GANG LIVES

Global Portraits from the Streets & Beyond

Edited by
Dennis Rodgers

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
José Luis Rocha Gómez (1966–2023)

CONTENTS

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This volume showcases research carried out for a European Research Council Advanced Grant-funded project on 'Gangs, Gangsters, and Ganglands: Towards a Global Comparative Ethnography' (grant no. 787935) – or GANGS project for short – that I directed at the Geneva Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding (CCDP) between 2018 and 2024, and which brought together a team of forty-nine researchers from all over the world.[1] A key component of the project involved the collection of thirty-one life histories of gang members or individuals closely associated with gang members from twenty-three different countries by thirty-five researchers. This volume brings together thirteen of these life histories collected by fifteen researchers, but I want to thank all of the GANGS project participants for their contributions, including in particular at two wonderfully stimulating 'Gang Lives' workshops organized in Geneva, Switzerland, in March and September 2023, where all the life histories were intensely and constructively compared, contrasted and discussed. I am particularly grateful to the GANGS project PhD students, Alice Daquin, Chiara Feliciani and Lene Swetzer, for their excellent synthetic reviews of the workshop discussions. I also want to thank Olivia Dellow at Bloomsbury Academic for her support, and the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their encouraging comments and suggestions. But most importantly, I want to thank all of the individuals who accepted to share their life stories presented here, most of whom must remain anonymous for obvious reasons, but without whom this volume would not exist.

Note

1 For more details, see https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.

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PICTURES

Figure 0.1 Portrait of a Nicaraguan gang member striking a pose, 2020.

Photo by the chapter author.

Introduction: Global Gang Lives

Dennis Rodgers

My name is Darwin; I'm sixteen years old. I grew up in a poor neighbourhood, with lots of crime, violence and drugs. My mother brought me up all by herself; life was hard, and we were poor – I was always saying to her, 'mum, I'm hungry, mum, I'm hungry' … When I was eight years old, I joined the local gang, and I became a delinquent. I got my first gun when I was thirteen. One day, a few months ago, my bróderes *(brothers) from the gang said to me, 'come on, let's go, woo, woo, let's go and attack the gang in the Dieciocho de Mayo neighbourhood!' So off we went, and we caught one of them, and started roughing him up. '*Oye*, calm down,* majes *(guys), I've got nothing to do with anything', he said to us. 'Yeah, sure', I replied, 'I've seen you with them, you're one of them, you're one of the Dieciocho de Mayo gang, you* hijuéputa *(son of a bitch)'. So I started hitting him, real hard, but he got away, and ran to the park where the other Dieciocho de Mayo gang members were hanging out, and we began to shoot at each other. Bam, bam, this way, bam, bam, that way, bam, bam, everywhere! And then the Dieciocho de Mayo guys shot this woman passing by, selling tortillas, by mistake. 'Let's get the fuck out of here', one of my* bróderes *said to me, 'come on, let's go, they killed that woman, the Police is going to come'. 'No, no', I said to him, 'let's kill those shameless* hijuéputas*, can't you see, they can't even shoot straight!' Bam, bam, we kept on shooting, bam, bam, here, bam, bam, there, but then they got La Juana. They fucking killed him – can you believe it? He was my friend, he died in my arms, my shirt was full of blood … We got the fuck out of there, but a few days later, I went back by myself, to get revenge. I saw one of the Dieciocho de Mayo guys, a fucker called Mongo, sitting on a sidewalk, smoking a joint. He didn't notice me as I got right up behind him, and then shot him in the neck – bam! – and he died there and then, face down in the street … I got the fuck out straight away but somebody saw me and I was denounced to the Police, and they came looking for me, so I've had to go into hiding. That's why I'm here now. But whoever denounced me had better watch out, because I'm a dangerous guy. My* bróderes *and I, we're going to get even, we're going to fucking blow away those treacherous cock-sucking* hijuéputas*, make them vomit blood until they understand that we're the ones in charge around here!*

***

The above monologue is from an interview that I carried out with 'Darwin' – this name is a pseudonym, for obvious reasons – in November 2009 in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,[1] a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, in Central America, where I have been carrying out research on gang dynamics since the mid-1990s. I was introduced to Darwin by a couple of local gang members I knew, who excitedly presented him as a gangster who was 'on the run'. I was naturally intrigued, and so I asked Darwin whether he was willing to tell me his story. Although initially reluctant to be interviewed he ended up accepting after the local *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members – most of whom I had interviewed previously for my research – vouched for me.

Darwin proved to be a vividly dramatic raconteur. At the same time, however, he clearly also lied and exaggerated repeatedly about his life as a gang member throughout our interview. I subsequently discovered that La Juana was in fact alive and well, that the murder that Darwin claimed to have committed never actually happened, and that rather than hiding from the Police, he had been sent to live with his grandmother in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández following the death of his father, and his mother's ensuing emigration to the United States in order to find work to provide for Darwin and his siblings. Although by all accounts he *had* been a gang member in his old neighbourhood, Darwin later admitted to me that he was never involved in anything other than low-level instances of crime and violence – petty theft, small-time muggings, opportunistic burglaries, as well as minor gang fights – that the most potent weapon he had ever wielded was a machete, and he had never killed anybody.

This was by no means surprising, as Darwin's real-life gangster experiences very much mirrored those of the majority of Nicaraguan gang members at the time.[2] He had clearly constructed his narrative around stereotypical tropes widely associated with gangs and gangsters in both the Nicaraguan and more global public imagination – namely that the gangs are inherently conflictual and violent organizations whose members are cruel, cold-blooded, vindictive individuals – likely in order to seem more exciting and interesting. Certainly, such representations of gangs and gang members are arguably what make them both fascinating and repulsive in equal measure. But they are also extremely misleading, as this volume highlights by presenting the life histories of thirteen gangsters from twelve different countries around the world.

These were collected in the context of the GANGS project, a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant-funded programme of research that I directed at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, between 2019 and 2024.[3] This brought together an international network of forty-nine researchers from around the world to study the global comparative dynamics of 'gangs, gangsters, and ganglands'.[4] The project drew on a variety of methodological approaches, including collaborative and transnational ethnography in five different cities – Managua, Cape Town, Marseille, Naples and

Algeciras – across five countries – Nicaragua, South Africa, France, Italy, Spain – as well as the collection of thirty-one life histories of gang members or individuals closely associated with gang members from twenty-three different countries.[5] The thirteen presented in this volume specifically focus on the motivations and processes through which individuals join and leave a gang, how gang membership unfolds, the long-term consequences of having been a gang member, as well as post-gang trajectories.[6]

Part of the originality of the GANGS project lies in the fact that comparative research is relatively rare within gang studies. Certainly, the overwhelming majority of investigations have focused on a single gang or location, whether intra-nationally (see Durán 2013: 9–10, on the United States) or internationally (see Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 8–11). This lack of comparative research is partly due to the widespread sense of 'American exceptionalism' that exists within mainstream gang research, well-illustrated by the eminent US criminologist Malcolm Klein's emphatic declaration that 'the street gang is basically an American product' (cited in Hazelhurst and Hazelhurst 1998: 3; see also Klein 1995). This has clearly hampered comparative endeavours in the past, both within US gang research, which has generally tended to ignore the non-US literature, and globally, insofar as non-US gang research has tended to assume that there is little cross-cultural correspondence with US gangs, and generally does not engage with US gang literature except conceptually, generally with a limited number of classics such as those written by Frederic Thrasher (1927), William Foote Whyte (1943) or Philippe Bourgois (1995), for example, despite the fact that the literature focused on the US iteration of the phenomenon constitutes unquestionably the most extensive and developed corpus of gang research (see Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004; Mohammed and Mucchielli 2007).

Admittedly, there exist a handful of volumes that can be said to offer something of an implicit comparative perspective by virtue of juxtaposing case studies of gangs from different countries, including most notably those by Kayleen Hazelhurst and Cameron Hazelhurst (1998), John Hagedorn (2008) or Jennifer Hazen and Dennis Rodgers (2014).[7] But none of these properly offer any form of direct or systematic comparison. There have, however, been two other large-scale comparative research initiatives focusing on international gang dynamics besides the GANGS project. On the one hand, the Eurogang project,[8] which has been ongoing since 1998, and which has been iteratively seeking to develop a framework for comparing US and European gangs on the basis of annual workshops that bring together an evolving network of researchers based in the United States and Europe (see Klein *et al.* 2001; Decker and Weerman 2005; Esbensen and Weerman 2005; Klein *et al.* 2006; van Gemert *et al.* 2008; Esbensen and Maxson 2012; Maxson and Esbensen 2016; Melde and Weerman 2020). On the other hand, the ERC-funded TRANSGANG project,[9] led by Carles Feixa at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain, between 2018 and 2023, which developed multi-sited, transnational ethnographic research to explore how Latino and Arab gangs could act as local agents of social mediation – as well as the

political and institutional barriers to such attempts – both in their homelands and within migrant communities abroad.

Both the Eurogang and the TRANSGANG project have drawn on gangster life histories in their research – indeed, they have been a particularly important element of the TRANSGANG project (see Feixa and Andrade 2020; Feixa 2021; Oliver 2023) – but neither of them has sought to compare these, whether intra- or internationally, generally considering them in a stand-alone manner. Indeed, comparing life histories is another key experimental innovation of the GANGS project, and to this extent, this volume is quite different to the overwhelming majority of previously published gangster life histories, which have tended to be monographs or articles focused on a single individual. Although unquestionably insightful, these inherently run the risk of showing those individuals only as 'one thing, in one way, over and over again', as the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie put it in her famous 2009 TED talk on 'The danger of a single story'.[10]

Even if a singular story can be very powerful, it arguably always gains in currency if it is contextualized in relation to other stories, as it is this that allows us to distinguish between its idiosyncratic aspects and its more general and generalizable elements, thereby enabling broader insights and inferences. This was explicitly one of the reasons why Oscar Lewis (1964) wrote up his famous life history of Pedro Martínez, a Mexican peasant whose life spanned the Mexican revolution and its institutionalization, drawing not only on Pedro Martínez's voice, but also those of his wife Esperanza and their son Felipe. Similarly, Patrick Naef (2025: 5) argues in relation to his research on the everyday nature of 'criminal governance' in Medellín, Colombia, which he explores through the trajectories of three young men whose lives are deeply but differently intertwined with the criminal group controlling their neighbourhood, that 'pluralism offers a pathway to gain a more comprehensive understanding of such contexts'.

This is very much what this volume seeks to do in bringing together the thirteen different gangster life histories presented here. At the same time, the aim is not to compare them directly. In line with the enormous variability and contested nature of gangs and gangsters, GANGS project participants adopted a 'fuzzy' definition of what constitutes a gang member, each drawing on locally contextualized and vernacular understandings rather than any putatively universal definition. Moreover, each life history presented in this volume should be seen as exemplifying – rather than representing – a particular gang trajectory, and makes no claim to being typical. This means that there is little use in trying to measure or tally specific empirical similarities or differences between the life histories. Each one represents a unique experience that cannot necessarily be fitted into a typology or analysed in relation to a fixed, cross-cutting hypothesis. Rather, the volume adopts what Sian Lazar (2012: 352) has called a 'disjunctive comparative approach', aiming 'to set different iterations of a phenomena alongside [each other to] see what [might] come … out of an examination of their similarities and differences'. Approached in this way, what each life history does when juxtaposed with other life histories is challenge certain assumptions, raise new questions, or potentially

problematize conventional thinking, thereby potentially generating new ways of seeing gangs and gangsters. The aim, in other words, is not to identify common patterns or trends, but rather for each life history to bring to the fore a range of more general issues about gang lives.

This is not to say that there are no common threads connecting the different life histories presented in the volume, however. Methodologically, all of the chapter authors, with one exception, have or had long-term, multi-year relationships with the individuals whose personal narratives they collected on the basis of multiple interviews carried out several years apart.[11] Indeed, in some cases – Atreyee Sen and Ram (Chapter 2), José Luis Rocha and Bryan (Chapter 8) or David Brotherton and King Tone (Chapter 11) – this relationship and their interviewing stretch or stretched out over the course of multiple decades.[12] This means that the life histories presented in this volume are doubly longitudinal in nature, both intrinsically, due to their inherent focus on trajectory, but also because they all draw on empirical material collected at two – and in many cases, more – moments in time. A majority of the life histories presented here have also been crafted in a proactively dialogical manner, in conversation with the individuals whom they are about, who have approved them, and are actively looking forward to seeing them in print, something that differs significantly from the way that many past life histories were produced.[13]

The life histories presented in this volume can also be said to collectively make a number of general conceptual contributions, including, for example, confirming the variability of gangs and gangsters around the world, whether with regard to their shape and size; their criminal, delinquent and violent activities; their relationship with other social actors including the state and other criminal groups; as well as the potential determinants and consequences of being a gang member. In particular, they highlight the contingent nature of the turning points that can shape individual lives, both generally and in relation to specific issues such as going to prison, migrating or suffering trauma, for example, as well as how different configurations and relations can potentially come to the fore to construct a gang member's life trajectory, thereby illustrating the fundamental embeddedness of gangs as social phenomena, and how this can condition both individual and collective trajectories. The life histories are also extremely insightful with respect to understanding the long-term consequences of having been a gang member, and more specifically, the basis upon which sustainable post-gang trajectories can potentially be constructed.

Empirically, this volume also makes an important contribution to broadening the scope of gang research beyond North American and European contexts.[14] Although two of the life histories are from the United States and two more from Italy and the UK (Scotland), the others come from Bangladesh, Belize, China (Hong Kong), Guatemala, Honduras, India, Kenya, Nicaragua and Sierra Leone, countries that are not the 'usual suspects' when it comes to gang research. Indeed, in some cases, the life histories presented in this volume are, to the best of my knowledge, the first to ever be published of gang members from these countries. This 'Southern' empirical dimension also significantly adds to the

more conceptual insights that can be gleaned from the volume contributions. In particular, some of the common issues and factors determining gangster trajectories that initially seem to come to the fore across different life histories can in fact often be seen as potentially leading to different outcomes in different contexts due to the cross-cultural variability of social processes. Or conversely, the juxtaposition of life histories from different contexts simultaneously also highlights certain commonalities that might be overlooked because they can take on fundamentally different forms in different cultural contexts, showcasing how these can consistently play a central role in shaping a gangster's life despite their institutional variances.

The rest of this introduction first considers the general global significance of gangs and gangsters, and what we can learn from them, before reviewing the relationship between gang research and the life history method, both past and present. It then offers a roadmap to reading this volume, highlighting both general insights and specific connections that might be learnt about the logics and experience of being a gangster. The stories presented in this volume are about lives that have been lived through violence, illegality and crime, but also familial love, friendship, addictions and ageing. As such, they offer insights into tragedy and loss, inclusion and belonging, departures and return, whether to gang cultures and identities, or to broader groups and communities – that is to say, basic forms of being human. They provide us with deep and intimate narratives that give voice to individuals who have had multiple encounters with gang worlds as insiders and outsiders, but who also live within a wider social world, thereby highlighting the universal experience that a gang life can be.

The global significance of gangs and gangsters

As Frederic Thrasher (1927: 5) pointed out in his pioneering study of the phenomenon in 1920s Chicago, 'the gang is a protean manifestation: no two gangs are just alike; some are good; some are bad; and each has to be considered on its own merits'. Certainly, almost 100 years of gang research since Thrasher's foundational study have highlighted how gangs can vary enormously in form, dynamics and consequences. Some gangs are very ephemeral, while others are more durable, some are big, while others are small, some are more involved in crime, others less, some are more violent, some are territorial in nature, others are more networks, and so on. This variability makes precisely defining what constitutes a gang very difficult, despite the fact that a lot of this gang research has been characterized by 'a longstanding and largely technical debate on the proper definition of the street gang' (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003: 43). This has not generated any clear consensus, however, as beyond the fact that gangs can be said to be collective social forms whose members consider themselves to be an identifiable group and who are identified as a group, and who routinely engage in diverse instances of crime, delinquency and transgressive violence, both

individually and as a group – although it is also important to note that not all of the activities of gangs and gang members are criminal, delinquent or transgressive – there are few elements consistently associable with gangs across the world.

Gangs moreover also exist on a fluid institutional spectrum. As John Hagedorn (2008: xxv) has pointed out, 'today's youth gang might become a drug posse tomorrow, even transform into an ethnic militia or a vigilante group the next day'. For this reason, he sensibly suggested that 'the best definition of gangs … is an amorphous one' (Hagedorn 2008: 31), that is to say, one that accepts their variability, and does not try to pigeon-hole them too precisely (see also Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 8). This is all the more so the case considering that, in the same way that the development economist Hans Singer is once reported to have said that 'an informal … enterprise is like a giraffe; it's hard to describe but you know one when you see one' (cited in Lubell 1991: 19), a gang is ultimately very much a commonsensical social phenomenon, albeit one that is generally locally situated and specific.

Similarly, even if some gang researchers have argued that gang members generally display particular personality traits, such as 'psychopathic tendencies' (Yablonsky 1963) or 'defiant individualism' (Sánchez Jankowski 1991), such analyses are in many ways rather self-serving, and no investigation has convincingly shown that gang members consistently correspond to any specific personality type (see Curry *et al.* 2014: 38–42). Certainly, for every gang member who might plausibly be categorized as a 'psychopath' or a 'defiant individual', there are more often than not at least an equal if not a greater number who do not display such personalities (and these are moreover personality types that can also characterize non-gang members, of course). To this extent, just as defining what constitutes a gang is complicated, so is distinguishing gang members, all the more so as they are never solely defined by their gangsterism.

At the same time, however, despite their variability, gangs and gang members are nevertheless recognizably global social phenomena, and their existence has been repeatedly noted across time and space all over the world (Rodgers and Hazen 2014). The historian Livy, for instance, famously commented on the political role played by gangs during the Roman Republic in his renowned history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*, while the medieval Arab geographer Ibn Khaldun described how gangs often conditioned the ordering of urban space in fourteenth-century North African cities in his celebrated geography of the world, the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. Similarly, the history of the so-called 'Wild West' is frequently recounted through the trajectories of gangsters such as Jessie James, Billy the Kid, or Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (White 1981). Closer to the present, anthropological, criminological or sociological studies have noted the presence of gangs and gangsters in contexts as disparate as Belize (Baird 2024), China (Boretz 2011), the Congo (Gondola 2016), France (Lepoutre 1997), Guatemala (Levenson 2013), South Africa (Jensen 2008) or the United States (Brotherton and Barrios 2004), amongst others.

This omnipresence arguably makes gangs and gangsters potentially highly revealing institutions and individuals. Certainly, beyond their general association

with crime, delinquency or violence, they can often also be connected to a range of other fundamental human activities, such as the exercise of power (Stephenson 2015), capital accumulation (Padilla 1992), socialization (Mohammed 2011), identity formation (Feixa 1998), territorial control (Suttles 1968), resistance (Brotherton 2015), transnationalism (Lamotte 2022) or the articulation of gender relations (Hume 2007), for example. Indeed, these are often observable in a much more direct manner through the gang lens, as Thrasher (1927: 3) implicitly argued when he contended that gangs were '*life*, often rough and untamed, yet rich in elemental social processes significant to the student of society and human nature'.

More generally, Thrasher also pointed out that gangs are both autonomous social phenomena, with complex internal logics and dynamics, and epiphenomena, fundamentally reflecting – and shaped by – broader social structures. As a result, although his research offered extensive information about the minutiae of '1,313' gangs in Chicago,[15] it was not 'just' a study of Chicagoan gangs, but also shed light on the broader political economy of the city and early twentieth century America, including in particular in relation to issues of migration, ethnicity, discrimination and race relations, as these were reflected in the actions of gangs and their members. Gangs and gangsters, in other words, were 'bellwether' phenomena for Thrasher, their emergence and particular evolution over time reflections of the changing nature of early twentieth-century American society. This more general perspective that gangs and gang members provide on the world is what makes them so important to study and understand.

Gang research and the life history method

According to Greg Dimitriadis (2006: 351), Thrasher's study of gangs in 1920s Chicago was the first systematic social scientific study of the phenomenon, and partly because of this, it remains 'without question the starting point for gang research'. Thrasher drew on seven years of multi-method primary research carried out between 1919 and 1926, a major element of which was the collection of gangster life histories, that is to say, personal narratives about an individual's life trajectory.[16] These, Thrasher (1931: 253) contended, 'reveal[ed] useful information concerning at least three important aspects of delinquent conduct: (1) the point of view of the delinquent; (2) the social and cultural situation to which the delinquent is responsive; and (3) the sequence of past experiences and situations in the life of the delinquent'. The monograph based on his research, *The Gang*, is consequently peppered with numerous extracts from what Thrasher referred to as 'gang boys' own stories', to illustrate not just how and why individuals joined and left gangs, but also to show how broader structural processes such as racial and ethnic discrimination cohered and intersected to produce specific lived outcomes and experiences, as well as how gang members – both as individuals and as members of a particular social group, that is, a gang – understood and interpreted these experiences.

Thrasher was not the first gang researcher to draw on life histories. They constituted the empirical basis of several early studies of gangs, including, for example, Clarence Rooks' (1899) *The Hooligan Nights*, which detailed the dynamics of late nineteenth-century London's underworld through a life history of 'Young Alf', or Joseph Adams Puffer's (1912) *The Boy and His Gang*, based on the life histories of 'sixty-six boys who were members of gangs' (Puffer 1912: iii). But the systematic institutionalization of life histories as a key method in gang research is very much associated with the so-called 'Chicago School of Sociology' (Bennett 1981), arguably the dominant school of socio-criminological thinking during the first half of the twentieth century, both in the United States and more globally (see Jones and Rodgers 2023). This particularly championed 'ideographic' research approaches (see Palmer 1928), including life histories, pioneered by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in their mammoth, five-volume landmark opus, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20),[17] and scholars associated with the Chicago School of Sociology drew – to a greater or lesser degree – on life histories in a series of now classic studies of crime and delinquency produced in the 1920s and 1930s. This included Thrasher's work, but also works by W. I. Thomas (1923), Clifford Shaw (1930, 1931), John Landesco (1933), Walter Reckless (1933), Ernest Sutherland (1937) or Clifford Shaw, Henry McKay and James McDonald (1938), for example.

Shaw and Sutherland's research, in particular, illustrates the multifaceted nature of the life history approach and the multiple advantages that this can procure very well. Shaw's *The Jack-Roller* (1930), for example, detailed the life history of a petty criminal called 'Stanley' – the name is a pseudonym – in exceptionally rich detail, often directly including unedited excerpts of Stanley's own writing, while at the same time relating the 'melodrama' of his life to broader environmental factors and the failings of the US juvenile justice system at the time (Salerno 2007: 143–58).[18] Similarly, in *Brothers in Crime*, Clifford Shaw *et al.* (1938: x) drew on the life histories of the five 'Martin' brothers to trace the contingent but often intergenerational transmission of criminal patterns of behaviour, as well as 'the relationship between delinquency and the culture conflicts which often confront the immigrant family in the physically deteriorated and socially disorganized communities in large American cities'. Commenting on the life history of Chic Conwell that he presented in *The Professional Thief*, Ernest Sutherland (1937: 229 & 231) for his part wrote that it showed 'how the culture of the underworld grows out of and is related to the general culture', but also that 'the professional thief is torn by conflicting tendencies; he is preying on society and at the same time is not happy as an enemy of society', suggesting that 'he started as an honest person' but then found himself 'enmeshed' in life's vicissitudes 'until he lost his integrity'.

As John Laub and Robert Sampson (2003: 58–9) have succinctly summarized, a life history approach has a whole range of advantages for the study of gangs, beyond those identified by Thrasher, Shaw or Sutherland:

> First, the life history method uniquely captures the process of both becoming involved in and disengaging from crime and other antisocial behavior. …

> Second, life histories can uncover complex patterns of continuity and change in individual behavior over time. … A third advantage is that life histories reveal the complexity of criminal behavior, … offer[ing] a way of breaking down complex phenomena by providing detailed information about events as they are experienced and the significance of these events for the actors involved. A fourth advantage is that life histories are grounded in social and historical context. … A fifth advantage is that the life-history method shows the human side of offenders.

In other words, the analytical power of life histories for gang research lies in their ability to simultaneously reflect both the uniqueness and the complexity, but also the variability, of the gang experience, in a way that foregrounds individual agency in a fundamentally contextualized manner. At the same time, life histories are also inherently humanizing from a representational perspective, partly because they are amongst the most relatable and empathetic means of depicting the human experience. They allow us to understand the motivations, the emotions, as well as both the banality and the exceptionality of events that shape an individual's choices and trajectories in ways that are eminently personal, and go beyond stereotypes, something that is particularly critical considering the frequently fraught politics of representation surrounding gangs and gang members.

Having said this, individual life histories also enable us to consider – and render more intelligible – complex processes and forces that go beyond the individual. As C. Wright Mills (1959: 6–7) famously wrote in *The Sociological Imagination*, 'no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography … has completed its intellectual journey', as it is only in 'the capacity … to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two' – that we can truly 'grasp what is going on in the world'. Obviously, an individual narrative never offers us unmediated insights. As Daniel James (1997: 36) highlighted in relation to his life history of the Argentinean political activist *Doña* María Roldán (James 2000),

> if oral testimony is indeed a window onto the subjective in history, the cultural, social, and ideological universe of historical actors, then it must be said that the view it affords is not a transparent one that simply reflects thoughts and feelings as they really were/are. At the very least the image is refracted, the glass of the window is unclear.

It is in this latter respect that gangster life histories are arguably especially insightful, insofar as they potentially offer a clearer image of things than other life histories. AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) notion of 'people as infrastructure' helps us to understand why this might be the case. This is an analytical concept that he developed in order to highlight how in many contexts – including in particular those where material circumstances are deficient and the state is not consistently the primary vector for social organization – specific categories of 'over-determined' individuals end up conditioning the 'modes of provisioning and articulation' that shape how local social orders come together (Simone 2004:

407 & 428). Gangsters are one example of such 'over-determined' individuals, by virtue of the fact that they frequently dominate their local communities – socially, economically and politically – and this makes their particular trajectories often especially revealing. In other words, their life histories provide us with what might be termed – following Wright Mills – a 'gangster imagination', through which to better understand not only gangs, crime or delinquency, but the world we live in more generally (see Rodgers 2025a).

At the same time, as Sidney Mintz (1979: 21–2) argued, writing about his classic life history of the Puerto Rican sugar cane worker *Don* Taso (Mintz 1960), any individual biography needs to be considered in a way that distinguishes between

> the personal, unique or idiosyncratic, on the one hand, and the culturally typical or normative on the other. … The goal of such an undertaking would not be to de-emphasize individual uniqueness or to eliminate the significance of personality in the study of change, but rather to specify … the way individuality plays itself out against terms set by socio-cultural forces.

To this extent, a life history – whether of a gangster or otherwise – should not be seen as 'representative' of any particular broader trends and processes, but rather as 'illustrative' of the way that these can play out, and how they can come together to shape a life. They concern potential and latency rather than typicality and manifestation. This is especially important considering that gang members are often sociologically exceptional, insofar as only a minority of individuals in any given context ever join a gang, and moreover most who do will also eventually leave the gang after a few years, as globally, the gangster status tends to be a finite one (see Covey 2003; Brotherton 2015).

Contemporary gangster life histories

Despite their versatility and the multiple insights they can procure, the popularity of life histories – both methodologically and in terms of their perceived ontological and epistemological significance – has waxed and waned in socio-criminological research since the foundational Chicago School of Sociology studies in the 1920s and 1930s. Evolving academic fashion – including in particular the increased pre-eminence of quantitative approaches within mainstream social science – saw a decline in life history-based research on gangs, crime and delinquency in the post-Second World War period (Becker 1970; Bennett 1981; Goodson 2001).[19] There has however arguably been something of a revival of the life history approach within gang research over the course of the past thirty years or so, as is testified by the proliferation of studies such as those by Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle (1996), Ralph Cintron (1998), Mark Fleisher (2000), John Laub and Robert Sampson (2003), Dave Brotherton and Luis Barrios (2004), Jonny Steinberg (2004), Robert Gay (2005, 2015), Lamence

Madzou and Marie-Hélène Bacqué (2008), Timothy Black (2009), Frank van Gemert (2011), Dennis Rodgers (2016, 2023), Azzedine Grinbou and Michel Kokoreff (2019), Carles Feixa and César Andrade (2020) or Randol Contreras (2024), for example.[20]

A striking feature of this new wave of research drawing on gangster life histories is that its geographical scope is much more global than previous gang studies, most of which focused on the United States and Europe, with the odd exception, including, for example, Lois B. DeFleur (1970) on Argentina, Luis Salas (1979) on Cuba, Don Pinnock (1984) on South Africa or T. Wing Lo (1984) on China. This change mirrors a broader shift in gang research over the past quarter century – particularly pronounced in relation to studies based on ethnographic investigations (Decker 2019) – partly linked to the rise of the so-called 'Southern criminology' movement that has sought to incorporate perspectives and knowledge from the Global South in order to challenge the dominance of Northern theories in criminological research (Carrington *et al.* 2016). There has arguably been a dual rationale underpinning such an approach. On the one hand, a desire to address power imbalances in knowledge production and reproduction, and to emphasize the need for a 'decolonization' and 'democratization' of the concepts, theories and methods used to study and analyse gangs (see Atkinson-Sheppard *et al.* 2025). On the other hand, there has also been a call to empirically 'decentre' gang studies from the Global North (Jensen and Rodgers forthcoming), as well as to engage in more comparative research (Jensen and Rodgers 2024), including in particular South-North comparison (Jensen and Rodgers 2025).

Beyond this, however, contemporary gangster life histories have arguably not evolved very much compared to the past, whether from a methodological or epistemological perspective (see Rodgers 2025c). More than a hundred years after the publication of W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1918–20) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, in-depth, qualitative interviews are still the most common means through which gang researchers conduct life history research, and a life history is still generally written up by the researcher, according to the latter's particular intellectual agenda. Admittedly, writing styles have evolved a little, with contemporary gangster life histories frequently more 'literary' than those produced by Chicago School of Sociology scholars, including dialogue and 'thick' descriptions of gesture and body language, for example, and they often also explicitly integrate a greater awareness of researcher positionality and display more reflexivity than previous studies.[21] Of particular note in this latter regard is the autobiographical dimension that many contemporary researchers add to their gangster life histories. Robert Gay (2005, 2015), for example, includes himself significantly in the narratives that he has written about Lucia and Bruno, something that allows us to understand much better his relationships with them, how he elicited certain forms of information, as well as the particular agenda(s) that guided his writing of their life histories (see also Feixa and Andrade 2020, for an example of a life history co-written as a dialogue between a researcher and his gangster interlocutor).[22]

The integration of autobiographical material by researchers in contemporary gangster life histories can of course be linked to the post-modern turn in the social sciences, as well as post-colonial and ethical concerns about confronting privilege, positionality differences and power imbalances. But it is also arguably the result of what – following Mikael Bakhtin (1981) – might be termed a 'chronotopic' change in the nature of the relationship between many contemporary gang researchers and their gangster interlocutors. Whereas in the past, this was frequently temporally circumscribed – Thrasher, for example, completely cut off his ties with his Chicagoan research interlocutors after finishing his field research (see Rodgers forthcoming) – the lives of gang researchers and their gangster interlocutors now often become entangled over prolonged periods of time. This is something that has clearly been facilitated by the rise of social media and other enhanced, instantaneous and cheap forms of globalized communication and travel (see Rodgers 2019: 128),[23] but it has also meant that many – but not all – of the recent wave of gangster life histories are based on a much longer term and repeated engagement between the researcher and their gangster interlocutor(s) than was commonly the case in the past. Gay's regular, repeated interactions with Lucia began in 1986, and with Bruno in 1999, for example (see Gay 2019).[24]

Paradoxically, this new longitudinality has arguably led to an increased problematization of linearity in contemporary gangster life histories, which often focus more on discontinuities rather than continuities (see Rodgers 2021), within epistemological frameworks that either implicitly or explicitly recognize that, as Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002: 865) has highlighted, most lives – whether of gang members or otherwise – are 'negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence'. Contemporary gangster life histories consequently tend to avoid representing life trajectories as 'totalizing transformations' involving an inevitable progressive movement from one life stage to another, as was the case of *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw 1930), for example, which had a 'redemptive' narrative, its central protagonist, Stanley, 'mov[ing] through the darkness into the light', as Roger Salerno (2007: 157) has pointed out. Instead, contemporary gangster life histories effectively focus on understanding how trajectories are shaped by specific points of 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks 2002), that is to say, the moments when broader structures and processes impact particularly strongly on an individual's life course, when new opportunities appear, or when the possibilities for an individual's agency are enhanced, and which mark significant but generally contingent turning points. These do not necessarily line up in a linear manner, so to speak, and trajectories are characterized by crisis, interruptions, reversals, as well as advances, progress or achievements, as is particularly well illustrated by Lamence Madzou and Marie-Hélène Bacqué's (2008) co-written life history tracing the former's haphazard trajectory from gang member to drug dealer and professional carjacker to community worker while moving between Corbeil-Essonnes, Paris and Congo-Brazzaville, and having to contend with racism, financial hardship, war, police brutality and urban segregation. The life histories presented in this volume similarly illustrate the highly contingent nature of gang lives the world over.

How to read this book

There are several ways to approach this volume. Firstly, simply as a collection of vividly written, real-life stories about individuals who have been or are associated with gangs in different parts of the world. The chapter authors have largely eschewed the dry and impersonal forms of writing that are all too often the hallmark of academic publications. Instead, they have sought to craft narratives that are poignant, evocative and intimate, that draw readers into the world of individuals who have frequently gone through more than most, foregrounding their voices, and allowing them to talk about and for themselves. Some of the lives described in this volume are stories of triumph, others of failure and yet more are simply tales of persistence and endurance in the face of difficult circumstances. They, however, all involve moments of joy and delight, anguish and grief, uncertainty and determination, fear and aspiration, or in other words, the whole gamut of emotions that characterize human life everywhere, thereby making them eminently and deeply relatable. As such, they call for and elicit understanding and empathy, and fundamentally humanize individuals who are all-too-often represented stereotypically in sensationalizing and pathologizing ways, not letting them disappear behind abstract categorizations and classifications. Each of the life histories presented in this volume is thus a unique narrative, and readers can choose to read all or some of them, according to their own personal interests and curiosity.

At the same time, however, even if the life histories all reflect a specific individual experience, as the poet William Blake (1988: 250) famously pointed out, 'general forms have their vitality in particulars; and every particular is a Man'. The life histories presented in this volume also highlight a range of more general issues about gangs and gangsters, including first and foremost confirming that these come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and that they can be involved in a wide range of criminal, delinquent and transgressively violent activities, from petty criminality to drug dealing to drug trafficking to racketeering to murder, amongst others. This diversity of activities is not necessarily remarkable considering the variability of gangs, and their specific manifestation in one context over another can often be associated to circumstantial differences that have been explored previously in the broader literature on gangs and crime, including the degree to which state authorities are present and how (see O'Donnell 1993), the geography of drug trafficking (see Arias and Grisaffi 2021) or the broader structure of labour markets and the lack of employment opportunities (see Bourgois 1995), amongst others. What is perhaps more surprising is the extent to which individuals can move between a whole range of seemingly unconnected criminal endeavours within a particular context. For example, Ram in India goes from being involved in drug running to conning tourists to cyber scamming in different locations across the country over the course of thirty years (Chapter 2). For his part, Kuch in Kenya becomes involved in a whole range of income-generating activities in the Mathare slum in Nairobi where he lives, some of which are legal, and some of

which not, combining these through a general 'hustling ethics' according to the opportunities that present themselves to him at different points in time (Chapter 6). This in many ways goes against the grain of many descriptions of gang members often being stuck in low-level, dead-end jobs, with few alternative opportunities (Bourgois 1995; Contreras 2013).

At the same time, some of the other life histories presented in this volume, including, for example, that of Shorty, a small-time marijuana-selling Belizan gang member (Chapter 5), suggest that a more circumscribed engagement in low-level criminal activities is also a possibility. This stands in stark contrast to a lot of the broader literature on gangs, which has highlighted how gang membership can be a potential pathway to involvement in organized crime. Certainly, this is what James Densley (2014: 517), for example, has argued in relation to British youth street gangs, contending that these can progressively transform into organized crime groups through a series of 'sequential actualization stages' (see also Butti *et al.* forthcoming, for a similar framework in relation to gangs in Colombia). Taken together, the life histories presented in this volume, however, suggest that this potential relationship is can be highly indeterminate. Although the case of Jennifer in Honduras, who 'graduated' from a local neighbourhood gang to a transnational *mara* (Chapter 3), shows that gang members can sometime move to becoming involved in organized crime, the life history of Danny in Glasgow suggests that this is far from inevitable, as his gang career remained strictly local, despite having periodic contact with individuals linked to more organized forms of criminality both during and after his time as a gang member (Chapter 7).

The difference between Jennifer and Danny's trajectories does not necessarily have anything to do with the transnational nature of the second gang that Jennifer joined, as the case of Rebel, a Salvadorean member of the transnational *Barrio 18* gang who emigrated to Italy highlights well, insofar as his transgressive activities in Italy were not in any way defined by the (putative) transnationalism of the *Barrio 18* gang but remained very local in scope (Chapter 4). The same is also true of Shorty, despite his trajectory having arguably been fundamentally conditioned by his multiple experiences of deportation from the United States to Belize, and gang membership in both places. What all these examples highlight is how gangs and gangsterism are fundamentally embedded social phenomena, deeply shaped and influenced by contextual factors.

Broader structures also explain why Jennifer's life history is the only one presented in this volume of a female gang member. Although female gang members are by no means unknown, they are unquestionably less common than male gang members. This however has little to do with any putative hormonal or physical differences, as altogether too many have disingenuously argued – for a critique, see Campbell (1984) – and everything to do with the existence of hegemonic forms of *machismo*, patriarchy and other kinds of gendered inequality, insofar as these socialize both men and women into particular roles and attitudes, and also condition gang dynamics (Hume 2007; Baird 2015).

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that human lives are always constituted dialectically, constantly balancing the tension that inherently exists between making personal choices and wider structural constraints. Certainly, a whole range of broader contextual factors come to the fore across the life histories presented in this volume as contributing to individuals joining gangs, such as impoverishment, lack of opportunities or discrimination, for example. Indeed, these are all issues that are frequently mentioned in the broader gang literature as frequently promoting gang membership (for critical overviews, see Brotherton 2015; Fraser 2017; Brotherton and Gude 2022). Yet when one considers that in any given context, it is only a small minority of individuals who ever join a gang, this clearly means that structural factors by themselves can only ever be one part of the explanation for gang membership rather than an inevitable cause. Not surprisingly, then, the life histories presented here, while bringing to the fore a diversity of contextual factors affecting individuals' trajectories, all also highlight how their influence is by no means deterministic. The fact that not everyone in Ram's community of origin in West Bengal is pushed into a life of crime, despite generalized poverty, illustrates this well, for example. Conversely, it is notable that Danny joined a gang after moving into a newly built post-war housing scheme in suburban Easterhouse from a dilapidated tenement flat in impoverished inner-city Glasgow. And Jennifer's life history of course intrinsically goes against the grain of the notion that broader hegemonic forms of *machismo* and patriarchy mean that female gang members do not become leaders or key figures in the gang (see also Rodgers 2024b).

It is arguably in the tension between individual agency and structural constraints that the vital conjunctures – that is to say the turning points – that shape gang lives emerge. This is something that can perhaps be seen most clearly in the way that the life histories presented in this volume are not just conditioned by the fact that individuals belong to a gang or engage in criminal activity. The life of Shorty, for example, showcases how his gangster experiences are fundamentally embedded within a broader family and community life that does not necessarily centrally turn around crime and delinquency, with his low-level drug dealing, in particular, clearly less important to him than his role as a carer and informal local social worker. Similarly, Sharif's time in a Bangladeshi street gang actually turned much more around his search for his family and surviving in a time of chaos and insecurity than any criminal or delinquent motivations (Chapter 10). Indeed, one of the most striking elements that cuts across all of the life histories presented here is how so many of the moments of vital conjuncture that characterize individuals' trajectories are associated less with their experiences as gangsters, and more with love and intimacy, something that is frequently overlooked when thinking about gangs and gangsters (see Jensen and Rodgers 2022), partly due to the way that they are represented in stereotypical and de-humanizing ways, but also because they tend to be reduced solely to their gangster condition. One of the major reasons why Bryan left the gang in Nicaragua was that he married a social psychologist working for the NGO that sought to offer him alternative opportunities (Chapter 8). Triad member 'HT' in Hong Kong similarly decided

to leave his gang life and drug addiction behind for love (Chapter 9). Even in the most unlikely of circumstances, such as the case of Chepas, an incarcerated member of the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang in Guatemala, who will likely spend the rest of his life in prison, the primary motivation driving his decisions and actions emerge as being his partner and child (Chapter 1).

The important role that imprisonment can play in shaping a gang member's trajectory is another cross-cutting issue that emerges from several of the life histories presented in this volume. This is by no means surprising; incarceration is considered a major factor determining gang members' life trajectories in the broader gang literature (e.g. see Miravalle 2022, as well as, more broadly, Stuit *et al.* 2024). But the life histories presented here illustrate how it can do so in a range of different ways. For example, in the case of Chepas, it has clearly institutionalized his gang membership. Indeed, in many ways, this negative impact of prison on his life has arguably been intergenerational, as his father's imprisonment shaped Chepas' youth and choices, something all the more poignant considering how his relationship with his own son is now being fundamentally conditioned by Chepas' long-term imprisonment. On the other hand, the prison experience of Rebel in Italy has been very different, insofar as carceral rehabilitation programmes that he was able to access in Italian prisons provided him with the means to complete his high school education and to viably enter the labour market, both of which clearly contributed significantly to his no longer being an active gang member.

Rebel's experience of prison is in many ways similar to that of 'HT' in Hong Kong, who learnt how to cook working in the prison kitchen while serving a seven-year sentence for manslaughter, something that enabled him to enter the labour market after being released, but who also stressed how his time in prison led to a process of self-reflection that led to him becoming deeply religious, something that has ultimately been important in shaping his post-gang trajectory as he has become an evangelical pastor. There are also analogies here with the prison experience of Antonio Fernández, a.k.a. 'King Tone', in the United States, insofar as he also underwent a profound process of self-reflection during the thirteen years of his incarceration, which led to him becoming a community and gang outreach activist (Chapter 10). To this extent, it is important to understand not just the fact of imprisonment, but also the broader carceral regime and the specific individual experience of imprisonment, as it is only by taking these into account together that we can understand how imprisonment can be either a negative or a positive vital conjuncture. At the same time, the life trajectories of Chepas, Rebel, HT or King Tone are all very contingent and situated in different ways, and even if they can be seen as sharing a particular vital conjuncture, this does not occur at the same moment in their respective trajectories, and does not necessarily have the same consequences over the long term. They are illustrative of possibilities rather than representative of certainties.

The same is true of the long-term consequences of having been a gang member, as well as post-gang trajectories. In this respect, the life histories presented in this volume can be divided into two halves. The first six focus particularly on life in the

gang, principally illustrating how and why individuals joined gangs and how their gang career has unfolded, with most of them still currently gang members. The last six life histories focus more on post-gang trajectories, and involve individuals who have left their gang. The post-gang trajectories of gang members are an important but frequently overlooked issue. Globally, most individuals who join gangs leave them and integrate mainstream society. This is talked about in the broader gang literature in terms of 'desistance', but the way this happens is not well understood. This is partly because desistance is frequently considered as an event rather than a process, as Géraldine Bugnon (2020: 227) has pointed out in relation to her research on youth desistance from crime in Brazil. To a certain extent this is arguably due to the fact that methodologically most studies of gangs and gang members are synchronic rather than diachronic in nature, that is to say, they offer a perspective on gang dynamics at only one moment in time (Cruz and Rosen 2020). Few studies have systematically explored the lives of former gang members *after* they have left the gang – an important exception is the longitudinal study by Laub and Sampson (2003) – yet it is arguably precisely this that is needed to understand how and why desistance might (or might not) occur.

In this regard, my own research on gang dynamics in Nicaragua, based on longitudinal ethnographic research over the course of thirty years in the poor, urban neighbourhood *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in Managua, the capital city, has included regularly interviewing and following the lives of a (purposefully constituted) sample of twenty local gang members. This has highlighted how individuals' motivations for leaving the gang have always been highly personal, idiosyncratic and contingent on opportunities (see Rodgers 2023). Those reported to me include – in no particular order – having children, marriage, experiencing a violent trauma (e.g. being severely injured), being imprisoned, becoming bored, having a lucky escape, being forced to join the army, emigrating, a death in their family, moving away from the neighbourhood, having a friend killed in front of them, parental pressure, evangelical religious conversion, being betrayed by other gang members, the kindness of strangers and finding steady employment.[25] Some of these have been more common than others at different points in time as a result of broader contextual circumstances, including the degree of violence associated with different local gang iterations at different points in time, and the variable risk that gang membership consequently entailed, or the wider state of the Nicaraguan economy and levels of unemployment, for example. Beyond the influence of such very general factors, however, I have not identified any issues consistently contributing to individuals' motivation for desisting. Moreover, none of these factors or events necessarily lead to desistance, as different individuals can experience them differently; this has been particularly true in relation to violent trauma, with some gang members shrugging off events that deeply shocked others, and vice versa. Ultimately, the specific motivation for desistance seems to be something very individual, dependent on a person's particular experiential understanding and interpretation of things, and contingent.

This is also what emerges from the life histories presented in this volume, which showcase similarly diverse – although sometimes quite similar – reasons

for desisting from the gang to those that I have encountered during my research in Nicaragua. For example, for Gaz, a gang member in Sierra Leone (Chapter 12), it was a combination of his sister dying, becoming bored, and his discovery of poetry that led him to leave his gang, while for Danny in Glasgow it was a mixture of getting married, finding employment and moving away from the Easterhouse housing estate where his gang was territorially located. The latter's life history also highlights how the consequences of having been a gang member do not necessarily have a negative impact over the long term, as the gang literature often suggests is the case. Indeed, Danny's post-gang life comes across as remarkably mainstream, whether in terms of his values or his work and family life more generally.

