cycles of violence, incarceration, and addition are indigenous to the street field and work together to lock people into it (Shammas and Sandberg 2016). A great many gang members in Cape Town fall back into gangs after trying to get out, while others have been killed or go to prison before they can exit. For those that do manage to disengage they can only do so at great personal and social cost. Gavin committed many acts of violence as a gang member. He had horrible violence done to him too. He sold drugs to his community, and groomed children to be Mongrels, just as he had been groomed. After Gavin inevitably ended up in prison for murder he joined the 28s prison gang, the same one his brother had been a member of years before. Once incarcerated, the obstacles he faced to get out were compounded by the criminalization, threats, stigma, isolation, and other impediments that attach themselves to even those gang members that want to get out (Dziewanski 2020b). Challenges like this did not stop after he decided to leave the gang either. Gavin was shot at, stabbed, beaten, and robbed after he de-identified from the Mongrels, and continued to live poor and without access to services in the informal settlement he had grown up in. Unable to find steady employment, social acceptance, and access to government services, gang leavers like him could only turn to the same autonomy, tenacity, intentionality, and adaptability to stay out of gangs as they did when they first entered them against their circumstances in the best ways they could.

In Canada, the history of colonization and continued settler colonialism has impacted Indigenous families, reshaping familial and community relationships. The impacts of colonization have been long standing, where "trauma waves" (Comack et al., 2013), or ripple effects continue to impact generations of Indigenous peoples. The most profound of these policies has been the Indian Residential School system, where primarily First Nations youth were removed forcefully from their parents and communities, sometimes at gunpoint, to attend schools, some over 1500 km away. Within the schools, it is estimated that half of the children never returned home (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015), and today there are efforts to find unmarked graves at these schools. The Indian Residential School era began to phase out in the 1960s,[12] but with it a different system began to emerge: a child welfare system that undermined Indigenous families by "scooping" children away and placing them primarily in non-Indigenous homes across Canada, and even globally (Stewart and LaBerge 2019). When examining life histories of Indigenous street gang members, intergenerational trauma caused through negative interactions with state structures (justice, education, child welfare, and health) have led to hyper-surveillance and increased negative interactions with police. Hyper-surveillance also supported

[12] Though the last school closed only in 1996.

colonial constructions of Indigenous peoples as being violent, in need of control by the state (Comack 2012; Henry 2019/2022). As such, many are pushed to become involved in local street economies that are controlled by local street gangs.

Roddy discusses how intergenerational colonial experiences influenced his decisions to become involved in a street gang lifestyle. Early life for Roddy was spent living with his grandparents as his mother was very young when she had him. Because of their experiences in residential schools and the removal of his mother, Roddy's grandparents would hide him when they passed police officers, as they were afraid, he would be taken away as well.

> It's funny though when I was a little kid… When I'd go driving around with them [grandparents]. Anytime we'd see RCMP, they'd tell me to hide. They'd tell me to hide probably cause of their own experiences cause that's who took away their kids right. And they weren't criminals, but they were still telling me to hide, know what I mean? I think they were just trying to protect me. They were still a little shook what happened back in the day. Cause it was not too long ago."

Growing up in a home with no running water, a mother who was dealing with her own addiction issues, and two younger siblings who he felt he had to look after, Roddy quickly looked up to his uncles and cousins who were involved in the gang life because of the money, power, and respect that they had. As Roddy explains,

> Wearing their colours, you know. That was cool. Know what I mean? To see the shirts he [uncle] was wearing for this for that. It's like 'man you know' I want that shirt too. Know what I mean? It was just something you wanted cause it was something that had power, right. And uh… that's the big uh… what I think now… to have power, you know, it's just every man uh… wants it.
> I guess at the time you have… you can have a bunch of guys with you or when you have so many friends like… gang members. You feel like you can do anything, you know, it's like uh… it's a power that uh… it's… you can't explain it. You have to feel it. "

At the age of 14, Roddy joined the gang, enduring a beating—known as "doing minutes"—at the hands of his fellow gang members. This ritual attack initiated him into the gang and prepared him for the violent assaults, armed robberies, and other acts of everyday gang violence that defined gang life for many years afterward. Although this was Roddy's official entry point into gangsterism, he had actually been socialized into street life long before that. Watching his uncles and older cousins had taught him the rules of the game from a young age, and violence was not unexpected to him. What Roddy did not anticipate was the impact that his engagement in street culture would have on him psychologically, and how difficult it would be to get out.