At the same time, however, the other life histories in the second part of this volume also highlight how the gang experience can actually offer critical elements for the construction of sustainable post-gang livelihoods, something that also goes against the grain of much of the gang literature, which often suggests that successful desistance involves completely leaving the gang life behind and reinventing oneself (for a review, see Carson and Vecchio 2015). The most obvious counter-example to this is perhaps King Tone in New York, who became a successful gang outreach activist partly on the back of having been a leader of the *Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation* (ALKQN) gang, something that not only gives him intimate knowledge about (some) gang dynamics, but also makes him a 'credible messenger'. Similarly, HT in Hong Kong became an evangelical pastor specifically ministering to Triad members and ex-members who have fallen into addiction, directly drawing on his own comparable experiences. The same is true of Sharif in Bangladesh, who has become one of the country's leading human rights activists specialized in the rights of street children, a topic he understands intimately as a result of his own time in the streets. The remarkable post-gang trajectory of Gaz in Sierra Leone has involved his first becoming 'The Paper Poet', writing 'street poetry' about his gangster life, before turning to collective farming with other former gangsters.

When seen from this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that many former gang members remain nostalgic about their past, including most prominently Rebel and Kuch, but also Danny, even if his past gang membership does not seem to have particularly impacted on his present. At the same time, that past can also catch up with you, even when it seems to be a potential benefit, as happened to Bryan, who left his gang to become a social worker with an NGO working to rehabilitate gang members, and in the course of doing so, began to collaborate with the Police as a local 'peace leader'. He was, however, drawn back into violence by wider political developments in Nicaragua, and more specifically the 'gangsterization' of the current authoritarian regime, which, following a failed popular uprising in April 2018, now uses an army of Police-deputized former gang members to brutally repress dissent and political opposition (see Rocha *et al.* 2023). Bryan's story is a reminder that being associated with a gang remains something extremely dangerous, something that the last life history of this volume, that of Sito (Chapter 13), also highlights particularly poignantly, insofar as it is not a life history per se, but rather the story of a life tragically interrupted, and the wide-

ranging consequences that this has had on Sito's family and friends. As such, Sito's death reminds us that a life history – whether that of a gang member or otherwise – always has a constructed narrative arc, one that is often implicitly redemptive and tends towards a happy ending, while in the real world, lives are all too often extremely fragile and contingent – and those of gang members particularly so.

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Notes

1 This name is a pseudonym.
2 See Rodgers (2024a) for an overview of the different phases of Nicaraguan gangsterism over the past thirty years, and the waxing and waning of levels of violence associated with the phenomenon.
3 'Gangs, Gangsters, and Ganglands: Towards a Global Comparative Ethnography', funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant no. 787935).
4 For further details, see https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.
5 Argentina, Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Russia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, the UK, the United States and Venezuela.
6 Eleven other life histories collected for the GANGS project explicitly sought to experiment with new methodological and representational approaches to both collecting and writing a gangster life history, and have been published in a special issue of the journal *Critical Criminology* (Rodgers 2025c). A further four specifically explored the epiphenomenal qualities of life histories, drawing on individual trajectories as a means to get to grips with broader geopolitical trends, and have been published as a special thematic section of the journal *International Sociology* (Rodgers 2025b). Two more life histories are being published in a forthcoming monograph (Jensen and Rodgers forthcoming), and the final one has been published on a stand-alone basis (Rodgers 2024b). In addition, a series of abridged life histories have also been published online in *The Conversation* – see https://theconversation.com/gangsstories-a-glimpse-of-hard-lives-around-the-world-227166.
7 There are also similar volumes offering a more focused regional perspective, in particular in relation to Central and Latin America, such as the landmark trilogy by ERIC *et al.* (2001, 2004a, b), as well as Jones and Rodgers (2009).
8 See also https://eurogangproject.com/.
9 See https://www.upf.edu/web/transgang.

10 See https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

11 The exception is Paolo Grassi's life history of Rebel (Chapter 4), whom he only met with twice over the course of a few months in 2021 for reasons that he explains in his chapter. Grassi, however, has a deep familiarity with Rebel's Central American context of origin, as well as Milan, where Rebel now lives and where they met, having carried out long-term ethnographic research in both locations (Grassi 2018, 2024).

12 In addition, it should be noted that while Alistair Fraser and Angela Bartie's personal relationship with their interlocutor Danny (Chapter 7) dates back to 2011, they also had access to the transcript of an interview that he carried out with other researchers in 1969, meaning that their chapter effectively – and rather uniquely – offers a longitudinal perspective over the course of more than five decades.

13 Certainly, this is the accusation that W. A. Marianne Boelen (1992) made in relation to William Foote Whyte's classic life history of 'Doc', which he collected in relation to the research that became *Street Corner Society* (1943). She claimed that the latter was unaware that his life history would constitute a central element of the former's research, and that moreover he did not approve of the way he was represented once he was able to read the monograph. Whyte (1993) strongly rebutted her accusations, but part of Boelen's more general point was that there is often an inherent power imbalance in the way that life histories have traditionally been put together, with the researcher almost always having more control over the narrative they craft than their research interlocutor.

14 This broadening of the scope of gang research is very much a growing trend. Although some edited collections or overview volumes published in the past often included a token chapter or small section about gangs in the Global South (e.g. Decker and Pyrooz 2015; Mohammed and Mucchielli 2007; Sanders 2017), more recent publications of this kind are increasingly intrinsically offering a broader global coverage, including, for example, those by Brotherton and Gude (2022), Bucerius *et al.* (2022), Pyrooz *et al.* (2024) and Carson *et al.* (forthcoming).

15 No more than 400 different gangs are actually named in Thrasher's study, with detailed information offered about substantially less, although four tables in the book offer non-specific, tabular information about the age, race and nationality, size and delinquent activities of respectively 1,213, 880, 895 and 1,313 gangs (Thrasher 1927: 74, 191, 319 & 386). According to Mary Dodge and Gilbert Geis (2003: 375), 'Solomon Kobrin, who worked for years with Chicago gangs, contended that it was Thrasher's research assistants who had specified the total [of 1,313] as an in-joke, and that it was the house number of a nearby brothel.'

16 There exists some terminological confusion with regard to what constitutes a life history. Certainly, the expression is often used interchangeably with other descriptors such as 'life story', 'oral history', 'personal narrative', 'testimony', 'biography' or 'a life course approach', amongst others. This proliferation of terms partly stems from the fact that life history research has developed across a variety of disciplines, all of which have different vernaculars, and different expressions also place emphasis on different aspects of the endeavour. In the context of the present discussion, a 'life history' is taken to be an individual's personal narrative about their life course, generally collected through an in-depth interview or series of interviews carried out by a researcher, sometimes supplemented with autobiographical material written by the interviewee. This empirical narrative can be written up in a range of

different ways – Ken Plummer (2001: 396–9), for example, distinguishes between the linear 'naturalistic life history', the more focused or thematic 'researched life history', and the more personally 'reflexive and recursive life history' – but according to Carles Feixa (2018: 55, my translation), *the* key distinguishing characteristic of life histories compared to other oral empirical sources is that they 'are not given, but constructed, that is to say, they are actively elaborated through interactive processes that imply a dialectical relationship between different social agents, states of being, and forms of representation: informant-researcher, oral-written, narration-action, synchronicity-diachronicity, memory-history, etc'.

17 Volume 3, in particular, offered, according to Martin Bulmer (1984: 54), 'the first systematically collected sociological life history', that of a Polish migrant to the United States called Władek Wiszniewski.

18 It should be noted that there is significant controversy surrounding the extent to which Shaw downplayed or ignored certain elements of Stanley's narrative in order to 'craft' a narrative that fit his scholarly agenda (see Gelsthorpe 2007; Salerno 2017; Snodgrass 1982).

19 Important – albeit isolated – exceptions include Joan Moore (1978), Jon Snodgrass (1982), Anne Campbell (1984), John Hagedorn (1988) and James Diego Vigil (1988). It should be noted that life histories remained important more broadly within certain social science disciplines, including in particular in anthropology, as is well exemplified by the popularity of studies based on life history research such as those by Sidney Mintz (1960), Oscar Lewis (1961, 1964), James Freeman (1979) or Marjorie Shostak (1981), amongst others.

20 Not all of these studies qualify themselves as being life history-based, but use analogous terms such as 'ethnographic', 'biographical', 'narrative' or 'life' to describe the interviews that constitute their principal empirical basis. In all cases, however, individual narratives are the central element of the research.

21 A major exception in this regard is William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, originally published in 1943, which while not directly linked to the Chicago School of Sociology studies, was quasi-contemporaneous and published by the University of Chicago Press. It drew significantly on life histories, including in particular that of 'Doc', and included what is still one of the most detailed and illuminating reflexive methodological appendices in its 2nd edition published in 1955 (subsequently expanding this even further in the 3rd and 4th editions, respectively, published in 1981 and 1993).

22 Loraine Gelsthorpe (2007: 516) has argued that because this kind of autobiographical reflexivity is missing in Clifford Shaw's (1931) *The Jack-Roller*, the narrative of which she contends was fundamentally shaped by Shaw's personal biography, we cannot 'be really sure where Shaw's own story ends and Stanley's begins'.

23 Indeed, as Yvonna Lincoln and Michael Lanford (2018: 464) have pointed out, 'new technologies, particularly the rise of social media and the shifting social relationships such technologies have engendered' could very likely lead to the emergence of a variety of new methodological and representational approaches to life history research in the future.

24 There are some past exceptions, of course. Clifford Shaw's (1930: 1) research relationship with Stanley that produced *The Jack-Roller* was, for example, based on contact 'over a period of six years', and they continued to engage with each other socially until Shaw's death in 1955 (Snodgrass 1982).

25 Dying could of course also be added to this list, with the gang in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández suffering a variable annual death rate over the past two decades, from 4 per cent per year in the mid-1990s to up to 10 per cent in the early 2000s. Having said this, dying is obviously a means of leaving the gang that is significantly different to those listed above, particularly with regards to its ramifications for having a post-desistance trajectory.

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Figure 1.1 'Prison Time', by William Curiel, a.k.a. '*Chepas*', 2012.

Oil on canvas, photo by the chapter author, reproduced with permission.

Chapter 1

Gangster, Brother, Prisoner, Son: Chepas and the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala

Anthony W. Fontes

William Curiel,[1] a.k.a. '*Chepas*', was twenty-five years old when we met in October 2011. He found me as I was leaving Pavón Prison, Guatemala's largest and oldest 'prison farm'. He came from the concrete *fútbol* courts, spectators shouting and cheering from the stands as their fellows scrabbled in the hot dry afternoon. Chepas had spied me taking photos with social workers who organized arts and crafts, talk sessions, and free meals for incarcerated gangsters and any other prisoners willing to join. He said he was ex-*Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13), from Zone 3 in Guatemala City, and asked for my help with a photo shoot. He wanted a black-and-white image of himself and a couple of other ex-MS-13 confederates smoking cigars and playing cards to use as a model for a painting. 'Like that famous painting with the dogs', he ventured. He earned his livelihood inside drawing tattoos, but he liked painting on canvas better. I must have said something about his own virgin skin, because he spoke of Gabriel, his deceased older brother. Gabriel had been an MS-13 leader when he was killed. 'My brother told me not to get any tattoos. He was green, just pure ink, and he didn't want that for me.'

Born into a family ensnared in the MS-13, Chepas grew up in the long shadow of his brother's murder. And by joining the gang, he locked himself into a path that would lead to decades behind bars. In this, his life story is altogether typical. Prisons are harsh wombs that have long nurtured gang growth.[2] Since the early 2000s in Guatemala – and across Northern Central America – locking up suspected gang members *en masse* made prisons corporate headquarters for the MS-13 and their sworn rivals the *Barrio 18*, where both gangs developed national leadership networks, fighting one another and other prisoner factions for control of prison life and the street.[3] Indeed, the gangs' capacity to leverage the conditions of mass incarceration and trespass porous prison walls is key to their survival and success. All of this has made the prison an essential waystation in gang life trajectories – a truth expressed in the infamous 'three points' tattoo imported from US-based Latino gangs naming the inevitable destinations of

'*la vida loca*' (the mad [gang] life): prison, hospital and cemetery. The everyday violence of prison life, the alienation that isolation can breed between the incarcerated and the free, and the ways prison's punishment extends beyond the law's sentence to haunt gangsters like Chepas are essential elements of gang life in Guatemala.

Prisons nurture gang evolution, but they can also preserve gangsters' lives. Chepas' claims to be one of three surviving members of his original MS-13 clique, and that he's alive only because he is locked up. Indeed, I went to prison to talk to gangsters sheltered from the bloody streets. The grey routine of prison time – each day contained by the morning and evening counts, each moment measured – by the longing for freedom that may never come[4] – also encourages idle talk and reflection, even with an interloper such as myself. My relationship with Chepas grew out of time shared in that purgatory, and in the years since I have borne witness – and tried to help him and his family – as he ricocheted from prison to the street and back to prison again. This account of Chepas' life traces how threads of gang belonging and violence, family history and hope, and mass imprisonment weave together to enmesh him and the people he loves most, creating a web that threatens to trap each new generation.

Chepas is the youngest of three siblings. He grew up in the home his grandfather purchased in the 1960s with money earned in military service and playing in local professional soccer leagues. The home is in Zone 3 of Guatemala City, located a few blocks from the general cemetery, and a few more blocks from the city dump. Like much of the old city, it was built in Spanish colonial style – the concrete façade conjoined with neighbouring homes making a barricade against the street and its countless dangers. A darkened foyer leads to a tiled courtyard open to the sky, surrounded by small, windowless rooms. Through the mid-twentieth century the neighbourhood was a working-class beachhead, alive with union politics, memories of the democratic spring and hope. But the terror and chaos of the armed conflict that afflicted Guatemala between 1960 and 1996 – roaming death squads, disappeared union leaders, failed protests and fearful silence – did away with such dreams. In the vacuum, organized criminal power took root and grew here and across poor neighbourhoods.

When I met Chepas in 2011, fifteen years after the official end of armed conflict in Guatemala and five years since he'd gone to prison, his family still lived in Zone 3. They have survived without prospering, falling into poverty, drug addiction and crime. Gabriel, the oldest of Chepas' siblings, had been dead for many years, shot by *narcos* (drug traffickers). Chepas' father was back in prison, his veritable second home through decades of addiction and drug selling. Chepas' mother, moonlighting as an MS-13 *paro* (helper), was in and out of her children's lives. Only Angela, Chepas' sister, remained, caring for her grandfather and the family home as age accelerated their entropy, and her daughters born of different fathers, who all seem to have some connection to the MS-13 and its inimitable hold over the family.

The Mara Salvatrucha *and Gabriel's murder*

'As time goes on, young men from other places began arriving. They wanted to be involved in something. It called to them. That's when my brother put himself directly into what is known as the *Mara Salvatrucha*', Angela said to me during an interview in 2012. She was talking about Gabriel, the oldest sibling. We spoke in an upscale café boasting Guatemala's best coffee. Julia, her oldest daughter, sat beside us, sipping a Coca-Cola. Chepas' release from prison was a week away. Angela wore heavy mascara and eye shadow, dabbing away tears before they streaked. Through two hours of recounting tragedy, she never spoke Gabriel's name.

'He became an aggressive person', she said:

> Violent in the sense that we couldn't walk or go anywhere because he would eyeball somebody, you know, 'what's up bitch', as they vulgarly say. He was put under *chequeo* (trial) to be part of the gang. One must win their respect, so he couldn't work anymore, and his girlfriend was already pregnant. When his son was born, he was practically already jumped in.
>
> At that time I understood nothing, brothers never tell you anything, and when I saw his first tattoo, I said, 'Why'd you do that?' He said, 'You can't know.' He had a marijuana leaf and 10 tears. Later he put 'ALS', the initials of his clique, the *Adams Loco Salvatruchas*, and they called him '*El Observador de Adams*' (the Adams observer). I didn't understand and it made me laugh. The first time I saw how things really were was when the *Mara Salvatrucha* put a *luz verde* (green light, i.e. killing order) on my brother's clique. Supposedly one of them had shot a guy who had the *ramfla* (leadership). So they gave my brother's clique a mission – they gave them 12 days to kill the guys who had kill a homie. I heard of it by accident. A few days later, my brother said to me, 'Sit down, I want to speak with you. Look, we have to do something, and if it doesn't come off they're going to kill me and the other crazies.' When he left, he asked me to hold on to a weapon for him. It was the first time I had a firearm in my hands. But for me my brother was everything.
>
> When the thing that needed to happen happened, one of them got injured, and I took him to the hospital. I don't like blood. It was my daughter Julia's father, but in those days we weren't anything, my brother was very jealous and didn't want me having anything to do with his people. So I took him, and then it was time to leave, all of a sudden there were police everywhere, and they had just brought in one of the boys who my brothers' clique had … you know. I called my brother, and he said, 'Get out of there now.' How was I supposed to do that? I put him in a wheelchair, and a nurse asked us where we're from. I told them we were from Zone 7, and she said OK, no problem, and signed our papers. But she's like, 'Ah, but over there in Zone 3 there's just been a triple murder.' "I can't believe it!', I said. But that was the moment I figured it out. We left the emergency room and there was a guard in charge, and he called us over, asked if we had permission to

> leave, and for our papers. 'Here they are', I said, and then we went out onto the street and into a taxi. Two days later, my brother told me: 'Cut your hair and dye it, dress differently, because they have your description and are looking for you.' I was 14 years old.

At that time Chepas was a child of eight, living in an orphanage in Xela, a city in the foothills of the Western highlands of Guatemala, three hours and a world away. His mother sent him there after his father was imprisoned on drug charges, before she herself disappeared. The nuns in charge were strict and cold, and Chepas said he never understood why he could not be with the rest of his family. He grew close to a quiet, studious boy named Freddy. Freddy would eventually become his adopted brother, joining Chepas' family in the capital after Chepas was reunited with Angela. Chepas' clearest memories from that time were the rare visits with Angela and Gabriel.

'Two months before they killed my brother, I decided to go see William, the little one', Angela continued:

> At the last moment my brother said he would come with me. I remember it so clearly – it was the last time we were all together. But my brother's error was bringing Casper along on this last visit. Casper was leader of Northside, and my brother was the leader of Adams. Driving back, I remember my brother said, 'William's gotten so big!' And Casper said, 'that's right homie, one more for the *barrio*'. My brother turned around. 'My brother will not do the same as I have, you hear me?' He was angry, and Casper was angry too.

A few months later, *narcos* ambushed Gabriel and other MS-13 homies in front of the Curiel home. Gabriel took a bullet in the hip, a mere flesh wound. He was awake, happy to be alive and laughing at death, when they took him to the hospital. But, as the confused family legend goes, the doctors saw his inked skin and at first refused to help him. He died in the night after receiving anaesthesia. Angela said it was an asthma attack. It is known that doctors in Guatemala will let gangsters die on the table, or find subtle means of 'execution'. No one knows for sure.

Casper's Northside clique spent the next three months avenging Gabriel's death. The last of them – the *narco* leader – showed up in a car trunk with fifty-odd bullets in him. 'Once he was dead, it was safe for us', Angela said, before going on to explain:.

> My daughter's father asked me, 'Now you feel ok?' 'Nooo', I said, 'it makes me sad, not for those guys, but for the family, the brothers and sisters, the mother, the children they leave behind.' My niece asked me, 'Why don't I have a father?' That's what happens. [But] no one was left that wanted to do me or my niece harm. A year, maybe two passed. That was when I went to get William. I was pregnant with my first daughter.

She nodded at Julia, who had finished her Coca-Cola and sat listening, before continuing:

> I was 17, a minor, so I had to steal William away from the orphanage. I didn't know how I would explain how this figure who had been our brother, the one who took care of us, was gone. I sat William down, and started to tell him that a year had passed since he died. But William just nodded, saying, 'I knew it, something inside of me already knew.'
>
> I was living with Luis, my husband, who was also one of them – they called him Fat – but he was trying to remake his life away from the gang. I worked and Luis worked and William studied. Our mother did nothing. William was my responsibility. He was always good at drawing and always smart. Time passed, and when I was pregnant again, I told William, 'something is strange with Luis.' Before we had always gone out together to different places, and then he didn't want to go anywhere, and I found it strange. He was always close to his mother, but then not at all. Then one day he told me he felt that someone was following him. 'I don't know how, but I can feel it', he said. 'Pray to God', I said, 'pray a lot to God...' Until one day, he said he didn't want to go to work, but he went because he said there were so many costs for the children.

'They shot him when he went for his lunch break', Angela said, closing her eyes for a moment. Julia and I watched her. 'His boss called and told me, and I don't remember anything after that until William came running in.'

A decade later, from his cell in Pavón, Chepas texted me his memories of that day:

> Angela was pregnant so Luis worked in La Terminal. I went out one day for a haircut and I was maybe two blocks away when they came shooting, running after Luis, and I saw them hit him in the head. But I didn't recognize his face all red with blood, and he was trying to get up, in agony with bullets in his head and he fell down again and that's when I saw the tattoo he had on his arm of some bars, and so I knew. But I didn't know what to do, and worse, I recognized the killer, a loco who's in prison now call *El Cowboy*. I realized that these fuckers didn't care about anything, not even family, only killing and fear. I went to get my haircut and the firemen were still trying to keep him alive. I saw them taking out the tiny shoes he had bought for Julia, who was two years old or less in those days. I went back home to tell Angela but when I got there the undertaker was there offering his services.

Angela's eyes glistened as she told me about the aftermath of Luis' death. 'William hugged me. "Calm down, calm down", he said, "but it was really him. I saw him." "Don't lie!", I said. "Just calm down", he said.' She gathered herself, her tone flattening, and went on to say that 'they killed him because he had left the gang. They try to hide what they do, dress it up in lies. But he was killed for leaving, and nothing more.'

Angela then fell quiet, staring at her coffee. She took a deep breath. 'This was when William stopped studying', she said. 'He said, "No, I'm going to work", which

he did in order to help me. But then … it was so sad – I say this because this is when everything started again – my mother came back into our lives, after all these years of leaving us alone, now that her surviving children were back together.' Angela's voice dropped to a low hiss:

> It was *she* who brought Casper along on a social visit, supposedly. I told William not to pay any attention, but he always identified with our brother. He and our brother looked so much alike, like twins separated only by age. Soon after that, people in the neighbourhood would confuse William with our older brother and they even beat him once, because in those days there was a rumour that my brother wasn't dead, that they had just faked his death, and we had buried only dirt. They hit him and we told ourselves it wasn't safe for him anymore. But when I finally understood, he was already with *them*.

She shook her head and let out a small, sad laugh, before going on:

> I told him, 'Get yourself to Xela, there you are okay, there's no one to … I'll take you on a bus...' But no, he was with the *muchachos* (the lads). How I cried. 'I don't want this life for you.' He disappeared then for a while, and when he came back, he had changed. This was four months before he would fall prisoner.

Prison time

Guatemala City, April 2006. Chepas had just turned nineteen. He was on the bus with Casper's package tucked into a battered backpack held in his lap, riding up the Carretera El Salvador, choked with cars, burning clutches and breaks, red busses belching great plumes of diesel smoke. They crawled with the traffic, Chepas trying to keep an eye on the homie riding point on a motorcycle several cars ahead. But the homie disappeared, and, too late, Chepas spied the police checkpoint and an officer in a black uniform waving the bus down. He shoved the backpack down to his feet. An officer mounted the bus and directed all the passengers to get off and present their belongings and their identity cards. Chepas slipped the package under the seat and got off with the others.

The police found the package. An officer unzipped the bag and pulled it out. He slit the tape, the black plastic unfurling. He pulled out a clear plastic bag filled with smaller baggies, and inside each baggy were two or three grey pellets. Chepas started backing away, eyes darting for an exit between the police hemming them in. But an old woman who had been sitting next to him pointed at Chepas and yelled, 'It's his. It belongs to that young man!' Chepas turned and ran, knocking past the first surprised police, but there were others. They tackled him to the ground and kicked him until he lost consciousness.

Thus commenced days of survival behind bars. With no tattoos he hid his gang affiliation from the authorities and stayed with the general population. When he arrived at his assigned sector, the sector leader, known as a *vocero*, greeted him and conducted an informal interview. Chepas tried to hide the truth, telling the *vocero* that he was in for 'a little bag of marijuana', but then the *vocero* took him to his 'little office', where he had a copy of Chepas' file, his identification and his charges. 'He sees I'm in for narco-trafficking and he assumes I have money', Chepas recalled. The vocero demanded 6000 *quetzals* (approximately $750). If he didn't pay up, he said, 'you won't live well at all'. Chepas refused to pay. 'I'm the one who charges rent. I don't pay it!', he said defiantly. The *vocero* and his henchman forced him to scrub the sector latrine on his belly, and kept him awake much of the night until he finished his labours. He protested, and they beat him.

Such everyday abuses are the drumbeat beneath periodic explosions of prison violence, as prisoner factions – gangs among them – fight to survive behind bars. Within a year, Chepas was transferred to Pavoncito prison, a newly built facility ruled by Captain Lima, an infamous military officer incarcerated for the 1998 assassination of Archbishop Gerardi. Lima – like other incarcerated military men – had a history with the gangs, engaged in a war for control of prison life and black markets waged across the prison system through the early 2000s. In 2003, Lima barely escaped a gang-organized riot to take him out, leaving his compatriots to be killed and quartered. A week before Chepas arrived at Pavoncito, prison officials delivered a clutch of gang leaders into Lima's hands; their bodies appeared the following day beaten, burned, torn apart.

Chepas and other transfers spent a week in the back of a van at the prison entrance, convinced they too would die. Captain Lima had met them, flanked by his enforcers, with a pistol tucked in his belt. 'You aren't wanted here', he said. Each night Chepas fell asleep imagining the mob would come for them, beat them, burn them and take their heads. Years later he painted his memories of that time: an obscure set of images centred around a quartered human torso with a shaved head hung in a cage. In the foreground of the painting, a long prison hallway, grey prisoners receive *rancho* (prison meals). 'There were days when I didn't even want to look at that shit', Chepas said with a sardonic grin. A dark figure in a trench coat loomed far off in one corner, death casting a long shadow onto the dismembered corpse wrapped in chains and the feathers of a quetzal. In the distance stood a watchtower, its beacon a burning sun.

Chepas survived because the authorities saw fit to transfer him and the others to Pavón, a prison several hundred yards down the road from Pavoncito. It felt like a blessing, with green spaces meant for farming and livestock, playing fields and courtyards open to the sun, Pavón had long been considered the 'Hilton' of the prison system. Pavón's kingpins – a consortium of *narcos* styling themselves the Committee of Order and Discipline – had built chalets and a night club, and operated booming illicit businesses from inside. The year before Chepas moved in, however, the good times ended with '*Operación Pavo Real*' (Operation

Peacock) and the retaking of Pavón by SWAT teams and military commandos. The government captured the committee leaders, who were later found half-naked, bullet holes in the backs of their heads.

Chepas nevertheless found a kind of peace in Pavón. There were others like him, ex-*Mara Salvatrucha* from earlier 'generations' – meaning men just a few years older than him – with whom he felt an automatic solidarity. He said it was easy to distinguish 'real' gang members from mere pretenders – those that had perhaps carried out a mission for the gang, done the gang a favour, who had never been real soldiers but nevertheless claimed such status in order to be something. There were *Barrio 18* members as well, glaring hostility burbling just beneath the surface. He found ways of earning money – mostly carving tattoos on fellow prisoners' skin with makeshift gear fashioned from sewing needles and guitar string. He could also play soccer for a *narco* who would pay him a few *quetzales* or in crack cocaine, a vice that Chepas would relinquish over and over again. Through those years, his family visits grew fewer and farther between. In Pavón, Chepas also met his father again for the first time in more than a decade. At first, he had nothing to say to the man. But eventually they reconciled, and before Chepas walked out a free man in March 2012 he asked me to take their photo together, father's arm draped on son's shoulder, faces neutral and serious.

Released

Guatemala City, April 2012. Chepas and Freddy met me in the central park in the late afternoon. They had taken the bus from Mixco, a suburb where Freddy, his wife, and their children live in a closed *residencial* (condominium), and where Chepas went to live to adjust to life outside of prison. I stood at the edge of the fountain and waited until I saw them approaching, Chepas' tall skinny silhouette and Freddy's shorter one sending a flock of pigeons scattering into the crystal blue sky. Chepas' face broke into a wide grin as our eyes met. We walked to *El Portal*, a nearby bar, and sat in the back corner where I imagine Che Guevara must have sat on that day in 1956 the Jacobo Arbenz administration fell to a US-organized coup, the day scholars date the beginning of Guatemala's cycle of doom. From here, one has a clear view of the bar and the entrance, protected on two sides by burgundy walls. It was a late lunch crowd and mariachi musicians plied their trade. I ordered an *ojo rojo* beer for myself, and Chepas and Freddy did the same. Freddy sat silent and unassuming, wearing a vague smile through three rounds of beers while Chepas spoke as if in a confessional. He had been out of prison for three weeks.

'I admire my brother very much', he said. We raised our beers to Freddy, who ducked his head. 'He has followed a good path his whole life, never gotten involved in anything illicit. Not like me.' This moment will come back to haunt us. A few years later, out at night hawking T-shirts to make rent, Freddy was to be killed in the cross-fire of a drive-by shooting.

'How many are still alive that you came up with?', I asked.
'That I know of … three, including me. And only one other is on the street. El Casper. The other is still in Boquerón prison.'
'Casper is still active?'
'Damn right.'
'And the others?'
'All dead, all of them. I am lucky I went to prison for these last five years. I would probably be dead too.'

I thought about how Chepas really did get lucky. All the guys he knew in the gang were dead, his brother Gabriel was dead and his friends in prison still faced decades more inside. Things could have been much worse. Chepas would even say prison was good for him. 'I think about all the things that I learned in prison and all the changes I went through when I was inside. Sometimes I don't even recognize myself, who I was, what I was thinking when I went in. And it's like, now that I'm out again, I don't even know who I am.'

He seemed comfortable sitting there, however, talking about his new life in the old world, or old life in the new world, about walking down streets where he used to work, these spaces mined with memories from which he had hidden for five years, encased in the concrete and metal cocoon. And since he had fluttered back into this world, what could he make of it? 'Walking down these old streets has opened up all these memories that I had forgotten. People that I had not remembered in a long time', he said. I asked him what kinds of memories, but he wouldn't speak of violence, not of specific moments, not to me and certainly not in front of Freddy. He preferred philosophical platitudes. 'I was convinced, I told myself every day, this is the life I chose and I know I'm going to die living it.' But instead he went to prison and survived.

Chepas was living with Freddy in Mixco to stay safe – from harm and, though it was mostly unsaid, from temptation. But he had already explored places that he had told me he would stay away from. A few days prior he had gone through Zone 3 to the house where his mother, Angela, and Angela's children lived. He said he was electrified with fear, hyperaware of every pair of eyes peering out of every doorway. But he kept his cool, he said, just strolling through the hood where they killed his brother and at one time would have killed him. But he had to believe that no one was left, and that no one had any reason to come after him.

These trips down memory lane helped him with a struggle that occupied his present: fighting against the urge to make easy money the way that he knew so well before. Here he lived with Freddy, living *off* Freddy truth be told, looking for work, but without any real hope of formal employment (six months later, when he finally obtained a government ID, he claimed to have applied to, and been rejected from, dozens of private security firms). He was trying to paint so that he had some paintings to sell, but without the possibility of even putting his stuff online because he didn't have an email, a computer or any idea how to use the internet. And in the first days out, Chepas couldn't bring himself to leave his brother's house. He would

sit on the stoop and look up at the stars and marvel. He had not seen the stars in the night sky for more than five years, always closed in before the sun went down.

But did Chepas want trouble? 'If trouble comes my way, I am ready to fight', he said as we finished our last round of beers. In the first months on the street, he would repeat those words like a mantra or a prayer walking through old neighbourhoods that could kill him. He imagined he kept a low profile, he imagined *he* was the predator. 'The dog that barks won't bite … All these young 'uns don't know what they're getting themselves into. They think they're good because they play with their lives … ' He shook his head. 'But today they're all dying anyway, the young aren't surviving. The old homies eat them', he said. The *vatos* (guys) that have survived to be as old as Chepas are the last of their generation. 'How am I going to risk my life after all that I have lived?', he said. 'Now it's about making money. Money runs everything these days, and *carnalismo* (brotherhood) isn't worth shit.'

A little over a year later, I came back to Guatemala to visit Chepas and his family in their home. I was fighting a fever, weak and disoriented as Angela and her daughters served lunch in the ramshackle courtyard. Chepas, his grandfather and I sat and ate as the children played all around. After we finished, I got up to announce my departure and Chepas ushered me into his bedroom. Bottles of paint and unfinished canvasses were stacked in a corner beside a thin mattress. Speaking quickly, he told me how I, more than anyone, had made him want to change. And not directly, not with advice or pushing or chiding him, simply by listening and encouraging him to paint, by being a safe place to speak his mind on events and thoughts that he could confess to no one else. Then he reached up and took a tennis racket bag down from the top of a scarred wooden dresser. Unzipping it, he drew out an object bundled in an old sweatshirt. I caught a dull gleam of metal. He tossed the sweatshirt onto the bed and held out an AR-15 assault rifle. The barrel shortened, the grip and body smooth with use. 'What the hell … ?', I exclaimed. He told me a man named Santos, a veteran of his old clique, passed him the gun a few days after Casper was arrested. I asked him why.

'In case of trouble', he said, his eyes darting from mine.
'What kind of trouble?'
'Once word of Casper's capture goes out, other cliques might want to move in on his territory.' Then he shrugged. 'Anyway, Santos just wants me to hold it for him.'

I knew there was something, something important, he wasn't telling me. But I couldn't probe further. The timing wasn't right. I was too tired. Perhaps I didn't want to know. He held the gun out to me and I took it. The metal was cool in my hands, the weight of the thing somehow comforting and also terrifying.

'Does it, um, work?', I asked.
Chepas snorted. 'Of course it does.'

I held the AR-15 to my chest and heard Chepas' mantra going through in my head. 'I don't want trouble, but if it comes my way, I will be ready.' I handed the gun back to him and watched him wrap it carefully. I could hear the children laughing in the courtyard.

'I just wanted you to know what's really going on', Chepas said. We walked back into the sunlight to say goodbye.

Prison (again) and fatherhood

El Preventivo Prison, Zone 18, Guatemala City, June 2015. It was 6.00 am when I found Maria, Chepas' girlfriend, and her sister in the visitors' line, flowing 100 metres down the block from the checkpoint in front of *El Preventivo* prison. Maria has bright green eyes and a light-skinned cherub face. She was nineteen years old when she and Chepas were arrested together in the back of her brother's taxi cab, but I saw how they were able to convince the cops that she was a minor. We had come to visit Chepas. Maria had a nylon bag with Chepas' clean laundry slung over her shoulder. She washed his clothes and brought them to him each week. She also held her one-year-old nephew to her chest, and he had tiny bottles of tattoo ink sewed into his pyjama pant cuffs.

An hour later, I lost them when they joined the women's line curling endlessly around the corner. Maria disappeared with the baby into a closet-sized room, where a female guard checked her cavities and opened the baby's diaper. A distracted young guard gave me a half-hearted pat-down and waved me through the broken metal detector. I entered through a steel turnstile to a sea of expectant faces, Chepas among them, waving me down. As he led me past a line of couples waiting outside the conjugal visit rooms – 20 *quetzals* (approximately $2.50) for twenty minutes alone with your *visita* (visitor) – the door swung open, and I caught a glimpse of a woman smoothing down the sheets, a man staring at her. We made our way to the packed common area. A set of huge speakers pumped out high-decibel reggaeton. Huddled couples, some fondling each other, others doing their best to make conversation in the din, filled every square foot. Prisoner waiters took food and drink orders, carrying plates of tacos, ice creams, sweets. Others lingered in the eves with quick hungry eyes, ready to help visitors find their prisoner, or carry messages to men still in the sectors below. Chepas had 'rented' a few square feet of cement above a packed walkway. We sat down. Up against my left elbow sat a woman watching her man as he gazed at their infant girl cradled in his arms. To our right, a prisoner, freshly shaved head shining, hugged a woman again and again, and slipped her a handcrafted love letter. Across the bustling walkway was a kiosk selling Playboy brand deodorant, cheap cologne, hair gel and *Viva* condoms.

When Maria finally arrived, Chepas laughed in relief, wrapped his arms around her and sat her on his lap. He leaned his head close to mine. 'If it weren't for Maria, man, I don't think I could make it', he whispered. 'I never had love like this.' He did not tell me at the time, but Maria was three months pregnant with their child.

Less than eight years since he first went to prison, and nearly two and a half years after being released in 2012, Chepas found himself under arrest again. The story of what happened to land him back in prison morphed and oscillated over the coming years. I learned about it first from a mutual friend, and then Chepas called me while I was in snow-shuttered Wisconsin, a continent away from *El Preventivo* prison, where a hundred voices and reggaeton thrummed in the background. It was not until I came back to Guatemala several months later that I got a full – or fuller – account. There in *El Preventivo*, among the teeming multitudes, he told me that the police got him with an unregistered gun in a plastic bag, but it belonged to the taxi driver, he claimed, who they also arrested. The police hauled them all in, Chepas fighting the cops who kicked his ass. 'I would rather die than go back to prison', he said. But in prison he was.

Someone had called Angela. She had rushed to the *Torre de Tribunales* (Courts of Justice) and claimed that Maria was her sixteen-year-old little sister. The cops at the precinct never linked the man they had arrested with Chepas' record, and held him until he could pay the 4000-*quetzal* bond (approximately US$500). He spent days in the holding cells in the underground parking lot of the Courts of Justice, a bare mesh cage under wavering halogen bulbs that were never turned off, petrol fumes and the faint smell of urine. Guards in grey and black uniforms lounged on plastic chairs as anxious family members brought food to their loved ones.

Then towards the end of March, the cops came to his family home in Zone 3. They had photographed Chepas in a car some months earlier. Cops from the Specialized Criminal Investigation Division (DEIC), I later learned from a police informant, had been tracking him for months, and Chepas' capture was part of an operation that had been ongoing for years. When they came to Zone 3 and took him away, his neighbour sounded the alarm – 'The *poli* have Chepas, the *poli* have Chepas!' – a practised defence mechanism to dissuade the kind of extrajudicial execution the DEIC is known for. Indeed, DEIC initially didn't take him to *El Preventivo*, or to the *Torre de Tribunales*. They took him to a deserted police precinct, where they put a hood over his head, beat him, threatened to kill him, tried to make him talk. Chepas shrugged, and said, 'I told them nothing, Anthony. How could I? I know nothing, I had nothing to do with any of this.'

But his story wavered, twisted, with blank spaces and questions that needed answering but for which no answers were forthcoming. He was arrested for '*asociación ilícita*' (illegal association), a charge brought into Guatemala's legal lexicon to strengthen the government's helplessness in the face of gang and drug trafficking activities that involve so many underlings that buffer the kingpins and *ranfleros* who are actually running things. They had phone calls from him to his buddy asking, 'hey man, how is it over there, what's the situation?', linked with a subsequent visit to a bank teller's house. Chepas said the bank teller had commissioned a painting. And his buddy's phone had phone calls to other dudes allegedly involved in the scheme. And Chepas *did* know that his buddy was involved in a ring of extortion and murder for hire. 'Who is this guy?', I asked. A buddy he met on the street, he said. 'Where? Which street? When?', I insisted. 'The street', he said, 'from before'. He was vague. Chepas knew stuff, he

said, but he wouldn't divulge exactly what. 'I'm no snitch', he said. He would be killed if he did talk.

In mid-December 2015, Maria gave birth to Anthony 'Toni' William Curiel in Roosevelt Hospital in Guatemala City. While the doctors performed the caesarean section, Chepas was being transferred from *El Preventivo* prison back to the Pavón, where he had spent most of his prior incarceration and where we had met. Chepas was eager for the relatively open spaces of Pavón. His days were defined by the stuttering progress of his illicit association case, the impending sentence closing in. He tried not to think about it too much.

The final hearing was in February 2016. Chepas said he made a speech – about prejudice against people like him, ex-gangsters who try to live an honest life, who are given no chance and are used by the government to wash away its own sins. It seems his speech convinced precisely no one. He was twenty-eight years old. The judge sentenced him to thirty-four years, on top of the four years he was already serving for the unlicensed firearm charge. I saw him some months later in Pavón.

Chepas met me at the inner gate, thronged with other prisoners waiting for their Holy Week visitors. Chepas was housed in Sector 12, improvised out of an old storage space to make room for a burgeoning population, which had nearly tripled since Chepas' last stay. There were no windows at all. Each 'cell' was jerry-rigged with thin strips of plyboard, two by fours, sheet-metal, bits of cloth. Chepas' space was perhaps 6 by 4 feet, with Bugs Bunny and Tasmanian Devil towels laid down on the floor for his bedding. We wondered aloud how the hell any of this was sustainable. Chepas said it was better than *El Preventivo*, where men slept in the hallways and he had to eat his food quickly before it went bad from the heat.

I'd come from the ramshackle offices of Chepas' public defence lawyers. A harelipped attorney handed me Chepas' final sentencing document, where his name appeared alongside dozens of others as a prime actor in a kidnap-for-ransom plot that never happened. The file contained no evidence, just the sentence and its reasoning in that esoteric legalese that pretends to dole out justice in precise increments of time: so much for this crime, so much for that one, reduced for this reason, augmented for this other reason. 'Ah, they never say they're guilty', he said. 'The prisons are filled with innocent men. But we lawyers, we have ways to get then to trip up and tell the truth, and expose themselves.' He must have read my expression because he stopped smiling. 'But of course, we are here to help them, and defend them as best we can.'

Chepas and I walked away from the madding crowds along a beaten dirt path along the perimeter fence, passing other prisoners and their visitors on promenade, and hobbled goats flicking clouds of flies in the drainage ditch. He spoke of how difficult life had been on the street before his arrest: 'The street humiliates you because you have no way of being a man out there', he said. 'It's not just "eat your *rancho* and show up at count", you have to pay for your lights and your water and everything else. And how are you going to pay for those things when you can't get a job?' He had tried. He had applied for dozens of private security guard jobs, and each time the employer saw his 'stained record', they turned him down. He had hung around the gang rehabilitation social workers from the Sports and Culture

Ministry programme – all ex-*Barrio 18* guys – who had promised him a job once he was on the outside. He had made speeches at youth violence prevention benefits. But in the end, he got nothing, while the ex-*Barrio 18* guys became programme assistants. He put it down to the old gang rivalries. No matter how far removed from the *vida loca*, Chepas said, '*Barrio 18* will stick with *Barrio 18*, MS-13 with MS-13, and that's it.'

'The first thing is to just withstand it. To just stand up to the humiliation and feeling of being lost', he said. 'And then get on with it.' Behind such stoic talk, he struggled. The 38-year sentence was more than he could bear. He had kept his composure when the judge handed it down, while Maria and Angela wept. But back in his cell in Pavón, he said, he considered suicide. Just to end it all. But when he shut his eyes, peering into that deeper darkness, he said he saw his child, and for him he would live. Toni and Maria were his anchor. 'I try not to think of "ah, with whom is she going?", he said. "Is she with another?" And even if she is, what is it to me now?' He was determined to protect her as best he could, he said. 'Other prisoners use their women all the time to make life better here. They use them to bring in drugs, or cell phones, or whatever. And yes, they can do that … but when it's the mother of your child you are risking your own blood. You don't do that. I won't do that.'

Around Toni's second birthday, Chepas asked me to be the child's godfather. I consented. When I arrived at Pavón I found the prison halls and sectors festooned in Christmas bunting. In Chepas' sector, men were busy: cooking, pouring wax for candles, tending chickens, brushing teeth. A *transvesti* (transvestite) with broad cheekbones and big pouting lips did her makeup in a little mirror perched on her knee. Backpacks and worn nylon sacks were arranged neatly along the far wall. Chepas emerged grinning. He had put on some weight and his face was less drawn than the last time I had seen him. Maria and Toni were napping inside. Chepas quietly pulled open the door on his newly constructed cubby hole – a wooden palette and thin mattress, and a neatly constructed crawlspace above. Mother and child slept, Toni's face tilted away from the door. Later, Chepas emerged into the sunlight with Toni clinging to his neck. The boy's eyes were dark and staring, and his long brown hair tousled from sleep. He buried his face in his father's shoulder as they approached us. After a while, he consented to be put down and sat with me. Behind us, a slim tawny cat dozed on a burlap bag. I pointed the cat out to Toni, and he also pointed and gave a solemn nod.

Chepas had planned a party for Toni's second birthday. Toni walked about in his little kid pants and shoes and button shirt tucked in, chasing after a skinny chicken with black feathers and red wattled head, clucking and bobbing to his delight. After a moment, Chepas returned with Toni's birthday cake – all shining white frosting – held aloft in one hand as if he were a fancy waiter and the sector an upscale restaurant. He cut the cake and divvied slices onto paper plates. But as a sector-mate handed out plastic cups of soda, an alarm sounded and we all froze. A booming voice on the prison loudspeaker ordered all visitors to evacuate. Chepas lifted Toni to his chest and hugged him with his eyes squeezed shut and handed him to Maria. I hurried after her and Toni through the inner gate towards the exit

line. Whispers flowed through the frightened crowd that a prisoner had stabbed the sub-director after he had arrested and booked his daughter for smuggling a SIM card in her plaited hair. And there he was, the father, lying handcuffed and weeping on the cracked cement floor some 20 metres away. We watched a heavyset hooded guard crouch athwart him, screaming into his face.

The years of Chepas' sentence pass, and Maria and Toni are his only visitors. For a few good years, Toni becomes something of a mascot for Chepas' sector, the men always kind and gentle, sneaking him sweets – 'Look how our boy has grown!' Each month Toni eagerly awaits his visit to 'Papa's house' and all his 'uncles' there, including a kind-hearted fellow who heals his hurt from losing his own son by playing with Toni on the prison playground, while Chepas and Maria take their time behind the Looney Tunes curtains. But the passage of time and the pressures of prison life drag Chepas down and away from the people he loves most. As Maria struggles to pay rent and Toni's school fees, their visits become ever more spaced out, and Chepas seeks out darker passages to escape the torture of time and loneliness.