Roddy never imagined his gang engagement to be his whole life, and did not want to be a part of the gang forever. But he did not know how to get out. Unlike other gang literature that highlights the idea of the gang "becoming a family," the gang *was* his family. It is this connection to kinship and gang involvement that needs to be understood for Indigenous street gangs, as it challenges gang theories that center on individuals looking to belong to a group, where they might not have a connection. Therefore, the gang was a set of kinship and social networks and practices he had come to rely on in order to survive within violent street spaces. It was not until he met a mentor who showed him that there was more than the gang life that he began to see a way out. For Roddy, it was the re-connection to his First Nations spirituality and opportunities to engage at university that began to pull him out of

the street gang lifestyle. However, just as getting in was not an immediate decision, getting out also took patience, support, and the opportunity to change:

> It took a very long time to leave. It took me four or five years to really leave. I met [my mentor] and he invited me to go to university and helped me get back to my culture. I told [him], that it was good that I was learning about all of this. I told him: fuck, man. I don't even think that you know, it's good that I'm learning all of these guys because they're all Neechies (Indigenous peoples) too… I don't even want to war with these people no more.

With mentorship, Roddy was introduced to opportunities that he was excluded from while growing up, which gave him a broader perspective and helped him understand that the only people he was hurting in gang wars were other Indigenous peoples who grew up in the same situations as himself; he learned that the power, status, and opportunity to make fast money came at a cost, which was the continuation of violence and subjugation of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Disregarding the warnings they heard, and paying no heed to the members who joined gangs only to come into contact with the law or fall victim to violence, Gavin, Roddy, and others in this study all made the decision to join gangs. Their decision to do so was an indication of the dire choices they faced when trying to navigate the insecure social circumstances they found themselves in. However, seeking out the streets only provided short-term empowerment without long-term uplift. Overall, the street cultural violence enacted by gangs attempts to differentiate among the differentiated, directing aggression against one's community, further entrenching one's neighbors, friends, family, and even oneself in insecurity and poverty. For research participants themselves, joining gangs generally compounded their already marginal positions, by contributing to drug addiction, incarceration, violent victimization, and severed ties with their families. While Gavin, Roddy, and other research participants did manage to escape the streets eventually, their participation in the violent street culture of gangs unfortunately helped reproduce the same social order that drove them to gangs to begin with.

Discussing Street Culture Across Contexts

This paper compared Coloured gangs in Cape Town to Indigenous gangs on Canada's Prairies, finding that street culture—epitomized by participation in violence and crime—offers gang members an adaptive strategy in spaces where the state has failed to offer its citizens development, security, and governance. The way that Coloured gangs engage in street practices has telling commonalities with how street practices are used in Indigenous gangs. Importantly, this includes the use of oppositional violence to increase one's social, cultural, and economic capital. The people in this study—Gavin, Roddy, and 23 others in Cape Town and 52 in Prairie cities—joined gangs and engaged in street culture as acts of agency. They made conscious decisions among imperfect and limited prospects. Research participants' paths into gangs were framed through their relationships to family and community members, who served as embodiments of street-based repertoires that offered living and breathing examples of how street capital can be attained and what it can be used for. The two protagonists the paper focused on—and the others whose stories are not directly referenced—engaged in accumulating street capital to earn power, protection, and money, in ways that showed great similarity despite the great geographical distances that separated

them. What is important is that their lives are proximate to each other in terms of their marginality—that their worlds and worldviews are similarly shaped by privation, exclusion, racism, and other forms of disenfranchisement—not that they are separated by multiple continents and an ocean.

Seen like this, joining gangs is not the product of some psychopathology, wickedness, or moral deficiency (Yablonsky 1959; 1959), but rather a calculated move to provide what participants believed to be their best opportunity to survive. The findings outlined above support other gang research showing that ghettos, townships, and other spaces of urban poverty are all places where deleterious markets, segregationist planning, and apathetic government conspire to push people into the streets (Bourgois 2002; Fraser 2015; Garot 2010; Shammas and Sandberg 2016). In doing so, it lends support to the argument that street culture frames the conduct of how gang members are expected to act according to specific street-oriented sensibilities and performances, where slang, posturing, fashion, and practices are used to embody what is expected of those who enter the street field. Additionally, findings from this paper add to the growing body of comparative gang literature (see: Dziewanski 2021; Fraser 2017; Hazen and Rodgers 2014; Higgenson and Benier 2015; Van Damme 2018) that draws direct comparisons across distinct contexts to show how street cultures are being similarly used in an attempt to counteract vulnerability, exclusion, and alienation, even within distinct cultural contexts, socioeconomic situations, and colonial legacies. What is at question is a set of gang cultural practices that are not particular to any one space—like, say, American gang culture[13]—but a set of generalizable, if localized, oppositional strategies that one often finds among the denigrated and excluded.