Around 2019, he falls hard into crack-cocaine addiction, joining a cold-call extortion crew to pay for his highs. He spends his days mimicking infamous gang leaders to extract payments from terrified strangers on the line, and his nights sucking on a crack pipe, flying away and crashing down. During the extended lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, he's nearly lynched by other prisoners during a riot targeting gang members and extortionists. The authorities throw him into an isolation block improvised from quarters once reserved for men facing the death penalty, haunted by their ghosts, and ruled by *Barrio 18* leaders. Each day, for a week, the shot-callers have him beaten. Chepas is eventually released from isolation but remains in the *Barrio 18*-controlled area of the prison, and they put him to work in their own extortion rackets, keeping him constantly monitored, another prisoner shadowing his phone calls and his visits.

This is where I last saw and spoke to Chepas. In late 2023 we sat together for several hours as he inked a tattoo on my shoulder while *The Exorcist* played silently on a flat screen and another prisoner fed the boss's tropical fish and turtles in an immaculate 100-gallon aquarium tank. We spoke of old acquaintances and of Toni's schooling, we cracked jokes – nothing that would prick the ears of the men idling about us. But through Maria and others I also learned that he has told her nothing of the addiction or the extortion, or why he is doubly punished, instead hinting that his lawyers are working hard to secure an early release. He is terrified that she might leave him if she understood what lay ahead, that he might never see Toni again.

'When Toni is around', Chepas murmurs in my ear above the buzz of the tattoo gun, 'I make sure I'm always smiling. But each time they leave I die a little inside.' He lives out his days in this prison within the prison, anxiously fearing the reckoning that will come when his son would understand what prison is, what the gangs are. He himself had grown up angry and confused that his father was locked away, that his brother was dead, and that MS-13 became both the poison and the cure. 'No one ever explained anything to me', he said. He wants to be as

honest as possible with Toni. So that deceit does not carve any more bitterness than already exists in his son's image of his father …

Notes

1 All names have been changed.
2 See, for example, Carter (2022) in Honduras, Fontes (2018) and Fontes and O'Neill (2019) in Guatemala, Skarbek (2014) in the United States.
3 Prisons' significance in ordering modern life goes beyond gangs. They are powerful 'heterotopias' – 'third spaces' – collectively imagined as removed and even isolated from the 'law-abiding' world, but in fact distil the dominant ideological, economic and social forces that structure all of society (Foucault 1977).
4 Prisoners struggle within and against prison's 'time-space walls' (Moran 2012) that temporally dissociate them from the outside world, and to carve out their own sense of self against the dulling routinization of 'clock-time' (Wahidin 2002: 182; see also Cope 2003; Wahidin and Tate 2005).

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Figure 2.1 Fishing boats along the Mumbai coast, a pencil sketch made by Ram to gauge the distance for throwing drugs, gifted to the chapter author in 2000.

Chapter 2

The Many Lives of Ram, The Petty Criminal: Migration, Love and Adaptation Across Indian Ganglands

Atreyee Sen

Prologue

I was born in a godforsaken village near the fucking border of Bengal and Bangladesh. Being part of the mother-fucking border business, I had a broad idea of what is fucking good, you know, fucking right, about the way we live our stupid-fucker human life, you know. The nicest and kindest people I knew while growing up: people who took care of others, helped out financially, transported people across Bengal borders, used their influence to get family members bank loans, etc., they were all sons-of-prostitutes, you know, mother-fucking criminals and illegal traders. All this didn't make people head-fucked, you know, people had different ideas of goodness, like how to be a good person and not an asshole. It's not like my stupid-fucker parents did not teach their boy the difference between right and wrong, they told me to always respect women, and be a good student in that mother-fucking village school. They told me not to be a cunt, you know. However, when a local asshole drug trader spotted me as a good discus thrower during a school sports meeting, he asked my ass to be fucked hard for a good fee. My poor-fucker parents did not disagree, you know. They needed money, so they offered my ass to this man. In this drug business, my asshole got fucked so hard, it became big enough for a bamboo pole to fit in comfortably. But I don't hold it against my parents, you know, they were good people.[1]

Introduction

This chapter explores the life of Ram, a small-time criminal, and his trajectory navigating through multiple ganglands across the breadth of India. His story is both exceptional but also paradigmatic of the lives of the multiple 'foot-soldiers' who make up the vast majority of those involved in gangs and crime syndicates, the petty criminals who carry out the small-scale management and delivery of services that sustain the universe of large criminal networks. The chapter shows how these

men who do street-work within 'gang-scapes' continuously and creatively reskill and adapt to changing crime environments, often migrating both within and across gang networks. This intersects in particular ways with their affective lives as intimate partners, devoted lovers and caring sons, and by tracing Ram's life, we see how his numerous identities feed off each other, exploding the pervasive myth of the brutal gangster '*goonda*', or thug.

The following sections offer a chronological yet fragmented retelling of Ram's life of crime, from his origins in a rural border region of eastern India, to the urban hub of coastal drug enterprises in western India, to the heart of tourist scams within nodal pilgrimage centres of north India and then back to digital scamming in the eastern region. I have known Ram for almost three decades now, and the life history I present here has been curated from numerous exchanges, both in person and at times over prolonged phone conversations. These have also been contextualized by almost three decades of broader ethnographic fieldwork among crime networks in the slums of Mumbai (see Sen 2007, 2008, 2018, 2021). Ram's story shows us how gang members navigate vast geographies, from contested borderlands to urban centres, from port cities to sacred religious spaces. It also illustrates that their lives are multiple, shaped by and shaping their criminal activities in ways that lead to contingent, dynamic and ultimately never-ending trajectories of love, loss and longing.

Ram the discus thrower

Ram was born in a village near the border of the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh. This was in the 1980s, he has never been sure about the exact year or date. Growing up in the context of a border economy, infiltrated by illegal trade, cross-border markets and people trafficking, Ram developed a flexible notion of what constitutes an ethical path for living life. The kindest people he knew while growing up were those who took care of others, he said. They helped out financially, transported people safely across the Bengal-Bangladesh borders, secured work for unemployed youth and used their limited influence to support people trying to enter rural bank loan schemes. These helpful people were all local criminals and illegal traders. For ordinary village folk like Ram and his family, these criminals led a moral life, 'doing good'. Thus, people living within these border areas and economies had unconventional ideas about what constitutes a 'good' person and a 'good' life.

By the time he was fifteen, Ram had developed a reputation as a highly skilled discus thrower. He had won several local competitions and frequently featured at sports meetings in his local area. When a local drug trader called Rahim attended a sports competition in Ram's village and saw that he was an exceptionally talented discus thrower, he asked Ram whether he could hire his services in exchange for a hefty fee. Ram did not (initially) know what he was being asked to become involved in, but he was tempted by the money that was offered to him, and so immediately

agreed. The fact that it was a known drug dealer who wanted to hire him did not bother him, since he saw him as one of the 'good people'; similarly, Ram's parents, who were peasants with a small monthly income, actively encouraged Ram to take up this opportunity.

In the early 1990s, then, Ram started his career in the local, cross-border drug trade by throwing small packets of cocaine over the border fence between India and Bangladesh. Although Rahim was a local drug trader, he mainly operated out of Mumbai. He often personally visited the India-Bangladesh border area, however, to oversee the smooth operations of the drug trade in that sector. It also gave Rahim an opportunity to visit his friends and family, keep up amicable financial relationships with the police and local politicians, but most importantly to recruit trustworthy, local youth as foot soldiers for local drug operations.

When Rahim took Ram under his wing, he taught him that all human skills can easily be monetized if people lived outside the remit of 'the law'. 'The law keeps people poor', said Rahim. Sold to his logic, Ram spent much of his teenage years venturing into border areas at night, with a torch and drug packs tied in small plastic sleeves (in case they landed in mud during the monsoon season). There was a designated place where he had to arrive on the Indian side of the border fence. This area was relatively unpoliced at night. There was an unknown person at the other side of the border, 'an abstract figure in the dark, who would flash his torchlight twice to show his exact location', Ram said. Ram would spin twice in the same spot, and throw the packages, one by one, into the air and across the border fence. They usually landed very close to the flashlight on the Bangladesh side. When all the packages were thrown across, Ram would flash his own torchlight to signal that his job was done. Rahim's local henchmen gave Ram or his parents some money the next day, either approaching him at school or his parents in their fields. This went on for several years. Although Ram was not very scholarly, he was happy that he could pay his school fees with the money that he received for his night-time activities.

One night, probably in 1995, Ram experienced a twinge in his throwing arm, and one of his packages fell on the fence. The barbed wire cut through the package and a white shower of cocaine sprayed onto the ground. Ram assumed that rain would wash away the cocaine, but it did not rain that night. The next day Rahim's men arrived in Ram's village and urgently told his parents to send Ram away for a long while. A set of (unusually) law-abiding border guards had found the package stuck on the fence, and had worked out that drugs were being thrown across the border fence. They were searching for those involved and had traced them back to Ram's village. The place would soon be swarming with policemen. Within a few hours, Ram, whose whole life until then had played out within the remits of his village, was on a train to Mumbai.

He was received by Rahim's cousin, Mohammad, at the central station platform. Ram's parents had told Rahim's men that they had no family beyond the village and did not know how they could ensure that Ram would survive financially if he left. 'Who has enough money to take in and care for a grown boy away from

his home?', they asked. When told about this, Rahim had decided that Ram's skills could be repurposed to suit his drug business operating on the western coast of India, and paid for his fare to Mumbai, reassuring Ram's parents that he would take care of him. And so off he went to India's brash, bustling commercial capital.

This is where I first met Ram in 1998, while doing my doctoral research in the slums of Mumbai. He took the initiative to talk to me after overhearing me talking on my phone in Bengali. Ram missed talking to older women in Bengali, his home tongue; such exchanges had been an integral part of his former village life, a traditional form of intergenerational socialization. He wanted to satisfy his longing to address someone as '*Didi*' (elder sister), in Bengali, and talk about life, generally. After our first exchange, Ram would magically appear out of nowhere, at various street corners, in local tea shops or while I walked by the sea during the course of my fieldwork. This was the beginning of a decades-long, on-off conversation. I frequently sought him out on subsequent visits, to catch up on his evolving life, as well as tell him, and ask for his opinion, about the different research projects that brought me regularly back to various urban field sites in India. But during our first exchanges, what I mainly learnt about was how Ram's discus-throwing skills were being well-used in Mumbai.

On his arrival in 1995, Mohammad offered him a bed in a slum shanty. He had to live together with several other low-level workers providing small-scale illegal services within the drug business. Ram was given an amount of money for daily food and travel, and then larger sums of money as one-time remunerations. The latter depended on the kind of work allocated to Ram. His recurrent and key task was to go to the beach in the middle of the night, and spot the boats where boatmen using a lantern indicated their location to Ram. Like in the old days, it was time for Ram to kick into action. He would spin twice in the same spot and throw small bags of drugs across the waves to land on a marked boat bobbing in the water. Sometimes the drugs would land in the sea, and Ram would be held responsible for the loss. So, he started to tie a thin cord used for flying kites around the bags of cocaine. If the packets landed in the water, he would thus be able to pull on the cord and drag the drowned packets of drug back to shore, and try to throw them onto the boats again.

I wondered why the boats could not be docked and loaded. Ram explained that if the police were patrolling beach areas, then they kept special surveillance over materials that were loaded and unloaded on shore, especially in the dark. However, if fishing boats were floating at a distance, with no sign of loading activity, then they would generally leave them alone. Ram never knew what happened to the drugs after they landed on the boats. Or so he said. He was asked to keep his mouth shut, do the job and take his pay. Over my years of conducting fieldwork within various illegal economies of Mumbai, I came to know that these boats played a key role in delivering drugs along the western coast. Fishermen would slice open fresh fish and fill them with small sachets of drugs. These drug-filled fishing crates were then delivered and sold through the fishing networks and markets along the coastline. Whether Ram knew this or not, I don't know; he preferred to follow instructions from Rahim and remain silent.

The police patrolling of beaches increased dramatically over the years. On the one hand, this was due to the beachfront and marinas being used by lovers for sex, secret meetings and romantic interludes, something that was my main object of study over a long period of time (see Sen 2018, 2022). The political debate in India over moral policing of modern youth cultures meant that these crackdowns steadily increased over the years. At the same time, following the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, when the perpetrators entered the city by boats, armed patrolling of the urban shoreline was further intensified. Due to this increase in patrolling, Ram the discus thrower had to find new ways through which to transport drugs, one which became – literally – entwined with a more intimate identity, that of Ram the lover.

Ram the lover

In 2014, I returned to Mumbai after a long break, and I found out that Ram, now in his thirties, was in love. He had been taking part in a Hindu religious festival when his eyes fell on a young woman eating sweet rice by the side of the road. She was laughing and eating at the same time. Bits of rice that were stuck on her teeth fell out of her mouth and onto the pavement. Ram was utterly mesmerized by her beauty and her charming laughter. She didn't seem to care about the religious procession passing on the street; she didn't bow her head or fold her hands. She was more interested in eating, chatting and laughing. Ram stared at her in awe for a long time. When she walked away, he crossed the road, bent over and touched the rice that she had spat out while laughing, that was on the ground. He surprised himself with this gesture. He knew at once that he had to woo her. After asking around, and two weeks of 'solid detective work', according to Ram, he discovered that she was a fruit and vegetable seller called Hema. She lived in a nearby slum. Ram didn't want to waste any time. Hema went out with her street cart piled with fruits and vegetables to sell on a daily basis. Ram approached her. She was not scared of him at all. Ram asked her whether she would be interested in going out for some tea. She asked, 'just tea?' He said yes. She laughed aloud, that charming laugh that Ram found so infectious. And then she agreed. According to Ram, at that moment in time, 'I knew that I had bagged and tagged my woman'.

Hema was a young widow, and she had left behind a small child in the care of her ageing parents in a village not far from Mumbai. She had come to the city to become a maid, but found that the domestic service sector in the city was not that easy to penetrate, especially without the support of networks and unions. Selling fruit and vegetable from carts was hard labour that involved walking long distances around neighbourhoods in the heat, dust and heavy rains; it was an area of work that many women were hesitant to enter. But Hema was willing to give it a go. She woke up at dawn when the food trucks entered the city, and delivered produce to fruit and vegetable vendors. Hema would collect her pile of produce from the vendors and walk around residential neighbourhoods until the early evening. She

liked Ram, but she did not want to marry again. That was her sole condition for starting a relationship.

Around the same time as he met Hema, due to the heavy patrolling of the beaches, Ram was asked to take on 'a different type drug throwing'. Instead of launching the drugs in the air to get them to the outlying fishing boats, he now had to load it into a small wooden dinghy, which he would then quietly float closer to the area where the fishing boats ferrying drugs were anchored. His new task was 'to throw the drugs from boat to boat, rather than from beach to boat'. Once again, Ram explained to me that the boats could not be moored too close to each other, as this would raise the suspicion of beach patrols, who in turn would alert the coast guards. So, Ram had to find a way in which to spin himself on a bobbing dinghy, instead of spinning on firm ground, so that the drugs would land safely on the designated fishing boats. Ram loved riding out to sea in a small boat, lighting a joint and looking up at the moon, while waiting for his cue to throw the drugs. He found these trips very romantic, and wondered whether he might take Hema with him on one of them.

During a heavy monsoon season in 2015, however, while spinning on the boat to throw a pack of drugs, Ram's leg got wedged between slippery, rain-soaked wooden planks, and he fell and shattered his legbone. Ram was in sheer agony for many months afterwards. After the accident, his fellow drug-working boatmen had dropped him off at the beach, but they had advised him not to go to the hospital. Instead, Ram went to Hema. She begged him to go to the hospital but he refused. He knew that Rahim's men would be watching him at all times. 'Doctors ask too many questions, they want too many documents', he told Hema. So, he stayed in his shanty room and Hema would drop by to take care of him. His bone did not set properly, however, and he developed a limp, which meant that he was unable to spin and throw anymore. Running out of money, he became more and more worried. If he were destitute, he would have to leave Mumbai and Hema, and return to his village in West Bengal. His insecurity consumed him. He repeatedly asked Hema whether she loved him despite his limp. She always said yes.

One day, as Ram sat around smoking dope and contemplating the next step in his life, one of Rahim's henchmen, Ali, visited him. Ram was nervous. When Ali entered his shanty, Ram started to blabber that he would never reveal anything about Rahim's drug business. Ali was surprised. He asked Ram whether he feared for his life. Ram said yes. Ali calmed him down. Ali merely had a new business proposition for Ram. He wanted Ram to ferry drugs into the suburban neighbourhoods in Hema's fruit and vegetable cart. Ali would coordinate with Ram about where to make the drug drops/transfers, usually to another peddler or individual clients. The drugs had to be buried deep into the fruits, and the buyers would purchase the marked fruits from the cart. A village woman and a lame man pushing a vegetable cart together would not raise suspicions. They could carry out their business without making the street police or residents wary of their presence in a residential neighbourhood.

Ram thought things over and said he was willing to do this. He would have tried his hand at any odd job within the drugs economy that would have given him some cash. However, he feared that Hema would reject the idea. And she did. She categorically told Ram that she would never put her work-life in jeopardy. 'My cart is the only source of income for me and my child', she said. Ali predicted that Ram would face resistance, and he told him to keep trying to persuade Hema. Ram coaxed and cajoled Hema. He said it was their only chance to be together, and for both of them to have an income. Hema eventually relented. And thus began a new chapter in Ram's life within the low-end drugs market in Mumbai, one where he became a street peddler.

Ram the street-peddler

Shortly after securing Hema's acquiescence, Ram and a rather disgruntled Hema were invited to attend a 'hide-drugs-in-fruits' workshop organized by Ali. This was to ensure that amateurs knew how to properly stash away drug packets. Ram and Hema were given special knives to learn how to scoop out sections of large vegetables and fruits, such as pineapples and melons, and carefully store the drugs in these carved holes. They also had to undergo training on how to properly slip the slice of cut fruit back into the hole, so that regular customers wouldn't be able to tell that a fruit had been tampered with. They also learnt that the fruits with drugs had to be hidden in a small compartment below the cart, so that ordinary buyers in the neighbourhood would not touch them to assess their quality of freshness. The buyers who were seeking drugs would ask for 'special fruits' or 'discount fruits', and that's when the fruits with drugs in them would be brought out. Ram and Hema were warned that they needed to be cautious while selling special fruits. In most neighbourhoods, male street vendors were treated with suspicion – as potential thieves, cheats, child kidnappers, voyeurs and so on – and they would be constantly under observation. Ram's job was to only take the money, and it was Hema who would have to hand over the 'special fruits'. Customers were informed that special fruits were on their way through word-of-mouth or special street signals, although later, the use of mobile phones became an integral part of this transactional universe.

I learnt about all this during a return trip to Mumbai in 2017. Ram was not completely satisfied with his new street peddler status, which he felt was not as 'cool' as that of the young boys who sold drugs on street corners, at railway stations, or even delivered drugs to affluent homes on bicycles or motorbikes. He was moreover at the lowest end of the peddling hierarchy because of his limp. He couldn't move fast, and he couldn't run away quickly in order to escape the police. But Ram also felt morally compromised, having involved the woman he loved so deeply in the drug trade. Hema, however, made it clear to Ram: if she ever got into trouble, she would be out of the game. She needed to be there for her son. The boy was getting older and required more financial support, which was why she had accepted to get involved, but she was only willing to go so far.

When Ram and Hema started street peddling, Ali would deliver a bigger packet of drugs to their place, almost every other day. Ram knew these packets well, since he had a history of throwing them across the fences. Ram and Hema would then open the packets, and transfer the drugs into smaller sachets, which would then be inserted into fruits and vegetables. Ram always cracked sexual jokes that drugs could not be inserted into a banana, because once the banana was opened you couldn't close it, and so the banana was really only for inserting. Hema was never amused. While Ram was well aware of the extensive drug networks in the city, Hema was quite disturbed to encounter it for the first time. Once news spread that Ram and Hema carried 'special fruits', they found a large number of people, especially young women, buying drugs from them quite openly. In the more affluent neighbourhoods of Mumbai, servants, maids, plumbers, nurses, car drivers and gardeners were often despatched to buy special fruits from Ram and Hema. 'Sometimes the owners even sent their dogs', said Ram. There would be cash folded into their collars, and he would then find a way to attach the drug sachets to dog-collars.

This 'drug-work' went on for several years, and Ram and Hema eventually received upgraded gadgets. As more people started using smart phones, Ram and Hema started coordinating with buyers directly through texts, and then later through WhatsApp customer groups. Business boomed as India underwent a period of economic expansion. In the meantime, Hema's son became a teenager and wanted to join his mother in the city. Hema felt under pressure, becoming very anxious about her and Ram's 'drug work'. 'My son might want to get into this illegal trade', she thought, especially if he was influenced by Ram. Even though friends and neighbours had become used to Hema and Ram's 'common law marriage', she felt that her son might not accept her relationship with Ram.

There was also another cost of drug peddling that bothered Hema. It was not just the fear of being arrested by the police – and the concomitant fear of being raped while in jail – rather it was the loss of trust from the women who had regularly bought non-drug-carrying fruits and vegetables from her. Her cart had been a veritable social centre, where the women would stand around, chatting away with her and each other, sharing their joys and griefs. Most of these women had figured out that she had been swayed into selling drugs with Ram. They moved on to other vendors, which left Hema dealing with just peddlers, addicts and partygoers who were solely interested in 'special fruits'. In early 2018, Hema left Ram and the drugs business. She left the slum and found a room somewhere else, where she could welcome her son into a safer urban environment. Ali asked Ram to 'drag her back by her hair'. Ram said no. Ali also wanted to know whether Hema would turn into a police informant. Ram said she wouldn't, and clearly she didn't, as Ram and Ali were never arrested.

Ram the scamster

After turning up drunk at Hema's door on several occasions and causing too much scandal, Ram decided to leave Mumbai. He asked Ali for help, and with the support of Rahim and Ali, Ram entered into a new phase in his life of crime, this

time as a scamster. Between 2018 and 2020, he went to Varanasi, a famous temple town in North India, to earn an income through what was called 'white tourist scam'. According to Ram, domestic tourists in these religious and pilgrim centres might be cheated by rigging autorickshaw meters, deliberately mistranslating services related to the offering of *puja* (a worship ritual), or even by marking up cheap souvenirs. But 'white tourist scams' were scams of a whole different level. These were targeted, organized, well-rehearsed and covered every stage of 'a white vacation', from arrival to departure. Rahim and Ali told Ram that he had 'a soft face', partly because he hadn't entered into any of the hardcore labour activities within the drug trade, which are often physically straining. Hence, he was a good person to be a scamster. People fundamentally trusted Ram.

Ram had been passed on by Rahim to a new crime boss, Jojo, who became his new mentor in the white tourist scamming industry. According to Ram, most white tourists visiting Varanasi on what he ironically termed 'eat, pray, love' journeys did not go through tour operators and travel agencies. A common element of such tours is that they generally pre-booked entries for religious events in advance for international tourists, who were usually given a guided excursion of the city at the beginning of their holiday, so that they could become familiar with the city and its people. The 'eat, pray, love' crowd tended to steer clear of tour guides, however, wanting a more 'authentic' and 'spiritual' experience. They sought to encounter the city's particular local 'culture', and experience a 'holy feeling' – to use Ram's term – without professional mediators, which made them vulnerable to scamming.

Ram would hang around at the temples to spot tourists who looked 'sad'. As he put it, 'tourists who were looking at the art and architecture, and reading guidebooks to know more about the history of these spaces were quickly rejected. The tearful tourist was what I was after.' Ram would approach these and draw their attention to temple priests who happened to be nearby, and who were also part of the scam. The latter would offer to help the 'sad tourists' with whatever was causing their grief, suffering or anxiety. Sometimes this ruse involved several priests in many temples. For example, one priest would offer 'the tearful tourists' flowers and sugar crystals to take to a sacred river nearby. Ram's task was then to escort the tourists to the water and help them float the flowers. During this time, when the tourists thought they were offering a calming *puja* and were at their most emotional, Ram would gently ask them personal questions about their family, marriage, deceased parents, etc. He would add that they should pray for the financial and spiritual well-being of their families, or souls of dead relatives, while throwing the sugar into the waves. The melting of the sugar in the river would bring reprieve. During this time, Ram would not discuss monetary transactions, but when the tourists returned to the temple from the river bank, the priest would be waiting for them. He would ask for 1,000 rupees (approximately €12 at the time) as donation to the temple, saying that without the donation 'the long life of parents or children, or even job securities could not be guaranteed', Ram explained. His job at that point was to encourage 'the tearful tourists' to pay up, stating that without a donation, a *puja* would be incomplete and could turn into a terrible curse on families. Most tourists ended up paying the donation, and at the end of

the day, Ram would get a cut from the total made. Since he was lame he was more easily trusted by white tourists, who offered a lot of sympathy for his disability.

Ram said he was not too fond of this job. It involved moving quickly between Varanasi and other nearby religious centres, so that he did not come on the radar of the local police. Sometimes tourists would return to pilgrim centres even after being scammed, and he would be singled out as a scamster. The tourists would often shout and warn other tourists, as they were headed to the river bank with Ram. He missed Hema. Moving around to that extent meant he could not have a real relationship with anyone. There were also few women in this scamming universe. It was dominated by priests, local tour-guides, stall owners and photographers, who were all men. He missed his home and his bed, as scamming tourists involved a lot of rough sleeping, often on temple steps, in order to catch the early-bird white tourists who came into temple areas at the crack of dawn. Jojo also did not care about Ram in a way that Rahim and Ali had. When I met Ram – accidentally, during a home visit to West Bengal – at the end of 2018, not long after he had moved to Varanasi, he had already begun plotting his escape. His chance came in 2020, when the tourist industry came to a standstill during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ram the cyberfraudster

In March 2020, the Government of India ordered a nationwide lockdown on its 1.38 billion citizens as a preventive measure against the Covid-19 pandemic. This announcement was followed by a mass movement of people across the country, a human exodus that was described as the largest since the partition of India in 1947. Ram was 'let go' by Jojo without a conflict and a severance package, and decided to return to West Bengal. He had sent money home over the years, and his ageing parents had managed to build a small house in the village. Ram's parents had also maintained amicable relationships with everyone in the village, often lending out money from Ram's remittances. When they told everyone that 'our son was coming home', no-one complained about the return of the prodigal son, despite his murky past. In the middle of extended lockdowns, when the whole of India was reeling under the impact of migrant labourers returning *en masse* to their native villages, Ram's return did not receive much attention.

A few months into the Covid-19 pandemic, I received a message from one of my usual Mumbai-based research interlocuters. She said that she had been in touch with Ram, and he had told her that it was urgent that I contact him. He had asked her to share his number with me, so I called Ram immediately, wondering whether he needed any financial help. Instead, it was Ram who offered to help me. He was now heading a gang of cyberfraudsters that targeted old people. Although by no means a new form of crime, cyberfraud exploded during the Covid-19 pandemic, as millions of unemployed, but educated, young people were plunged into poverty. In particular, more than half of India's cybercrimes can be traced back

to Northern and Eastern India, which are now marked out as digital India's new crime underbelly (Ma and McKinnon 2022). On his return to West Bengal, Ram had come into contact with the leaders of a local cybercrime group and, because 'they were in awe of my journey through various crime networks across India', was offered a position coordinating the activities of their network of cyberfraudsters working in semi-rural and peri-urban areas. This included identifying potential fraud victims, and Ram had wanted to talk to me to ensure that my elderly parents, who lived in West Bengal, did not receive any calls from his team.

Ram's tasks included training newcomers with the help of 'specialists' in the field to create an insidious web of mobile phone SIM cards, digital wallets and bank accounts opened using fake Government of India-authorized documents (such as India's Unique Identification Aadhaar cards), through which to embezzle vulnerable old people stuck at home by masquerading as bank executives. They either asked for funding to be 'temporarily' transferred to these specially created accounts, or else extracted confidential details such as user IDs, passwords and Aadhaar card numbers, under the pretence of updating bank documents. They created a sense of urgency by alarming elderly customers that their accounts would become inoperable. After gaining login IDs, they would swiftly swindle money, often emptying bank accounts before the users got suspicious. Ram's prior criminal career, in particular scamming tourists, enabled him to teach trainee cyberfraudsters how to create a sense of urgency, to feed on insecurities and to spin webs of misinformation amongst senior citizens, mostly in the small urban centres of West Bengal.

It was through my conversation with Ram that I discovered that these crimes are often termed 'Vishing', or 'Voice Fishing'. Because vishing had to sound convincing like any other scam, Ram taught trainees how to sound innocent but firm, similar to the persona he had adopted when scamming white tourists, and to mix their tech-savviness with social engineering tactics to convince targets to give up confidential information. Ram however remained sceptical of the cockiness of the young people working for him. While they knew how to place hundreds of calls simultaneously, using voice over internet technology, spoof the caller ID and make the call appear to come from a trusted source, they really did not know how to tap into human vulnerability. 'You have to be soft-voiced, you know, since people can't see your face', he said. Ram taught young trainee fraudsters how to trap their victims into conversations, help them navigate a series of instructions and then trick them into feeling obliged to give up their information.

Ram the cyberfraudster's generosity vis-à-vis my family only went so far; when I asked him if he could add other elderly members of my extended family to his list of those not to be called, he said that this would be too nepotistic. Nevertheless, cyberfraud was an activity that also revealed a critical but also somewhat surprising aspect of Ram's criminal life, one that defined his entire criminal career, but which I had not necessarily been – consciously, at least – aware of, namely his non-violence.

Non-violent Ram

During my most recent meeting with Ram, in 2023, I asked him what he would like me to 'tell' about him. He was now in his forties. We both discussed the aches and pains of growing old. I sought his consent to write about his life story for this chapter. He said he was happy that I had followed his life throughout my academic journey. I pressed him further and asked, 'What is the most important thing about your life which you think is worth telling?'

Ram thought for a bit, before saying that he had been non-violent throughout his life of crime, and that's what made him Ram. I asked him what he meant by 'non-violent'. He had used the vernacular word '*ahimsa*', which implies a respect for life and the avoidance of violence. The notion was a fundamental element of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, which seemed as far away as I could imagine from the diverse criminal worlds that Ram had traversed throughout his life, so I was a bit taken aback by the reference. Ram went on to say that looking back at his life, he realized that he had never wanted to kill anyone. When he had gone to Mumbai at a young age, he knew that a capacity to assault and kill people would have enabled him to scale up the hierarchy of crime. Mohammad and Ali were good generals for Rahim because they had been hardened by the crime world. They had killed, maimed and tortured people, and had been tortured and imprisoned themselves. Ram had remained at the lowest level of the drug trade, as a thrower, a courier and a peddler. He had never had to be violent and did not have the capacity to attack anyone with a knife or a gun. He was aware that many of his criminal peers had laughed at him for being 'a wimp', even more so after he met Hema. Most of the men around him abused women, especially when they were drunk. But not Ram. And when Hema had wanted to leave him and the drug business, he had let her go. Even though it broke his heart. Similarly, scamming people, whether tourists in Varanasi or old people online, might lead to emotional scarring or financial ruin, but it did not lead to bloodshed and death, which for Ram meant that he was respecting the ideal of *ahimsa*.

This depiction of 'non-violent Ram', that he offered me while sipping tea in a roadside shack in a north Kolkata slum, took me by surprise. My shock made Ram laugh. He said that a lifetime of crime makes even hardened criminals philosophical and reflective. And Ram was just a small-time odd-job man within the business. At the same time, staying non-violent, particularly when engaging in large-scale, transnational crime businesses such as drug dealing, scamming or cyber-fraud, meant that he was less likely to attract the attention of the police, according to Ram. This also meant that his family were not subjected to threats and intimidation from the local police. Staying out of prison – long-term, Ram seems to have had at least a few short spells – also meant that Ram was never in a crime-associated context known for fostering particular forms of violence.

To emphasize his desire to be represented as a non-violent man, Ram asked me to look at the official site of the Kolkata Police on my phone. He told me to open a link that took me to the site for the 'most wanted' criminal outlaws. This

webpage contained photos of criminals, their facial descriptions and also stated that these men are armed and dangerous. Ram said that it was his non-violence that had kept him off this page. He told me that he had gone through a period of penury during the Covid-19 pandemic, when he used up all the money that he had saved. But he was not tempted to carry out home burglaries, and hurt homeowners while stealing their cash and jewels. He was aware that middle-class and affluent home-owners kept a lot of cash at home, especially during the Covid-19 period, to avoid standing in queues at banks. They also relied on home deliveries in order to avoid crowded bazaars with unmasked buyers and sellers. Ram had been asked by other criminals in his networks if he wanted to take part in 'delivery burglaries'. He would not have had to hurt or attack anyone. He would simply have had to pose as a delivery person, and to get the homeowners to open their door. Ram reminded me that his 'soft face' made people trust him. When a homeowner opened the door, the other burglars would barge in and rob the house. But Ram consistently refused to take part in such enterprises, as he did not want to be even indirectly responsible for any violence.

I asked Ram, since he seemed to be in an open and philosophical mood, whether he was aware of the huge numbers of deaths that drug consumption led to every year, all over the world. He nodded. But he felt that he was not directly involved in these deaths. We went on to discuss the difference between 'involvement' ('*jorito*') and 'implication' ('*jorito thaka*'). Ram said that even if he did not kill anyone during a home invasion, he would still be 'involved' in any murder that happened. It would be a case of direct causation – in his language, 'direct violence'. But if he was selling drugs on the street and someone died of an overdose, or he was throwing drugs to a boat and then the boatowner was shot by the police, he would be 'implicated' in the violence but he would not be the cause of it. And he was okay with 'implication', but not with 'involvement', as he explained:

> I am not a mother-fucking *goonda* (a thug). I might have fucked people over, you know, sometimes fucked them over really hard. Like I have taken their money, but if you look at some the bank accounts of people that I have scammed, they were loaded, you know. It's like you look deep down their assholes and you won't find shit, you will find cash. But I was not into murdering them, you know. Nor did I ever raise my hand against anyone, you know. Sometimes like I wanted to smash people's heads against a wall, but I didn't. And that makes me non-violent, right? I can be a criminal and I can be non-violent, right? I've moved in and out of so many gangs, you know, and had many gang bosses, I have seen them all. They are fucking brutal, cruel sister-fuckers. I am not like that.

Ram also told me something else that interested me, namely that he was appreciative that the criminal world was still so cosmopolitan. Against the backdrop of the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, and the growing atrocities against Muslims (see Misra 2020 for an overview of this topic), Ram was contemplative of his easy associations with Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians in the context of his life of crime. He had attended Muslim religious festivals in

Rahim, Mohammad and Ali's homes, and they attended and celebrated Hindu events with Ram. Hence, Ram also saw himself as non-violent because he got along with everybody, irrespective of their religious affiliations. I suspect that Ram likely added this last discussion because he was aware of my broader research interest on this topic,[2] but it does signal some potentially very different dynamics in the criminal world compared to mainstream Indian society. Ram concluded our discussion by saying to me, 'When you write about me, you must remember to refer to me as "the good guy in a bad world"'. And then we parted ways. For now.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the life trajectory of Ram, a small-time criminal, as he made his way through the low-end economies of large gang operations in India. Recruited at a young age into the drug business in West Bengal and then in Mumbai, Ram used various physical and relational skills to navigate the street-level transactions that animate the local worlds of illegal enterprises. As he moved from the drug trade to the arena of white tourist scamming, and then onto cyberfraud, Ram expanded his repertoire of competencies over time, not just to profit from his professional involvement with these overlapping circles of crime, but also to develop a nondescript persona to remain below the radar of law enforcement authorities. In telling me his story over the years, Ram has represented himself in different ways: as a sportsman, a good lover, a devoted son whose life of crime helped his ageing parents lead a life of relative affluence, and a non-violent person.

As Ram has moved from one city to another, he had to constantly reskill to access the illegal market that he was involved in. His different identities reflect this constant sense of flux, of personal and professional transformation. While throwing drugs onto boats and then selling drugs disguised as a fruit vendor, young Ram had to rely on being shadowy, silent and stealthy to navigate the street-level cocaine markets. While moving on to working with tourists, an older Ram had to be more visible and upfront, talking directly to the people he scammed, and using extensive conversation skills to dupe white visitors at temple grounds. He also had to learn the basics of religious rituals, sacred temples and how to use his authority to draw in vulnerable pilgrims. He had to exhibit wide knowledge on the subject to avoid being detected as a scammer. He used his disability, vulnerability and intuition to dodge law enforcement authorities, as well as attract the sympathy of people he cheated. When working in the field of cyberfraud, Ram was invisible to whose he defrauded, only making the persuasiveness of his voice and 'fraud pitch' visible to his callers. Ram's life trajectory shows how low-level migrant workers within gangs can respond effectively to the changing demands of illegal labour markets, and like other migrant labour economies (Rogaly *et al.* 2001), they constantly adopt new skills in order to survive. In doing so, however, they also contribute towards the survival of larger gang businesses, whose activities are also always in a constant state of evolution (see e.g. Rodgers 2024).

Notes

1 From an interview with Ram carried out in 2023.
2 See https://anthropology.ku.dk/research/research-projects/current-projects/angle/.

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Figure 3.1 Gang tags marking the boundaries of a gang-controlled area in Honduras, 2018.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 3

Jennifer: The First Female Gang Leader in Honduras

Ellen Van Damme

The first thing I did when I arrived at my hotel was to videocall the friend with whom I usually stay in the city and tell her that I had arrived. In the midst of our conversation, on seeing the flimsy door to my hotel room, she suddenly told me forcefully to block it with a chair, just in case. Wearily, I followed her instructions. I was exhausted from my travels and was still feeling a bit nauseous from car sickness. I had forgotten about the sickening curves of the roads in the interior of Honduras, a country where I have been carrying out research on and off since 2017.

I had travelled to the city[1] by express bus, paying extra for safety – in relation to both security and Covid-19 – but when we had arrived at the central bus terminal a bit before 8.00 pm, everything was closed and we had been left out on the street, in the rain. Luckily, another local friend of mine, Eduardo, had arranged for me to be picked up by a trusted taxi driver, Gustavo. He had been waiting for me at the bus terminal, and had safely delivered me to my hotel.

I had come to the city in order to carry out an interview with Jennifer, a former gang member whom I knew from my previous research, for the ERC GANGS project.[2] I could only be in the city for a few days, so despite my fatigue, after eating a light meal, I started preparing for my interview the next day. I texted Jennifer to ask for her exact address, so that I could send it to Gustavo. Gustavo had been very cheery and had talked enthusiastically the whole way to dropping me off at my hotel, but now he responded very seriously and with a deep – almost angry? – voice: 'I don't go to that zone, because I've had a bad experience there.' After asking for more specific indications from Jennifer, it turned out that she did not live exactly in the specific neighbourhood where Gustavo did not want to or could not go, but close by, where it was still (relatively) safe. Jennifer said in a voice message that she would guide us from the entrance of her neighbourhood to her house. I felt a bit bad. I did not know the zone – I barely knew the city – but I was trusting Jennifer. At the same time, I was asking Gustavo to take a risk, and it was not clear if he would have agreed had Eduardo not insisted on him 'taking good care of me'.

The next day, as it happened, it was a colleague of Gustavo who arrived to pick me up at 8.30 am, saying that Gustavo could not make it, because he had already agreed to take another client somewhere else. Was this a coincidence, or was he avoiding taking me? When we arrived at the agreed-upon meeting point with Jennifer, my new taxi driver, a big sturdy man in his late twenties, visibly started to become nervous. I told him to wait in front of the Wendy's fast-food joint, as Jennifer had told us, but instead he drove around slowly, the car windows lowered,[3] repeatedly asking me to call Jennifer to ask her where she was. Finally, after a couple of minutes that felt like an eternity, Jennifer arrived in a bright, tight-fitting pink dress, on a child's bicycle. Her short-sleeved dress revealed her tattoos, a reminder of the time when she was an active gang member. Was she not supposed to cover them up?

Jennifer guided us into the neighbourhood, greeting people left and right, until we came to a crossroads, at which point she circled back and stopped next to the taxi driver's lowered window. I was sitting in the right backseat and moved a bit closer. Jennifer said – almost yelled; I am sure that everybody around us heard her – that this was the '*frontera*', or border.[4] I noticed my taxi driver becoming quite nervous now, breathing deeply through his nose under his face mask. I asked Jennifer whether I should just get out of the car and walk with her to her house. She said no, albeit with an urgent look in her eyes. She just wanted to point out to me that we were crossing a border, and that we should do so quickly (so why did she stop there to linger in the first place?).

We crossed the *frontera* and rapidly arrived at her house, just one block further. On arriving, Jennifer's youngest boys, seven and eleven years old, came out to greet me, along with her (new) partner, who looked quite a bit younger than she was, and did not have any visible signs of gang affiliation – he wore loose shorts, a loose black basketball tank top and a black baseball cap. Jennifer gave the bike she had just been riding to her eleven-year-old son and sent him to accompany the taxi driver back across the border and out of the neighbourhood. At that point, Jennifer's fifteen-year-old son came out of his room to say hello, and Jennifer told me that she kept him at home, only letting him leave the house to go to football practice, insisting that he come straight back home afterwards. He was at a dangerous age, she said, likely to be recruited into a gang.

I sat in a plastic armchair, at a 90º angle from Jennifer, who sat on a small two-person sofa without armrests, legs tucked under her to be more comfortable. Two years had passed since we first met. That had been at the house of a social worker who had been supporting Jennifer just after she had left her gang. That day, in 2019, I had been finishing up an interview with Jennifer's friend, Yoselin, whom I had met and interviewed the year before, and had been due to interview Jennifer, but she had not showed up. I had called a taxi and had been in the process of saying my goodbyes to everyone when suddenly, as I opened the front door to leave, Jennifer appeared. She entered the house without looking at me and greeted Yoselin, the social worker, and the latter's mother, who had known Jennifer for a long time. She had asked how Jennifer's children were doing. 'Thank God they're doing well', Jennifer had replied, taking a seat next to Yoselin. I ran out to ask my

driver to wait a bit longer for me and ran right back in, unpacking my notebook and audio recorder. 'Okay', Jennifer said, 'What is it that you wanted to ask me?' I briefly explained my research on women in and around gangs in Honduras (Van Damme 2019, 2020) and went through the informed consent protocol, before asking whether we could do an interview. She nodded formally, while looking at me very seriously, before saying: 'Look, the only reason why I'm here is because other people have vouched for you; Yoselin said that you're trustworthy, but I can only talk about the things I can talk about.' The Jennifer sitting in front of me in 2021, with whom I have maintained sporadic contact over the past two years, was much more relaxed, and spoke with much less hesitation.

In what follows, I want to give voice to Jennifer's story in all its aspects of her life. Much gang research tends to focus on phenomena such as patriarchal expressions of masculinity through violence, very much in isolation and limited to the gang. However, Jennifer's story brings to the fore how violence in fact operates in a fundamentally systemic manner, along a continuum. Drawing on Kelly's (1988) concept of a 'continuum of sexual violence', whereby she recognizes that all women in her study had experienced sexual violence in their life in some way, without distinguishing which experiences are worse than the others, in this chapter I want to draw on Jennifer's life story to open up the concept of violence and highlight how girls and women in gangs can suffer from a range of emotional, economic, physical and structural violences that interact with each other throughout their life.

My logic here is to de-exceptionalize the experience of violence and illustrate its everyday nature and consequences. A lot of gang research, for example, focuses solely on gang rape and does not look at sexual abuse outside the gang, committed by non-gang members, and how this can impact on women's lives. As we will see, women like Jennifer are often marked from a young age by intrafamilial violence, which subsequently influences the way they experience other types of violence later on in their life. It is arguably essential to look at these kinds of connections in order to avoid placing both gangs and women's experiences of violence outside of everyday, gendered relations (Hume 2009; Rodgers 2024). Unless we explicitly seek to understand the embedded nature of violence and the experience of violence, we risk blaming gangs for all violence and ignoring the fact that women have been suffering from gender-based violence for decades, and that for women who have been gang members like Jennifer, the continuum of violence neither starts on, nor is limited to, the streets, but often starts begins at home.

A happy family

Born in the 1980s, Jennifer grew up with both of her parents, one brother and two younger siblings in a 'seemingly united family'. Her father did not have a regular job, so her mother was responsible for taking care of the household. When her mother got tired of carrying the burden, she left the family to be with her lover. Jennifer was thirteen years old. From then on, her family started to 'disintegrate',

according to Jennifer.[5] Soon after leaving, her mother came back to 'take charge of her children'. In particular, she felt that Jennifer's body was maturing as she was growing into an adolescent, and was afraid that the father, 'like any other man', would be tempted to abuse his teenage daughter.

Jennifer's mother kicked her father out and brought in her lover, Jennifer's new stepfather, to live with her and her children. This was a big mistake, Jennifer explained: 'My dad never had any bad intentions; I believe that if my dad would have stayed with us, the disorder in my family would not have happened.' Jennifer's mom had been developing a drug and alcohol problem, under the influence of her lover, and more and more of the responsibilities for taking care of the family fell on Jennifer. She dropped out of school when she was thirteen years old, subsequently imitated by her younger sister.

Jennifer became responsible for cooking, doing the laundry, cleaning the house and taking care of her younger sisters. She soon began to feel so exhausted from this adult life that she 'had not chosen' and said to herself that she would never have children when she would grow up while cursing herself for being born a girl in a patriarchal and macho society. She did not want to be a woman, because in her conception, she said, a woman is 'fragile, delicate, beautiful'. She wanted to be a man, so that she could work and provide for her family, avoiding the need for her mother to bring in another man to take care of the family (Jennifer recognized that she had internalized machismo by thinking in this way).

Despite her taking on multiple household responsibilities, it was her mother's lover who took on the patriarchal role of head of the household. Given he was bringing money into the household economy, it was him who would decide what the family would eat – which meant no meat for the children, only for the adults – and he frequently maltreated both Jennifer's mother and her siblings. One day, Jennifer entered the living room and saw her stepfather sitting in an armchair facing her younger sisters who were playing on the floor. He was wearing loose shorts and had spread his legs in a way that exposed his genitals to the children. Jennifer, anxious about the well-being of her baby sisters, did everything she could to take care of them, including ensuring that their bodies were covered up at all times: 'I would wrap my youngest sister in a diaper, and for my other sister I made her wear panties, shorts, and pants on top of that, so that he [the stepfather] could not touch their genitals.'

Jennifer was sure that her stepfather's bad intentions were oriented towards her sisters, and as a result, she 'forgot to protect herself' (if that would have even been possible). She cried out for her mother the night that her stepfather abused her, but her mother did not believe her, as Jennifer explained:

> The love for a man is greater than that for a daughter. Instead of helping me, my mother hit me, punished me, blamed me for having seduced my stepfather. I forgive my mother, because I love my mother, and I know she suffered a lot from domestic violence herself.

Taking a break in her retelling of this difficult story, Jennifer looked at me and said: 'Thank God he is in prison now, for femicide; that man was a sick man.'

After being sexually abused by her stepfather, Jennifer was kicked out of her home. It was the middle of the night, pitch dark outside, and the storm that had been flooding the streets for days soon soaked her to the skin. Having no phone – this was the 1990s – nor any sense of where to go, she walked aimlessly through the empty streets of the neighbourhood where she had grown up and had lived in peace with her sisters and parents for most of her life. Trying to look for shelter from the rain, she saw a group of young boys hanging on a street corner. When she came closer, she recognized some of them from school. One boy in particular stood out, as he had frequently tried to chat her up, albeit always courteously, when she was still attending school. She knew that he was a local gang member, and having no interest in that world, she had always rejected his flirtations.

The boys recognized Jennifer immediately when she came closer. They were shocked to see her all wet, anxious and beaten up. When they saw blood running down from between her legs, they took her by the arms, looked her in the eyes and asked her furiously: 'What has happened? Who did this to you? Did the gang from the other neighbourhood rape you? Was it them that touched you? Tell us! We'll go over and take care of them.' Jennifer, lowering her head, said it were not gang members, and she told the boys what had happened. The gang took her to their hangout, where they gave her dry clothes and wrapped her in a blanket on a mattress on the floor. Jennifer became very sick with fever, and the boys took her to a doctor who told them that she had a vaginal infection caused by the rape. The boys went to buy the pills the doctor prescribed and took care of Jennifer.

Easing into the gang

The gang that took Jennifer in was one of many such local urban gangs that proliferated in Honduras during the 1990s. Although frequently involved in violence, the focus of these gangs principally revolved around territorial identity, listening to rock music and smoking weed. Jennifer did not have to do anything to form part of this group: she was not raped by the gang members, she did not have to go through a ritual of being beaten up, nor did she have to take up any weapons and kill someone to show her courage. That rainy night, when she had bumped into these boys after being raped by her stepfather, she entered the gang 'the way a pet that you love a lot and that you want to protect would have entered'.

She did not have any intentions to join a gang, nor to be involved in any violent or criminal acts. But while she was lying there on the mattress, sick with fever, thinking about what had happened, 'the morbidity of evil' started to wake up in her, as she put it. She wanted to learn how to shoot a gun. She wanted to take revenge on her stepfather for what he had done to her, and she needed to go and get her sisters out of that house, because otherwise he would do the same to them as he had done to her. She decided there and then that she wanted to become a

gang member, at the age of thirteen, effectively being pushed from one cycle of patriarchal violence to another:

> And that's how it went. Over one night, I had entered a world of violence. Everything had changed in less than 24h. Everything. Everything. Everything! All that was pretty had changed. I dreamt about fairies, about Barbies, about my prince Charming. I dreamt about my *Quinceañera*,[6] with my pink dress and all of that. And he (the stepfather) came into my life to ruin all of that … What more can I tell you.

Jennifer's time in the local gang did not last that long, however. The post-Cold War political settlement in Central America saw significant numbers of refugees and immigrants who moved from the region to the United States in the 1980s return, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Many returnees had been involved in US Latino gangs, including in particular the *Barrio 18* and the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13), and brought back their more violent gang culture, which was moreover fuelled by a bitter rivalry (Cruz 2010; Ruiz 2019; Serrano 2021). This put significant pressure on the more local, traditional gangs. Jennifer always kept her eyes and ears wide open, to stay ahead of things, to not be caught by surprise. One day she overheard that a big decision had been made by The Gang[7] in prison. Big decisions were always made in prison because that was where the gang leaders were, and gang members who were not detained would visit imprisoned gang members to ferry messages between the prison and the outside world. The gang leaders had decided that gang members from the smaller local gangs had the option to either join The Gang or to be killed – they all got a '*luz verde*' (green light).[8] When Jennifer overheard this, she did not hesitate for a second. Right there and then, she decided to join The Gang.

Becoming the first female gang leader

Jennifer jumped into The Gang 'the way a man jumped into it', by being beaten up by several gang members for a certain amount of time (thirteen seconds if being jumped into the MS-13 and eighteen if into the *Barrio 18*). Given that there were barely any female gang members at the time, Jennifer received the beatings from male gang members. Despite common gang myths and journalistic reports – based on limited data – claiming that women are raped or 'sexed-in' to the gang (Miller 2001; López Calvo and Santos Pejic 2013),[9] Jennifer did not have to have any sexual relations (forced or voluntary) with a male gang member as part of her initiation rite. Indeed, she was adamant that she did not want to enter the gang as a male gang member's girlfriend or wife, but wanted to be treated just like any male gang member.

She had to overcome a lot of obstacles, however, because up until she joined the gang, only male gang members were allowed to have tattoos, carry guns and

kill. A woman's role in the gang was to serve the male gang members, have sex with them and smuggle drugs into prison, because women were less likely to be suspected. Jennifer did not want to be told what to do. She did not want to be a drug mule, she wanted to be the one managing the drug mules. She did not want to be an anonymous and replaceable low-level soldier, she wanted to be a leader. She attached herself to the leaders of The Gang and began to learn everything she needed to know, incorporating one lesson after the other: 'never leave a friend behind on the battlefield', 'who kills with a bullet will be killed by a bullet', 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' and most importantly, '*ver, oír y callar*' ('see, hear and keep quiet').

Jennifer was eager to learn because she wanted to climb up in the hierarchy as fast as possible. 'But it cost me a lot to climb up that ladder', Jennifer told me, sighing. 'It cost me a lot of beatings to earn the respect of violent men; men with tattoos all over their body and face.' Jennifer made it, however. She earned the respect of these men and soon became the first female gang leader of The Gang. By the time she was fifteen years old, Jennifer was overseeing the dealing of marijuana, coordinating dozens of mules and had moved from being an ordinary gang member to a leader. Even though female gang members were allegedly not supposed to have tattoos, and despite the great prejudice and discrimination there was in wider society over women with tattoos, Jennifer tattooed the name of her mother on the inside of her arm. She did it herself, with a needle and battery acid.

The ongoing fight against machismo

'There is machismo in the gangs in the same way as that there is machismo outside of the gangs. Being a woman and belonging to a gang, means double discrimination.' Time and again Jennifer had to deal with an omnipresent daily machismo in the gang. Female gang members, even if they did not maintain personal relationships with male gang members, were expected to take care of the gang household: do the men's laundry, cook them food, etc. Jennifer had suffered under the violent machismo of her stepfather – and before that her brother, she also told me – and was in no way going to settle for any more macho behaviour in the gang.

'In my case it was not going to be this way', Jennifer said, 'because I came from a world where I had to do my brother's laundry and my brother would beat me up, where my stepfather hit me and raped me, where … So, I was not going to do anybody's laundry in the gang'. Jennifer felt she had the right to be treated like any other gang member. She would not tolerate a fellow member yelling at her, and she demanded a justified reason whenever a leader would tell her she was going to receive a '*chequeo*' (punishment) for having allegedly done something wrong. She was often punished even harder because of her opposing the ambient machismo of the gang. And when she received a punishment, she fought back hard:

> Look honey, for them to be able to punish me, up to six or seven *homies* would have to hold me down. Because I would just jump from one place to another, and I would turn the whole place upside down. I would do everything to make it difficult for them to hit me. Because the gang leaders always gave you the option to defend yourself.

Jennifer would also sometimes, especially when she was in prison, dress in a 'manly' fashion, with baggy shorts, high socks, a long belt and a baseball cap. But perhaps more than anything else, what enabled Jennifer to challenge the patriarchal gang structures was the fact that whenever The Gang needed someone to go and fight or attack someone, Jennifer was always down to join. While when she first became a gang member she had no intention to get involved in any violent gang practices, she became inexorably drawn into these as she sought to protect herself from, and counter, other forms of patriarchal and interpersonal violence, both at the hands of fellow gang members, as well as rival gang members and the authorities, very much highlighting the continuum of violence.

Killing in the name of the gang

After having demonstrated her fighting skills and courage by standing up to other male members of The Gang, Jennifer was told that she was ready for her first '*tumba*' (grave), and was given the task to kill a member of The Rival Gang. However, she did not want to kill anyone other but her stepfather. Killing her stepfather was the only reason why she had learned to fight. The leaders of The Gang were not happy to find out about this, because they felt that Jennifer was not in the gang for love of The Gang, but only to take revenge on her stepfather. The Gang would not allow her to kill her stepfather, because at the time non-gang members – known as '*paisas*' – were respected and it was not allowed to kill them.

But Jennifer's desire to kill her stepfather did not go away. One day someone informed her that they had seen her stepfather in an old billiard hall in the city centre. She did not hesitate. She took a gun and went to look for him. By the time she got to the billiard hall, though, he was no longer there. Soon after, Jennifer was arrested and imprisoned, and could no longer pursue her plan to take revenge on her stepfather. While she was locked up, she found out her stepfather continued to abuse her mother, and that he had even stabbed her with a knife. Jennifer was furious, but there was nothing she could do about it while in prison. Her stepfather was, however, eventually arrested and imprisoned for having raped and mutilated a thirteen-year-old girl, as well as for attempting multiple femicides of adult women, including Jennifer's mother. Several years later, once Jennifer had left the gang and 'traded her gun for the bible', she found peace with the fact that she was never able to take revenge on her stepfather. As she put it, 'God was the one who didn't want me to stain my hands on him, because look, now he is in prison'.

Jennifer did end up killing in the name of The Gang, however. Every time she did so, she would hide in a hotel afterwards and lay low for a while, consuming drugs to numb herself. The problem, though, was that 'the killing was a never-ending story, if they killed two members of The Gang, we would go and kill three members of The Rival Gang, and they would then take their revenge again on us. It never stopped.'

The need for more women in the gang

Following the implementation of the *Mano Dura* ('Hard Hand') anti-gang measures in the early 2000s, many alleged male gang leaders were locked up in prison. Consequently, both The Gang and The Rival Gang started recruiting more girls and women, in particular to bring food and smuggle arms and drugs into the prisons. Young women in the gang were also used to steal guns from police officers, private security guards or other men, by 'seducing' them. Moreover, women were deemed particularly useful for drug smuggling, given they could smuggle more drugs in their body than men could, using both their vagina and anus. For 500–1000 Honduran Lempiras (20–40 USD), girls would stuff as much drugs as they could in their body and try to get it past the prison guards.

Jennifer had always felt very conflicted about this practice, telling me: 'I never liked it, but because I commanded many drug mules, many girls, youngsters, chicks, I had to do it, because I was a leader. And above me there was an even bigger leader. If one of the girls under my command made a mistake, it was my responsibility. If they fucked up, I had to pay for it.' At the same time, Jennifer always sought to take good care of the female gang members who were under her command. Even when she had to lay low, after a killing, she would make sure that the women had enough ammunition, money, weapons, but also personal items such as clothes, deodorant and sanitary towels. She also made sure that none of the women were caught by the police.

An eye for an eye

Jennifer got onto the police's blacklist when she shot a police officer who was holding down one of the girls from her clique. The war was on. Jennifer found out that there was an order to shoot and kill her, and bring her head to the police officer she had shot: 'My capture order was that when they found me and with whom ever they found me, they had to rip off my head and bring it to that police officer to show that I had been erased from the map.' When the police did get hold of her, they dragged her to the police station. They were sure it was her but got confused by some new tattoos she had. According to the capture order, the gang member they were looking for did not have those tattoos. Jennifer cried out that she was not the person they were looking for and gave them a false name.

The police were still convinced that she was the one they were looking for, even though they could not prove it. They treated her as if they had caught one of the biggest fish of The Gang, as if she was '*La Reina del Sur*' (The Queen of the South), as Jennifer put it. She was locked up in an isolation cell and one male police officer after the other would come in to hit her, torture her and rape her, over and over. 'I was just a girl', Jennifer said, 'I was only 19 years old, and then they sent me to prison for 8 years.'

Easing out of the gang

> It was there, in prison, that I knew I wanted to leave the gang. On the street the gang looks very nice and pretty, but once you end up in prison you get to see the other side of the coin. A lot changed for me in prison. After having been raped and tortured by those police officers, I was sent to prison, and put in the section for gang members. I had hoped to join my *homies*, but they were furious at me, telling me, 'you didn't care about all the leadership we gave you; you fucked it up! You left all those chicks behind, now we'll have to give them all a *luz verde*!'.

Jennifer requested that the gang leaders give her permission to continue her leadership from within the prison. They gave her an ultimatum: if she wanted to stay in the gang, not be killed and continue being a leader, she would have to kill the leader of The Rival Gang. 'Tell me, Ellen', Jennifer said at that point in our interview, looking at me with an indignant look in her eyes, 'how was I going to get close to that man?' I said that I could well imagine that it was likely impossible. 'Well', Jennifer replied,

> I actually did end up meeting him and getting close to him. I don't know how I did it, I'm telling you, I was a phenomenon in the gang, maybe it's because of my beauty in combination with my evil skills, I don't know. I got close enough to him to kill him, but I got scared. I was scared of ending up for 30 or 60 years in prison and never seeing the outside world again. I was scared of not seeing my daughters again,[10] because I had left my two daughters there on the street. They were 1 and 2 years old when I left them.

Jennifer decided instead that she wanted to leave the gang. 'It was a big mistake', she said, 'to declare that I wanted to leave the gang while I was in prison. You can leave the gang when you're on the streets, but not when you're in prison'. After having killed a fellow inmate who had stolen her favourite sneakers in a knife fight, Jennifer was transferred to another prison. That is where Yoselin, who was one of the female gang members who worked for her, came to visit. Yoselin had brought Jennifer her favourite lunch and insisted that she eat it. Jennifer did not feel hungry, so she pushed it aside. When it was time for Yoselin to leave, she

hugged Jennifer intensely, and gave Jennifer a meaningful look when walking out of the cell. Jennifer, having known Yoselin for many years, knew something was up. She did not eat the food Yoselin had brought, suspecting that it was poisoned, because in the eyes of The Gang she had made too many mistakes.

Shortly after this episode, Jennifer gave birth to her first son in prison when she was twenty-three years old, and she knew she had to leave the gang forever. She started writing letters to all the leaders of The Gang that she knew in Central America and in Los Angeles, to ask for permission to leave. In addition to asking to be left in peace once she got out of prison, she also asked for permission to cover up her tattoos of The Gang, especially as these had caused her a lot of trouble in prison. After filing her petitions to leave the gang, she was transferred to the wing of the prison for non-gang members. However, because she still had not received permission to cover up her tattoos, her fellow detainees were very suspicious of her:

> They [The Gang] had released this new law that whoever would strike through or cover up their gang tattoo would be killed. So, in prison I had a lot of problems with the other convicts. One of them grabbed my arm and stretched it out for someone else to cut my arm. They wanted to cut off my arm! Another guy wanted to cut me here (points to her other arm). Always the violence of a man: 'tell us; give us a motive for why we should not cut your arm off! Why are you not getting rid of those tattoos?'.

Eventually, Jennifer received written permission to leave the gang and to cover up some of her gang-related tattoos, except the one that included the name of The Gang. She added some curls to the tattoo, but the name remains visible. Her body will always be identified with The Gang.

Life after the gang

When Jennifer came out of prison, she got married to a former gang member, who was actively involved in a number of rehabilitation projects for former gang members. He tried to involve Jennifer too, but she did not trust anyone and preferred to keep a low profile. She had two more children, her two youngest sons, with him and they were together for almost a decade. Jennifer had just given birth to their youngest son when her husband was killed, and she became a widow at the age of thirty-one. 'He was one of the few who really had changed', Jennifer said with tears in her eyes, 'he did integrate into society, you know what I mean? He wasn't going about scamming or extorting people. He really had changed his life'.

When her husband was killed, Jennifer was scared that they would come after her and her children next. A religious organization, *Second Chance*, helped her apply for asylum in Colombia, and soon after she packed up her household and moved with her children to Bogotá. *Second Chance* helped her enrol in a nursing

course. They provided her with a house and paid for the first three months of rent. Beyond this, it was up to Jennifer to make a living to pay for rent and other costs. Jennifer studied during the day and worked at night, which meant that her children spent a lot of time alone on the streets. People would perceive them as delinquent for hanging out in the street so often. She was working several jobs, including in construction, as a dancer in a strip club and as a street vender selling '*baleadas*'.[11]

More violence and drugs

Starting a new life in Colombia was not easy for Jennifer and her children. After the first three months in Bogotá, when *Second Chance* stopped paying her rent, Jennifer started renting out a room to a woman from Panama, so that they could share the costs. Jennifer spent most of her time outside the house, studying and working multiple jobs at the same time to make ends meet, which meant that her children spend a lot of time alone or with her Panamanian housemate. Jennifer's children suffered while in Bogota. They were bullied at school for their Honduran accent. One day one of her sons came home with poop in his backpack, and they had flushed his head in the toilet. There was not much Jennifer could do about it.

Jennifer also took up alcohol and drugs again. It started with just one joint, to relax after work, but soon she was drinking and doing drugs every day with her Panamanian housemate, and under her influence Jennifer became addicted to heroin. 'My Panamanian housemate pushed a needle in my arm and injected me with heroin. I had a huge relapse because of the heroin. I wasn't aware of what was going on with my kids anymore.' At the same time, Jennifer was suspicious of her Panamanian housemate, and especially the way she looked at her children, seeming to check out their bodies. Eventually, Jennifer was able to access her housemate's phone and found out that she was involved with a human trafficker who wanted to buy the kidneys of her youngest son and the corneas of her eldest son's eyes. 'It was very traumatizing to read those messages on her phone', Jennifer said, lowering her voice so that her sons could not hear us, 'they (the Panamanian housemate and human trafficker) were looking at my son's eyes to sell them to an old person, an old man who couldn't see anymore'. Jennifer confronted the Panamanian with those messages, and they got into a physical fight. Jennifer kicked her out, but did not file a complaint with the police, because she was afraid that they would not believe her and would take away her children.

Shortly after having ended her friendship with the Panamanian, Jennifer met someone while working as a dancer in the strip club. She clarified to me that she had not worked as a sex worker because she did not have sex with the men, she would only dance for them and that was it. One night, however, once Jennifer had finished her shift, a man came up to her and told her how she was 'a beautiful Honduran woman', and asked her out. They started dating and not long after that

he moved in with her. The domestic violence she had suffered as a child started all over again. As is often the case with victims of domestic violence (Moulding *et al.* 2015), Jennifer initially blamed herself:

> Since I was a little girl, I have suffered from domestic violence, Ellen. So, I was already carrying that trauma here, in my head, because of the situation with my stepfather who hit me and my mother; my stepfather who had raped me, my mother who didn't believe me, who kicked me out on the street, and all of that, you know. All of that was adding up, so when my partner started hitting me and abusing me, I blamed myself for it.

Jennifer was the main victim of her Colombian boyfriend's beatings, but one day he tried to hit her son and she stepped in to protect him. Jennifer's boyfriend started hitting her hard with a belt, and her son ran out of the house to find the local neighbourhood gang leader. Jennifer was very sociable, so she knew a lot of people in her neighbourhood, and many had felt sympathy for her, living alone taking care of her children, studying and working at the same time. When the gang leader heard what was happening, he sent two gang members to Jennifer's house to put an end to the beating and evict the abusive boyfriend (as ironic as it may sound, it was a local edict that the gang would not tolerate violence against women in their neighbourhood).

Jennifer was left alone with her children again, and retraumatized from this episode of domestic violence, she started numbing herself once more with drugs and alcohol:

> I had this great opportunity, and I didn't take enough advantage of it … In Bogotá, I had a serious relapse. I couldn't continue studying, so I never got my diploma as a nurse. I was expelled from Colombia and sent back to Honduras, because they had to take my children away from me. They took away my children because, well, because I was drinking and doing drugs, I hung out with bad people. I destroyed myself. I don't blame anyone else because it was my own decision.

When Jennifer and her children were sent back to Honduras, they stayed with her mother and sister while she weaned herself off alcohol and drugs. Jennifer has now been sober for seven years.

The last women surviving

Jennifer, Yoselin and two other women are the only survivors from the generation of female gang members that Jennifer led. According to her, it is because they are the only ones who stood their grounds and who were respected for that. 'The other girls', she explained, 'some of them were sleeping around, others were even sleeping

with police officers, and then there were those who made some mistakes while fulfilling their tasks.' Most of the women who were under Jennifer's command have been killed, died from AIDS or were killed along the migratory route in Mexico, trying to get to the United States. Only one woman she knew from back then is still active in The Gang, because she is married to a male gang member.

'I have survived until now by maintaining a low profile.' After having had some bad experiences with journalists who published articles narrating her story and showing her pictures without her consent, for a long time Jennifer refused to give interviews or talk about her experiences in The Gang. She seemed to be doing okay now, having found a bit more stability in life. But she was worried about her friend Yoselin, who had recently had to flee to Mexico with her fifteen-year-old son and fourteen-year-old daughter. Yoselin used to live in another neighbourhood, not far from Jennifer, but because Yoselin's neighbourhood and Jennifer's neighbourhood were controlled by rival gangs, the two of them had not been able to meet up very frequently. The only place they could meet up and speak more freely was in the city centre.

Jennifer told me that Yoselin's son had got involved in some shady issues, and the gang controlling her neighbourhood had put a *luz verde* on Yoselin and her family. They had had to flee hurriedly, leaving behind everything. Jennifer told me that one of the reasons Yoselin had to flee was that she never really let go of the gang lifestyle. She would still talk and behave as if she belonged to The Gang, insulting people, acting up and often threatening violence. However, she did not have any protection from The Gang anymore, all the more so that she lived in a neighbourhood controlled by The Rival Gang. Despite this, Yoselin had been able to set herself up as a *chiclera*, a chewing gum seller, something that she was very proud of, often sending me pictures and videos of herself selling her goods. Jennifer confirmed this during our conversation, and said that Yoselin had been saving up to buy an ice box, so that she could also start selling cold drinks, a sign of success. Now that she was in Mexico, however, she was doing very badly, Jennifer said. She had run out of money, and she and her children had to sleep on thin mattresses, and her health was deteriorating. Jennifer cried as she recounted Yoselin's situation. They had become very good friends whilst in The Gang, and I could sense that she still felt responsible for taking care of Yoselin. Last time Jennifer had talked to Yoselin, she had told her that her children were begging on the streets because her health had deteriorated to the point that she could no longer work. When Jennifer told Yoselin she had to be careful that her daughter did not start working as a sex worker, Yoselin had started to cry and could only say '*ay, mami*' …

Tired of that life

Jennifer told me her story because she knows how the stories of women in gangs more often than not remain silenced: 'Because I think that the story of the male gang member is often heard, but if you are going to sit down and listen to the story of the female gang member, you will be amazed, because as a woman, one experiences many different things than a man, and as a woman, you are treated

differently.' Jennifer said she has been tempted to go back, especially when The Gang called her to offer a lot of money to sell drugs again. She was struggling at the time, but nevertheless said no. 'I decided not to go back', she said, 'because that life is tiring. When I was still in the gang, I wanted to eat a *baleada* on the street, and I got almost killed by members of The Rival Gang. I want to be able to eat in peace'.

Jennifer has escaped death several times, it is almost a miracle she is still alive. She has been shot (and had surgery) in the back of her head. She has two scars on the inside of her left arm: a round scar where the bullet went in, and a flat scar where they cut in to take the bullet out. Then she made me touch her belly and lifted her dress to show the huge vertical scar from her chest down to her belly; she had been shot several times in her abdomen, and they had to operate on her there to extract the bullets. She has also lost use of her right lung after being shot in the back. And those are only gunshot wounds; on top of this she has been beaten up and stabbed so many times she cannot keep track of it. Jennifer was thirty-eight years old when we carried out our interview together.

Time to leave

Jennifer kept on receiving calls from her sister and mother during our interview. They had started up a small business together, selling food for parties. They would either prepare it in advance or take all their equipment and ingredients to the venue and make it there. They had an event the next day, so they had to start preparing. When Jennifer's youngest son began to become restless and started calling on his mother's attention, I decided it was time to wrap up the interview.

Before I left, Jennifer showed me around her house. It seemed pretty homely: two bedrooms, one for her and her partner, while her three sons shared the other room. A bathroom, which frequently had no water, a big kitchen and in the back, they had a *patio* with a *bodega* where they kept a puppy. Jennifer told me that they mostly kept the door between the kitchen and the *patio* closed, because the outside wall in the yard marked the divider between their zone from The Rival Gangs' zone. Indeed, whilst we had been talking, in the living room, we heard two shots coming from behind the house. Jennifer had looked up and summoned her son to close the door. Her son peeked outside before closing the door and said it had been '*cuetes*' (firecrackers).

When my taxi driver arrived – this time it was Gustavo – Jennifer sent her eleven-year-old son with us on his bike to guide us across the border. I noticed big black graffitied gang signs along the way, which I had somehow missed coming in. Driving slowly with the windows down, Gustavo seemed at ease. He told me that his bad experience had occurred in another, nearby area. Speeding up, once we left Jennifer's neighbourhood, we pulled our windows back up, and turned on the AC. When I arrived back to my hotel, I ordered lunch, and then slept a couple of hours in the afternoon. I felt exhausted. Jennifer's story was not new to me, I had heard similar stories before, but that does not mean that I was less affected

by it or felt any less emotionally involved. Life has not been easy on Jennifer, but she continues to struggle against the violence that surrounds her, in all its forms, something I admire enormously. We remain in frequent contact, and all I can hope is that things will only get better for her, even if the odds are stacked against her.

Notes

1 Pseudonyms have been used for all the individuals mentioned in this chapter, and I am deliberately not using the names of cities or neighbourhoods to ensure their anonymity.
2 See https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.
3 Lowering the car windows is a security measure and common practice in gang-controlled neighbourhoods in Honduras. It is a way of showing transparency to the gang members, by making it clear who is in the car (Frank-Vitale 2021).
4 In this context, the '*frontera*' is the invisible border that separates one gang territory from another. These borders are invisible in the sense that there are no physical markers indicating where one gang-controlled territory ends and the other begins. Although sometimes a lower-level gang member or even a '*paisa*' (a 'citizen', i.e. a person who is not a (active) gang member) will be guarding the border to report who is entering and who is leaving the neighbourhood, if the police is coming, etc. Everyone living in a gang-controlled neighbourhood is aware of the invisible *frontera*.
5 While I use the word disintegrate to stay close to Jennifer's family history, I agree with Lopez (2017), who criticizes the concept of disintegrated or dysfunctional families. How a 'typical' or 'functional' family is defined differs between cultures, and is also highly influenced by the media and state representation.
6 The *Quinceañera* is an important celebration for girls in Honduras and the whole of Latin America, whereby a girl's transition from girlhood to womanhood is celebrated in the presence of her family and friends.
7 In this chapter I have chosen to use the expressions 'The Gang' and 'The Rival Gang' to refer to the *Barrio 18* and MS-13 without actually identifying which one is which whenever Jennifer is directly involved.
8 *Luz Verde* means that a 'Green Light' is given to a certain person or group to be killed; it means a death warrant or death sentence for that person or group.
9 The University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) of the Central American University 'José Simeón Cañas' in El Salvador conducted one of the few studies on female gang members in the region (Santacruz *et al.* 2010). The gang members they interviewed in prison all claimed to have been initiated by a beating. However, it needs to be recognized that two of the interviewees refused to answer the question, and the overall sample was very limited.
10 In addition to her three sons, Jennifer has two older daughters who are in their early twenties, but they do not live with her anymore.
11 A *baleada* is a flour wrap with fried beans and other toppings such as cheese, eggs, avocado and sometimes even chicken or chorizo. It is the national dish of Honduras.

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Figure 4.1 Via Lorenteggio, Milan, Italy, 2022.

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Chapter 4

'Obviously, I Do Not Deny It, Nor Will I Ever Deny It': An Individual History of the *Barrio 18* Gang between El Salvador and Italy

Paolo Grassi

Introduction

July 2021. From San Siro I head to Giambellino Lorenteggio. From one social housing neighbourhood of Milan to another.[1] They are marginal areas of Italy's richest city, interstitial spaces populated by old and new forms of youth socialization such as rap crews, street groups and gangs.[2]

After a few weeks of chatting via WhatsApp, I have finally managed to get an appointment with Rebel,[3] a former member of a Milanese *clika* (chapter) of the *Barrio 18* gang, who is currently incarcerated with work release. Actually, I did not really know anything about him, but the way I obtained his contact says something about his story and the story of his gang. Some weeks before, in San Siro, I met Luca, a young man detained in the same prison as Rebel, also on work release. I was interested in his story because he had recently created a rap record label to work with young people from marginal neighbourhoods. To introduce myself, I outlined some of my previous ethnographic research carried out on gangs in Guatemala and Italy (Grassi 2018, 2023).

My search for interlocutors linked to the world of the Latin American gangs in Milan was then at a dead end. While Milan was frequently described – at least until 2017 – as the European capital of Latin American gangs (Valencia 2016), my fieldwork had only uncovered some tenuous traces of a social phenomenon that seemed to have almost disappeared. In response, Luca had said to me, 'Hey, I know a "*marero*".[4] He's in prison with me, but he also works outside', before then adding, 'if you want, I could ask him if he wants to tell his story to you'.

So here I was. I parked my car along Via Lorenteggio, just after the sign for an Ecuadorian restaurant where Rebel works. The street is a hot desert, the ambient temperature is almost 35 degrees. I text him[5]:

'I am here.'
'Where? I cannot see you. Do you see the bar? Come in.'
'OK.'

I recognize him by the tattoos that cover his arms and neck. He is wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. We shake hands, and introduce ourselves:

'I don't even know your name', I tell him.
'"Rebel", is that okay?', he replies.
'Yes, that's fine.'

We order: a Red Bull for him, a coffee and an iced bottle of sparkling water for me, although I would prefer a beer. We sit down at a small table in a corner of the room. I start talking. I explain to him who I am, my research, and how I got to him. Then it is his turn. We mix Italian and Spanish, compensating for our respective language gaps. Rebel tells me about his story, that of Latin American street groups in Milan, his experience in prison and his future plans. His narrative comes out somewhat randomly and in an often confused fashion. I reconstruct a logical thread only in the aftermath.

Two interviews, a life story

The beginning of my research in Milan dates back to 2017. I was interested in analysing the relationship between 'structural violence' and urban space, starting from an ethnography of San Siro, one of the biggest social housing neighbourhoods in the city (see Grassi 2024). Initially, I collaborated with an action-research group at the Milan Polytechnic formed by urbanists and architects, but since 2019, I have also been developing a more 'traditional' ethnography of Milanese street groups, thanks to funding from two ERC projects, the TRANSGANG project led by Carles Feixa at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain and the GANGS project led by Dennis Rodgers at the Geneva Graduate Institute in Switzerland.[6] These parallel research paths ended up intersecting at a methodological and an interpretative level, as I came to interpret the street groups through a spatial lens developed thanks to my collaboration with the action-research group (Grassi 2023), while also reflecting on the relationship between violence and urban space in San Siro through the lens of its street groups (mainly rap crews – see Grassi and Sánchez-García 2021).

I collected Rebel's life story principally for the GANGS project, which I was invited to join due to my prior research on, and familiarity with, gangs in Central America. At the same time, however, it is important to note that contrarily to what is usually reported on in relation to research on gangs (see Whyte 1943; Bourgois 1995; Rodgers 2016, 2024; or Fontes 2018),[7] as well as with regard to anthropological research more generally (see Crapanzano 1985; Griaule 1997 [1948]), my collection of Rebel's story did not take place after I had developed a solid and lasting relationship or a longitudinal exchange with him. I did not

know Rebel well and Rebel did not know me. Our relationship was initiated by a mutual acquaintance and broken off within a few months. It effectively amounted to two meetings and the exchange of a few messages between June and September 2021. At the same time, Rebel perfectly understood my role and the purpose of my interviewing him. And he simply wanted to talk to someone, share his point of view, giving it to someone, even a stranger – or a 'Martian', to use Oscar Martinez's (2021: 38) term in his powerful book about his experiences as a journalist also interviewing gang members – so that they could write about it, and leave a trace of his story.

Is the way I collected my data necessarily problematic? It could be argued that Rebel's story suffers from the transience of what might be termed our 'investigative relationship'. There are certainly gaps, inconsistencies. As Pollard (2009) – amongst others – highlights, however, ethnography is very often unpredictable and an inevitably partial enterprise, one that will always generate incomplete representations. Despite the possible gaps, I am sure that Rebel's testimony offers relevant and novel insights relating to the recent history and social dynamics of Latin American street groups in Milan. His story 'fits' within my broader research trajectory on gangs, in Italy and elsewhere. And it also has significant intrinsic value. There are very few academic – or even non-academic – articles that cite direct testimonies of former Latin American gang members in Milan. Even in recent years, the few researchers who have focused on this issue have experienced difficulties in obtaining similar contacts (see De Cesare 2018; Comunale 2020). Ultimately, what Rebel's story offers us is a unique window on the way that gang membership can be something enduring, but in a way that changes over time and across contexts, thereby problematizing the mainstream narrative about the way that migration spreads gangs, as I will now endeavour to demonstrate, reconstructing his life history.

Growing up among gangs

Rebel is a Salvadorian man in his thirties. He was part of the second wave of Latin American gang members in the city, those who were not initiated in their home countries, but rather in Italy, although still connected with their 'mother' gangs in their countries of origin. He became a member of the *Barrio 18* gang in Milan in 2007.

Rebel was born in the municipality of Zacatecoluca, in the province of La Paz, in El Salvador. He was thus a child of the civil war that afflicted that country between 1979 and 1992. The political issues underlying the conflict were not resolved, and perhaps not surprisingly, the 'peace' that followed war was characterized by high levels of 'social' violence linked to the emergence of youth gangs, whose escalation led that El Salvador being branded as 'the most dangerous country in the world' when measured by the number of murders in the first quarter of the 21st century (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP 2001; Demoscopía 2007; Martínez and Martínez 2018).

Rebel has a younger brother and sister, both of whom also live in Italy nowadays. Their parents separated when he was eight, his father abandoning them, his mother emigrating to Italy. Rebel continued to live in El Salvador until he was thirteen years, however. He did not live in the midst of ultra-violence as experienced by many of his peers in other urban areas of Central America (Rodgers 2009). His neighbourhood in Zacatecoluca was fully controlled by a *clika* of the *Barrio 18* gang. This meant there were no local conflicts with other gangs, which, from the point of view of its residents, meant there was peace, as Rebel explained: 'Fortunately, the neighbourhood where I lived in those days was, I can say, quiet because the 18 controlled it well because they have always been in all those areas, there was harmony.'

Rebel also explained to me that at the beginning of the 1990s, Salvadoran gangs did not yet consist of the armies of youths that became so frightening in El Salvador, at least until a few years ago. Most gang members were '*muchachos*', older young men who had grown up in the neighbourhood, and whose gang was not something to worry too much about. As Rebel put it, 'at that time, I was only worried about having fun and playing football'. Things changed quickly, however: 'If you joined the gang, they forced you to stay with them, you know? You could not go out. You had to report everything because if you did not do it for a week, they looked for you because they thought that you had become an informant or something, even if it was not true, you know?'

Not being part of the gang did not mean not having any relations with it. The gang 'was part of the *barrio*', and Rebel knew its members, and would often meet them regularly on the streets everyday, something that is often thought to lead to joining gangs. In Zacatecoluca, however, Rebel lived with a grandmother and an uncle. He described his uncle as an authoritative figure, able to keep him 'out of trouble', a person capable of forging relationships with gang members who granted him and his family some protection:

> 'If I went out to play baseball, they knew that they had to respect me, because I had a family behind me. Instead, so many times the family is missing there [in El Salvador]. Boys can stay on the street all day long and their parents are not there. Instead, my uncle had me under control.'
> 'Was your uncle respected by the residents of your neighbourhood?', I asked him.
> 'He was respected because he was a friend of some powerful people, as well as of people known by the 18.'

Rebel eventually emigrated and joined his mother in Milan in 2006, something that clearly constituted a major turning point in his biography. He described this transition as both something dictated to him but also as a personal choice:

> Until I was 13 years old … it was then that I felt a little that I was growing up and that I realised that I … I tell you like this: if I continued [to live in El Salvador],

> you know? Maybe, just like all the guys, not only me, it could go bad for us, you know? I mean, I tried to come to Europe to get a better future, but on the one hand, no … I used to feel … I didn't want to leave some things there, you know? Some things of my home country. You come here [to Italy] because you know that you can eat better, you can dress better.

Rebel knew that moving to Italy could be a unique opportunity for his future, away from gang violence. Nevertheless, in Italy he paradoxically reproduced what he seemed to want to escape from. As if living a self-fulfilling prophecy, Rebel was unable to take an alternative route to the one that had seemed promised to him in El Salvador.

Latin American Milan

On 4 July 2006, the Italian national football team was preparing to play the semi-final of the World Cup against Germany in Dortmund, at the Signal Iduna Park stadium. Italy beat Germany 2–0 after extra time and won the right to play the final against France, on Sunday 9 July in Berlin. Following the victory against Germany, all over the country people go out on to the streets, honking car horns and waving national flags. It is into this surreal atmosphere of celebration that Rebel first arrived in Italy, on an Iberia Airlines flight that landed at Milan Linate airport: 'I remember … the emotion of getting on a plane for the first time … But I also remember the semi-final party … This is something that in El Salvador does not exist.'

Rebel moved in with his mother and her new partner. His younger brother had already joined them some years before. The family lived in via Padova, in one of the zones considered to be the most multicultural in Milan. As Cognetti and Lazzarino (2019: 63) have highlighted, in 2016, 34 per cent of the population of that area were foreigners, against a city average of 19 per cent, and they describe the area as, and as having transitioned from a traditional working-class neighbourhood to a 'chaotic and hybrid' multi-ethnic district.

After his arrival, Rebel was not enrolled in school. He fitted into the urban fabric of the city by playing football and meeting mainly Salvadorian youth like himself: 'I was training in an *oratorio*[8] for almost a year, I didn't manage to play in an official team because I lacked some documentation to obtain a kind of temporary document in order to be legally registered. Actually, I played illegally for a period.' Then, he added, 'When I arrived, I realised that everyone was hanging out with people from their own country, right?'

Rebel's narration testifies to the specific socialization that is linked to the migratory experience in the city during that period. Especially at the beginning of the 2000s, ethnically homogeneous groups formed by young foreigners started to visibly populate the public space of Milan:

> I saw that Ecuadorians, and people from other countries, always had parties. We started to go to the parties, right? […] but little by little we began to divide because we realised that sometimes they looked at us, they treated us, you know? […] Then we started dividing, since we were already Salvadorans, we were only Salvadorans […]. Sometimes I dressed like an Ecuadorian or wore a hat with pants on … Guys looked at me, they stared at me as if they wanted to get into trouble. But I noticed a change if I dressed as a Salvadoran, if I shaved and put a bandana on my forehead. In this case, they ignored me … That has happened to me so many times.

Those Latin American youth started to create their own street groups, sometimes joining the gangs of their home countries, such as the *Latin Kings*, the *Comandos* or the *Ñetas* in a first phase, and then the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* gangs in a second one. The former were studied by the members of Codici,[9] an independent social research agency, whose studies (Conte and Bugli 2008; Conte *et al.* 2008) helped to interpret this first wave of gangs, and especially to understanding their differences vis-à-vis the Latin American context, and challenging the stigmatized understandings fomented by the state authorities and local media. Codici implemented an important mediation process that led to these street groups becoming formal juvenile associations (Conte and Bugli 2008), but unfortunately, this process stopped around 2010, and they did not have the opportunity to intervene in relation to the Central American gangs of the second phase.

Milan, like other European cities, only became an important destination for global migration routes from the 1990s onwards. Migration and integration policies were slow to develop (Fondazione ISMU 2006), and creating street groups, using public spaces, meeting at discos or in private houses, and drawing tags and graffiti could be interpreted as forms of resistance, or of a social refusal of marginalization, at the very least (Queirolo Palmas 2010). In other words, the Latin American street groups of Milan started to reinvent the city, a 'Latin American Milan' that was inscribed into urban space through new imaginaries connecting different countries, cities and neighbourhoods (Conte *et al.* 2008).

Livin' la vida loca (but in full compliance with the rules of the gang)

Rebel explained to me how at the beginning of 2000s there were some youth who had been gang members in their home country, before coming to Italy, but that this didn't impact on Milanese gang dynamics, that old rivalries and grudges did not travel. As he put it: 'There were people from the *Barrio 18*, but they were always drunk … [And] we had even known that they shook hands several times with rival gang members, in nightclubs, and so on, and didn't do anything, you know?'

Nonetheless, as a local Milan Latin American gang culture developed, polarization between different groups developed organically, for reasons that were not related to previous gang dynamics in Latin America. Partly due to his feeling

of isolation and alienation in the city, Rebel – along with other youths – started coming together as a street group, both for comfort, and to make collective sense of their experience as young migrants in a foreign city. They drew very much on Salvadorian *mara* gang culture to do so, thereby reproducing what many of them were running away from.

'Everything began between 2007 and 2008. We create a real *clika* (gang chapter), you know?', Rebel told me. He explained how the *clika* joined the *Hoover Locos clika* of the *Barrio 18* from the Zacatecoluca area. This was important, because affiliation with a mother gang in El Salvador was a matter of prestige. To be a true '*marero*' you had to show that you had a relationship with the centre of power. Rebel and his mates had constant interactions with gangsters in El Salvador. However, this relationship did not involve the management of criminal activities or strong transnational networks, it was just a matter of exchanging information, or explaining what was happening in Milan:

> 'It was to refer information,' Rebel said.
> 'And weren't you afraid of this connection?', I asked.
> 'No, we weren't,' he replied. 'As I said, practically it is something that you eventually have to do. If you decide to find something here [in Italy], you have to follow the rules, you know? Obviously, there are so many things here that like … they don't work like there [in El Salvador], such as extortions, things like that, that don't happen in Italy […]. On the contrary, there life is riskier, because there are extortions, there is revenge for deaths, you know? Here, there are no deaths, you know? […] We also decided to give information because if you start something here and you don't keep updating, it is not useful, because no one will respect you.'

Rebel's discourse is obviously rather ambiguous. Between 2019 and 2021, I managed to meet and interview somebody who claimed to be the former leader of the *Mara Salvatrucha* in Milan. His view on the relationship with the 'mother gang' in El Salvador was somewhat different. He claimed he wanted to inform it as little as possible, in order to be able to maintain a greater degree of independence. Independence for what, is the question. Valencia (2016), who wrote the above-mentioned article that defined Milan as 'the European capital of Latin American gangs', for example, asked a former *marero* why the *Barrio 18* and *Mara Salvatrucha* in El Salvador might have been interested in sustaining Italian *clikas*, since they didn't seem to receive any economic benefit from doing so. The former *marero* responded that the main purpose was just to expand the global footprint of the gang.

Rebel's *clika* grew to about twenty mainly Salvadoran youth within a couple of years. New members were recruited from peer groups: friends and acquaintances who frequented the same areas of the city. The *clika* structured itself by mimicking the rules and values associated with the *Barrio 18* in El Salvador (Ranum 2008; Insight Crime and Center for Latin American & Latino Studies 2018):

'The first thing', Rebel said, 'is the tattoo: more than other things, this was what we imposed to … everyone. Even if he was a kid, he had to have the "numbers" [18], you know? In order to understand the consequences of his choice. We also forced older guys to get the numbers. Because there came a period when many talked and talked, hanging around, you know? […] So, we suddenly decided, from one day to the next, to start tattooing everyone …'

'OK, but did they accept this?', I asked.

'Some of them called us with an excuse, but most accepted … '

'And did you give nicknames to yourselves?'

'Yes, the nicknames, but above all the most important thing was the internal discipline to know that there is a "pressure", to know that if before you went to the clubs without any tattoo, tomorrow you will no longer have a clean body, you will go with identification, you know? You know that you can no longer go peacefully, you know that you have to have support behind you.'

'So, you wanted to create a solid group.'

'Yes, in our opinion the most important thing was having the numbers. This was more important than anything, to be counted and to respect our rules and roots […]. Having a tattoo was a source of pride, you know? We knew we could feel safe, you know? That we were more and more.'

Rebel became the '*palabrero*', the leader of his *clika*. Unlike his mates, he was recognized for his 'fairness' and 'seriousness'. Rebel did not smoke, did not drink, but above all, he was able to comfort and support the younger members of the gang: 'I told them: "Look, you are not alone", you know? There were two boys, in particular, two or three who felt alone. So, what I did with all those guys […] was offer them support […], I decided to give them moral support and met with them often to make them feel that they mattered.'

The only real differences between the Milan gangs and those in El Salvador concerned the control of territory – almost absent in Italy, as mentioned by Rebel above – and the more limited levels of violence associated with Milanese groups. At the same time, as group identities became more cemented, there began to be clashes between different gang groups in Milan. In the beginning, these mainly involved fist-fights and stabbings, including, for example, on 13 July 2008, when Ricardo, a member of the *Barrio 18* gang, was attacked by Necio and Pirata, members of the *Mara Salvatrucha*, and lost an eye. Then, things got worse.