While agency is put into action by individuals, the reasons why street culture manifests as it does in South Africa and Canada have much to do with the similar experiences that Coloured and Indigenous communities have with historical and contemporary structural oppression. Colonization and settler colonialism have shaped how social structures actively push Coloured and Indigenous Peoples to connect with street culture and gang culture. However, despite the connection between structural oppression and street culture, approaches to the gang issue in South Africa and Canada favor law enforcement over efforts to address the social causes of gang-related crime and violence through redistribution, reconciliation, and rehabilitation. Part of the problem is the overwhelming international effort to export an Americanized war on gangs around the world (Fraser 2015). South Africa's current approach to gangs, for instance, was derived directly from legislation in the US aimed at tackling the mafia (Goga 2014), despite criticism that such a strategy may be inappropriate for the South African context (Goga and Goredema 2014; Gastrow 1998). Most problematic is how this approach to gangs falls into a "parasitic" conceptualization of gang groups, which it demonizes and separates from a so-called good society (Standing 2006: 65–66). In Canada, the narrative of Indigenous street gangs continues to be viewed by justice officials as on the lowest rung of organized crime and are policed as such (Buddle 2012; Comack et al. 2013; Henry 2015). When approached in this way, gangs on both sides of the Atlantic are seen and addressed as if they are the cause of social problems, rather than as a systemic structural outcome, as was argued in this paper.

The pathologization of gangs in South Africa and Canada fits a general international shift among public officials and the media to a definition that emphasizes the criminal

[13] Not to say that there are no connections between American gang culture and the two types of gangs studied here. One example might be found in the roles that American gangster rap plays in gangs in Cape Town (Dziewanski 2020d) and on Canada's Prairies (Buddle 2012).

and violent elements of gang membership (Klein and Maxson 2006). Rather that pursuing a complex and costly agenda of social reform—creating jobs, building houses, training police, expanding water access, repairing roads, etc.—politicians can more easily attack gangsters as dangerous deviants. It is a more conservative social philosophy bent on enhancing the ability of law enforcement to incarcerate gang members as a way of destroying gang organizations. But gang organization cannot come about or grow outside of the urban social ecology gangs are found in. This is why street cultural scholars like Fraser (2015) are calling for a shift away from standardized moralistic approaches to gangs, to street-based understandings that reconnect the gang with the societies, economies, histories, and cultures that give rise to them, and which keep them going. Critical street cultural criminology recognizes the historicized, interrelated, and sociocultural nature of inequality (Brotherton 2015). Segregation is not merely spatial or material. It limits possibilities for cultural interpretation and social action, further compounding the spatial and material imbalances that exist between dominant and marginal social spaces.

Gangs are an embedded, systemic feature of the unequal and exclusionary urban landscapes—whether in South Africa, Canada, or elsewhere—giving reference not just to community settings in which these phenomena exist, but also to the broader historical, economic, political, social, and cultural relations those communities are set in. The deep-rooted contours of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and disempowerment—past and present—in similar ways shape social life on the Cape Flats and on the Prairies, creating the conditions by which many young Coloured and Indigenous men and women turn to gangs and street culture. It assists them in deflecting coping with systematic marginalization through the construction of defiant identities that exists in opposition to dominant polite, white society. Although street culture provides gang members some hope for empowerment in the near-term, as well as connections to underground economies, the long-term prospective for gang membership is not promising. Most literature on street gangs has shown that street cultural involvement is often short-lived and highly violent (Shammas and Sandberg 2016). Though gang members like Gavin and Roddy do make it out, their paths toward disengagement are not easy—and can be perilous. More needs to be done to create more equal societies in which young men and women do not feel to begin with that the gang is their only escape from the vulnerabilities and risks they face in their everyday lives.

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