A murder

In 2009, Rebel killed a leader of the *Latin Kings New York* of Milan. What initially seemed like a settling of scores between *Latin Kings New York* and *Latin Kings Chicago*, had actually consisted of a semi-planned punitive expedition by Rebel's *clika*, seeking to establish itself and its reputation. Rebel told me this without getting upset. His voice did not tremble, his eyes did not look away. As if that

incident concerned someone else. But his description of the event was chaotic and confused, almost stream of consciousness:

> Despite the problems that had happened, we [the gang] made the decision, no, not the decision, it was a spontaneous thing, right? We decided to go up against those who are really important in the other gangs, do you understand me? Not to go to the first person you meet, small fry, only the big guys, do you understand me? And it is this that has meant that I am now paying a very long sentence, right? Because just that same day that happened, that same day that we went, I tell you, because we went with other people, right? But just that same day, hours before, there was an attack by the New York gang, some guys who … attacked three of our guys, they saw them in a park … About 50 guys from the New York, they were called, they came to the park because they had been given bad information, do you understand me? That the Chicago gang, with whom they were enemies, was having a meeting in a park. So they arrived 50, do you understand me? To look for the Chicago gang believing that they would find them. Instead they found those three guys from our gang, as I was telling you and they attacked them, do you understand me? They broke their heads, and they did a couple of other things to them. It was all very fast. We arrived in just 3 minutes, some boys told us what had happened, and we went there immediately, although we weren't that many, we were about 10. But there was nobody there anymore. We searched the sides of the park … to see if there was still someone, we started … we divided ourselves into groups of 3, because we were well armed that day, and each one had his own thing, and we looked for them at least to catch a group, but we didn't manage to. That same day we talked and decided to actually go, look for those who had been the main ones involved in that attack, do you understand? The leaders! This was not the first time that the New York had attacked our guys … Do you understand? And so, we talked until a conclusion was reached about going to hunt them down that same night.

Rebel did not elaborate on how he carried out the killing, except to reiterate that it was something 'spontaneous', an escalation of violence whose foregone conclusion was death. But what is certain is that he was arrested shortly after this tragic event and convicted. He was eighteen years old.

The prison and the gang

Prison represents a clear watershed moment in Rebel's life trajectory. The first prison he was incarcerated in was San Vittore. This is one of the three main prisons of Milan, together with the Carcere di Bollate and the Casa di Reclusione di Milano Opera. Conditions in Italian prisons can be very different from one institution to

another. In 2009, San Vittore was incredibly overcrowded. In an interview that appeared in an online newspaper (Biella 2009), a local politician stated:

> The level of overcrowding, which has never been so severe in the years I have been visiting the prison, is such that it creates untenable situations. For example, on the second and fourth floors of the sixth wing, up to nine prisoners can be found sleeping in bunk beds almost touching each other. In a cell measuring a maximum of 10 square metres, they also have to cook in a small corner, and the beds are very close together.

Prison rehabilitation projects are few and far between, partly because most prisoners spend on average just two to three months imprisoned in San Vittore (Antigone 2018).

Rebel initially did not experience his imprisonment as a tragic event:

> At that moment, I can tell you that it was not tragic because I saw it as a game. I looked at this thing as a game for many years … Perhaps you feel the impact of being inside the prison, but because of your young age you do not realise what you created, perhaps. I reconsidered everything year after year, getting to know the weight of my … The consequences that I had caused.

At the same time, Rebel could also count on the support of two 'families': one outside the prison, made up of his relatives, who never abandoned him, and one inside the prison, made up of other members of his gang.

Rebel was, however, transferred to the Opera and then to the Bollate prison. The Bollate prison has, since its foundation, sought to develop experimental reintegration projects. All sections are open and inmates can leave their cells during daylight hours, to participate in work, training or socializing activities (Antigone 2015). Entering Bollate prison marked another turning point in Rebel's biography, as he described: 'I had the opportunity to go to Bollate afterwards. Bollate is the prison desired by each detainee and I had the opportunity to go to Bollate where I began to change my mentality a little.' He then added: 'I felt all the years that I had lost … I saw a computer after many years … touching a mouse seemed strange to me.' However, after three years in Bollate, in 2018 Rebel was transferred again:

> 'Then […] I had a disciplinary report and they transferred me. I went to Vigevano punitive section. In Vigevano I continued to have the disciplinary measure for a year and a half until I had the opportunity to finish high school. I can say that study is the most important thing I got from Vigevano, because if I had not studied … I arrived in Vigevano, I always misbehaved, but I studied.'
> 'What does misbehave mean?', I asked.
> 'Misbehaving, I had a telephone, do you understand me? … and obviously you

> can't have communications with people outside. But […] I needed to have contact with the outside world because when I was in Bollate, I was able to leave for three months; then I already felt something about what life is like outside, a future life.'
>
> 'What does the punitive section mean?', I queried.
>
> 'The problem is that all the people who come to this punitive section are shitty people. They are people who take drugs and pills […] Prisons are made by the people incarcerated there. In fact, if you find a calm, more mature person, you spend a peaceful coexistence at the end. If you don't live with the right person in the same cell, and if you see those people full of therapies, where you are going to walk around like … you can't even talk to a person like that.'

After finishing his high school studies and graduating in early 2020, using this as a testimony of his reformed nature and good behaviour, Rebel asked to serve the rest of his sentence under a regime of 'semi-freedom' [*regime di semi-libertà* in Italian],[10] a measure that would have allowed him to work outside the prison and to return there only for the night and weekends. As his request was being considered, the Covid-19 pandemic exploded, however. The Ministry of Justice decided to suspend all special permissions, semi-freedom regimes, as well as family visits in all the Italian prisons from 22 February 2020. In response to this, protests and riots triggered by inmates exploded in prisons all over the country on Saturday 7 March 2020. Over the next few days at least ten rioting prisoners died in unclear circumstances and dozens of people were injured, including prison wardens and police officers (Antigone 2020; Rizzo 2020). This was linked to the pervasive problem of overcrowding, and the Ministry of Justice decided to let some prisoners serve out their sentences under domiciliary confinement. Rebel was one of them, and soon after his release from prison and return home, he started to work during the day in the restaurant in Giambellino Lorenteggio, near the bar where we met.

Forever marero?

Sitting at the table in the bar, I asked Rebel what he thought about his biographical trajectory. The *Barrio 18* still represented an important reference for his identity construction, something that was part of his habitus. Police informants were 'shits', the members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* as well. The gang helped to organize his vision of the world, the reality surrounding him: 'I could say that [the *Barrio 18*] represents a past and a present thing. However, I don't have "the mentality" anymore, you know?' Rebel felt he was still a gang member, but he also stressed that he was no longer active: 'Perhaps the things that I feel, I take them inside my heart without looking for problems … without getting into trouble. It would

be stupid, you know?' However, not being active certainly did not mean that he rejected his past:

> Clearly, I do not deny it, nor will I ever deny it … but I think that I can still lead a quiet life without getting into trouble. Clearly, there are always people who can look for problems. … [But] I live quietly. I … do not deny the person I am, but obviously, I already make that clear, you know? I don't feel like I have rivals. I walk down the street calmly, but if the occasion arises, first I would warn you. I'm not here for little things, that is, to argue over something stupid. Clearly, you can't come to talk to a kid, you know? Kids reason very differently.

This generational gap that Rebel alludes to is something that he also used to explain the latest development concerning Latin American gangs in Milan, and more specifically, the murder of Ernesto Odir Barrientos Tula, a Salvadorian citizen of thirty-four years old, in March 2019. Three Salvadorians were arrested some days after, and the police had talked about an internal fight among members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* (Il Giorno 2019). Rebel had, however, met Barrientos Tula in prison, and their encounter had almost turned into a fight:

> The person they killed was a person who … I was just entering the same cell by mistake and he jumped out of the cell and said to me 'here I am'. There were three of us, he started insulting me but he stayed there, without doing anything. […] I realised that he was there, you know? […] What happened to him is something that I think about because I know how things are in the street. If I actually go out right now, I would be calm, you know? I would say: 'I have to make a new life because I've been released from prison'. I wouldn't go to these new guys [gang members] who have just arrived. They can have direct contact with El Salvador, you know? In this world, you have to be more afraid of young guys like them than of older people […]. So, he certainly made this mistake.

Rebel argued that *maras* were still present in Milan, as well as in the close cities of Varese and Como, but he confirmed that they were more hidden than before, and also had rather weak connections with their 'mother gangs' in El Salvador. I nevertheless asked him what he thought was going on in El Salvador, and how he saw the war on gangs over there[11]: 'Finding a solution is very difficult', he said, 'because of the "mentality" as I said, the mentality of so many people. It is very bad, right? There are so many who allow themselves to be brainwashed, there are always people who only think of acting as an armed force. There are people who always think only to be a soldier and stay in that mentality, right?'

I asked Rebel if he wanted to go back to El Salvador. His answer surprised me, perhaps showing a lack of knowledge of the current events of his home country:

> 'Of course, I would,' he answered.
> 'But can you go, or not?'

'Yes, I can. As soon as I finish my sentence, I would like to go to my home country, but obviously with all the precautions, especially economic ones.'
'Aren't you afraid of … other gangs?'
'No, I personally think that you have something to fear only when you have been a person who has not been upright, you know? Because … obviously you already know which gang controls each area, obviously you don't go anywhere. But I do know that also if I have any problems with my gang, I would face them. … If they see you and you are wealthy … They respect you. […] When I was in El Salvador, I saw so many gang members who arrived with absolutely nothing […]. If you arrive and have some resources, you are prepared.'

Essentially, Rebel seemed to be arguing that a person with enough economic capital would be able to move quite freely in El Salvador, clearly underestimating, however, the insecurity that certainly characterized the country at the time of the interview (Balutet 2024). After all, Rebel had not been back to his home country for about twenty years when we carried out our interviews. But these contradictions also showed the nature of the bond he had with El Salvador: a relatively weak and imaginative one – in many ways like that of the Milanese gangs with their Salvadorian counterparts …

Conclusion

Rebel's story offers a challenge to dominant discourses on gangs and street groups, showing how gang affiliation evolves over time and shifts depending on specific dynamics, even when it reflects common trajectories of deviance and eventual redemption (see Covey et al. 1992; Hazen and Rodgers 2014). Raised in a gangland in El Salvador, Rebel reproduces the violent dynamics he was socialized into as a response to the socio-economic marginalization he later faced in Italy. Through this experience, he formed a gang very much based on the template of gangs in his country of origin, even establishing transnational links with the putative 'mother gang' in his homeland, though this connection clearly remained very tenuous. The definition of Rebel's identity revolved around the gang that welcomed him, first on the street and then in prison. Rebel recognized himself in this cosmogony. He felt like a *marero*, between two countries and two continents, although the relationship with his home country was probably not as close as it had been when we carried out our interviews.

Part of the reason for this is that Latin American gangs in Milan are clearly different from their counterparts in Latin America. They have different dynamics, and most importantly, operate in a different context – one that is less violent, less punitive and offers more opportunities for second chances, even after being involved in violent tragedy. Such contextual factors are important. While imprisoned, Rebel was able to take advantage of opportunities to educate himself,

and also to work. At the same time, he was only able to do so once he was transferred into the prison that offered it to him. In this sense, Rebel's story shows how the Italian prison system is not a homogeneous and standardized reality. Paradoxically, even the pandemic was an opportunity for Rebel because it allowed him to reconnect with his family and experience a kind of freedom through a domiciliary confinement programme.

At the same time, Rebel did not blame anyone or anything for his destiny. This is how things went and they could not have gone any other way. Apart from the incongruities of his murder narration, I never registered any sorrow or shame in Rebel's discourse. In one way, this very much corresponded to the ethos of the tattoo he had on his left hand of three black dots in a triangle, symbolizing the *mara*, death and prison: the only three fields within which a *marero* can place himself. On the other hand, Rebel's life history also testified to an existential horizon that seemed to transcend these elements. Beyond the mythology of the gang, through his narration Rebel showed that he possessed other reference points – family, education, work – and aspirations, including, in particular, the possibility – despite all – of living a new and different life. Rebel looked forward to his future with cautious optimism. Whether his optimism was warranted, and whether he can build this alternative future, is another question, but leaving my academic stance aside for a moment, I will just hope that he is right and that he will be successful.

Notes

1 By 'social housing', I am referring to groups of houses owned by the Lombardy Region or the Municipality of Milan that are allocated to people in need through special calls for applications. In Milan, the Lombardy Region manages about 35,000 social housing units through the Aler company. The Municipality of Milan, on the other hand, manages about 23,000 dwellings through the MM company. See Cognetti and Padovani (2018) and Immaginariesplorazioni (2012).

2 I will use 'gang' and 'street group' interchangeably in this chapter, although traditionally, 'gang' is a term generally used by media, the authorities, as well as youth themselves, while 'street group' is more of an academic construction aimed at avoiding criminalizing and stigmatizing interpretations of the complex social phenomenon that is a 'gang' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004).

3 All names have been changed to protect the subjects' anonymity and security.

4 The word '*mara*' is used to denote gangs in Central America; a '*marero*' is a gang member.

5 All translations from Spanish and Italian into English are my own.

6 See respectively https://www.upf.edu/web/transgang and https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.

7 In all of these works, the researchers manage to develop deep relationships with their interlocutors that have allowed them to access their intimate symbolic universes.

8 An *oratorio* is a juvenile centre connected to a Catholic Church.

9 See https://www.codiciricerche.it/it/.
10 A method of enforcement of detention, provided for by Law 354/1975, which mitigates the deprivation of liberty.
11 Since 2019, through a series of states of emergency and mass incarcerations, the Salvadorian President Nayib Bukele appears to have curbed the violence associated with the *maras*.

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Figure 5.1 Fish or weed? Belmopan, Belize, 2022.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 5

Blood, Deportee, Dealer, Carer: The life and Times of a Belizean Gang Member

Adam Baird

Introduction

This is the story of 'Shorty', a pseudonym that he chose himself in reference to his height. Shorty is a diminutive, dark-skinned Creole man born in Belize City of mixed African, European and possibly Mayan descent. He was born in 1978 and was forty-three years old when I last interviewed him in 2022 at his home in Belmopan, the village-like Belizean capital city of just 15,000 people. His is not an uncommon story in this part of the world. He migrated to Los Angeles as a nine-year-old, escaping dire socio-economic circumstances, moving to a poor gang-affected neighbourhood in the South Central district of the city, ending up in the 'Rollin' 20s', a 'Blood' colours gang, embarking on a life of crime. He was caught, sentenced and upon release deported back to Belize in 2003 as an 'illegal alien'. He re-entered Los Angeles illegally almost immediately, was apprehended again in 2005 and 're-deported' after serving a further seven-year stint behind bars in California. He then served time at Belize Central Prison between 2015 and 2019 for illegal firearms possession, which was his last time in jail. Following release, he moved to Belmopan.

Belize is a small country of some 400,000 people located in Central America, but with its long coastline it is also both geographically and culturally part Caribbean. I first went there in 2011 expecting a tourist paradise and was shocked by the stories of intense gang violence. The country had gone through a traumatic homicide boom between 1999 and 2000, placing it on a par with the notorious Northern Triangle countries of Central America, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as surpassing Mexico's homicide rates. This was driven by a kaleidoscope of 'Blood' and 'Crip' gangs that had rapidly proliferated on the impoverished Southside of Belize City, set up by deported Belizeans from US iterations of these 'colors'[1] gangs that began arriving in the early 1980s. This history is covered extensively in my book *From South Central to Southside* (Baird 2024). As is often

the case when gang violence grips, it has not receded significantly since. The tide came in and refused to go out again.

I first interviewed Shorty in November 2016, in Belize Central Prison. He tended to speak performatively. Such was his masculine *braggadocio* (Baird 2020b) that he leaned into the voice recorder on my phone to make sure it caught his opening line: 'My name is [Shorty] an' I am the *Prince* of the Rollin' 20s. *Everybody* know who I am' [his emphasis]. He insisted I take photos of his one-hundred-point-plus rap sheet, the Pre-Sentence Investigation report or PSI, confirming his stories and '*gangsta*' status. It turned out to be an invaluable source of information, and a means of triangulating the stories he told me about his life, both in 2016 and in 2022, when I was able to re-interview him as part of a global and collective ethnographic research project on gangs, the ERC GANGS project.[2] This chapter offers a ranging chronological tale of Shorty's life, beginning with his early years in Belize and then Los Angeles, followed by his '(re)deportation', his move to Belmopan, followed by an analysis of his current status of 'hustling without harm'. Some concluding thoughts are followed by a brief 'Coda' section, deliberately left as a cliff-hanger so as not to 'fix' Shorty in time, but rather, to highlight that his precarious life is ongoing, and that he does not 'exist' simply because he has been written about.

Early years

Shorty was born in 1978 in Belize City. His Belizean father was a mechanic and small-time weed dealer who moved to Los Angeles, dying of an alcohol abuse-related stomach ulcer in 1993. He has two brothers and a further half-brother and half-sister. When he was two years old his mother migrated to the United States, leaving the children behind. She left because her new partner, the father of Shorty's half-sister, had been beating her, so Shorty lived with his biological father. According to his aunt's statement in the PSI, he and his siblings were 'abandoned' by their mother, and subsequently suffered abuse.

Shorty then moved in with his grandmother, still in Belize City. However, the grandmother was overwhelmed caring for a number of other children, so he was regularly left to his own devices unsupervised on the streets; Shorty said that he often had to find food for himself and did not have enough clothes to wear. Eventually, in 1987 after a seven-year hiatus in Los Angeles, his mother returned and took Shorty and his siblings back to California with her. In his own words, he said, 'I was in the States for twenty-seven years, an' I grew up in the Rollin' 20s. I was born in Belize City, I left here in '87. My mother came and got us, all five of her children and took us to the States.' Shorty was nine at the time and could not remember his mother when she came to get him. He felt forsaken by her, a grudge he holds to this day. When he arrived in Los Angeles, he also spent time living with his father who had since moved there. Although his father would give him money and housed him, he was an alcoholic and largely absent.

Shorty resisted talking about his childhood in detail because it had clearly been traumatic. I never found out details of the abuse, but physical and sexual violence suffered by children on Southside is widespread (Gayle et al. 2016). My own research details how many young men in gangs on Southside had been raped repeatedly as children, then in adolescence many hustled as gigolos to get by. Approximately 90 per cent of schoolgirls said they had exchanged sex for food, money, mobile phones and even taxi rides (Baird 2024: 114–24). At the same time, Shorty's 'demons'[3] came to the surface mainly when he talked about his mother, while he often became melancholic when talking about his father.

Shorty is old enough to remember the times before asphalt streets were laid downtown in Belize City, times before the Bloods and Crips appeared. There was still street violence involving youth groups called 'Base Boys', who sold weed on corners (bases), but this was rarely lethal. 'It was areas [that fought], but it was just Northside and Southside back then, it was just two sides … and the ground was clay. Wasn't no concrete', he said. It is worth remembering that in the 1980s the Bloods and Crips had only just begun to appear in Belize (Muhammad 2015; Warnecke-Berger 2017; Baird 2021), so he would have seen the beginnings of their influence as a child before migrating. I asked him about how he ended up joining the Bloods:

Shorty: Where we lived in Los Angeles, 39th between Benker [inaudible] and Normandie [South Central, just south of Pico Union], it's a Bloods block called Rolland Curtis, where all the Belizeans was Bloods … One day I went to the store with my brand new bike. The Crips took my bike. I went to the Belizeans and they took me back to beat the boy up, hold him, I beat him up, took my bike back. Next day he try to run me and my momma over in a G-ride.

Adam: A what?

Shorty: A G-ride, a stolen car … anyway, the motherfucker tried to run me an' my motha over, an' uh, he didn't succeed. I find my little.25 [gun] an' I buss on his bitch ass.

Adam: Did you get him?

Shorty: No, I din' get him. That motherfucker went to jail like six weeks later, killed a man … he wuz like my nemenenis, nemanasis, how you say it?

Adam: Nemesis.

Shorty: Nemesis. That motherfucker like Darth Vader an' I'm a like Luke Skywalker …. He two years younger than me at school an' he pushed my little sister, an' I beat his ass. An' he couldn't forget it. When he took my bike he thought that it was gonna be over, but the war start … So because of that fight I became a gangbanger, because the Belizeans took me to show me to be strong, I was strong after that day. They gave me a gun an' I was stronger. Then I bought my own gun an' I became a boss. Then I move out my momma house an' I went to live with my aunty, an' Shorty start to be a gangbanger … I was twelve in 1990, thirteen in '91.

Adam: So when you pulled out the twenty-five when the guy tried to run you an' your mum over, how old were you then?
Shorty: Eleven [in 1989].
Adam: What?! … A twenty-five, that's a .25 gun?
Shorty: A gun yes … coz when the guy took my bike, I couldn't leave the block no more, coz I lived on the block in the 30s neighbourhood, an' we couldn't leave the block anyway we want to [due to adjacent Crip territory]. They gave me the gun after the guy took my bike.
Adam: Really?
Shorty: Yes! I was eleven.
Adam: Jesus, man!
Shorty: But then I learn on my own, cuz I see my momma strugglin' with five kids … an' her husban' left her as soon as she got here … One sister an' four boys, five of us … When we got to the house, there's one phone, one furniture, an' a bed, no frame. Five kids.
Adam: Where d'you sleep?
Shorty: My Daddy came an' got me the same night, cuz my mother married a Jamaican [another man]. He was a bookie [gambling], he was a mechanic, an' he sold weed. He died in 1993 when I was fifteen. Er, ulcer, drinkin'.
Adam: Was he in a gang?
Shorty: Hell no! My dad was old. He was forty-four when he had me … He was the best person ever … but he didn't like my mother … She said 'if you gonna take him take all of them' an' he said 'no I'm gonna take mine'. An' he didn't like her no more …

Shorty's father, allegedly, had only had one sexual encounter with Shorty's mother and she became pregnant. When Shorty was two days old, his mother knocked on his father's door, Shorty raps on the table to imitate knocking on door: 'There you go, yo' son!' [mother asking for maintenance money] An' my Daddy hated my mother ever since. But the more hate that he had for her, he gave me more love.'

Adam: So he took care of you?
Shorty: No. He just gave me money, he didn't really take care of me, he just gave me money. An' I could do anything. When I go to jail, he ain't even mad … my Daddy be like 'you all right? What happened?' I said, 'my bad', an' he accept me. He done give me a thousand dollars an' dropped me off at my momma's house …
Adam: But did he realize when you were eleven that you had a .25 [gun]?
Shorty: Well … my Daddy bought me a BB gun. Look like a real gun. So I would use this BB gun an' go an' do dumb shit. So one day I went to do some dumb shit an' they shot at us an' I couldn't shoot back, an' that's when I got a real gun, because I had lost the first twenty-five the Belizeans gave me on Rolland Curtis. When I got to [my] twenties I started buying me 32s an' 9s, 405s. I had a lotta guns coz my homie used to give us guns to protect our neighbourhoods. An' they was rich! [Blood leaders] was donating

> US$10,000 to the NAACP [The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] an' when I found out I was like 'Yo! We need some of that money!' an' they start doing it though me, because I grew up there since I was young …

Shorty's story is not atypical of Belizean migrants or other gang life histories (see Miller Matthei 1998). Poverty, hardship, domestic abuse, parenting characterized by instability, 'abandoned' by his mother, his father dabbling in weed dealing, giving Shorty a BB gun as a child and effectively acquiesced to his run-ins with the law, even giving him money after one arrest … This clearly facilitated his entanglement with the local Bloods, 'the Belizeans', he said, othering them in third person to signal his own 'Americanness', something he reaffirmed throughout our interviews.

Shorty's ganglands, in both Los Angeles and Belize City are harsh settings where 'chronic vulnerability', the long-term absence of legal and dignified opportunities, helps gangs flourish (Baird 2019; Baird 2020a; Baird et al. 2022). This brings me to contemporary philosopher William MacAskill (2022: 46) and his theorization of 'contingency', which 'represents the extent to which a state of affairs depends on a small number of specific actions. If something is very contingent, then that change would not have otherwise occurred for a very long time, or ever'. MacAskill is discussing the likelihood of certain past events occurring and our capacity to shape the future, an articulation of structure and agency debates. Each gang member's life history is individual. The question is, to what extent are trajectories into gangs *contingent* upon the conditions of the social terrains where gangs emerge? Arguably, pathways into gangs are highly *contingent* upon the conditions of said social terrains. Decisions (agency) that lead individuals into gangs may be chance or fluke, but the chances of this occurring are hugely increased by context (structure).

Take Shorty's bike story. On another day, he would not have ridden to said location, would not have had his bike stolen, would not have contacted 'the Belizeans', had the kid beaten up, who then would not have attempted to run him and his mother over, and Shorty would not have sourced a gun and tried to shoot him, which paved his way into gang life. Considered alone, these are an unlikely and unique chain of events leading to gang life. Yet they were heavily contingent upon the ganglands where they played out, Shorty's whole world at the time. The next question to ask is whether Shorty would have ended up joining the Bloods if the bike incident never occurred? Of course, it is impossible to say, but given his home, upbringing and that he grew up in the middle of a Belizean gang territory in Los Angeles, the bike incident is likely to be *non-contingent* in Shorty's eventual entry into the gang. In short, if it wasn't the bike, eventually it would have been something else.

An accumulation of personal, domestic and social factors can generate a subjective or 'masculine vulnerability' (Baird 2025) that leads boys into gangs when these chance events occur. This is an academic interpretation of the notion

of 'at-risk' youths, but said accumulation is often high in poor gang-saturated neighbourhoods. These settings are existentially *contingent* for gangs, meaning the happenstance 'stolen bike' type stories we see in life histories that trigger boys and young men to join gangs will likely occur sooner or later. On the other hand, this means it is far less likely to happen in wealthier gang-free neighbourhoods. The outstanding dilemma here is that *most* young men living in ganglands *do not* join gangs, despite these highly contingent settings. Here, collecting and comparing life histories such as Shorty's and others in this volume can potentially provide some answers to this critical question.

(Re)deportation

What followed Shorty's entry point into the gang was a steady 'career'. He said he had been selling drugs all his life and his rap sheet laid this out. In 1994, at the age of fifteen, he was arrested for murder, robbery and attempted murder, but the charges for murder were eventually dismissed due to insufficient evidence. In 1996, when he was seventeen, he was arrested for robbery when he was caught battering someone with a metal rod. In early 1997, he was arrested variously for live ammunition and firearms possession, robbery, carjacking and in December that same year, the LAPD arrested Shorty for being 'a felon in possession of a handgun'. As his PSI describes:

> Officers were patrolling an area known for the sale of narcotics by Rollin' 20s gang members. [Shorty] saw the officers, threw down a clear plastic bag on to the ground, and ran through an alley. The officers chased him. They recovered the plastic bag, which contained numerous rocks of cocaine. As [Shorty] was running, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handgun, which he threw through a glass window that broke on impact. [Shorty] slowed down and was taken into custody. Officers recovered the handgun inside an apartment. It was fully loaded and ready to be fired. The resident refused to give any information, fearing retaliation from Rollin' 20s gang members. At the police station, [Shorty] stated that his girlfriend was pregnant, she already had another baby, his rent was $525, and he was 'just trying to sell some rock and make some money for (his) family'.

The stories continue in that ilk until he was imprisoned for two and a half years in 1998, following which he went through the deportation process and was sent back to Belize in August 2003. Shorty did not stay long and immediately planned his return to Los Angeles, heading back via Mexico in March 2004, but by January 2005 he had been re-arrested for an outstanding marijuana dealing warrant and a new cocaine dealing conviction. His PSI lists Shorty's reasoning for returning so quickly to the United States:

> [Shorty] returned to the US when his son's mother died last year. He will 'always be there for his son' [Shorty's words]. [He] is not able 'to give his son what he needs if he is far away'. [He] does not want his son to be without parents the way [he] was. He talks to his son often and tells him to be patient … Offence level increased by 16 levels as he was previously deported for a drug trafficking conviction.

Shorty's PSI was somewhat confusing about what happened afterwards. It notes that he received an initial sentence of 850 days, following which he was held at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility while being 'processed for removal from the United States', and eventually deported for a second time in 2011. I tried to understand better how this rather confused process had actually taken place:

Adam: So what did it feel like coming back? How come you got deported in the end if you've done bits and pieces of time before [in US prison]?

Shorty: Because when the feds came in there they wanted me to tell on somebody [become an informant]. I fought 'em … they put me to jail first and I was in the glasshouse … a tunnel of fears. And they let me out, I went to my house and they raid my house.

Adam: What they tricked you?

Shorty: Yeah, to see if I was gonna do crazy shit, like dig up the guns [to reveal where his illegal guns were] … but I already got deported and I went back, so they had that over me. But Shorty Junior's [his son's] momma had just died, she died of sickle-cell …

Adam: So then finally they sent you back, right? The ICE jus' take you straight from the prison and put you straight on the plane?

Shorty: No, no. I did seven years in the feds [prison] for crossing the border and six months for hitting the police.

Adam: You punched the police in the face?

Shorty: When the officer was interrogating me I wasn't talkin', so he slammed the fuckin' table 'I'm talkin' to you young man!' and I just fuckin' flinched [started to swing]. So they give me six months for that and they give me seven years for crossin' the border. Sixty-five months.

Adam: How'd you cross the border, you went up through Mexico [when he returned in 2004]?

Shorty: Yeah, I went to Cancun, went to Juarez, from Juarez to Tijuana, and my wife was there. My daughter's mother was there to pick me up with a Mexican girl in the car and they crossed me over. I have my ID and everything. I only stayed for six months, 2003, then I went to jail 2005, when I went to court, an' they kept me in court for child custody, for Shorty Junior. I went to jail for seven years after that from 2005 to 2011.

Adam: Seven years just for crossing the border?!

Shorty: Jus' for crossing the border. Six months for the assault. Six months for beating up the two police [his PSI shows he also received time for marijuana and cocaine dealing]. They fucked me up but I beat them up I say, coz they was two against one. I was chasing one and took the mace from him and I pepper sprayed his bitch ass and I kicked the other one. I was big tho, I was doin push-ups, I was real big. Plus dey was both shorter than me and they was Mexicans. And I don't like Mexicans so I '*buss up their rass*' [using Belizean Creole]. They had to bring the whole goon squad to come stop me.

Adam: If you cross illegally I thought they just send you back straight away, right?

Shorty: Nah, not me. I'm high profile, I'm the Prince of the Rollin' 20s. They been tryin' to get me.

Adam: So they been trying to get you for a long time …

Shorty: They get me for anything. I went to jail for everything except rape.

Adam: Did they get you for homicide?

Shorty: Er, yeah, you will see it in there [charges for murder and attempted murder later dismissed] That's a PSI [hands author rap sheets]. It's yo' all history. I got forty-eight points I think [ranking for conviction].

Although Shorty was born and spent his early childhood years in Belize City, the vast majority of his living memory up to that point was based in the United States. He felt American and spoke to me with an American accent, only reverting to Creole to talk to his uncle. His whole story is in fact littered with references which disparage Belizean gangs, society and politics in general, and he often calls Belizeans 'ignorant'. Understandably then, after his first deportation in 2004 he was keen to return. He had a handful of family contacts in Belize City, but he barely knew them. His mother had just died in Los Angeles, his father had since passed on and he was leaving his young son behind in Los Angeles. This is the double punishment of deportation, not only did he serve his time, but the family consequences were severe. Deportation meant his entire life was uprooted and dropped into Belize City, a hyper-violent context where he had no realistic opportunities for find work given his convictions, tattoos and the fact that decent work is extremely hard to come by regardless. The trauma of these events weighs heavily on Shorty, so much so that despite the dire consequences of extended jail time if he is caught, he dreams of going back to the United States. Interestingly, his main motivations were his children rather than the rest of his extended family there:

Adam: Do you miss them [his extended family in the United States]?

Shorty: No. Don't miss nobody but my kids. Fuck 'em if I'm a miss a motherfucker that don't miss me. I know some part of my kids they miss me, they miss they Daddy. They [his extended family] jus' start gangbanging in 2015, 2016, 2017. An' they all in jail for murder already …

Adam: So, the thing with your case is you can't go back with this on your shoulders.
Shorty: I need to get disguised … so when I go back they won't try to hold me or nutin' like that. My oldest son, he's twenty-two about to be twenty-three. He's in prison. That's Shorty Junior … [doing] three years.
Adam: So how do you manage the relationship with your family over in the States whilst you're here if you can't go back?
Shorty: Um, they mad at me [for getting deported].
Adam: They mad at you?
Shorty: What the *fuck* can I do? Can't fight no government. I didn't tell [snitch]. Y'all should be happy about that, now they got their good name [shows picture of daughter on phone] That's my daughter, she's eighteen.
Adam: Man, she's pretty!
Shorty: Yeah, she just finished school.
Adam: Have your kids been over here to visit you?
Shorty: No. I don't want them to come. I don't want my kids in this country.
Adam: Why not? Is it too rough for them?
Shorty: No, it's not that, it's just that. I don't care for this country like that. I don't care for my kids to be in here. They could come [on holiday] but I don't want to be around them, I don't want nobody to know my kids.
Adam: You want to keep them safe, to protect them?
Shorty: Yeah, yeah … they not in the game, only little Shorty [Junior] is. Little motherfucker …
Adam: But you were in a position of power [to protect them]?
Shorty: I had the power. I still have the power … yeah, real talk. Nobody could mess with me at the time …

Shorty's discourse about his US-based family is full of contradictions, but nevertheless highlights both the difficult conditions in which they live in the United States, his complicated relationship with them, including his children, and the enduring pain of separation. It is significant that, realizing he had let his guard slip and that he could not care and protect his children, Shorty finished up with the status reassertion, 'I still have the power'.

Going to Belmopan

Shorty's life in Los Angeles had continuity to it, selling drugs and gangbanging. He only began to change after his second deportation in 2011. To this day, Shorty identifies as a Los Angeles Rollin' 20s Blood and disassociates himself from gangs in Belize City who are 'not real Bloods'. He clings to former glories, a source of identity and esteem. Part of his life changes were brought about by a rejection of Belizean Bloods' values, behaviour and anomic 'crazy' violence. His 'Prince' status from Los Angeles – if true – did not give him automatic authority over

the Bloods in Southside Belize City. He strategized to stay alive, putting distance between himself and the city, telling me that a lot of deportees had been killed. Arguably, if Blood norms and behaviours in Belize were closer to those of the Rollin' 20s in Los Angeles, Shorty would likely have set up shop as a bona fide Blood in Southside. That is speculation though, and there are other reasons he got out. He was ageing and dreamt of staying alive so he could be with his children in the United States:

> Shorty: [After being deported in 2011] I went to Belize City where I got caught with my gun coz I was living back at Kings Port [in the city]. So then I went to jail an' I say, 'you know what, I'm not messin' with Belize'. People love me [in Belize City] but I won't socialize with them coz I know for a fact that they wouldn't hesitate to kill me, coz I'm a Blood. But Bloods didn't kill Bloods where I come from … but when I came here they did it the wrong way … To come to a country an' see someone with a two zero [a Rollin' 20s tattoo] on their arm an' they shooting at another gang that is two zero, it don't add up to me … Because gangbanging is not a gang-banging thing no more. See, I'm not a gangbanger, *I'm a representative of a gang* [his emphasis] an' that's the difference … [Belizean gangs are] not gangs, they youts. Because the gang is organized … an they from the same gang, they killin' each other … They are young, I'm older than them guys. When I came to Belize [City] in 2003, *all them little ni**az was on my dick* [his emphasis]. When I came back 2011, they killin' an runnin' shit. They never disrespect me, they jus' treated me like 'hey Shorty!' But if you killin' yo own kind I don't respect you … If you don't got nothin' for them, then they be like 'ni**a, I gonna kill his ass tonight. That dude is dead'. 'Why?' 'Cuz he didn't give me no $5 of weed for free'. 'What?! Why you kill him for that?' 'I don' know, I felt like it ni**a. Fuck that shit, it happen already. That ni**a don't give me $5 dollaz o weed'.
>
> Adam: And that sort of thing happens?
>
> Shorty: *All-the-motha'-fuckin'-time* [his emphasis]. There's a lot of homies here … a lotta deportees have died, coming from Los Angeles … When I first came in 2011, April 30th, I distanced myself. I see the groups, I see the violence, an I decide to get me a gun. I ain't never shot nobody with my gun. I ain't never robbed nobody with my gun. I kept it in the house for protection, but the [police] officers decide I was flossin', they didn't like my style, an' they came to my house an' find my gun an' send me to jail for five years.

Shorty has spent approximately half of his life in jail, mostly in the United States. When he went to jail for the first time in Belize in 2013 for illegal firearms possession, he was asked for US$10,000 to pay off the judge but said that even though he had the money – which I found hard to believe – he decided not to.

Shorty: Now, when I went to jail, I came to know a calibre of dude, but to be honest with you, they ni**az are psychopaths … you can't trust nobody in this country. The country itself is untrustable. An the youts, I don't blame them [for being violent] because that's what people do in this country, an' that's why we have the attitude we have now as Belizeans. Coz we like some bulls, soon as you brand us we gonna kick … There's a lotta people in this country that allow themselves to be killers, gun men. An' I don't blame them because it's a struggle, the government themselves have put them in that position where they have to do what they have to do to survive, to eat. They have kids, they mother don't work, social don't pay nothin'. *This country is a downfall to its own downfallness* [his emphasis]. Because of the greed, those who on top, only wanna keep stayin' on top. Those on the bottom will remain there if they don't make up their mind an' do somethin' … Now I don't live like that, I try to be better than my own environment. [In Belmopan I do not] gangbang, this is not something I took lightly. I live here, I watch, an' I a observe, an' I don't knock nobody for doing what they do, but don't come around me [gangbanging] because I stay in my own lane … I don't fuck with nobody no …

Adam: Well and also you are older now, right? You're out of Belize City, you're up here, you got your space. It's like you changed your life quite a lot?

Shorty: I got seven kids, five in the States an' two here. Shorty Junior's in jail, my other son he's doing ok, right, an' my daughter just graduated from high school going to college. I'm still in touch with them. My twins, erm, they're ok?

Shorty was clearly long-in-the-tooth for the streets. He mentioned how young new gang members are and he wanted to be a present father. Yet having been a gun-carrier since the age of eleven, he now could not live without guns, especially considering the insecurity he felt in Belize, his reputation and visible tattoos marking him out. Unsurprisingly, it was illegal firearms possession that had landed him in Belize Central Prison. And perhaps not surprisingly as well, considering his complaints, fears and aspirations, Shorty also decided to physically leave Belize City, give up 'gangbanging' and relocate to Belmopan, which is where I met him again in 2022.

Hustling without harm

Belmopan is small but heavily policed as the political capital hosting the international community. On my arrival in 2022, I WhatsApped Shorty to arrange a meet. He was working the corner of a traffic light junction with three other men who struck me as somewhere between gangsta and indigent, particularly one older man in his fifties who turned out to be Shorty's uncle. I asked Shorty about the cooler of fish he was hawking to cars pulling up at the lights. He laughed, saying 'I

don't really sell fish, I sell weed', lifting up a fish to show me several zip-locked bags underneath. He would later tell me that he had not had a formal job since 1993 because of his criminal record.

After a beer on the corner watching Shorty sell 'fish' it was getting late and he invited me back to his house with his uncle, a ten minute walk away. It looked dilapidated from the outside and the roof was rotting. Inside it was a good size, and Shorty had acquired a prison habit of keeping the place tidy. He told me that he had separated from his last girlfriend whom he had a baby boy with. She had moved in with four of her other children which he could not handle or afford, so after a few months he 'kicked her out'. She lives in a different town, and Shorty told me he sends maintenance money regularly, yet sees his son irregularly. We sat in his living room and Shorty began to sort small BZ$20 (US$10) bags of weed from one large Ziploc bag, the front door wide open for business, signalling to his regulars.

A steady trickle of customers arrived. It was all very relaxed, lackadaisical Belizean style. Many stopped for a chat, some hung out to smoke a joint and one even drove me back to my hotel afterwards. Shorty was an affable and professional dealer. He only smoked a little weed considering I was there for a few hours; we got a take-out 'chicken n' rice' and drank beer. In the background he had YouTube playing on the TV, wildlife documentaries about lions, and, to my surprise, a lot of Country & Western music, 'I love that shit,' he said. Shorty wasn't broke, but he was certainly not wealthy either. His was a day-to-day existence.

We went on to discuss the changes in his life since his last period in Belize Central Prison. His was not a radical transformation, rather his decisions had led him to become what could be labelled the 'friendly community weed dealer'. I saw this side of him clearly when one young lady came in that evening looking sheepish. It turned out she did not have BZ$20 for a bag of weed, but Shorty gave her a break and they were both all smiles by the end of the exchange.

Adam: [To young lady] Evenin'!
Young lady: [To Adam] Evenin'! [To Shorty] Dis is all I have today [puts coins on table].
Shorty: *What da fuck is dis?* [his emphasis]
Young Lady: Thass tree dollaz.
Shorty: You can't be coming in here with mothafuckin' three dollaz, bitch.
Young Lady: Today I don't have BZ$20, today iss jus' not there.
Adam: [To Young Lady] Three dollars?
Young Lady: [To Adam] Yeah, I'm s'posed to be one of his regulars.
Shorty: How much weed you gonna get for tree dollaz man? I'm gonna give it to you tho [hands over a surprisingly large amount of weed]
Young Lady: [Giggles] Bye Shorty, thank you!
Shorty: Yah, thank you!
Young Lady: Bless up!
Shorty: Yo yo.

I went on to ask Shorty about the differences between dealing drugs in the United States and in Belmopan to understand how he might have changed:

Adam: Do you just sell weed, or cocaine or anything else like in the States? (sic)

Shorty: It's something I don't fuck with now [hard drugs]. When I was in the States, I sold dope all my life and I watched my best friend's momma fall victim. An' they lookin' at me like 'damn Shorty … you sellin' my people stuff. An' I'm like ok, an' I stop selling dope an' I'm a buy weed an' I'm gonna sell weed forever. An' I never stopped selling weed since the age thirteen. Alcohol is toxic, but weed, it's a herb ting … Coz weed is an easy drug to maintain to tell you the truth.

Adam: So why did you take that decision? You know, you said 'stay in your lane', to stay back a bit. Is that to like kinda keep yourself safe? Or is it because you're getting older and you're tired of the bullshit?

Shorty: In this country you can't trust nobody, so I stay away. I only got five people in my group. An' with five people I try to interact with every day. Now when I'm out there I got my head down, my hopes high, an' I don't talk to nobody …

Adam: Is that like a strategy to keep going?

Shorty: In this type a age now, you can't just have a ni**a hangin' with you, coz you don't know what a guy done. He mighta kill somebody last night, come here and hang with you, and they comin' for him … and if they can't find him they gonna hit you. That's the way that is.

Adam: Like a strategy to stay safe, so nothing happens to you? I mean, Shorty, I would see you as a survivor.

Shorty: I *am* a survivor. *I stay the fuck out of the limelight,* in my own world [his emphasis].

Adam: Have you lost many friends since you've been here?

Shorty: Since I been here? I lost two homeboys. Got killed one week apart from each other. One lived with me and the other one was having sex with a George Street [Blood] guy's wife. An' he went to his brother's funeral, the wake, they killed him right there. But he's so stupid, yeah because, why would you go there and have a meeting with some people you can't trust. But I loved my homeboy, I wish he woulda did it differently … and he died. Shot him in his neck.

I asked Shorty about his life as a low-level, community dealer, how he was getting on, if it was enough to sustain him and still give some money to his ex-girlfriend for his new baby son. He said he got by fine but lamented continual police extortion:

Shorty: The police used to tax me. This is a police fuckin' city, they fuck with you … Business [selling weed] is never bad, it's just bad when the police

come coz they want to extort. The police got guns [seized from gangs] that they reissue, they sell them [back to gangs]. It's a recycle …

Adam: It just seems like the police be taxing all the time, right?

Shorty: That's all they do. Every day. Every minute. Every second. Dem some chancy [corrupt] motherfuckers here.

Adam: Police dem chancy, that was TY's song! *Police Dem Chancy* [a well-known song in Belize].[4]

Shorty: That's why I got my camera now [CCTV outside his home], so dem motherfuckers don't come. Coz last time they broke my back door, that's BZ$280 … An' I just got my bathroom remodelled … and they just broke all my tiles in there, the shower part, so I have to get it all done over … They come in my house when I wasn't there. My neighbours call an' tell me the police is in my house [looking for drugs and money]

Adam: But they doin' this for extortion, right?

Shorty: Uh huh [yes], I'm Shorty and I'm a [high profile] person. They know who I am, they watch me for anyting I do, it's like a high priority for them, and they read my fuckin' file. They know who I am an' what I'm about.

The police did not find Shorty's stash of weed and I did not ask him where he hid it, but I assumed he had a lot more than the large Ziploc bag on the living room table. He complained bitterly as I mulled the irony of installing CCTV so he wouldn't be robbed, by the police.

What struck me most about my last encounter with Shorty, however, was that he had become a carer for his uncle with special needs. His uncle was milling around in the background for the whole interview, apart from when he went out to get the food. And although Shorty did not seem over the moon to be taking care of him, he did:

Shorty: Uncle [shouting and speaking very slowly, using hand gestures] YOU EAT ALREADY? YOU WANNA EAT? YOU EAT ALREADY? EAT? EAT?

Uncle: [undecipherable mumble, but Shorty understood him. He had not eaten].

Shorty: Yeah, yeah, come. TWO CHICKEN AN' RICE. CHICKEN AN' RICE. CHICKEN AN' RICE … GET TWO BEER AND TWO STOUT. TWO BEER, TWO STOUT. AN' A DOLLA CIGARETTE …

Uncle: Tuuu beeaa waan stouuu …

Shorty: Yeah. AN' A CIGARETTE. AN BUY THE CHICKEN. $7.50 CHICKEN. $7.50 CHICKEN. $7.50 … GET DA BIKE!

There was a harshness the way he spoke to his uncle, but he clearly felt responsible for him, fed him, made sure he was ok. It dawned on me sitting in his living room that on balance Shorty had become an extremely positive local community member. He sold weed, a common, socially-acceptable and low-harm drug, the personal possession of small amounts since decriminalized. His living room was

an after-work drop-in centre, he had rapport with his clients some of whom were obviously friends, and to cap it off, he was carer to his uncle. This 'civic' Shorty was juxtaposed with the *braggadocio* presentation of his gangsta past, and the language of 'bitches', 'hoes' and 'whores', although much of this was without doubt an unsubtle performance-to-the-researcher.

Whilst Shorty has not gone through a complete transformation, he has clearly mellowed. Gone was his appetite for the cut-and-thrust of gangbanging and it was evident that he did not want to spend more time in jail where repeat convictions imply steeply increased sentencing. He had developed a specialization selling weed over decades of experience and was simply carrying on in the absence of realistic employment possibilities. 'Hustling without harm', I jotted down in my field notes at the time. He was still a quixotic character. Whilst he had left gangs behind, he still clung to his identity as a 'Prince' of the Rollin' 20s. But this came across as nostalgia facing a less glorious future of daily grind. He knew this, which is probably why he talked up his past life so much, as the limelight it afforded him gradually slipped through his fingers. I left wondering if being 'civic' Shorty would bolster his esteem enough to fill the void.

Conclusions

Shorty has become more reflective as he has aged. Although he was a little stoned and we were three beers in, he made his first overtly political comments about poverty driving young men into gangs in Belize during our interview in 2022:

> Shorty: I'm saying we can overthrow this government. I'm not saying no bad vendetta, I'm jus saying with the votes, we can overcome. But no, [gangs] don't do that, they wanna kill each other and don't have nothin to eat …
> Adam: I'm glad you brought this up. I've been thinking, where's the revolution?
> Shorty: They don't have that fuckin' spark. They never went somewhere where they learn what the fuckin dynamics of life is, the race thing, the poverty thing.

Seen from this perspective, Shorty's decision to move to Belmopan was not a precise 'life stage', one of the 'totalizing transformations that move people from one named status to another' (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 865). It was more an accumulation of pressures that forced his decision-making, it was above all a survival strategy: stay alive, avoid jail, sell weed, provide for a child, support an uncle, maintain a home, forge community relations, make new friends, using ingenuity and technology to avoid costly run-ins with the police.

It is not surprising that Shorty continued to sell weed. It is his trade, in which he is an expert. With tattoos, a criminal gang past, crushing poverty and the witheringly high unemployment rate, what else could he realistically do to make a living? He

is now stuck in a legal grey-zone where sales are criminal but personal possession is not. Dealing created a deep connection to his neighbourhood, maybe his role as a community hub was serendipitous, but at the same time no one saw him as a ferocious gangbanger. Post-gang masculine status reduction affected him deeply, clearly one reason why he promoted his US Blood history that no one seemed to care about but him. Notes of desperation sometimes inflected Shorty's interviews as he fought the emasculation of status decline after life in the gang. It may be patronizing, but as I left his house that evening in Belmopan part of me felt sorry for him.

In a less-than-conscious way, though, Shorty was off-setting the decline of his gangsta status through his position as the friendly community weed supplier. He is clearly quite pleased with this role. His living room has become a drop-in centre, and his clients have become his friends. 'Come, sit, let's smoke a joint together and chit-chat', as he put it. And he took care of his uncle, highlighting how if he did not, he would be 'homeless'. Perhaps a more humanizing way to think of Shorty today, then, is as a 'reformed community dealer'. But ultimately, what his life trajectory points to is the need for individuals to maintain a sense of self-esteem throughout their lives in order to survive, but that this self-esteem can be achieved in a range of different ways, even by gang members.

Coda

Before leaving Shorty that day in 2022, I asked him one final question:

> Adam: And the future? Get back to the States?
> Shorty: Oh, that's gonna be soon … I get back on my own. I did it before and I can do it again.

Shorty has not responded to my WhatsApp messages as of 2023.

Notes

1 The Bloods and Crips are known as 'color' gangs in the United States because they use red and blue items of clothing as identifiers.
2 See https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.
3 'Demons' in Belize mean rage, anger and violent behaviour connected to individual trauma (see Baird 2024: 115–16).
4 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ2I2X_HCVg.

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Figure 6.1 Gaza gang graffiti, Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya, 2018.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 6

THE HUSTLING ETHICS OF A DRUGS DEALER IN MATHARE, NAIROBI

Naomi van Stapele

Introduction

Kuch proudly donned a Manchester United shirt bearing the name 'Baba Jay' on its back, a homage to his four-year-old son, who strikingly resembled him, before we set out. Navigating through a labyrinth of corrugated iron sheet houses and the muddy alleyways of Mathare, an area of Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, made up of a large agglomeration of poor slums, we eventually reached a pigsty situated precariously on the edge of a cliff, adjacent to a shaky bridge. Below us, a river flowed with murky water, albeit recently cleansed by heavy rain that had washed away the common debris left by the open sewers snaking through the narrow streets of the impoverished neighbourhood. Adjacent to the river, a modest waterfall cascaded, where to my astonishment I saw ten immense pigs revelling in the streaming water. Kuch excitedly explained that these were the mature ones, soon to be sent for slaughter.

Kuch then revealed the pigsty itself, which a member of his gang was reluctantly cleaning. On the other side, a drunk man herded about twenty smaller pigs into a small hut to prevent them from straying amidst the maze-like ghetto while the pigsty was being cleaned. Kuch disclosed that they typically employed alcoholics for such tasks, as they believed cleaning the pigsty was unsuitable for their image as gang members. The gang member currently cleaning was, however, being punished for having lost money selling heroin for Kuch and his gang. Amused, Kuch taunted the vexed young man while pointing him towards the grimy walls.

Kuch, a long-time gang leader in Mathare, has built his reputation and authority over years of involvement in heroin sales. Recently, he has transitioned from being a local gang leader to a drug baron, consolidating his influence within the illicit trade and expanding his operations significantly. Kuch's story provides a lens through which to explore the dynamic and relational nature of authority

in a Nairobi ghetto, particularly as it is constructed, contested and reimagined through what I term 'hustling ethics'. At its core, hustling in Mathare can be seen as a response to precarity – a practice of making-do that ethically sustains and unsettles authority, and more specifically, masculine authority (van Stapele 2025). Central to this exploration is the concept of 'un/doing authority', a framework that views authority as a relational process (Jauregui 2016), whereby different modes of authority are continuously enacted and undone through diverse relational, everyday practices (van Stapele *et al.* 2025).

Kuch's trajectory – from petty theft and mugging to heroin dealing, gang leadership, and eventual entrepreneurship – illuminates the precarious dilemmas and improvised strategies that characterize existence on the margins of society. His negotiations with his peers, heroin bosses and broader social, cultural, economic and political structures demonstrate how his authority is relationally constituted through specific practices, even as it remains vulnerable to rupture and transformation. In particular, by examining his life, we see the key relationship between a hustling ethics and different processes of un/doing masculine authority. As such, through Kuch's story, we glimpse not only the precariousness of survival but also the tenacity, creativity and complexity that define hustling.

Hustling, ethics and un/doing authority

The notion of 'un/doing authority' refers to the process through which competing modes of authority are enacted, challenged and reshaped (van Stapele *et al.* 2025). For Kuch, this manifests, for example, in his ability to assert leadership among football mates by being a drug dealer while resisting drug-dealer stigmatization by providing services to his neighbours. These acts maintain his authority as a young man while challenging predominant forms of moralizing. Drawing on Mattingly's notion of the 'moral laboratory' (2014, 2018) and Zigon's 'anthropology of moralities' (2010, 2014, 2021), this chapter therefore explores how Kuch's habitual and exceptional practices shape his life from an ethical perspective. The notion of the 'moral laboratory' emphasizes trial-and-error, relational dynamics and adaptive responses in precarious contexts. This challenges binaries of compliance and resistance, illustrating how actions – deliberate or improvised – both sustain and unsettle authority and moral orders. Zigon, on the other hand, highlights how moments of rupture force individuals to confront fragility and engage in ethical reflection, reconfiguring moral landscapes and envisioning new pathways.

When paired together, Mattingly's emphasis on ongoing practices and Zigon's focus on crises reveal ethics as existing on a constantly shifting continuum. Mattingly illustrates how persistent uncertainties prompt relational experimentation, while Zigon shows how reflection amplifies during critical junctures, spurring moments of intensified deliberation. Together, they illuminate ethical engagement across scales, from daily decisions to transformative societal responses. Ethical action thus does not merely reproduce moral orders; it is a

transformative process of reconfiguring legitimacy and authority. For Kuch, this interplay between the habitual and the exceptional manifests in how he adapts language, posture and movements, embodying the relational and dynamic nature of moral experimentation. These practices, deeply tied to the precarities of poverty, crime, and violence, highlight how a particular ethics can emerge as a creative response to structural challenges, in this case, a 'hustling ethics'.

In the Kenyan context, the term 'hustling' captures the dynamic interplay between creativity and survival, functioning as a mood, action and condition (Thieme *et al.* 2021). Hustling embodies a relentless pursuit of alternatives to formal structures, demanding constant negotiation between risk and reward, survival and aspiration. While not inherently gendered, hustling in Mathare is deeply intertwined with the performance of masculine authority, particularly for young men operating in conditions of precarity (van Stapele 2021). As this chapter describes, for men like Kuch, hustling ethics are enacted through moral improvisation and experimentation – pragmatic and often ad hoc and embodied actions that align with the moral and aesthetic expectations of their publics. Through these practices, they continuously reconfigure their positions of masculine authority, engaging with and reshaping the ethical and emotional registers of their audiences to navigate ever-shifting moral landscapes.

A born hustler

Kuch was born in the Kosovo slum in Mathare in the late 1980s. He grew up with a single mother and claimed not to know his father (though I later discovered that he knew very well who his father was). Kuch left home at a very young age. During the late 1990s, it was customary for teenage boys between fourteen and sixteen to leave their family homes after undergoing circumcision. Kuch, however, had forced his own circumcision at a much younger age, around eleven. Following the guidance of older boys, he applied a specific plant to his penis, resulting in an infection that necessitated an operation leading to his circumcision. This act of what effectively amounted to self-circumcision deviated from the customary rites of passage and can be seen as an early instance of moral experimentation where Kuch's actions blurred the boundaries between adherence to traditional norms and improvisational resistance, an early enactment of his masculine authority.

From a young age, Kuch aimed to both embody and deviate from the dominant modes of authority. By forcing premature circumcision, his venture into manhood was a hustle, showing himself and his peers his ability to be independent, despite 'his voice having not yet broken', as he put it. Seeking further independence, Kuch moved into his cousin's small, corrugated iron-sheet house after recovering from his operation, sharing a single bed with two other teenage boys. To support himself, he engaged in various odd jobs and income-generating activities common among young boys at the time. He scavenged for nails and other metal items near alcohol distilleries along the riverbanks,

raised rabbits and doves and pilfered food and clothes from hawkers along the main road. Kuch excelled because, as he shared later with me, he 'first acted and thought later'. He showed no fear and always shared his spoils with friends to, as he explained, 'have a backup when he needed support'. Such practices reflect the relational dynamics of ethical life in Mathare where sharing resources serves as both a survival strategy and a way to solidify one's position within a network of trust and reciprocity.

The heroin trade in Nairobi emerged around 2000, with Mathare becoming its epicentre. At the time, it was controlled by three female bosses, who set up a salespoint in an area that came to be known locally as 'Nigeria', after what was locally perceived as the origin of the highest-quality heroin. They recruited young, recently circumcised men in need for work to sustain their newly found independence, to manage heroin distribution, safeguard the operation and handle logistics. These young men, mostly teenagers, were often rooted in local football teams that doubled as gangs. Kuch was still considered too young at the time, but some of Kuch's older football teammates were drawn to work in the heroin field.

Around the same time that the Nigeria salespoint emerged, another significant development occurred, namely the rise of the Mungiki movement in Mathare, which also attracted many young men looking for belonging and work (van Stapele 2010). Originating as a religious political group in the early 1990s among the Kikuyu ethnic group in the Rift Valley area of central Kenya, the Mungiki movement found its way to Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos with an influx of refugees escaping rural political violence linked to the 1992 and 1997 elections. Initially, Mungiki groups presented themselves as Kikuyu cultural revivalist communities, attracting many local young men and women, including some of Kuch's friends and teammates. The Mungiki movement, however, rapidly morphed from a religious political movement into a more economic political one, developing a portfolio of both legal and illegal resources and activities.

For example, during a period of around five years, between 2001 and 2006, the Mungiki movement controlled the majority of Nairobi's ghettos, almost the entire city's public transport industry and the lucrative Dandora dumping site, rendering it a formidable economic and political force. The movement also drew on this power to impose itself on other activities through extortion. Initially, Mungiki in Mathare only extracted bribes from illegal alcohol distilleries and the heroin salespoints, but as its influence grew, it began actively obstructing local operations as well, particularly those of the alcohol distillers. Kuch never joined the Mungiki movement but frequently attended their meetings, and he learnt to speak Kikuyu through his grandmother. Due to his proficiency in the Kikuyu language, he connected easily to Mungiki leaders, something that set him apart and contributed to his developing a definite masculine authority, particularly in relation to his peers.

Hustling alliances

Around 2004, when Kuch was seventeen years old, he began to work for some of his older football teammates by transporting sachets of heroin from one location to another. He also occasionally stored weapons for criminals for a fee in his house. At the same time, he became involved with a group of 'highway robbers', an emic term used to describe people who hijack cars and steal from people and houses outside the ghetto, preferably along the nearest highway. This early phase of Kuch's life exemplifies his initial steps in navigating the precarious terrain of hustling ethics, where authority and legitimacy are negotiated through acts of courage, skill and improvisation. His involvement with highway robbers further shaped his ascent into a position of masculine authority. In contrast to thieves who stole inside the ghetto, or pickpocketers, highway robbers and bank robbers were respected for their level of skill and courage and for the potential high returns. As he became known for his fearlessness and abrasiveness, Kuch soon earned a promotion to a dealer position at the Nigeria salespoint, despite his young age.

As a dealer, he made approximately €10 a day, which was considered a significant fortune locally and an unimaginable amount of money for Kuch. Unlike his teammates, who indulged in clubbing and displaying their lavish lifestyles, Kuch chose to invest most of his earnings in rental housing, a bar and in animal rearing, including pigs. Kuch's strategic investment decisions reveal his capacity for improvisation, skilfully navigating the tension between his personal aspirations and the expectations of peers who often regarded him as unconventional. While most of these ventures were partnerships with one or two teammates, Kuch aspired to eventually become the sole proprietor by saving up to buy out his partners. He revealed that he preferred to diversify his business interests to mitigate risks, given that he lacked the family support enjoyed by most of his colleagues at the heroin salespoint. Kuch's mother and grandmother lived in Kosovo and increasingly depended on him for financial support, as both their physical conditions worsened during the first years that Kuch became a drug dealer. His younger brother and sister were still too young to contribute, and without a father to provide access to rural land, as many of his peers had, Kuch had to forge his own path.

In 2005, Kuch, along with eleven other footballers, many of whom were also heroin dealers, established both the 'Gaza' football team and the 'Gaza' gang,[1] drawing primarily from the younger members of his previous football team. This dual formation of a football team and a gang reflects the interplay of relational and performative aspects of hustling ethics, where masculine authority is negotiated through collective practices that blur the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate domains. Among the eleven founders, Kuch and six others rose to prominence as drug leaders, signifying their dual role as active participants in drug transactions and gatekeepers who controlled access to the dealer role. Their hustling ethics were marked by the strategic and often violent assertion of their authority over other dealers, enabling them to control shifts at the distribution site and oversee the cash flow and supply chain. At the same time, they skilfully

navigated the fluid and precarious dynamics of their relationships with heroin bosses and law enforcement, balancing coercion with negotiation to maintain their position within an inherently unstable power structure. They also provided security services to members of the local community.

Over time, the membership within both the Gaza gang and football team fluctuated. Nevertheless, the seven drug leaders and the four other original Gaza team founders consistently maintained close ties, as they were also involved in other joint business enterprises. Notably, one such venture they embarked upon in 2005 was the establishment of a bar called the 'Gaza Beach Pub'. The bar, much like the gang itself, served as a site of moral improvisation, where Kuch and the other leaders crafted resonances with other gang members, younger peers and their neighbours, balancing their reputations as drugs dealers, community youth leaders and local security providers within a shifting moral and economic landscape. Their role as local security providers, in particular, granted them the respect of the wider community.

However, the relationship between the Gaza gang and the surrounding neighbourhood grew increasingly fraught, marked by escalating tensions and underlying discord. One of Kuch's close friends was a local Mungiki leader, and several members of Gaza had familial or other type of close affiliations with Mungiki, despite the latter's discouragement of dual membership with other groups. While Kuch never spoke openly about it, it was widely known that Mungiki members also frequented the Gaza Beach Pub. Hustling such affiliations reflected the fluidity of un/doing authority, where competing modes of power – gang leadership and Mungiki influence – were simultaneously enacted and contested. After what residents dubbed 'the Mungiki riots' of late 2006 in Mathare, the Gaza Beach Pub became the Mungiki headquarters in Mathare. The riots occurred after Mungiki decided to increase its 'taxes' on alcohol to combat alcohol addiction among Kikuyu men, a move that backfired and sparked a violent uprising by alcohol distillers. For three weeks, the Bondeni area of Mathare, where alcohol distilling was concentrated, became a battleground between residents, Mungiki, and military police. Ultimately, Mungiki was forced to retreat from Bondeni to Kosovo, where they operated from the Gaza Beach Pub between late 2006 until June 2007.

Kuch explained to me why the Gaza members allowed the Gaza Beach Pub to become the epicentre of Mungiki activities during an interview in May 2012: 'They paid good money to us. No, we were not Mungiki, but they paid us. And people feared us.' This statement underscores how Kuch's hustling ethics intersected with the dynamics of fear and financial pragmatism. Kuch did not elaborate further, but it appears that alongside their existing affiliations, financial compensation and the bolstering of a fearsome reputation may have influenced Gaza to align themselves with Mungiki. Another Gaza member, Jijo, shared with me during a later interview in September 2013 that they too had feared Mungiki's alleged readiness to resort to brutal force. These moments of rupture and alignment underscore the relentless improvisation and precarious recalibration of authority

that lie at the heart of hustling ethics, reflecting the dynamic interplay between instability and strategic and tactical adaptation.

Meeting Kuch

I first met Kuch in August 2008 after the demise of Mungiki in Mathare. I met him through Malik, a Gaza member, who was a close friend of a close friend of mine. I have worked in Mathare on and off since 1998 and have travelled back and forth to this part of Nairobi since I was fifteen. I know many people in Mathare who speak Swahili, the predominant language and, most importantly, they know me. This allows me to quickly establish relationships of trust with members of different groups, including gangs.

When I first met Kuch, he straight away took me to the Gaza Beach Pub to show me his success, as he put it, but before we settled down to watch football and enjoy a cold Guinness, he took me to an open space behind the bar near the bridge. Surprisingly, for someone not known for being talkative, a stream of words suddenly spilt from his mouth. With great excitement, he pointed towards the river flowing under the small bridge and said, 'This is where there were bodies, just floating. It was just like war.'

On Monday, 4 June 2007, Mungiki members allegedly shot and killed two police officers in Kosovo, prompting the eponymous 'Operation Kosovo'. Mungiki had been losing ground in Mathare in the wake of the riots in 2006, which had made them more vulnerable, and the police seized the opportunity to completely oust Mungiki from this part of Nairobi. Between 5 and 7 June, military police cordoned off Kosovo, and residents, especially young men like Kuch, Malik and Jijo, were rounded up. Kuch recounted the harrowing experience: 'I was pushing my face into the ground, it was so painful, and I heard, ta, ta, this other guy, next to me, was shot dead. I lay so still, it hurt. They say around thirty died. No, I saw at least a hundred bodies. They took us in a lorry to Karura [a nearby forest].' Shaking his head in disbelief, he said, 'I thought I would die right there. So many of us died. It was a massacre. They took us to Karura, and I managed to escape. I ran, ran. I couldn't go home.'

Moving his hand over his shaved head, Kuch smiled timidly, revealing his crooked teeth, unsure of how he survived such a horrific ordeal. 'This bar, everything was broken, we had to build it from scratch.' The bar, made from corrugated iron sheets, featured two seating areas adorned with large flat screens, proper sofas and fridges stocked with cold beers. I was impressed by how swiftly they had managed to restore the bar even beyond its former state. It illustrated the performative and embodied nature of un/doing authority, as Gaza members not only reclaimed but also redefined their social and economic spaces through creative and collective efforts.

Kuch informed me that the heroin bosses had eagerly revived the heroin trade after Mungiki's demise in Mathare. While the post-election violence of late 2007

and early 2008 had also negatively impacted the business, by around April 2008, the Nigeria salespoint was fully operational again, and the Gaza members were thriving. When I met them in August 2008, in addition to re-establishing the bar, they had added to their portfolio of activities the pigsty, two cows, several rental houses, multiple water vending businesses, an electricity shop and distribution centre and a small vegetable garden near the bridge and the river, where Kuch had pointed out that the bodies from Operation Kosovo had been lying. Through these, Gaza members led by Kuch strategically leveraged economic diversification to assert their authority while adapting to the volatile currents that defined life in Mathare.

Lead hustler

Between 2008 and 2010, Kuch rose to prominence as the leader of Gaza, his fearless demeanour both foregrounding and reshaping the group's evolution – from a local football team with a few members dabbling in the heroin trade to a notorious gang that occasionally played football. This shift exemplifies how Kuch leveraged his daring reputation as part of his hustling ethics to solidify his leadership. He also became a broker for two heroin kingpins who resided in Nairobi's affluent neighbourhoods, relying on intermediaries like Kuch to secure their operations in the ghetto. Kuch's role underscores the adaptive ethics integral to hustling, where his skill in navigating power networks – connecting the ghetto, law enforcement and drugs bosses – enabled him to mediate between competing moral and economic orders. While the bosses cultivated extensive ties with higher-ranking police officials to secure trade protection through profit-sharing, Kuch and his peers managed daily interactions with lower-ranking officers responsible for collecting bribes.

Kuch was always busy. Over our fifteen years of knowing each other, I have frequently had to run after him from one business to another as he ensures that everything runs smoothly. This relentless activity underscores the iterative, embodied nature of hustling ethics, marked by resourcefulness and effort. In May 2012, Kuch shared his future dreams. He took Malik, his closest friend, and me to a Somali restaurant in the centre of Nairobi to talk privately. He never discussed his business or private life in detail inside the ghetto, saying: 'The walls have ears and eyes here.' Feeling safe in the noisy restaurant, Kuch pushed aside his plate, took my pen and notebook, and began sketching a house. 'Next time you come, I will house you, and this will be your room,' he said, indicating one of the rooms in a stone house he was building in Ruai, an emerging neighbourhood on Nairobi's outskirts. He had already paid for the land and finished the foundations. This investment reflects Kuch's ability to balance short-term hustling with long-term stability, showing how his entrepreneurial practices aimed to create opportunities beyond the ghetto. I calculated that his work had cost over a million Kenyan Shillings (approximately €10,000). 'Next time you come, I will not be working at

the ground (the Nigeria salespoint), but I will be my own boss.' Malik, equally stunned, whispered: 'You even have a gym, ha ha.' For six years, Kuch had carefully invested the money he made dealing drugs, running a pub and starting an electricity distribution centre. He used his profits to purchase land outside the ghetto, engaging in everyday actions of saving, planning and building. Malik and I were amazed by Kuch's perseverance and the wealth he had amassed, all the more so with Malik not knowing about it.

Despite his considerable wealth, Kuch chose to remain in Kosovo, focusing on strengthening his businesses while preserving his ties to the local community and his position as a gang leader. Unlike other Gaza drug leaders who relocated to more comfortable homes with modern amenities, Kuch's storied past as a highway robber and his enduringly tough demeanour solidified his authority, both within the gang and beyond. His reputation rendered performative displays of success unnecessary, in contrast to figures like Malik, who relied on ostentatious clothing and lavish lifestyles to assert their status. Not having to engage in this kind of conspicuous consumption enabled Kuch to reinvest profits into new business ventures, including his strategic takeover of the local illegal electricity trade, which further consolidated his influence and authority as a man in the neighbourhood, despite his young age.

Hustling politics

Kuch's activities extended beyond drug dealing and business ventures like the electricity sector; he was also deeply embedded in local political dynamics. One Thursday afternoon in August 2010, as we sat outside the Gaza Beach Pub, Kuch received a call. Speaking rapidly in Kikuyu, he later revealed it was from Councillor Franko, requesting his help in mobilizing youth for a city council project in the nearby Eastleigh neighbourhood. Kuch explained that in return for such efforts, he earned 'commissions', and occasionally undertook other discreet assignments. This revelation highlighted Kuch's ability to bridge gang networks and broader political structures, positioning himself as a key intermediary in Mathare's complex socio-political landscape.

Kuch's shrewd political instinct were also evident in the lead-up to the 2010 by-election for the local Member of Parliament. While openly aligning himself with a candidate called Bishop Wanjiru, he discreetly worked for others, maximizing his earnings by navigating competing interests. Kuch played a pivotal role in orchestrating security for candidates during their visits to Kosovo, coordinating the distribution of food packages to local residents and organizing events to enhance their public image. Occasionally, he would divert funds intended for voter incentives, justifying it as a necessary investment in his own ventures. His close friend Malik frequently voiced concerns about the dangers of such actions, particularly given the politicians' ties to high-ranking police officials. But Kuch remained undeterred, leveraging his networks to benefit both himself and his

group. His willingness to take bold risks highlighted the calculated audacity that defined his hustling ethics and was one of the factors that further cemented his reputation and authority.

By 2011, Kuch had formalized a youth group alongside the Gaza football team, effectively transforming the gang into a recognized entity capable of legally accessing local development funds and securing political legitimacy. The group held regular meetings to strategize on income-generating ventures and craft proposals aimed at attracting these funds. The prolonged campaign period leading up to the 2013 elections offered a unique opportunity for groups like Gaza to deepen their ties with competing politicians. Several candidates discreetly funnelled funds to Gaza, ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 Kenyan shillings (100–500 euros), while others financed more specific project, including, for example, a poultry project. However, after the elections, political attention and financial support evaporated, leaving many projects in the lurch. This was the case of the chicken farm, which ultimately failed. What this highlights is that even though Kuch was adept at exploiting the fleeting opportunities offered by politics, the ebb and flow of political patronage nevertheless left him and other Gaza members in a situation of structural vulnerability.

A family of hustlers

Between 2013 and 2016, Kuch and I lost contact as he relocated from Kosovo, Mathare, to a more spacious apartment in Kasarani, a neighbourhood in Northeast Nairobi. This move marks a transitional phase in Kuch's life, where his hustling ethics expanded beyond immediate survival to encompass aspirations of stability and familial security. During this time, Kuch ascended the ranks within the drug trade. As demand and supply increased, more bosses emerged, creating little resistance to Kuch's rise. Concurrently, he and his wife welcomed a daughter, and his wife began studying nursing at a local college.

Kuch and I reconnected unexpectedly in February 2017 when a friend, Was Was, informed me that his close friend, Maich, had been hospitalized due to heart failure. Rushing to Nairobi Hospital, I was surprised by his admission to such an expensive private facility, as most Mathare residents sought care at the cheaper and closer Kenyatta Hospital. Maich, in high spirits, recounted how he calmly walked to the hospital during a heart attack, bypassing the guards and heading straight to the cardiology department, successfully hustling his way to receive quality healthcare – leaving the worry of the bill for later.

At the hospital, I noticed Kuch's wife and daughter among Maich's visitors, and then Kuch. Slowly, as I observed their interaction, I realized Maich was Kuch's father. Was Was, detecting my dawning comprehension, chuckled but refrained from confirming. I kept my surprise to myself, unsure why Kuch had hidden this connection. This revelation underscores the layered relational dynamics of hustling ethics and the intricacies of social structures, where personal histories and kinship ties are often concealed to navigate societal norms and moral judgements. Kuch

and I were thrilled to reunite, and he invited me to join his family for an outing on Sunday. During the visit, his wife, now a nurse, carefully tended to Maich, who was recuperating at Kuch's residence. In a private conversation, I asked Kuch why he had concealed his father's identity. Kuch smiled playfully and said, 'You know how it is in Mathare – we keep things to ourselves. Yes, I knew, but I couldn't reveal it.' This response highlights the role of secrecy and disclosure in a context shaped by precarious moral orders, where authority is negotiated through the careful management of personal narratives. He offered no further explanation, and I chose not to press.

That Sunday, we enjoyed an extravagant meal at a playground where Kuch's children happily played on a bouncing castle. This rare moment of familial joy illustrates the relational and embodied dimensions of authority, where Kuch's hustling ethics extended beyond economic ventures to reimagine his role as a father and provider. It was a rare moment of family joy, underscoring the complexities of life and relationships in Mathare. These complexities, rooted in the intertwining of personal, social and economic dimensions, reflect the ongoing process of un/doing masculine authority as Kuch negotiated his place within shifting moral and relational landscapes.

Upcoming hustlers

In 2018, I received information from Malik that Kuch had begun encountering resistance from other bosses within the Nigeria salespoint. His rapid growth posed a threat to their trade, and he was increasingly treading on their turf. I resolved to see him to obtain more details about what had happened. My usual method of locating Kuch, which involved visiting the Gaza Beach Pub, proved futile as he had gone underground. Inquiries about his whereabouts were met with evasive responses from friends and neighbours, who, despite knowing of our friendship, averted their gaze and refused to divulge any information. Kuch furthermore frequently changed his contact numbers, making it impossible for me to reach him directly.

Between 2018 and 2020, each time I saw him, I had to patiently wait for him to reach out to me, which he did on multiple occasions. As I roamed around Mathare, visiting friends or conducting interviews, Kuch would often suddenly emerge from behind a wall of corrugated iron sheets. He had an uncanny ability to locate me whenever I was in the area. Our conversations were often brief and conducted amidst a crowd of onlookers, leaving insufficient time to delve into the intricacies of his life and aspirations before he hurried off to attend to his various ventures. He explained once that he couldn't linger in one place for too long, fearing both assassination attempts and arrest by police. The more influential bosses of Nigeria boasted established family connections with the police, politicians and powerful local business owner, providing them with a superior apparatus to suppress competitors like Kuch.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, Kuch was arrested for drug trafficking and subsequently incarcerated in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison for serious offenders. Occasionally, he managed to make phone calls to me and others from behind bars, always displaying unwavering confidence in his imminent release. I assumed that he would remain incarcerated for an extended period, and I had already begun making arrangements to interview him in the prison. However, in early 2022, to my surprise, I received a cheerful message from Kuch announcing that he had been released. It took us a while to be able to sit down for our interview, however, as Kuch was absent, 'travelling for work' every time I came to Kenya during the course of the year. When we eventually managed to connect in March 2023, however, and we met up at a familiar establishment, the old Somali restaurant in Nairobi's city centre where both of us felt at ease to converse openly. For three hours, Kuch recounted the events of the past three years, providing a detailed narrative of his experiences. He also delved into the history of the Nigeria salespoint, providing many of the details about it that are included in this narration of his life story. This was unlike him. Before, he had always been evasive and vague, but now he went into considerable detail as he shared his story. He explained that he was less afraid of what people thought of him now that he was older and more self-reliant as a boss, even if it was evident that the Gaza gang's influence had waned significantly. As a consequence, Kuch could no longer venture into Kosovo or any part of Mathare, as doing so put his life at risk. Partly because of this he had discontinued his drug trade activities in the Nigeria salespoint.

I pondered over this for a while before seeking further elaboration. How had this sudden transformation unfolded? How had Gaza lost its power? Kuch explained, 'You know how young ones always come up?' The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, the rapid rise in living costs combined with a nose-diving economy had altered the landscape significantly. Numerous youths found themselves confined at home, unable to attend school. Some even dropped out altogether, leading to an increase in drug use and petty crime among the younger population in Mathare and beyond. Consequently, new local buying and selling drug dens and salespoints emerged, which Gaza sought to control. This posed an opportunity for the more established and experienced bosses as they formed new alliances to neutralize the Gaza bosses, whom they still perceived as upstart newcomers. The Gaza bosses presented a more substantial threat to their established positions compared to any of the other younger, up-and-coming drug-dealing groups that emerged in Mathare with Covid-19, who were perceived by the Nigeria salespoint bosses as easier to control. An additional point of contention was that, displaying his entrepreneurial prowess, Kuch had also proactively diversified his drug-dealing operations, establishing alternative channels to procure and distribute heroin beyond the confines of Mathare. Prior to his incarceration, he had transitioned into the role of a wholesaler in the drug trade, making him dangerous competition to the more established dealers of the Nigeria salespoint, whom he was persuaded were behind his arrest.

Kuch said, however, that 'I knew I was not going to stay long in prison. In Kenya, when you have money, you can buy anyone.' He went on to share that he

had paid off a judge and was granted an appeal which then led to his release. 'It wasn't difficult, it just took some time, because it was Covid and there were no hearings.' He then showed me pictures of his new house and of his newborn son. He and his wife had divorced a few years before he went to prison, but he had met someone else and they got married right before he went to prison, and she had helped secure his release. He still saw his older children, but he did not like to talk about his ex-wife. Mid-way through our interview he received a call, and I heard that it was about an Uber. When he hung up, he explained that he had several Uber cars in addition to all his other businesses: 'I lost everything I had in Mathare, but I have some businesses here and there like the Ubers.'

Almost casually, he then mentioned that the person who had called him was Mary, a Member of the County Assembly that we both knew. I jolted upright. A few months before, Mary had lost her ex-husband and the father of her children in what was rumoured to be a police kidnapping ordered by the more established Nigeria bosses. Her ex-husband had been a founder of the Gaza gang together with Kuch, and a major drugs boss in his own right. Kuch nodded his head to confirm my thoughts and relayed that he and Mary were sometimes partnering in business, but that there was some tension between them because the last time her ex-husband had been seen was in one of Kuch's Ubers, and his Uber had turned up at a local police station after Mary's ex-husband had disappeared. Kuch told me that he was in constant danger, because as long as Mary's ex-husband was not found, he was inevitably the focus of suspicion, even if he had been a close associate of Mary's ex-husband. This required him to navigate all sides carefully, remaining constantly vigilant and adaptable, although he recognized that ultimately, 'I cannot win'.

Kuch's hustling ethics – rooted in adaptability, improvisation and strategic navigation – enabled him to rise, sustain and reconfigure his power amidst precarious and rapidly shifting socio-economic and moral landscapes. From leveraging secrecy and mobility to survive rivalries, to using entrepreneurial resilience to diversify his ventures and manipulate legal systems for his release, Kuch exemplifies how authority is continuously contested, enacted and reshaped. His transition from a Mathare-based gang leader to a wholesaler and business owner outside the ghetto illustrates the fluid boundaries between personal, economic and political domains, highlighting the iterative processes that define his hustling actions. However, the persistent threats to his safety and moral ambiguities in his relationships underscore the fragility of the ethical basis of authority in contexts of systemic marginalization, where alliances, rivalries and generational shifts constantly redefine power and survival.

A happy hustler

I asked Kuch if, despite everything, he was happy and whether he was doing more or less okay businesswise. 'I am so happy to live in my own house, a stone house, with my gym hahaha, and your bedroom', he answered, hinting to our conversation a few years ago. We both laughed. 'I am doing okay', he continued, more seriously.

'I am travelling a lot. I am leaving tomorrow again. I will show you.' He googled a place that I cannot disclose here and told me he goes there every now and then to buy 'supplies', as he termed it, in bulk, to then distribute back in Kenya. I asked him whether this travel was dangerous, and he answered, 'No, it is not dangerous, ha ha, again if you have money, and I also don't do this alone. I have good protection.'

At this point, Kuch sighed and startled me with a tirade on drugs abuse by young people in Mathare: 'Mathare has changed. Nigeria is gone, and other drugs, like mawhite, mayellow, mablue, tab tabs, are used. And nowadays, they are not the junkies like before, but children. It has become very dangerous in Mathare. Crime is everywhere now, and these kids are crazy when they are high, and they are high like for days.' I shared his concerns. I had recently found out that some of the gangs I used to work with now had started to use these new drugs, instead of their regular marijuana and khat. A nineteen-year-old gang member had explained to me in March 2023 how he drank Muratina with a combination of the coloured pills and would then only drink hot water for three days to maintain his high, which he explained helped him to be aggressive so that he could steal inside Mathare. Stealing inside one's own neighbourhood was considered a deplorable act and was often met with immediate retaliation by neighbours and passersby. But at the same time, as he explained, 'going outside to steal is a death sentence. Killer cops are everywhere, so stealing inside Mathare, you may not die.'

Police repression in Nairobi was at an all-time high. In November 2022, the Nigeria salespoint was cleared by the police, ostensibly to show the media that they were doing their work. Contrarily to past raids, it looks like the consequences of the clearance would be permanent. Rumours suggested that this was because wealthy Somali businesspeople were increasingly buying up plots in Mathare to develop, and that they had made a deal with the most prominent heroin bosses to vacate the ground which had become prime property. Whatever the reason, the business from Nigeria became scattered all over Mathare and small heroin-selling hubs popped up, along with salespoints for the new drugs. Perhaps not surprisingly, a period of conflict has commenced between the different smaller gangs and bosses controlling this decentred trade, which was still ongoing at the time of writing this chapter.

Warring over turf is not something that had occurred in Mathare previously. The rapid and pervasive expansion of the lucrative heroin trade, as well as that associated with the new drugs, to most corners of this neighbourhood ignited a fierce contest for customers, resulting in frequent killings of known drug dealers. Simultaneously, emerging drug kingpins found themselves ensnared in a ceaseless struggle with their counterparts. In the past, Mathare had exhibited a semblance of organization centring around distinct trades taking place in specific locations, each controlled by defined individuals or small groups. The heroin commerce was largely contained to the Nigeria salespoint, while the illicit alcohol trade (entailing distillation, sales and distribution) was predominantly concentrated in Bondeni, for example. While competition among bosses existed, authority was consolidated in the hands of a select, well-connected few who effectively governed these spheres. However, the current landscape seems to have shattered, suggesting

that both Mathare and criminality have entered an era of unprecedented change. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kuch concluded our most recent interview by saying:

> I am happy I invested in businesses outside Mathare, and also outside drugs. My friends from Gaza always laughed, why are you setting up this business or that? It gave me a foundation, and it also helped me to build connections outside Mathare. Now, it is very hard to trade in Mathare. People get killed now. That is new. I am doing okay, but most of my friends from Gaza are dead, or they are underground. You saw our beach pub, it still there, but now it has junkies, like zombies, and it has become like Nigeria. A new generation has come up. I am so glad I made it out [of Mathare].

Conclusion

Kuch's life story offers a compelling lens into the 'hustling ethics' of young men in Mathare, and the difficulties they face in maintaining their (masculine) authority to construct viable trajectories. Kuch's journey – from a boy scavenging for survival to a gang leader and a drug baron to an entrepreneur – illustrates the continuous and precarious negotiation of moral and economic orders that define hustling ethics. Hustling emerges not just as a survival strategy but as a relational and adaptive practice that contests and reinforces (masculine) authority in nuanced and context-bound ways.

Kuch's story highlights how hustling ethics unfold through three interconnected dynamics. First, authority figures like Kuch rely on fluid, embodied performances to establish legitimacy within shifting moral fields, drawing on their lived experience and social positioning. Second, they cultivate resonance by appealing to aesthetic and moral sensibilities that evoke trust and familiarity while opening space for new possibilities. Third, hustling operates within structural forces such as poverty and marginalization, which constrain and create opportunities for moral improvisation and experimentation. Together, these dynamics illuminate the creative, layered and relational dimensions of ethical action, reshaping both personal trajectories and broader societal structures.

Ultimately, what Kuch's story underscores is how hustling ethics, grounded in relational adaptability and moral improvisation and experimentation, not only continuously shape individual survival and (masculine) authority but also offer profound insights into the resilience, creativity and ingenuity that emerge within contexts of systemic marginalization. In this regard, though, Kuch is by no means exceptional. There are and have been many other similar young men in Mathare. But his trajectory is in many ways quite exceptional, especially compared to that of many of those whom he grew up with, the other Gaza boys, most of whom are now 'dead', he says. The question, then, is why Kuch has been able to hustle so effectively and survive. Is it luck? Force of personality? Historical contingency?

Probably all of the above, in varying measures that are impossible to quantify. Ultimately, I am just happy that my friend has 'made it'.

Note

1 A name obviously linked to geopolitics, and made popular as a means of referring to resistance against oppressive political power by the Jamaican dancehall artist Vybz Kartel.

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Figure 7.1 Demolition in Easterhouse, 2009.

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Chapter 7

The Second Act: An Oral History of Glasgow Gangs, 1969–2022

Alistair Fraser and Angela Bartie, with Kate Wilson

Introduction

The author F. Scott Fitzgerald (1941) once famously wrote that there are no 'second acts' in American lives. The line is often taken to mean that transgressions in public life are impossible to fully erase, and has been applied to corrupt politicians and former gang-members on the road to 'going straight'. As a character from a prison reading group in the HBO drama *The Wire* explains: 'He's saying that the past is always with us … you can say you're somebody new, you can give yourself a whole new story. But what came first is who you really are, and what happened before is what really happened.' In this chapter we reflect on this notion of 'second acts' through discussion of the life history of Danny, now seventy years old, who was once a core member of the 'Drummy' gang in Glasgow's notorious Easterhouse housing estate. The chapter is based, uniquely, on three separate interviews with Danny: the first, aged eighteen, in 1969; the second, aged fifty-nine, in 2011; and the third, aged seventy, in 2022. Despite developing street-smarts and a capacity for violence, which we refer to as 'street habitus' (Wacquant 2007), Danny was able to find a 'second act' beyond the gang in which these attributes were brought to bear on a career in trade.

After a brief outline of our methodological approach, the chapter is organized under four thematic headings that follow different stages of Danny's life: (1) gangs, friendship and street habitus; (2) masculinity, family and romantic relationships; (3) work, deindustrialization and the 'second act'; and (4) ambiguities, reflections and the Drummy at seventy. Throughout, while exploring the theme of 'second acts' we reflect on the role of historical contingency in the composition of Danny's life story.

Three moments

In 1969, as radios throbbed with the Rolling Stones' *Street Fighting Man*, released the previous year, the housing estate of Easterhouse, Glasgow, in Scotland, gained public notoriety for youth 'gangs' and territorial violence. Famously, the popular entertainer Frankie Vaughan travelled to Glasgow in an attempt to instigate a truce. During this period, two sociologists, Gail Armstrong and Mary Wilson, conducted an extended study of the Easterhouse gang phenomenon (Armstrong and Wilson 1973a, b). Published in 1973, the same year that Patrick's (in)famous *A Glasgow Gang Observed* came out (Patrick 1973), Armstrong and Wilson's research was influenced by critical criminology and social constructionism as part of the National Deviancy Conference movement, involving both a media analysis and participant-observation of the Easterhouse Project (Bartie and Fraser 2017b). Danny was one of sixteen 'gang boys' interviewed in 1969, and at the time was actively involved in the 'Drummy' gang, including crime, territorial violence and conflict with police. His interview is short and full of swagger, describing moments of conflict with a devil-may-care attitude that may reflect both his age and bravado in front of older, female researchers.

A second interview was conducted with Danny by the two principle chapter authors in 2011 as part of the British Academy-funded project, 'Narratives of Glasgow: Oral Histories of Youth Gangs in Easterhouse, 1965–1975' [SG101450].[1] At that time, Glasgow gangs were once more in the media spotlight, contributing to sensationalistic reporting depicting Scotland as the most violent country in the developed world. This motivated us to revisit Armstrong and Wilson's original study, seeking to capture the experiences of gangs 'behind the headlines', both past and present. We tracked down Armstrong and Wilson, who had retained a goldmine of original fieldnotes and interview transcriptions conducted with gang-affiliated youth in Easterhouse, and sought to trace the original 'gang boys', who would now be in their fifties, while re-interviewing the original researchers and others connected to the area. Danny was, at that moment, standing at something of a crossroads. He had been on sick leave from his work of more than thirty years, and was defiant in his talk of his past involvement in the Drummy.

Finally, we re-interviewed Danny in 2022 for the ERC GANGS project.[2] By that time, Glasgow's reputation as a 'violent city' had been recast in the wake of a successful movement towards violence prevention, and, as a result, we approached the third interview with a different set of questions in mind. We had worked with our researcher, Kate Wilson, to review the content of the 1969 and 2011 interviews and to identify aspects of Danny's life that were either missing, only hinted at or mentioned in passing. Our focus for this interview was very different from the previous interviews. Instead of focusing on Easterhouse and the Drummy gang, we wanted to ask more about his life beyond the gang. When we met with Danny, he had just celebrated his seventieth birthday and this milestone, alongside significant changes in his life since we'd last met, elicited a more reflective and moving interview than we had anticipated. With Danny in many ways leading

the interview, it was also a longer interview than expected – the total length of the recording was two hours and forty-four minutes. Altogether the interview was wide-ranging, vulnerable and candid, with Danny reflecting poignantly on issues that had once appeared stolidly defined: masculinity, work, crime and family among them. This chapter draws on all three interviews to offer a longitudinal portrait of Danny's life, both as a gang member and afterwards, as well as to highlight how Danny's sense of self and his understandings and reflections about his trajectory have changed over time.

Gangs, friendship and street habitus

Danny was born in 1952 in a working-class area in the north-west of inner-city Glasgow, initially living in a single-end tenement with an outside toilet. Danny's family qualified for one of the new homes being built as part of Glasgow's postwar housing project and, after living for a few years in one of the other big outlying housing schemes, at the age of ten, Danny moved across Glasgow to Easterhouse, one of the city's new schemes on the north-eastern periphery. In his 2011 interview, he recalled positive experiences of the area as a younger child, largely owing to its geography:

> When I first went to Easterhouse I must admit I loved it, to me it was a kind of adventure playground as I seen it, you know, it was a bit different from [the old area] so to speak in the sense of we were kind of right near the woods and a big loch and things like that, which probably, I probably hadnae seen up until then, you know. But … I found it good, certainly good and it was exciting, it was just like a big play park to us, you went down the woods, you played at the usual kids games, you know what I mean?

Danny's testimony here reflects many experiences of early life in the scheme, with other early tenants remembering new homes in Easterhouse, with pleasant scenery and inside toilets, as a 'bit like paradise' (Ferguson 1977: 23). As Danny recalled in 2022, children's games of 'Cowboys and Indians' morphed into another team-based rivalry, that of football:

> Your toy gun was a plank off a fence, you know, peeling off a fence, and that was your gun, you know what I mean. And you made toy hats, if you were an Indian, you just got an old can and squashed it onto the end of your bit of wood, and things like that, and that was your fun, you know … it was cowboys and Indians 'till you were old enough for the football. And then, the football was like 22 a side, you know what I mean. If you weren't down for nine o'clock in the morning, 'till the eleven a side played out their game, and then it was everybody to themselves, a 22 cavalry charge, you know … Other than that, you had not a goddamn thing you could do at night, other than roam the streets, you know.

> And it was pretty poor, pretty poor. As I say, I don't even remember a playpark. There wasn't any cafes, clubs.

Half of the new residents of Easterhouse were under the age of twenty-one, and the area was famously constructed with no resources or amenities such as schools, cafes, shops or employment opportunities. As such, large numbers of young people congregated on street corners and in public spaces and made their own entertainment on the streets, forming into groups, playing football and fighting (Armstrong and Wilson 1973a: 67). Borders were formed in breaks between housing schemes, sorting young people into factions, with gangs taking their names from the street or neighbourhood. While, in Danny's recollection, the planning of Easterhouse and the social conditions contributed to his participation in gang life, it was not his only motivation for taking part. In 2011, he recalled an incident in which he was shot with an air rifle as the first time he 'had problems with gangs'. After chasing his attacker, he found himself being accepted into a wider group:

> So I think probably you had to earn your reputation very early on in the sense of, if they'd seen you were what we called 'gemme' enough to stand up to them, you know, and, and you could handle yourself then you get more and more accepted into it and you wouldnae get that kind of thing which probably in this day and age is bullying with kids, you know.

The 'gemme' attitude that Danny refers to is one that runs deep in Glasgow's history. The writer William McIlvanney observed that 'standing up for yourself, sometimes against improbable odds, became a Glaswegian convention' (McIlvanney 1987: 18). Risky leisure pursuits combined with everyday violence, and 'actual bodily harm was risked for the sake of peer group status' in a pattern that was shown to have real and lasting physical impacts on individual health (Johnston and McIvor 2004: 138). Over time, Danny developed a local reputation for violence. After recounting a series of 'square-gos' and pitched battles, he reflected in 2022 that

> if you didn't have a reputation, then you would get picked on all the time. You could see it coming, you would get beat up. The guys would just take liberties, and they would club you with something, hit you with anything, just for the hell of it, because they were drunk and high on wines, and all these kind of things. So you know, you just had to be on top, and be respected.

This same attitude to risk and reputation is also evident in Patrick's 1973 study of youth gang violence in 1960s Maryhill. Patrick describes a 'gemmie' as embodying a 'devil-may-care' attitude to risk and danger, often involving violence (Patrick 1973: 189). For the participants in Patrick's study, a 'gemmie' was 'someone who is prepared to fight, whatever the odds, even if defeat or physical

punishment is inevitable' (Patrick 1973: 85). Similarly, for Danny, gang fighting was about 'bravado' and respect, as he detailed in 2011:

> It was just reputations I think probably … Bravado and things like that just to get a bit of respect and a name for yourself so that you could be left alone … I don't know how the guys that didnae get involved in a gang coped, you know. They must have just sat doonstairs on the bus an' the hood up type of thing and kept … Fair play but I couldnae have done it, I couldnae have done that, you know.

The concept of 'street habitus', first coined by Wacquant (2007), refers to an internalized, embodied and durable disposition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) that enables individuals to navigate life amidst a violent street culture. Learned through early socialization the traits of the 'street habitus' involve an embodied streetwise posture (Anderson 1999), developed as a response to deep-seated socioeconomic exclusion (Bourgois 1995). The 'street habitus' becomes a way for individual agents to negotiate, or 'improvise' responses to everyday presenting situations (Wacquant 2014), gaining status and respect in the 'street field' (Shammas and Sandberg 2015). As Sandberg and Pederson (2011: 34) assert, 'street habitus can be conceptualised as the relatively permanent and sometimes unconscious dispositions of individuals committed to street culture. It is the embodied practical sense that is seen in hypersensitivity to offences and frequent displays of violent potential.'

Over time, then, Danny came to forge a territorial 'street habitus' in which a tough posture, a fearless attitude of defiance and fierce loyalty to friends and family became internalized (Fraser 2013). By the age of fourteen, Danny was immersed in gang life in Easterhouse. The 'Drummy' – named in association with Drumlanrig, where the gang leader lived at the time, as well as Drumpellier Loch – would regularly fight with other neighbouring gangs. In all three interviews, Danny recounted using a range of weapons in fights, including stones, fire pokers, sticks and sometimes blades. As he summarized in 2022:

> It was just out and out tribal, that's all it was, you know. And it was a day to day routine. … some of the things you did were ludicrous. I mean, we used to run, we had football pitches, and you would run into the football pitches, maybe 50, 60 of yous, in pitch black. You would charge each other. Now, the British Army wouldn't do that, in pitch black, run into it, not knowing what's there. And you ran at each other, not knowing if the guy's got a sword, a knife, a hatchet, anything.

Unlike the stereotype of a territory 'controlled' by gangs, for Danny gang life was intimately bound up with community life in a neighbourhood marked by 'hard' masculinities and everyday violence. The description of the 'wild West' of the local pub that he offered us in the 2022 interview, for example, paints a vivid picture:

> They had a pub at the bottom of the street, it was called the Casbah, very aptly named, you know, the Casbah it was called. And that was just a cowboy shop, you know, your original cowboy bar. I remember vividly taking friends to it … I'd say, come up to the pub, there's a good group and all that, and they'd be like, aye, we'll come up and visit you, and everything … Within minutes a fight would break out, and the chairs were going, and my friend and his girlfriend would get up to run out, and I'd say, don't run out, sit where you are … and if you see a chair coming you can dodge it. He was like, you're off your head. But that's what we had to do, you know, if you stood up and tried to run away, for sure, you would get a tumbler on the back of the head, or a chair on the back of the head. So you're better just sitting, and you can watch and see if something is coming towards you, you know.

The abiding sense from all three interviews is that of an environment in which masculinity, everyday violence and systematic disadvantage propelled a violent street culture in which the youthful gang was just one iteration. As Danny went on to discuss, a form of 'street habitus' was common to many in the community – including family, friends and partners.

Masculinity, family and romantic relationships

For many young men in Easterhouse the territorial gang was the medium through which they developed their masculine identities, but of course it was not the only one. Young men like Danny were also sons, who lived in family homes, attended school and work and might also be brothers, boyfriends and so on. All of these influenced and shaped their sense of self, and their understanding of what it was to be a man (Bartie and Fraser 2017a). Danny's 1969 and 2011 testimonies touch on his wider relationships, mentioning his relationship with his parents, especially his father, his siblings and his wife, but it was not until our 2022 interview that he expanded on these.

Despite the day-to-day impact of his involvement with the Drummy, and the widespread attention Easterhouse was receiving, Danny recalled trying to keep his gang-related activity hidden from his parents. Asked what his parents thought about his involvement with the Drummy, he told Armstrong in 1969 that initially they didn't know, and once they did realize, his mum was 'never bothered' as long as he did not end up 'booked' or in court: 'She didn't think I was … really bad.' When we asked him the same question in 2011, he responded:

> You obviously tried to hide it from them. They must have, deep down they must have known what you were up to, you know. As I say a very rare occasion did the police ever come to my door which was a good thing and I think probably my dad was thankful for that, he probably says 'well, as long as the police don't come to my door'. You knew, you couldnae escape it anyway, it was, you know, if

> anybody escaped getting arrested in Easterhouse it was a miracle … So I think he was quite pleased frae that point of view. I think my mum saved me once, she, she as mums do at the end of the day she, you know, she said 'no, it wasnae my son, my son was in the house'.

In all three interviews, the importance of being 'gemme', of being able to stand up for yourself and hold your own in a fight, was a form of masculinity prized not only by his peers but by his father. Towards the end of our 2011 interview, he recalled:

> I didnae know much about my dad's early life but I mean he was always, still to this day I mean he keeps a cosh behind the door and he's eighty-three, you know, and I think he was a … Well I'm saying that I think it was, what age was he? Maybe seventy odds when a guy across the road challenged him or something, and he was only thirty or something like that and my dad would have a go, you know, he had a go with him.

It is clear that this 'Glaswegian convention' of standing up for yourself remained important to his father's sense of self throughout his life, even in old age. Danny observed in 2011 how his father had communicated to him the importance of being able to handle yourself even as a young child:

> In those days you were, if you come up and got a doing [beating up] as a kid yer dad gave you a choice. You either get back doon and get in again or he woulda gied ye a doin', so that was pretty much the, the culture then … and that, that's, that's how you knew not to go up to yer da greeting [crying] because ye'd have mair chance of getting a lamp [punch] aff yer da, you know. So you had to go back down.

Whilst his father made it clear he should handle his fights alone, there were instances when he did in fact get involved, at moments when a perceived line had been crossed. In 2011, Danny recalled an incident when a neighbour's son chased him with a hatchet and Danny 'kind of punched his lights in', leading to the boy's father grabbing him. Later that night, the other boy's father had shouted insults up to Danny's house, calling the family 'bastards' amongst other 'obscenities.' This, combined with the boy's father getting involved, resulted in Danny's father taking action:

> I didn't know a thing about it but apparently my dad got up at six o'clock in the morning, put his working boots on and went down chapped his door and took him down the pitches for a square go, you know. And he was a big bricklayer, he was a big lump of a man, you know, he was a big colossal man but my dad went down and punched his lights in, you know. But that's what you did and that was it forgot about it, there wasnae another word said about it.

His father appears in all three interviews as the traditional head of the household, someone to be both respected and feared, and someone who modelled the form of violent, 'street' masculinity that Danny was also learning on the streets and in his interactions with his peers. During our 2011 interview, Danny described how when he had turned eighteen, his father had taken him for his 'first pint' at the Casbah, and a man tried to start a fight with him, following him into the toilet after an initial scuffle in the bar. Danny had sensed that the man was behind him, and explained:

> You've got to strike first otherwise he will, you know. So I kind of I skelped [hit] him and afore I knew it my dad came in at my back … [Laughter] And my dad got ladled into him as well, you know what I mean. He was one of the older guys and a lot bigger than me, I was only eighteen he'd maybe be in his late, well twenties anyway, twenty-five or something like that, you know, so he was one of the older kind of guys, notorious. So needless to say me and my dad and the dog, went outside, you know, and he was shouting obscenities, you know, and I kind of walked up the road as proud as punch me and my dad … [Laughter].

Although Danny is one of four children, discussion of his siblings was quite brief in 2011, apart from noting that none of his brothers were involved in the Drummy, one because 'he kept his nose clean' and the younger 'tearaway' probably kept safe by association with him. In 2022, Danny discussed his siblings in more detail, referring to them as a 'close-knit family' who had experienced some fallouts in more recent times. However, the image communicated is one of a close family who provided support to one another, emotionally, practically and financially. Danny had a strong bond with his family, and this sense of security may be a reason why he was able to successfully move beyond gang life.

Danny's romantic relationships were also important to his life trajectory. In 1969, Danny recalled his first experiences of getting a girlfriend, which initially led him to spend less time with the Drummy. Then, in both 2011 and 2022, Danny recalled how his relationship with his future wife impacted on his decision to leave Easterhouse. Asked in 2022 what part she played in Danny getting away from gangs, he responded:

> Oh, a big part, I mean, obviously, we were childhood sweethearts, as they call it, we were at school going together, type of thing. And I think we were about 14, and we've been together ever since, you know. And as I say, I can't remember if she gave me the ultimatum, but probably along those lines, like, we'll need to get out of here, and we need to get away from this, you're going to get the jail.

Together they made a commitment to save up enough to be able to buy a house and apply for a local authority mortgage, and were able to buy a house in an older working-class area of Glasgow. Once they moved in, it took the couple time to build up their belongings and most of their money went on 'keeping the house'; Danny commented that it was the couple's pursuit of 'the trappings and the

good life' that prevented them from having children. Both had very strong work ethics, and in 2022 Danny spoke proudly and at length of their successes in their respective careers over their lifetimes.

Work, deindustrialization and the 'second act'

Raised in a social environment where violence was normalized, Danny gained a local reputation and – like many of his contemporaries – spent his leisure time fighting and engaged in minor mayhem. Unlike many of his peers, however, Danny left the area aged eighteen with his wife-to-be, attempting to start a new life 'beyond the gang.' Through hard work, he was successful in building a career in the motor industry, but was never quite able to 'leave' the gang behind completely. As Phillips notes the status gained from 'getting a name' can be a double-edged sword, involving enhanced reputation but also 'reluctant fighting to protect a reputation' (Phillips 2003: 717). Former associates would appear at his workplace unexpectedly; violent incidents would erupt during nights-out; and trouble would follow him as he moved around the city. While, as Vigil notes, most young people 'mature out through a process of gradual disaffiliation and breaking away from the gang' (Vigil 1988: 106–7), reputations were not always easily lost.

As criminologists have long recognized, desistance from an offending lifestyle – including gang life – can require a rescripting of biographical experience (Maruna 2001). However, as Sandberg and Pederson have pointed out, since 'street habitus' represents the habituation and socialization of actors within a violent street-world (Sandberg and Pederson 2011; Fraser 2013), it may not be amenable to deep alteration. Rather, this may result in a period of internal conflict or contradiction as past and present habits co-exist (Venkatesh 2003).

As Danny got older, he began to experience a conflict between his gang life and ambitions for work, recalling being assaulted by rival gang members at 6.00 am, on a railway platform on his way to work and having to 'duck and dive' as he passed through other gangs' territories – the Den Toi and the Pak – on his way to and from work. As he stated in 2011:

> So it was a kind of a, a bit scary in the sense of it was like an obstacle course going to your work in the morning, you know, because they'd either be standing waiting for you coming home at night or even first thing in the morning when they got to grips with your route, you know. And then they would time the courses for your coming home or to work and things like that so you would either get chased, hit with bottles or attacked or whatever, you know.

Danny started socializing in the city centre and mixing with young men from other areas of the city. While gang allegiances endured, sometimes leading to violent encounters, it is notable that he recalled meeting and forging friendships with men from these other areas through work. This suggests some degree of tension

between existing territorial identities and work-based identities. Ultimately for Danny – as for others (Thornberry *et al.* 2003) – it was work and relationships that afforded a 'stake in conformity' that was sufficient to leave Easterhouse behind and start a new life elsewhere.

By the 1970s, while many friends had lost their lives, become imprisoned or moved away, Danny had left the gang, and established himself in regular work. Notably, during this period of relative postwar abundance, there were many jobs available for young men without qualifications. As he recalled in 2022, 'when I first left school [in the late 1960s], there was plenty of jobs. Well, compared to these days. You just went to the brew [employment office], and the brew had a wee kind of, the old-fashioned Filofax. And they just, do you fancy this, do you fancy that, do you fancy this, and you either said, yay or nay.' Ultimately Danny found regular employment with a well-known family firm whose manager was a larger-than-life character. Danny found the work and relationships in the firm fitted well with his own attitudes, and he thrived in an environment of hard work and masculine social relations. He spoke with reverence and respect for the manager: 'The boss was the type of guy, old-school … he was hands-on, everything. And he taught me a lot, you know, he taught me a lot. He was a wonderful man, I loved him. I always say to people, he's the only guy I would have worked for, for nothing, you know.' The manager saw potential in Danny and he suggested in 2022 that his street skills had prepared him for organizational roles and promotion:

> I went there, and I was there 34 years, I got promoted. I was in there about two or three years, and I got a foreman's job, and then I got a manager's job, and I was a manager for 30 years. So, and I don't know, maybe, I would have said it was the streetwise education, I was quite an organiser, you know, and I think that's what has shone out, you know. That I was a good organiser, and leadership qualities, probably, I think that's the two things that they kind of spotted in me. And I got a manager's job, and I was there, manager, for 30 years. So I done well. The boss looked after me.

Despite his best efforts to build a life unconnected with his past – leaving his local area for an affluent suburb – he was periodically recognized, and pulled back to the street culture he'd left behind. In one episode, recounted in both 2011 and 2022, he was spotted in his workplace by a successful drug dealer who cast an obtrusive presence in the calm neutrality of the garage forecourt, sporting a 'Crombie coat' that exuded gangster presence. Danger is palpable in Danny's account: association with a known criminal might have jeopardized his position in the workplace, resulting in an emotional tension that Danny expressed as a 'cringe' in our 2011 interview:

> He was just an absolute idiot, you know, we just, just couldnae get rid of him … I mean if he seen me in my work and I'd be standing with [the boss] having a meeting there in the middle of the showroom or something like that and he'd come up and maybe the big same Crombie coat on, you know, like the biggest

> gangster in town and walk right up to you. 'Alright Danny, how are you doing son?' And all that, you know, and I'd cringe.

This 'cringe', as Danny put it, can also be expressed as a tension between past and present – between 'street habitus' and his work environment. Latterly, in the 2022 interview, he elaborated on the feelings of tension that emerged in the workplace.

In 2011, Danny was signed off work for stress that resulted from a change in the working practices at the motor company, a circumstance we were not aware of at the time of our interview that same year. In 2022, he explained that 'when the boss stepped away from it, it was accountants that came in charge then, and accountants, my God ….everything had to be regimented'. Following a pattern of deindustrialization and neoliberalization repeated across the city, the work environment in which Danny had thrived became depersonalized and 'regimented' (Phillips *et al.* 2021). Crucially, an individual's habitus does not automatically accede to the new conditions of the field – as the saying goes, 'old habits die hard'. Drawing on Bourdieu, this is referred to by McNay (2001: 146) as 'paradoxical relations', in which the dispositions inscribed in the habitus are experienced as being out of sync with the new field logics, something that is experienced as unsettling. This tension was resolved by Danny in a simple way: by taking early retirement. The tensions between continuity and change were an issue that came to the fore frequently in our interview in 2022, Danny revealing a number of new layers to his previous recollections that opened up a number of new avenues for understanding his trajectory in a longitudinal perspective, as the next section explores.

Turning the kaleidoscope: Ambiguities, reflections and the Drummy at seventy

At one level, it was not necessarily surprising that Danny reflected back more profoundly on his life during our 2022 interview. This took place shortly after he turned seventy years of age, although the changed tone and process of 'life review' (Summerfield 2016), especially compared to our 2011 interview, did not just arise from this process of ageing. Between 2011 and 2022, Danny also experienced significant life changes that prompted him to revisit his memories and experiences, including his sick leave and subsequent retirement from work, the recent and ongoing serious illnesses of a sibling and close friend, and the loss of his father in traumatic circumstances. Listening back to the 2022 interview there is a sense of pain, loss and vulnerability in his narrative that contrasts with the confidence, humour and excitement of running with the Drummy that are foregrounded in both the 1969 and 2011 interviews.

Another noticeable contrast between 2011 and 2022 is Danny's perspective on his father. As we explored earlier, his father was a figure of authority in his family, both feared and respected, and an important influence in the development of

Danny's sense of masculinity. In retrospect, we looked at this relationship narrowly in our 2011 interview, seeing his father as passing on this 'hard masculinity' and, as the story about the cosh behind the door suggested, still representing this in his eighties. During our 2022 interview, however, Danny told us his father had died in 2012 and 'it broke my heart'. He recounted some very painful and traumatic memories of his father's illness, his dad's 'horrendous' experiences in hospital, as well as a breakdown in his relationship with one of his siblings. Alongside these painful memories, he also opened up about his relationship with his father. The image of the distant authoritative figure described in 1969 and 2011 was rendered more complex and fragile, with feelings of regret and sadness coming to the surface in our interview in 2022. In particular, Danny recalled that when his father came home from work, he expected 'peace and quiet' to enjoy his dinner, cups of tea and to watch television, and then 'by the time he'd finished his dinner it was time for your bed. So you technically never really seen your dad, you know. Which I thought was quite harsh at the time, the more I think about it.' Indeed, Danny explicitly contrasted the expectations to play in his room so that his dad could relax with more involved parent-child relationships in contemporary society: 'You just, you were put in a room, and that was you. It was like getting, I don't know, sent away. I say it didn't bother me, but I suppose later in life when you think about it, you think, well I never really got to know my dad. You never got to talk to him, you know.'

When we asked him whether he remembered everyone spending time together as a family, he initially said no, this was not something he really remembered any families doing at that time, but then recalled that his dad had always made sure they had an annual holiday as children, repairing 'an old banger [car]' and borrowing a friend's caravan on the west coast of Scotland. Later, he recalled a fishing trip that his dad invited him on at the age of fifteen with a friend and his son. Together, they set off on a boat on a sea loch in the west of Scotland and were caught up in a frightening storm, with Danny recounting in vivid detail in 2022 the fear they all experienced before reaching safety: 'And that kind of put me off going on the boat and fishing, for a long, long time, you know. So that was the fishing out the window, basically. So that was the nearest I got to spending time with my dad ….' These examples are moving in the way they reveal vulnerability in young Danny and a sadness about missed opportunities to get to know his father more in his formative years. Even the story Danny told us about them fighting a man together in the Casbah takes on a new poignancy in our 2022 interview, as Danny ended his re-telling of this story with:

> And that's the first time I probably ever bonded, truly, with my dad, if you know what I mean, in all the years, you know, as I say, sitting in the bedroom, and get your hair cut, and all this. And that was the first time I ever bonded with him, and that was on my 18th birthday, I'll never forget it.

A related element that came through strongly in our last interview is Danny's rock-solid sense of propriety and moral values. The stereotype of gangs was and

remains that of marginalized and excluded youth doing what they can to survive, often having an ambivalent attitude towards legality and work. In 2022, however, Danny railed against people who chose not to work for a living or who made their money by illegal means, criticizing those that are 'not interested in working, not interested in getting up out the rat race and making a life for themselves'. Illustrating this point, he recalled bumping into 'a wee thief' he had known in Easterhouse in a pub elsewhere in Glasgow when they were both around sixty years old. Noticing him standing at the bar in a suit and tie, Danny asked how he was doing, to which he responded: 'I'm not doing nothing … I've never worked since I left school', telling Danny 'you're off your head' for working, before buying him a large malt whisky. As they shook hands and parted company, he pressed something into his hand, which Danny thought was drugs (which he noted his disapproval of):

> And I goes to the toilet and opens it up – a £20 note. He's given me a £20 note. I said, there's something not right here. He's never worked since he left school, I've worked all my life, and he's put a £20 note in my hand to get myself a drink. I said, the world's gone mad, it's not right, is it, you know what I mean? But it's just the way it is, crazy. Crazy!

During the last few minutes of our 2022 interview, Danny also reflected back on aspects of his time in the Drummy, including his involvement in shoplifting, which he said he felt pressured into doing 'as a bravado thing', but noting, 'I was never a thief. Whereas, all these guys would break into houses, I just think that's despicable, you know … I would never do that.' Mulling over his use of weapons, he commented, 'I think when it came to the crunch, there's just that wee bit in the back of my brain saying, don't do this, you know what I mean? […] I think I had more sense, and my family life, I would say, had taught me not to do that, you know. It was predominantly more for protection.'

These reflections suggest that the sense of belongingness that young Danny grew up with in his family network combined with more positive outcomes of his involvement in the Drummy to produce a strongly articulated sense of appropriate standards of behaviour. Interestingly, in retirement, Danny had recently reconnected with two other former members of the Drummy gang, and met with them for shared holidays, golf and trips to the pub. This reflects the persistence of critical social relations over time, in a way that demonstrates the positive reciprocities of foundational social relations over the life-course (Weaver and Fraser 2022). These were evident in his time with the Drummy in the principles that you do not fight someone for no good reason, and you stand your ground and never run away and leave your friends. As he reflected in 2022:

> In terms of education, I think it was probably a good thing, it made me more streetwise. I would never have swapped it for six O levels, put it that way, and a school uniform, no way, no way. No way would I have done that. As much as it was probably a shitty life, you know what I mean, in terms of the gangs, and

> all that kind of thing, I wouldn't have swapped it, you know, I wouldn't have swapped it for anything.

These principles appear to have remained strong, presenting in different forms as he got older and his circumstances changed.

Conclusion

The Drummy was a temporary phase in Danny's mid to late teens, one that he was able to successfully leave behind as he fashioned a 'second act' beyond the gang. As he recalled in 2011, 'once I got to about eighteen, nineteen I started to venture away frae it and say "right I'm not, that's not for me this carry on"'. He also moved away physically, seeking to put distance between Easterhouse and married, working life by moving first to an older working-class area, and then to a small town just outside Glasgow. We suggest that Danny was able to successfully create a 'second act' for a number of reasons: a relatively stable extended family, a strong moral education, a supportive group of friends and a relative abundance of employment opportunities as he entered working life. However, although Danny successfully grew up and out of the gang, his testimony demonstrates the enduring influence his teenage involvement continued to have in later life. It is apparent, for example, that Danny continued – and continues – to draw on the 'street habitus' first developed in 1960s Easterhouse, albeit standing his ground in ways that rely less on the 'gemme' masculinity of his youth, and more on his strongly articulated sense of what is right and just. Similarly, Danny articulates positive links between his 'street' education and his successful career.

In their original study of the Drummy, Armstrong and Wilson emphasized that it was necessary to refer 'to the subjective definitions of the situation held by the actors themselves' (Armstrong and Wilson 1973b). Thanks to these two sociologists, we are fortunate to have rich first-hand accounts from young people describing what being in a gang meant for them at the time. The value of oral history to studying the subject of gangs is that it offers an effective method for exploring subjective identities and meanings associated with gangs – especially how these change over time, whether in response to individual moments or to the wider shifts that occur in an individual's life circumstances, their community or the city in which they live. By talking about their past from the vantage point of the present, interviewees discuss not just 'what happened', but how they felt about it – and, crucially, how they feel about it now. Throughout our last interview, Danny recounted both positive and negative perspectives about his time in Easterhouse, in a manner that suggests he is still evaluating and reflecting on the experience and seeking some sense of 'composure' in his memories. As Abrams (2010: 66) argues:

> The story that a person tells is just one of many that are possible. The script is not deterministic. Its shape, form and content is determined by the need for the narrator to construct a memory story with which he or she can feel comfortable at that moment. And a comfortable telling is often one in which the story told coheres with larger cultural understandings.

Danny's awareness of this came through in our final interview as he mulled over 'how things used to be', then and now. When we asked him during our 2022 interview if he had read the transcript of the interview he did with Armstrong in 1969, which we had sent him, he replied: 'Aye. I still shudder at it and say, that isn't me, you know.' Many of the details about gang activities, the use of weapons and the anecdotes he shared in 1969 remain consistent, but their meaning and his attitudes towards them have changed in interesting and illuminating ways. These arise from changes in his own life circumstances as well as from broader shifts that have taken place in society in the half century since that first interview.

Oral history methodology combined with sociological concepts offers a way of sensitively unpacking the significance of gangs to individuals and, with repeated interviews, exploring how and why this might shift over an individual's lifetime. Revisiting past interviews also offers us as researchers the opportunity for a 'second take', offering insight into how we have developed and refined our perspectives and understandings of the subject since we first undertook our interviews (Bornat 2003). Exploring Danny's involvement in the Drummy, both then and since, has allowed us to reflect on our own changing identities and interests, as well as the insights to be garnered from combining in-depth oral history interviewing and criminology. This 'second take', we feel, affords an important reflexive vantage point on the 'second act' we describe. We hope these reflections carry potential for understanding the meaning and significance of gangs in other times and places, adding depth and nuance to ongoing debate on the global gang phenomenon.

Notes

1 This project had the aim of interrogating popular stereotypes of Glasgow, particularly those focusing on Glasgow's reputation as a 'violent city' and sought to examine the moral panic over youth gangs in Glasgow from the perspectives of the 'folk devils' themselves, by undertaking a case study of Easterhouse gangs during the period 1965–75.

2 See https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.

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Figure 8.1 Gang tattoos, Nicaragua, 2003.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 8

The Life of Bryan in Nicaragua

José Luis Rocha

'I left my stepdad shitting into a bag' was one of the more memorable phrases that Bryan[1] used while describing his life to me. I had heard it before, but never applied to a stepfather. It's an expression that Nicaraguan '*pandilleros*', or youth gang members, generally use mockingly to refer to their victims whom they have stabbed in the abdomen, whose intestines have been perforated, and who have to defecate into a plastic colostomy bag afterwards. Bryan telling me that he had left his stepdad shitting into a bag suggested that his household was riven by extreme levels of intra-familial violence, something that was not necessarily surprising, considering a broader Nicaraguan context beset by high levels of domestic violence (Ellsberg *et al.* 2000), as well as the fact that Bryan was a gang member, who can often – but not always – enter into conflict with their families.

At the same time, however, Bryan did not act like a typical gang member. When we first met in 2003, one of the first things he said to me was 'I'm getting old', which made me smile. Although he was about to turn twenty-one, he was a skinny youth who looked at least five years younger. Like many gang members, he had tattoos on his arms and chest, but more unusually, none that he couldn't cover up. That possibility of being able to display or hide his tattoos, depending on his social context, facilitated a chameleon-like persona. It meant that while he was a gang member, he could also fit in with other social groups without arousing apprehension or suspicion.

Indeed, a striking element of Bryan's persona was that he always actively sought to resonate with his interlocutors, whomever they were, trying to understand and respond to their wishes and interests. It was something that proved to be a boon during the interviews we carried out together, as he would always go beyond what I generally expected from a gang member. He was open, voluble and engaging, and he took me multiple times to his neighbourhood, to his house, spontaneously and expansively introducing me to his family, his gang, his drug providers, his favourite tattooist and showing me his weapons. I didn't need to ask him for anything, he was always two steps ahead of me, and seemed delighted to share his life with me.

This may have had to do with the fact that Bryan and I first met in the offices of the Centre for the Prevention of Violence (CEPREV), a Nicaraguan NGO working

towards the construction of a 'culture of peace'. He was one of several 'at-risk' youth who at the time came to the CEPREV on a daily basis to receive psychological counselling and participate in violence-reduction activities, and the only one who responded to my request to be interviewed as part of my then ongoing research on youth gangs (Rocha 2007b, 2010, 2013). We held our first interview at the CEPREV, but subsequently met up multiple times in the *Reparto* Schick, an urban district in the south-east of Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, made up of a conglomerate of small, impoverished neighbourhoods, including the *barrio* Carlos Fonseca Amador,[2] where Bryan lived.

Originally founded as a model housing development in the mid-1960s, the *Reparto* Schick grew chaotically during the 1970s and 1980s, and became infamous during the 1990s as the breeding ground for some of Managua's most notorious youth gangs, including for example *Los Comemuertos* (The Eaters of the Dead), *Los Rampleros*, *Los Cancheros* or *Los Mataperros* (The Dog Killers), amongst others. It was in this context that Bryan came of age, joining his local neighbourhood gang at the age of fourteen, before subsequently leaving it five years later, and then becoming a poster boy for the CEPREV and its violence-reduction programmes, as he detailed in multiple interviews in 2003.

Bryan and I subsequently stayed sporadically in touch, mainly as 'friends' on Facebook. My participation in the ERC GANGS project[3] prompted me to actively re-contact him in late 2021 to carry out an interview to trace and reflect on his life since the early 2000s. After a promising start, our exchanges were cut short by broader national political developments, and more specifically the forced closure of the CEPREV in 2022, but they nevertheless revealed that – perhaps not surprisingly – Bryan had continued to work closely with the CEPREV through the late 2000s and 2010s, before – perhaps more surprisingly – moving on to collaborating closely with the Police in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

Bryan's trajectory is both typical and unusual, but highlights how the experience of being a gang member can serve to construct a viable post-gang career, both intrinsically but also more contingently, by allowing him to seize opportunities, and facilitating his adaptation to new and evolving situations. The first part of this chapter draws on my interviews with Bryan from 2003 to trace his early years and his experiences as a gang member, including in particular his interactions with the Police and the Nicaraguan judicial system, as well as his encounter and involvement with the CEPREV. The second part is based on a single interview we carried out in late 2021, as well as more informal online exchanges afterwards, and looks back at his post-gang trajectory after 2003. A conclusion offers some reflections about Bryan's particular life course.

Early years

Bryan was born into a poor family in the *Colonia 10 de Junio* neighbourhood in north-east Managua in 1982. His parents separated when he was still an infant, and his father left the family home. Bryan saw him again once, and he and his

elder sister were brought up by his mother, who worked as a cleaning lady, and his grandmother. Bryan had an idyllic image of his early childhood: 'My life was good, I had a lot of support from my family.' When he was seven, his mother met a new partner, and Bryan, his mother and sister moved to live with him in the *Reparto* Schick. 'Our family began to change when we joined my step-father', Bryan recounted. His mother was the new family's sole bread-winner; his step-father was unemployed, and Bryan said:

> My stepdad maltreated us a lot when my mother was working, especially my sister, … and I didn't like seeing that, and so I started to be aggressive against him, … also because of the way he mistreated me, because he would often hit me, and lock me out of the house. … Once he threw hot soup at me, and so I hit him on the head with a baseball bat.

Bryan always hoped that his mother would intervene, but she never did, 'preferring to become an alcoholic instead', as he put it. Confrontation between Bryan and his stepfather kept escalating until one day 'I stabbed him, and left him shitting into a bag, six months he had to shit into a bag before they could operate on him. And he still can't shit properly!' By then Bryan had joined the local youth gang, although he had already gained a reputation in the neighbourhood of being a 'rebel':

> Before entering the gang, I was already seen as a troublemaker … because of the way there was conflict in my family. I would look for ways to let off steam and would always be looking for trouble with others. I never stayed in the same school for very long because the teachers were always against me, just like my stepdad and mother at home. They would say, 'Bryan, be quiet!', or they would threaten me with a ruler, and I didn't like that at all, so I would become aggressive and hit them back.

Bryan did not progress beyond the fourth grade of elementary school and, by the age of twelve, was spending his days hanging out in the streets of the neighbourhood, committing petty crimes and consuming drugs:

> I first started smoking marihuana, and also drinking alcohol with Diazepam. Then marihuana with that white powder, cocaine, but I only did that three times. I didn't like it; it made me vomit. So much stuff made me vomit … Glue, I sniffed glue, too … Once I also sniffed and drank gasoline, that was bad. But I never tried crack, because if I had, it would've been tougher to stop.

Through the intermediary of a local priest, Bryan's mother was able to get him checked into a local rehabilitation centre. Although he swore that he stayed clean afterwards, it is clear from his narrative that he relapsed several times, at least until a health scare prompted him to quit for good:

> Once some arseholes were following me, and after running for just one block I could feel my heart starting to go bum bum bum … Accelerating, like tachycardia, you know? I felt as if my head was about to explode … I had to stop running, I couldn't evern go one more block, I thought that my heart was going to jump out of me! When I got home, I gulped down a cold soda, in one go, and decided there and then that I had to stop consuming.

It is not at all clear whether Bryan had really stopped consuming or not when I met him in 2003, especially as he remained close to the world of drugs. When I asked him during one of our meetings whether I might be able to purchase some crack in his neighbourhood, in order to find out what the going rate was, he immediately took me to somebody whom he said sold 'the best crack in all the *barrio*', and after I had bought some, he gave me a crack pipe and lessons as to how to prepare everything, while at the same time telling me about the evolution of retail prices over the past two years.

Joining the gang

Bryan joined the *barrio* Carlos Fonseca Amador gang when he was fourteen, and left it at nineteen. His period of gang membership (1996–2001) corresponded to the 'Golden Era' of *pandillerismo* in Nicaragua, when a second generation of gang members took over the gangs that had been established in the late 1980s and early 1990s by former conscripts who had been demobilized following the end of the civil war that afflicted the country during the *Sandinista* revolutionary period (see Rodgers and Rocha 2013; Rodgers 2024). As Bryan recalled:

> Before, it was calm. There was crime, but the gangs didn't exist yet. Folk could circulate at any time, people could enter the neighbourhood at any hour. Gangs didn't exist, drugs did, a little bit, but you didn't hear much about them … Later, some guys who called themselves *Los Brujos del Reparto Schick* [The *Reparto* Schick Sorcerers], they were the first to emerge. They were the first gang that was born there, in the *Reparto*, they would boss everyone around, but they would also talk to us kids on the streets, telling us how we had to defend our neighbourhoods. Later this gang disappeared and others emerged – *Los Comemuertos*, *Los Rampleros*, and us.

Bryan's gang engaged in a range of different forms of crime, delinquency and violence, including fighting against other gangs, which were also opportunities for individual gang members to gain fame and notoriety. As he described, talking about himself:

> I liked it when the guys would say: 'Fuck, "*Biberón*" is "*sobre*" [brave]'. We all gave each other nicknames; they used to call me "*Biberón*" (baby bottle) because

> I liked to drink! But it was their way of praising me, I was like their symbol, the trophy of the gang. 'This guy is brave; this dude has no fear' – I felt good when they said that about me. The more they said it, the more I got involved in the gang. I kind of felt like I was their shield, their first line of protection. Whenever there was a fight or any problem, everybody would say 'Let's go get *Biberón*!' I always went all the way, you know. I would always go up first against other gangs and the Police, and the guys behind me knew they were safe because I was there to cover them it they had to run away.

Bryan regaled me with numerous stories about his exploits, some very likely real, others clearly exaggerated. He talked about how he could climb over any wall 'like a cat', hide in strangers' houses without them noticing, 'climb onto a moving bus', punish '*bombines*' (snitches), mug three people at once, or break into a warehouse and steal thousands of cigarettes. He would often talk about how his dog, 'Pacha', had followed him everywhere, a loyal sidekick who had often defended him from 'enemies' until 'someone killed my dog. Why would anyone do this, I don't know … Someone gave him poison … I didn't know who it was at the time, but later I learnt it had been this old lady, a neighbour of mine, and me and the boys went to mess the fucking bitch up and ransack her house.'

Between one adventure and the next, Bryan was arrested several times. Due to the provisions of the 1998 Nicaraguan Code of Childhood and Adolescence (*Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia*), he was always tried as a minor, and never incarcerated in a proper prison for any length of time. Instead, he was sent several times to youth detention centres. When he was sixteen, he was sent to the *Centro Amigos*, located in the municipality of Pueblo Nuevo in the department of Estelí, in Northern Nicaragua. There he met other youth with whom he 'completed his corruption', as he put it:

> There were five of us, one from Somoto, another from León, another from Estelí, and two of us from Managua … We met at the Centre, and … instead of becoming straight, … we became more crooked … We taught each other all sorts of things … After nine months, we escaped, we stole some guns and we went to Estelí, where we robbed a gas station. The Police started looking for us everywhere, so we took off to Honduras, we went to El Espino [a small town on the border between Nicaragua and Honduras], where an old woman let us stay in her house until a car drove us to a nearby town further in … But it had been reported that we were in Honduras, and because the way we talk sounds different, people told us to go back to Nicaragua because if we were arrested in Honduras we wouldn't be able to get out … Some folks helped us and let us hide in a farm when the Police came close by, and then we went back to Nicaragua and I returned to Managua.

Bryan said that he had learned many things during his adventures in the North of Nicaragua: 'Those guys taught me a lot of things, I learned new lessons.' He thought he would be able to teach these things to the gang members in *barrio*

Carlos Fonseca Amador, but discovered that they had also advanced in the process of what he called 'corruption':

> When I got there, I told them what had happened to me, and they said, 'You're kidding, man, you think that's dope? We're fiercer than those dudes.' The gang had got stronger, more daring than before I went to the North, but they still admired me, and looked up to me … One time I stole an AK[-47] for us from a guard at the *Distribuidora Katín* [a large food store in *Reparto* Schick]. In broad daylight! I just walked right in, and picked it up right next to the guard's chair, while he was sitting on it. I hit him across the head with it, and then ran off. When the homies saw me returning with the AK, they said, 'fuck, man, that's hot stuff', and we then went to the *barrio* Elías Blanco [another neighbourhood in the *Reparto* Schick area] and held up a bus with it there. We shot up the bus' tires afterwards, so it was stuck there … Two days later four Police cars came to take the bus away, but nobody came to look for us and the AK, probably because the guard didn't have papers for it.

The gang also deployed greater professionalism in fighting against other gangs: 'Before it was all chaos, now we would plan everything ahead. Before going into a fight we would write down a plan on paper, with strategies and everything: how we would go in, the exit … How we would exit if the cops came. Some of us were good at that, so we organized ourselves.' These skills were also used against the Police:

> We had no respect for the cops. We hated them and would attack them with whatever we had at hand … stones, knives, bottles, guns, whatever. If they started firing at us, we would fire back at them, throw them out of our neighbourhood. Whenever they looked for us, they could never find us, because we were familiar with every nook and cranny and could hide. We could also ambush them, and scare them away. We'd shoot at their feet or over their heads, and they would drop to the ground.

Bryan's gang arguably reached the zenith of its power around this time, in 2000–2001, recruiting more members, who multiplied outwards signs of belonging to the gang, including in particular getting numerous tattoos. Showing me his, Bryan explained their significance to me:

> The teardrops on my face represent the dead, those I've killed from other gangs, I remember them every time I look at my face in the mirror … This one is of a burning monk reading a satanic book … This one is of my dog Pacha who was murdered … I also have these two clowns smoking marihuana, that's so that I can tell any homies who are fucking about, 'you dudes are like clowns', it's a symbol, you know …

Bryan also wrote songs to further promote his legend and that of his gang, which included lyrics such as

Here come the dudes who want to shade us out,
But they can't do it,
Our gang will never end,
So all you lazybones, start to tremble,
And start to show us some respect,
The big one, *el Biberón*, is here to blow you all away

Close encounters with the police and learning to be 'smart'

Bryan did not always idealize his experience with the gang, however, often emphasizing in our interviews the hardships that membership entailed: 'I suffered a lot as a gang member. People discriminated against us, they said things like "you're the scourge of society, you're good for nothing, you're trash … " Many things like that.' This kind of discourse became very prominent around the turn of the century with a critical transformation in Nicaraguan gang dynamics, when they became increasingly predatory against their local communities (see Rodgers 2006). The latter also led to a change in policing tactics, as police officers – often frustrated by the provisions of the 1998 Nicaraguan Code of Childhood and Adolescence – increasingly turned to extrajudicial punishments to discipline adolescent gang members:

> One day I got caught by the cops. I don't know why they picked me up, I was just minding my own business, but anyway, they came straight up to me and kicked me down, and then kicked me in the chest. Then they picked me up by my hair – I had long hair at the time – and dragged me to the patrol car and threw me in, and continued to beat me until they threw me out of the car … I spent a whole week spitting blood afterwards … Another time, they took me to the Police station, and they beat me so hard that I saw death close-up … The others in the holding cell cried out, 'Agent, agent! This kid is dying, he has a fever', but the cops just said: 'Let that son of a bitch die, the mother fucker is a criminal, we'll be doing society a favour' … The way they treated us! As if we were not human beings, as if we were from another world, another planet … As if we were a brick in the wall … They'd hit us and then they'd say: 'You're just scum; you're worth nothing.'

Although Bryan was never formally imprisoned, he was detained over a dozen times in police station jails, in violation of formal judicial protocols. The longest detentions lasted fifteen and twenty-two days, but most of the time he was released after a few days, as he learned to be 'smart'. As he explained:

> Learning to be smart ('*aprender a descobijarse*'), that means knowing what to say when the police arrest you. You need defend yourself, but you have to do it

> with words, not violence … I learnt how to tell the cops who would arrest me, 'if you're bringing me in, it's your business, but you have to investigate first, you have to charge me, if you don't have any charges against me, it's illegal to arrest me'. They'd then invent thing, and so, when they brought me before the judge and they had charged me with lots of things, I'd say to the judge very calmly: 'Look, I haven't confessed to any of that. I didn't sign anything, no paper or anything. I don't know anything about this, I don't know why I've been arrested. I think the problem is that some of my neighbours hate me, maybe because they see how I'm getting ahead, making my life. It could be they are jealous, yes, I guess it's that.' Of course this was a lie, but the judge would then say to me: 'You don't sound guilty, I'm going to have to investigate more, but here they are accusing you of stealing a television set, a Nintendo, and a dog'. I'd tell her: 'Look, I already have a television set, and I had a dog that my neighbour poisoned, I've only had problems with her, and with no one else in the neighbourhood, and that's because she poisoned my dog'.

Through this kind of self-confidence, self-depreciating and polite discourse, Bryan was frequently able to convince judges to release him and tear up the charges against him. He was once even able to turn the tables on police officers after they had beaten him:

> One time, they cops beat me up, I was bruised all over, and when I got taken to court, I told the judge, 'look, this is how the police officers beat me up'. The cops had to stand in a line, and the judge asked me to point out the perpetrators. Their faces were mean-looking, they looked like angry bulldogs, and they thought I would just shut my mouth, but I didn't, and I pointed out those who had hit me, 'That one, that one, and that other one'. And the judge said, 'OK, I'll take care of this, you can go.'

Bryan subsequently frequently sought to use this event as a defence against police abuse when he was detained in a police station: 'I would tell them [the Police officers]: "If you want to, hit me. But then we'll meet in court." I had experience with this, and they knew it.' He also drew on this kind of implicit legal intimidation in another way, as he explained:

> One time, several of us were caught together, and the cops beat us all up, badly, and then threw us into a holding cell. Then the Police commissioner came to visit, to see who was in the cell. All my friends moved into the shadows, but I went up to him and said, 'look at what your cops did, Commissioner', and I pulled down my pants and showed him the cuts and bruises. 'I said to him, they're not allowed to do that, the Code of Childhood and Adolescence doesn't allow it', and he let me go immediately, sending me home in a patrol car, while the others had to stay for fifteen days.

As Bryan put it once: 'In reality, I was my own defender, I advocated for myself, no else did.' A striking element of our interview in 2021 was that even if he was now very critical of gangs, Bryan recalled these episodes rather proudly, even going so far as to say at one point that 'no Police officer could outsmart a *pandillero* like me', and saying that he owed a lot to having learnt to be 'smart', and that it helped him when he began to engage with the CEPREV around 2000.

The CEPREV

The CEPREV was founded in 1997 by Mónica Zalaquett, a Chilean journalist and psychologist who came to Nicaragua to join the *Sandinista* revolutionary struggle in the 1970s, staying on after the triumph of the revolution and marrying Ricardo Wheelcock, a former *guerrillero* and high-ranking *Sandinista* army officer. In a small, traditional society such as Nicaragua, in which kinship is decisive (see Vilas 1992), this marital bond facilitated a close relationship between the CEPREV and the Nicaraguan National Police, which was led by Wheelock's former comrades-in-arms.

The CEPREV's psychological approach to violence-prevention made it a valuable partner for the latter from the early 2000s onwards, when the Nicaraguan National Police sought to represent itself as promoting a non-violent community policing-based model of urban security management vis-à-vis international donors such as the Inter-American Development Bank or the Swedish International Development Agency (see Policía Nacional de Nicaragua 2011; Castro Rivera 2012). Although the reality on the ground – as starkly reflected in Bryan's encounters with the police as a gang member – was quite different (see also Rocha 2007a; Rocha *et al.* 2023), the collaboration with the CEPREV's programmes was frequently held up as evidence of the police's non-violent approach to dealing with youth crime and delinquency.

One such programme involved 'street psychologists' engaging with 'at-risk' youth in poor urban neighbourhoods in Managua that were known for their gang violence. Initial encounters often took place in local Police stations, where the police would facilitate CEPREV psychologists making contact with youth detained in holding cells, in order to allow them to organize follow-up neighbourhood visits after they were released. Due to the virulence of its gangs, the *Reparto* Schick was one of the first areas of Managua that the CEPREV targeted, and it is because of this that Bryan first came across the organization.

Initially he was very resistant to the efforts of the CEPREV psychologists, even making fun of them: 'Whenever they came, the guys would say: "These girls [the CEPREV psychologists were mostly women] are crazy". We thought what they did was madness, just nonsense … And when the girls came, I would run away. If someone said "there comes the psychologist", I would leave, I didn't want to see them. I was utterly closed-minded.' Over time, however, Bryan came to change his attitude:

> Once we were fighting with another gang and the psychologist happened to be there. 'Calm down, boys. Please!', she said. And we calmed down. We did so because of the way they talked to us, the way they said things to us, with respect and affection. They would say nice things. They would give us talks and counsel, and their advice came from their heart into ours. We even began to feel that we are worth something, that we are not scum, but that we could be important.

Soon, Bryan started to regularly visit the organization's offices in the *Colonia 10 de Junio* neighbourhood. As he explained:

> It's nice here, you know. This is the neighbourhood I was born in, even if I'm not longer from here, and the CEPREV is a place to meet with friends, they feed you, there's activities, you have workshops, they can also get you scholarships, and even when they don't have any for you, they hire you, like to paint the walls or stack the chairs, and all.

He also noted how local neighbourhood inhabitants, who had previously shunned him, seemed to change their attitude towards him: 'They would say "that kid is no longer involved in anything". The people in the *barrio* would now support me instead of insulting me. And that made me feel good. When people see you, they see you differently, and they complement you. They would tell the other homies, "see, you ought to be like *Biberón*"'.

Not all youth who engaged with the CEPREV had the same experience, however. Bryan's engagement was in many ways special, as he became the CEPREV's 'trophy', as he put it, in the same way he used to be the gang's 'trophy' as *Biberón*, the fearless, crazy *pandillero*. Similarly to the way that he had learnt to use the law against the police, he rapidly assimilated the language and ethos of the CEPREV, and would often use psychological jargon in presenting himself, including during our interviews in 2003:

> *Pandilleros*, well, that's what people call us, but we are not *pandilleros*, we are youth groups, youngsters who have psychological issues, young people who are rejected by their families and by society, who have been traumatized, and who have to unlearn our trauma. We are worthy, we are not *pandilleros*, that word sounds so ugly. What we are is 'at risk' youth, and we need to be rehabilitated, to reintegrate society.

Bryan was clearly very proud of his symbolic importance for CEPREV: 'They see me as a symbol that represents that it is possible to get out of gang life. My neighbours all say I look different, so do the Police, so do the psychologists. And I like that, I like being a symbol. I used to be a negative symbol, now I am a positive symbol.' He became the organization's go-to success story, written about in newspaper articles and the reports of international agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Swedish International Development Agency or

the United Nations Development Programme, as well as international NGOs such as Casa Alianza.

Although there was clearly an element of cynicism to Bryan's engagement with CEPREV, which he sometimes compared in a very self-satisfied way to his 'smart' interactions in the past with the police and judicial institutions, there is no doubt that it also brought him some definite psycho-social benefits. And it also provided him with material ones, too. In 2002, he received a scholarship to learn how to become a welder, and he was also frequently paid to participate in meetings with potential CEPREV sponsors, where he was paraded as 'a success story'.

A gradual exit

Officially, Bryan had left the gang and his violent ways behind two years prior to when we met in 2003. One time, however, after a long day spent surveying the *Reparto* Schick together, we sat down to have a beer, and he pulled out an enormous machete from his trouser leg. He had had it with him the whole time – and to my embarrassment – I hadn't even noticed … I asked him why he had it with him, and he answered, 'I brought it to defend you.' Later on, though, he admitted that he'd brought it because we were going to go through parts of the *Reparto* Schick where he still had enemies, and he needed to be able to defend himself.

When Bryan had been part of the gang, it had provided him with protection against his enemies. This was no longer the case after he 'retired', which he said he formally did in 2001, and the loss of this protection was clearly something that concerned him:

> It was hard for me to leave because of my enemies. Whenever they saw me, they'd come and attack, throwing stones at me or trying to beat me up. Once they got me in the chest with a construction block, and I almost fainted … Then they started shooting at me with mortars, just missing my head … Some of my homies heard the commotion, and came and saved me … If they hadn't been nearby, who knows if I would be telling you this story, that day I came really close to dying … So it was hard to stay away from my gang because of this, and also because when I was attacked and injured, I wanted revenge, and I couldn't get that by myself.

Not surprisingly, perhaps – certainly in view of Dennis Rodgers' (2023) research on 'desistance' amongst gang members in another neighbourhood of Managua – Bryan's exit from his gang was in fact gradual, and had many ups and downs. In addition to gang rivals targeting him, he also had to face drug relapses – something which he only talked about elliptically, clearly ashamed – as well as ridicule from his former gang mates. Bryan often said during our interviews in 2003 that he had left the gang because he had begun to think and to reason differently as a result of

his interactions with the CEPREV. He told me how he had once tried to explain his new reasoning to his gang peers after he had let someone steal a cap off his head in front of them:

> So they said: 'What the fuck? He came right up to you and took your cap, and you did nothing to him?' And I replied, 'come on, guys, you know it's not really worth it. The cap … you can get another one, but it's not the same with your life, you never know what a guy like that might do to you. How much do you think a coffin will cost? Not only that. Your family will be destroyed. You guys need to think about this. You can easily get another cap. What are forty-five pesos compared to a life?' But they didn't understand, they said that my head had gone soft, and they just insulted me, saying 'Uy, no way man, you're just destroyed'.

Things got even worse one time when Bryan tried to defend a neighbour's daughter who was being harassed by some former gang mates, and he became their victim:

> They struck me on the knee with a large tube, I was crippled, and they also hit my back. Afterwards, they went to stone my house … That day I finally understood what fear means. I had never been scared before, had never felt fear. I was a superhero type of person, like Superman. But after they beat me up, I became scared, and I tried to avoid them as much as I could.

Twenty years later

Bryan and I stayed sporadically in touch during the late 2000s and 2010s, but I did not actively seek to meet with or interview him during this period. The invitation to participate in the ERC GANGS project, however, prompted me to re-contact him in late 2021 to see if he would be amenable to carrying out a new interview in order to both trace and reflect on his life trajectory since our exchanges in the early 2000s. He agreed, and we met up in a café in a shopping mall.

Bryan was now thirty-nine years old and had been out of the gang for twenty years. He had gained some weight and had got married in 2008, with one of the CEPREV's psychologists. They had an eleven-year-old daughter and a six-year-old son. The former was named after Mónica Zalaquett, the CEPREV's director, for whom Bryan clearly felt a real warmth: 'I named my daughter Mónica out of the deep affection I have for *Doña* Mónica', he said.

The CEPREV had continued to play a key role in his life. Through a scholarship, Bryan had been able to study carpentry in the early 2010s, and had set up a carpentry business in *barrio* Carlos Fonseca Amador, where he still lived. He had his own, separate workshop, and had built up a regular clientele. He had also joined an evangelical church and his discourse was now tinged with numerous religious

elements. He, for example, now explained how having been a gang member was 'proof that the Devil wanted me to go astray, because I was a sinner, but today God has infused me with the strength to resist, because He is stronger than the Devil'.

Bryan's relationship with the CEPREV had continued until 2015. He had gone beyond simply being a poster boy for their programmes and had actively involved himself, particularly in his neighbourhood, acting as a 'promoter' and running youth workshops. Although he had ceased to collaborate with the CEPREV, he said that he continued to engage in community work:

> Before leaving the CEPREV, I had the opportunity to represent it in several Central American countries as a 'peace leader', and I keep fighting for our youth to have an opportunity and a life change like I did. I continue doing community and social work in my *barrio* with at risk youth, even if I don't work with the CEPREV anymore, I work with other organisations now. My wife still does consulting work for *Doña* Mónica, though.

Bryan glossed over why he had left the CEPREV during our interview and talked mostly only in general terms about his post-2015 professional trajectory, saying that he was working with a number of other NGOs, as well as the Nicaraguan National Police. The latter was not necessarily surprising considering the close partnership that existed between the latter and the CEPREV, and photos posted on Bryan's Facebook page showed him posing with both low- and high-level police officers in various circumstances, as well as receiving awards and certificates for his 'peace leadership'. The timing of Bryan's departure from the CEPREV was suspect, however.

Police collaborator

In April 2018, Nicaragua was the theatre of a mass popular uprising against the current *Sandinista* government led by President Daniel Ortega. Now only revolutionary in name, representing an elite oligarchy rather than the poor majority of the population, the *Sandinista* regime that returned to power in 2007 had become increasingly unpopular following the end of Venezuelan aid after the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013, which undermined the social redistribution programmes that had underpinned the regime's clientelist political system. This was replaced by increasing repression and social control, in a broader context of increasing levels of impoverishment, rising inequality and fiscal imbalance (Rocha 2018, 2020; Rocha *et al*. 2023).

The latter situation led to significant protests and anti-government critiques from 2014–15 onwards, particularly by civil society organizations, which the Ortega regime increasingly sought to muzzle. Its attempt to implement huge pension cuts and tax increases in early 2018 was the spark that led to mass demonstrations across the country. The regime violently repressed these, and instituted a reign of

fear and terror through arbitrary acts of violence and the imposing of curfews in poor neighbourhoods. Over 300 people were killed, hundreds more 'disappeared', thousands arrested, while over 70,000 Nicaraguans fled across the border to Costa Rica (Collombon and Rodgers 2018; Equipo Envío 2018; Ortega Hegg et al. 2018; Rocha 2021).

The Ortega regime has continued to consolidate its power through the extensive – and often violently – deployment of Police and '*parapoliciales*', or 'para-Police', that is to say groups of deputized armed civilians (Rodgers 2024), electoral fraud (Robinson 2021), constitutional reform[4] as well as closing down over 3,500 NGOs.[5] This included the CEPREV, which was forcibly closed down in March 2022.[6] The campaign against the CEPREV began much earlier, however. The organization had started to distance itself from the police around 2014–15, after the latter adopted (even) more repressive means of engaging with poor urban youth (see Rodgers 2024). Collaborations and exchanges were reduced and then cancelled, and the CEPREV became increasingly critical of the police – and the Ortega regime more generally – in international policy circles.

On 3 September 2015, a former CEPREV 'promoter' called Samir Antonio Matamoros – somebody who had a rather similar profile to Bryan's, having been a gang member before becoming a promoter – allegedly fired shots at an anti-government protest. He was arrested and two days later an article was published in the official government newspaper, *19 Digital*,[7] where it was claimed that he had made the following statement at a pre-trial preliminary hearing:

> I am a CEPREV promoter, a few days ago I had a meeting with *Doña* Mónica Zalaquett, who expressed her concern that people were not attending the demonstrations and that she wanted to add fuel to the fire so that things would happen … She offered me some things, so I decided to think about it, I thought about what she had told me … I have nothing more to add, I'll just say that things happened, I made a mistake, but I have needs.

The article concluded by stating that the

> CEPREV, an acronym for the Centre for the Prevention of Violence, is a non-governmental organization founded in 1997, that has the goal of "contributing to the construction of a culture of peace in Nicaragua and Central America", according to its website. However, in reality the organization is linked to right-wing political organizations, with whom it plans criminal actions to try to destabilize the country.

This episode was the first shot – so to speak – in the Ortega regime's campaign against the CEPREV, which culminated in its closure in March 2022. It must clearly have impacted on Bryan, and was very likely the reason for him ceasing to collaborate with the CEPREV in 2015. Bryan did not cut off all his ties with the CEPREV, since his wife still worked for the organization. But it was clear from his Facebook page, on which he often reposted government propaganda

denouncing putative right-wing coup attempts, that he had chosen a side. Indeed, Bryan's Facebook page, and what he shared about himself when we met up in 2021, seemed to suggest that he had become an active collaborator. He hinted that he had been recruited as a '*parapolicial*' after the April 2018 uprising, although he also said, it seemed to me almost wistfully, that 'these new activities with the Police are very different to my previous collaborations with them, as a "peace leader"'.

Bryan and I continued to exchange virtually for the next few months after our interview in late 2021, trading messages via Facebook and WhatsApp. I tried to gently probe and find out more about his collaborations with the police. In March 2022, however, he abruptly ceased replying to my messages. I assumed that this was linked to the CEPREV being formally closed down by the government. I later learnt, however, that unbeknownst to me, Mónica Zalaquett had also shared some of my publications with Bryan's wife around the same time, and in particular my book, *Tras el Telón Rojinegro* (Rocha 2021), in which I trace the police's central role in putting down the April 2018 uprising, as well as the historical origins of its practices of torture and repression. Did Bryan's wife share them with him? Was this why Bryan ceased communicating with me? Certainly, it is not difficult to imagine that in the polarized context of contemporary Nicaragua, he probably concluded that maintaining a relationship with me and his collaboration with the police were not compatible, just as he effectively previously had to choose between the CEPREV and the police …

Conclusion

Bryan's trajectory from gang member to police collaborator is both typical and extraordinary. His descriptions of his early years in the gang, and his relationship with the CEPREV, are by no means unusual. His *pandillero* experience resonates with that of other Nicaraguan gang members described by Dennis Rodgers (2023), for example, while his engagement with the CEPREV is not dissimilar to that other gang members I have come across, both in Nicaragua and elsewhere, with comparable organizations involved in gang mediation or violence-reducing interventions. The fact that he then went on to work with the police is also not necessarily surprising; one can imagine that his gang experience provides him with specialized knowledge that would be useful 'to the other side', so to speak.

At the same time, however, it can also be argued that Bryan has moved from working 'with' to working 'for' the police, and in doing so fundamentally 'switched sides'. His involvement in the post-2018 political repression constitutes a real betrayal of the values of peace and non-violence that were at the core of the CEPREV's mission, particularly considering how Bryan constantly put himself forward as an embodiment of the CEPREV's successful promotion of its ethos. Even if he does not seem to have been directly involved in harassing and closing down the CEPREV, he is at the very least complicit.

I was able to continue tracking Bryan's Facebook account after he ceased messaging me, as he never 'unfriended' me. He continued to post an enormous amount of FSLN propaganda, as well as information about police activities, both generally and operations he was involved in. In mid-2023, however, his account was abruptly shut down, and Bryan now has no internet presence that I can track. Did something happen to him? Has he suffered the ire of the Ortega regime, which frequently turns on its own supporters? I have no way of knowing, but what I hope is that the disappearance of Bryan's Facebook account simply signals that he has decided to '*descobijarse*', to be 'smart' once again, adapting and removing himself to avoid drawing attention in uncertain times. Another meaning of the word '*descobijarse*' is 'to get away', and I really hope that Bryan has got away, and that one day, we'll be able to meet again, all the more so considering that his last message to me was: 'You will always have a friend in me, and will always be welcome in my humble home, and to my humble neighbourhood. We are humble but full of human warmth. A brotherly hug to you!'

Notes

1 This name is a pseudonym.
2 This name is a pseudonym.
3 See Introduction and https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.
4 See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/22/nicaragua-ortega-wife-absolute-power.
5 See https://www.dw.com/es/gobierno-de-nicaragua-sigue-cerrando-ong-y-suman-3500-disueltas/a-65683186.
6 See https://confidencial.digital/politica/regimen-ordena-cancelar-otras-25-oeneges-de-servicio-social-desarrollo-y-democracia/.
7 See https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:33241-pistolero-de-metrocentro-monica-zalaquett-me-contacto-para-echarle-lena-al-fuego.

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Figure 9.1 HT's church's flag, inspired by traditional triad flag design, but featuring a cross and the church's name instead of triad symbols and slogans, 2017.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 9

The Life History of a Triad Member in Hong Kong

Sharon Ingrid Kwok

Introduction

The traditional perception of triad societies revolves around their cohesive organizational structures, restricted membership, centralized command and deeply rooted rituals. These characteristics create the impression that members face significant challenges in 'desisting' – that is to say, to leave a triad society – due to the deep structural bonds they foster. There is no doubt that renouncing triad membership in the past was difficult. Desisters were required to get approval from their superior and to submit to a punishment. However, contemporary triad societies have largely abandoned traditional rituals and hierarchical structures. Instead, they function as much more fluid platforms through which to recruit participants and foster criminal networks, and that provide access to illicit opportunities, resources and social capital (Kwok 2017).

In this chapter, I will draw on the life history of HT, a triad member of the Wo Shing Wo triad society in Hong Kong, as a case study through which to examine how triad subculture can transform an ordinary teenager into a gang member before then exploring their desistance journey out of the triad. The first part of the chapter provides some background, firstly about gang desistance and then about triad societies in Hong Kong. The life history of HT is then presented in two parts. The first explores HT's background, detailing his trajectory from involvement in local youth gangs to becoming a full-fledged member of the Wo Shing Wo triad society. The second part examines the key transition points that led to HT's desistance from the triad and criminality more generally. I then draw on HT's life history to think about the notion of gang desistance more critically, before finishing with an epilogue that offers some of HT's own reflections about his life as described in this chapter.

Gang desistance

The concept of 'desistance' traditionally refers to the process by which individuals cease engaging in criminal activities. While the classical definition emphasizes the permanent termination of crime, contemporary interpretations focus on desistance as a gradual process of discontinuation or cessation of offending (Laub and Sampson 2001; Dong *et al.* 2015). This process has been categorized into two stages: primary desistance, which involves a temporary withdrawal from offending without a significant change in identity, and secondary desistance, which entails a profound transformation in identity and the adoption of a crime-free lifestyle (Lee 2022).

When considering gang membership, the concept of desistance becomes more complex. Unlike individual criminality, gang membership often represents an enduring state rather than a single act, deeply intertwined with identity, lifestyle and social networks (Kissner and Pyrooz 2009). Gang desistance specifically refers to the process through which individuals disengage from gang life and de-identify with gang culture. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) highlight two critical components of gang desistance: 'de-identification', that is to say, the shedding of gang-related identities, and 'disengagement', or the cessation of gang-related activities. Decker, Pyrooz and Moule (2014) further elaborate on this process by identifying four stages of gang desistance:

i) A trigger of change, or the first doubt about past gang experiences;
ii) Experimentation with new social roles, often involving anticipatory socialization;
iii) Incentive for change, or a turning point that provides an opportunity for transformation; and
iv) Termination of gang life, marked by a complete separation from gang-related activities and identity.

Complementing this, Giordano *et al.* (2002) propose a more focused 'theory of cognitive transformation', which outlines four key socio-psychological factors underlying change: (1) an openness to new experiences, (2) the presence of prosocial opportunities, (3) the replacement of the self with a new identity and (4) a redefined perspective on deviant behaviour and lifestyle. These very much emphasize the pivotal role of identity transformation in enabling gang desistance, where individuals redefine their sense of self and align with 'prosocial behaviours'. Giordano's theory also highlights the critical importance of personal identity and social agency, highlighting how changes in identity, social connections and environment can reinforce the desistance process. Furthermore, it stresses the necessity of breaking ties with gangs and criminal networks to minimize the risk of relapse, thereby achieving sustainable desistance (Giordano et al. 2003).

Giordano's framework arguably provides a comprehensive understanding of desistance, highlighting the interplay of psychological, social and structural factors. Central to this process are cognitive transformations, where individuals undergo internal shifts, reassessing their identity and viewing gang affiliation as incompatible with their future aspirations. Key life events, or 'hooks for change', such as marriage, parenthood or employment, often act as catalysts for these shifts. Social networks play a critical role in offering positive relationships for support. Structural opportunities, such as access to education, employment and rehabilitation programs, are also vital for reintegration, helping former gang offenders transition from criminal networks to prosocial activities. Giordano thus underscores the dynamic interaction between individual agency – the conscious decision to change – and the availability of structural support, including social, legal and economic resources. Despite these supports, challenges such as criminal records, financial pressures and the risk of recidivism remain significant. In addition, cultural and emotional factors complicate this journey, as individuals face challenges like gang retaliation, loss of identity and the resilience needed to counter stigma.

A brief history of triad societies

Triad societies originated in seventeenth-century China during the Qing dynasty and were founded on the basis of a patriotic doctrine that emphasized values such as loyalty, righteousness, secrecy and brotherhood. Initially created as resistance groups against the ruling Manchu regime, triads evolved into secretive organizations focused on mutual aid and community protection. Over time, however, they transformed into criminal organizations involved in activities such as extortion, prostitution, illegal gambling and drug trafficking. After the Second World War, triad societies splintered into independent groups, each recruiting members and asserting territorial control. These territories became hubs for both legitimate and criminal enterprises, spanning industries such as construction, entertainment, wholesale foods, finance and transportation.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and subsequent state crackdowns against triads, they especially flourished among overseas Chinese communities, including in particular in Hong Kong. During the 1950s through to the 1980s, joining a triad society was common in Hong Kong. Morgan (1959) estimated that there were approximately sixty triad gangs in Hong Kong, with one in six locals a triad member. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Hong Kong was widely labelled 'the capital of triad society' (Lo and Kwok 2013). Many joined for protection or profit-making opportunities (Kwok 2017), despite the fact that proclaiming oneself or acting as a member of a triad society is strictly prohibited under Hong Kong law (Kwok and Lo 2013). Today, Wo Shing Wo, Sun Yee On and 14K are the largest and most influential triad societies (Kwok 2017).

The structure of triad societies

Zhang and Chin (2003: 471–2) identify several key features of traditional triad societies, including their hierarchical structures, restricted membership, monopolistic practices, use of violence to eliminate rivals and territorial control. In particular, traditional triad societies were generally highly centralized, with a clear chain of command, and members had different roles and responsibilities. At the apex of the hierarchy was the 'Cho Kun', or Triad Chairman, who oversaw the overall operations of the triad society. They were supported by a 'Cha So', or Treasurer, who was responsible for managing financial resources, and a 'Heung Chu', or Incense Master, who held ceremonial responsibilities and supervised rituals, initiations and cultural practices. Below these senior roles were the 'Red Poles', or Triad officers, responsible for managing specific territories. Each Red Pole would oversee groups of '49', that is to say, ordinary triad members, also known as 'Blue Lanterns'. These were involved in and directed criminal activities and enforcement operations within their respective territories, although they also often recruited and managed subordinate groups composed of youth and juvenile gang members, sometimes known as 'Holding Blue Lanterns' (probationary triad members), to execute street-level operations such as fighting, extortion and drug dealing. This organizational structure enabled traditional triad societies to maintain control, efficiency and flexibility across diverse operational areas and geographical regions (Chu 2000; Kwok 2017).

Modern triad societies have adopted a more decentralized structure. While central leadership still exists, their influence on territorial operations has diminished. Triad factions operate autonomously, with faction leaders wielding authority to mobilize, promote and dismiss members. They oversee illicit businesses within their territories, often recruiting teenagers from the local area to strengthen their power. Seniority in hierarchy, once determined by rank and experience in the organization, has been replaced by financial power (Kwok 2017).

Triad territories

Territories are central to the functioning of triad societies, serving as both operational and social spaces. Typically located in areas with low socio-economic status, such as public housing estates across urban areas of Hong Kong (e.g. Hong Kong Island or Kowloon), as well as villages in rural areas of Hong Kong (e.g. the New Territories or Sheung Shui), these territories range in size from single streets to entire districts. Urban hotspots such as Jordan, Mongkok and Yau Ma Tei, located in Kowloon, often host multiple triad societies. Within these territories, triads operate both legitimate businesses, such as restaurants and entertainment venues, and illegal enterprises, including extortion, illegal gambling and drug dealing. These spaces also play a crucial role in recruitment and communication among members. Triad members, often 49s, recruit youth gang leaders as 'new blood', integrating them into the organization.

Triad subculture

Subculture plays an important role in triad society (Kwok 2020). Not only because it is important for maintaining the cohesiveness of the group, but also to control members through the assimilation of triad values in their everyday, routine lifestyle (Lo 2012). Studies have highlighted traditional triad subculture, such as sworn brotherhood, loyalty and secrecy (Chin 1990; Lo and Kwok 2012), as well as an 'eye for an eye' ethos and the use of violence and blackmail for conflict resolution (Lo 1984). Concern regarding 'face' and Triad 'Dor' (reputation, respectively, without and within triad community) is another significant element of triad subculture. Dor is very much about ability and power and credibility. Maintaining face and good Dor is what enables cooperation between triad members and brings about opportunities to run a more profitable business. Materialism is another key subculture among contemporary triad members. Triad members often spend money buying luxury goods (i.e. cars, watches and branded fashion) to signal their face and Dor (Kwok 2017). More generally, routine entertainment for triad members often involves drug use, gambling and nightlife activities such as clubbing, drinking alcohol and visiting prostitutes (Lee 2022).

The 'triadization' of youth gangs is the gradual process through which youth are socialized into adopting triad subcultures, criminal values and routines. This transition can occur in several stages: joining youth gangs under the control of triad leaders, engaging in street violence with triad protection, and progressively participating in minor and serious crimes before forming alliances with triads to operate organized crime (Lo 2012). Key to this process is the hierarchical 'Dai Lo–Lan Tsai' (big brother-small brother or protector-protégé) relationship, which binds youth gang members to the broader triad network and makes disengagement challenging, akin to being ensnared in a web. Youth gangs often incorporate triad norms such as loyalty, brotherhood and secrecy into their legal and illegal activities, further immersing members in the triad subculture. Triads enforce these norms through control mechanisms that compel youths to align with their values and practices, ensuring conformity and fostering integration into wider triad society. Since most triad members join during their teenage years, they become accustomed to these practices and internalize the associated values, which is one thing that makes desistance from the triad value and lifestyle particularly challenging.

These different elements of triad society and the way in which they come together to condition both triad membership and desistance can be seen in the life story of HT, a former Wo Shing Wo triad member, as the next sections detail.

HT's story, part one: Becoming a triad member

HT, a former triad member and a reformed gangster, is now in his mid-50s. He joined Wo Shing Wo, one of Hong Kong's largest triad societies, during his teenage years in the 1980s. Over the years, HT accumulated forty-two criminal records:

one-third related to drug dealing offences, another third involving counterfeit product sales, and the rest pertaining to violent crimes, including manslaughter. I have known HT for almost ten years. Our paths first crossed when I visited a Christian church in Hong Kong that specializes in providing religious services to the triad community. HT, a church member responsible for welcoming newcomers, was the first person I met there. Through my involvement with this church, I built a relationship with HT, who later became a gatekeeper for my doctoral fieldwork on triads (Kwok 2017).

When I was invited to participate in the ERC GANGS project,[1] he was an obvious research interlocutor to approach due to the trust we had developed over the years. Moreover, HT's life story provides valuable insights into the way that triad membership and subculture influenced not only his joining Wo Shing Wo but also his journey towards desistance. His biography highlights the personal transitions and community support that shaped his path out of criminality, offering a unique perspective on the dynamics of the triad lifestyle and the possibilities for reform.

HT was born in Vietnam to a Vietnamese mother and a Chinese father. At the age of two, the family moved to Hong Kong. Although they initially enjoyed financial stability, his father's business failed, which forced them to relocate to a rural village in the New Territories. This relocation marked the start of a troubled childhood. HT's father became abusive, and the family's overall dynamics deteriorated rapidly. Meanwhile, as an outsider in the village, HT faced relentless bullying and social exclusion, making it difficult for him to form meaningful connections. After his parents' divorce, he took on the responsibility of caring for his younger siblings while his father worked long hours as a security guard. The pressures of caregiving, coupled with the lingering instability at home, left HT feeling increasingly isolated and alienated. Searching for an escape from his difficult circumstances, he spent more and more time away from home – an environment in which he felt he had no support or sense of belonging.

His exposure to gang culture began early, as his primary school was situated near a football field frequented by local youth gangs and triad members. This environment normalized their presence, although HT's first significant impression of the triads' power came when he witnessed a fight between two rival gangs. The group supported by a triad protector emerged victorious and avoided further harassment, underscoring the value of triad protection. This experience left a lasting impact on HT, highlighting the physical security triads could provide. Around the same time, HT's younger sister was harassed by local youth gangs. Unable to protect her himself, and with his father absent, HT sought help from a schoolmate who was a triad member. The schoolmate offered help but required HT to pledge loyalty to the triad. At just twelve years old, driven by a need to safeguard his sister, HT became a probationary member of Wo Shing Wo.

By age thirteen, HT had his first serious run-in with the law when he was arrested for assaulting a police officer. This incident marked the beginning of his exposure to minor criminal activities and gang culture. After being expelled from middle school, he transferred to a new school in Tsim Sha Tsui – an area known for its gang presence – where he formed connections with various other triad

factions and participated in crimes such as theft and fighting. Despite these new associations, HT's loyalty remained firmly with his original group in Sheung Shui. Under the guidance of his triad protector there, he took part in frequent gang fights, solidifying his ties with this group. Recalling the strong bond he shared with his Sheung Shui brothers, HT said:

> I felt closer to my Sheung Shui group of friends, my triad brothers, because we had known each other for a very long time. With my Sheung Shui triad brothers, we joined the triad fights about once a week under our Dai Lo's (protector's) instructions. This was mandatory for all gang members as following gang rules was strictly enforced. I did not feel that close to my Tsim Sha Tsui school friends since many of them were not part of a gang or were from different gangs. There was a lack of cohesion, and I only viewed my Tsim Sha Tsui friends as classmates.

HT's deeper engagement with illicit business began when he and his Sheung Shui gang hosted parties in village houses, charging admission fees. This early foray into illegal enterprise foreshadowed his later ventures in vice operations and criminal activities. Seeking greater security for his operations, he pledged loyalty to a new, higher-level Wo Shing Wo triad leader, Fat Man, who offered both mentorship and more lucrative opportunities. Under Fat Man's guidance, HT absorbed crucial triad norms, refined his reputation-building strategies and learned how to manage illegal operations, including drug trafficking. Taking on roles as both a hitman and a drug trade manager accelerated HT's ascent in the triad hierarchy. His influence grew alongside his faction's expanding criminal pursuits, cementing his reputation. After three years of probation, his dedication to Wo Shing Wo – exemplified by his regular participation in gang fights and unwavering loyalty – earned him official membership as a '49 Chai' (ordinary member of triad society).

HT's success was short-lived, however, as he succumbed to heroin addiction. Drug addiction, a taboo in triad culture, severely undermined his reputation, relationships and sense of belonging within the community. Fellow members shunned him, recruits abandoned him and his triad protector lost trust in him. HT described feeling like 'trash' during this period, as his addiction pushed him into a cycle of homelessness, imprisonment and social isolation:

> When I was homeless, I often woke up by garbage containers. Whenever I saw them, I felt like I was no different from garbage – abandoned by everyone and useless. When I was craving more drugs, I even tried to look through the garbage for cups with few drops of methadone to stop craving. I felt like I was no different from those homeless beggars, which made me feel terribly ashamed. I was once a successful triad; how come I had become no better than the trash?

HT was eventually arrested for drug-related offences and was mandated by the court to participate in a rehabilitation programme. He was admitted multiple times to the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers (SARDA), Hong Kong's largest provider of (both voluntary and court-mandated) drug treatment

and rehabilitation services, where HT underwent comprehensive treatment in a secure residential rehabilitation facility. The structured care, including medical supervision and therapeutic interventions, enabled HT to successfully quit drugs and develop strategies to cope with potential relapses.

After going through a series of drug rehabilitation treatments, HT was eager to resume his success in the triad community and reclaim his previous wealth and reputation. To re-establish his triad career, he changed his triad nickname and moved to triad activity hotspots in Kowloon, such as Yau Ma Tei and Mongkok, distancing himself from his former faction in Sheung Shui. There, he engaged in the lucrative counterfeit VCD and drug businesses, which supported his lavish living, particularly in Mainland China, where he felt respected and valued by people around him. Although this 'golden life' lasted for about ten years, he relapsed into drug addiction, and in 2000, while under the influence of drugs, he pushed a drunk man to his death down the stairs leading to his drug den, mistakenly thinking he was a policeman. HT was sentenced to seven years in prison for manslaughter as a result.

HT's story, part two: The pathway to desistance

During his imprisonment, HT was able to reflect on his life and came to regret his actions and the harm he had done to many, and he also came to recognize the devastating impact of drugs on his life. Determined to turn things around, he vowed to change career and 'do something meaningful for people'. During his time in prison, HT worked in the prison kitchen, learning how to cook, and decided that he would seek to put the culinary skills acquired behind bars to use after serving his sentence, pursuing a new path as a chef.

HT's life transformation was also profoundly influenced by Ivy, the person who became his wife after he left prison. Ivy had been a friend of HT's sister, with whom he had been friendly but had lost contact. One day she asked HT's sister about him, and on learning that he was in prison, went to visit him and subsequently started a correspondence with him which flourished into a relationship on his release from prison. HT attributes his initial post-prison successes to the genuine love and care that Ivy offered him. Having grown up in a dysfunctional family and spent years immersed in a gangster lifestyle, HT's relationships had principally been transactional, motivated by financial gain and the pursuit of status. Ivy's steadfast support, especially during his darkest moments, catalysed a shift in his life:

> Her 'never give up' attitude towards me, even when I was at rock bottom, made me feel that this love and care were genuine, and made me think about my days in the past. When I was a 'druggie' with absolutely nothing, my triad brothers, my girls, even my family left me. Only Ivy has stuck by my side through my ups and downs. This made me feel that I couldn't go back to my old life and disappoint her.

Despite Ivy's unwavering support and his determination to change, HT's path to recovery was fraught with challenges. A major obstacle was his deep entrenchment in the triad subculture and his long-standing addiction to drugs. The social environment of the public housing estate where he lived after prison, rife with drug users and dealers, further reinforced these ties. Having spent his teenage years fully immersed in the triad lifestyle, HT lacked meaningful social activities, proper work experience and alternative support networks. Even if Ivy would accompany him to methadone clinics and encourage his abstinence, his triad brothers were not just companions but his primary source of emotional and social support, making disengagement an arduous process.

HT's struggle to leave his past behind became especially evident in the face of a workplace betrayal. He had been working as a chef in a restaurant and created a dish that became very popular. The restaurant owner, however, stole his recipe and fired him. Feeling betrayed, HT reverted to familiar patterns by calling on his triad brothers to retaliate. He then succumbed to his drug cravings, describing the relapse as 'automatic':

> I just didn't know how to cope with the feeling of betrayal and injustice. Anger was all over my body and mind, which drove me mad. I just wanted to get rid of these feelings, so I decided to take revenge and return to drugs. Looking back, though I was trying to quit my old life, my mind and values hadn't changed. Whenever something bad happened, I dealt with it the triad way like before.

This relapse strained his relationship with Ivy, who eventually asked him to (temporarily) leave their home. Homeless once again, and desperate, HT said that he recalled one evening in a park the advice given to him by a priest in prison: pray to God when all hope seems lost. Sceptical but desperate, HT turned to prayer. Shortly after, his sister, who had heard from Ivy that HT had relapsed into drug addiction, introduced him to somebody connected with a church specializing in helping drug addicts.

Faith became a cornerstone in HT's journey of transformation, providing him with a renewed sense of purpose and moral guidance. The church community offered him not only spiritual solace but also a sense of belonging and understanding. By participating in positive activities such as hiking and barbecues, HT gradually replaced his previous routines of nightlife and substance abuse with healthier alternatives. The structured and supportive environment of the church reinforced his commitment to desistance and allowed him to redefine his identity around service and spirituality. HT's newfound faith also helped him repair relationships with Ivy and his family, particularly his mother, whom he visited more frequently and whom he involved in social and church activities.

Central to HT's transformation was Pastor Lee, a former triad member and drug addict who became his mentor. Pastor Lee provided unwavering support and taught HT to reframe his worldview. He emphasized that money, material possessions and fame only lead to suffering when placed above all else. True fulfilment, Pastor Lee taught, comes from selflessly serving others. This profound

guidance shifted HT's values from materialistic to altruistic and inspired him to adopt a particular motto:

> I want to follow [Pastor Lee's] footprint and help those with similar experiences as us. He taught me how to preach among triads and drug users, and most importantly, he demonstrated and taught me how 'life saves lives', which is my motto now.

With Pastor Lee's help, HT became an assistant pastor at a church, which also specialized in outreach to the triad community. In this role, he supported drug addicts and triad members on their desistance journeys, offering unwavering support even in the face of relapses. Witnessing their recovery brought him profound satisfaction and reinforced his commitment to helping others embrace a new way of life through faith. Eventually, HT left his position at the church due to disagreements with its leadership. This transition led to a period of depression, exacerbated by the loss of income and the emotional toll of leaving the church he had served. During this vulnerable time, some triad members approached him with offers of lucrative 'non-violent jobs'. Though tempted, HT recognized these offers as 'traps' designed to pull him back into the triad world:

> It took me a very long time to quit the triad life. If I went back, it would make all my efforts in the past worthless. I know offering me a job is a trap. As a triad, I know this very well. If I accepted it, they would ask for more. They know my value: my triad experience and networks. They wouldn't let me go that easily.

HT maintained boundaries with his former triad associates, staying in contact as friends but avoiding involvement in criminal activities and triad society-related disputes. He acknowledged their shared trauma and nostalgia but was determined to serve as a positive example, hoping to inspire them to leave the triad life and embrace Christianity. HT also realized that avoiding his past connections would only isolate him further and increase the risk of relapse. Instead, he chose to engage purposefully with his triad network, believing that his experiences could serve as a catalyst for change – both for himself and his triad friends. Engaging with them was crucial to HT, as it provided an opportunity to lead by example. By maintaining a positive and sustainable lifestyle, he not only reinforced his own commitment to change but also demonstrated to his friends that transformation was possible:

> Avoidance doesn't help. Instead of avoiding, I choose to confront. I believe this is the best way to continue my 'drug – and crime-free journey'. To convince them not to continue their drug life, I need to be a good role model. Sharing my experience is also a reminder to myself not to relapse.

HT has continued his work with drug addicts through a Christian drug rehabilitation organization, finding fulfilment in helping others overcome

addiction. He has also pursued theological and counselling studies at the Bible Seminary of Hong Kong to advance his evangelism. HT's journey exemplifies the transformative power of love, faith and community, turning a life marked by addiction and criminality into one dedicated to helping others and spreading hope.

What does HT's story tell us about triadization and desistance?

In Hong Kong, most triad members joined the society during their teenage years (Lo 1984, 2012; Kwok 2017). For youth in high-crime, low-income neighbourhoods facing economic insecurity, family disruption and other adversities, joining a gang can serve as a strategic adaptation. Gang membership provides a sense of belonging and protection (Weerman *et al.* 2015), particularly for those in public estates or rural areas dominated by triad influence. Seeking protection is often the primary motivator for joining triad societies (Lo 2012; Kwok 2017) as it enables survival in conflicts with rival youth gangs under triad protection. Living in such environments, including schools and neighbourhoods, normalizes triad subculture and fosters its acceptance.

HT's teenage experience reflects how his complicated family relations, school failure and peer influence all contributed to early criminality. This combination of factors created vulnerabilities that were readily exploited within a broader context marked by 'triadization', where the triad subculture provided a perceived solution to these adversities. In this regard, HT's story aligns with prior research on youth gangs and deviance in other parts of the world (e.g. Decker et al. 2013). What distinguishes the Hong Kong context is triad society influence. Triadization – the assimilation into triad subculture and structure – plays a critical role in fostering criminal engagement, as noted in studies of triad-related youth deviance and frequent violence (Lo *et al.* 2011).

After triadization, youth adapt to triad norms, deviant lifestyles and crime operation methods. HT's development followed this trajectory: joining a youth gang, benefiting from triad protection, using violence for revenge, assisting in illicit operations and eventually becoming a full-fledged member of a triad society. HT adopted triad subculture values, reinforced by his frequent interactions with triadized peers and members in his schools and neighbourhoods. While some youth can grow out of deviance through 'disillusionment and maturation' (Decker and Pyrooz 2011), HT's particular life circumstances entrenched him further in triad culture and criminality. Drug addiction marked a clear turning point in HT's life, devastating his triad career, self-esteem and relationships with both his triad brothers and his family. Although drug dealing is a core triad business (Lo and Kwok 2014), drug use – though common due to accessibility (Lee 2022) – is taboo (Kwok 2017). HT's addiction undermined his ability to perform violence and coordinate criminal operations, both of which are core components to maintaining triad 'Dor', that is to say, reputation and status within the triad hierarchy (Kwok

2017). The erosion of these abilities led to HT's loss of trust, reputation and eventual abandonment by his associates. As Tam *et al.* (2018) describe, addiction triggers a destructive dependency cycle that erodes self-esteem, trust and social relationships, deepening entrenchment in deviant networks. This process amplified HT's isolation, declining health and loss of peer trust, cementing his downfall.

HT's addiction led to his abandonment by triad members, and a process of 'de-identification', as a result (Lee 2022). This abandonment, along with being estranged from his family, could have been a pivotal moment for creating the 'first doubt' about his gang life (Pyrooz and Decker 2011). As Ebaugh (1988) highlights, first doubt is the first definable stage of desistance. It often occurs when individuals experience a change in their social environment, drastic changes in relationships or tragic events in their lives. However, without the replacement of gang values and lifestyle with more prosocial ones, and the formation of alternative support networks, desistance ultimately remains passive and insufficient.

This is something that can be seen in HT's case, when his attachment to triad materialism and nightlife habitus remained unaltered, while his addiction imposed financial pressures that compelled him to engage in an ever-increasing number of criminal activities to make quick money to feed his consumption. His enduring relationships with triad members provided continuous opportunities for illicit business, and his fixation on restoring his triad Dor prevented any critical self-reflection, leaving him firmly rooted in the triad subculture, which hindered meaningful desistance. Seen from this perspective, HT's real desistance journey began following his imprisonment for manslaughter, an event that triggered profound remorse and a critical moment of moral reckoning. This internal reflection – stemming from the gravity of taking an innocent life, according to HT – marked the first significant disruption to his triad identity and laid the groundwork for his subsequent transformation. Unlike external pressures, such as abandonment by the triad, this deeply personal confrontation compelled HT to critically evaluate his actions and their far-reaching consequences.

Two things stand out in relation to HT sustainably engaging in desistance from triad society, that enabled him to develop a new outlook, values and practices. One was meeting Ivy, whose unconditional warmth, care and support provided HT with a powerful incentive for change. Motivated by her influence, HT sought to restructure his life, pursuing legitimate employment to replace his reliance on illicit income. This marked the initial step in his disengagement from criminality. However, his desistance journey faced significant hurdles, including the enduring grip of internalized triad subculture. When faced with crises, such as betrayal in the workplace, HT reverted to the triad principle of retaliation, employing threats and violence while resorting to substance abuse to manage emotional distress. Additionally, his continued close relationships with triad associates, coupled with an absence of replacement social circles, perpetuated the influence of the triad subculture, underscoring the critical need for value and social network transformations.

The second element that cemented HT's path to real desistance was his finding faith and adopting a new role as a Christian and assistant pastor. Religion and

his new activity of helping others who had suffered like him provided him with a new framework and identity that enabled 'secondary desistance', that is to say, a wholesale transformation of his ethos and lifestyle. HT's religiosity fundamentally transformed his identity and values, replacing the materialism and self-centeredness of the triad subculture with altruism and spirituality. This value transformation was facilitated by structured opportunities within the church, which provided settings for reflection, spiritual growth and value reinforcement.

The development of more positive social circles was also crucial. The church became a platform for building new, supportive relationships with 'church brothers'. These connections fostered trust, rapport and a sense of belonging, effectively replacing the brotherhood of the triads. At the same time, HT's role as an assistant pastor was also transformative. This position provided him with recognition and a sense of achievement, demonstrating that legitimate means could fulfil his need for validation and purpose. It also provided an institutional means through which to engage former triad members in a particular, purpose-driven way of trying to push them away from the triad. The role also required him to embody his newfound values, holding him accountable as a role model for others. Witnessing the positive changes in individuals with similar backgrounds further strengthened HT's commitment to his new identity and values.

In this regard, however, mentorship and tailored guidance were essential. Pastor Lee, sharing a similar background to HT, served as an influential mentor who understood his struggles and the challenges of desistance. Pastor Lee's support helped HT accept Christian values and navigate the process of change, offering both spiritual and practical guidance, which facilitated new value transmission and reinforcement. More generally, the success and sustainability of HT's triad desistance was also shaped by and reinforced by the recognition of others (Decker *et al.* 2014), including significant family, friends and employers, fostering a positive reinforcing cycle that sustained his triad desistance.

Conclusion

The works of Giordano and Pyrooz previously mentioned highlight the interplay of identity transformation, supportive networks and the progressive nature of desistance. They underscore how shifts in self-perception, social connections and environmental factors interact to overcome the barriers to desistance. Turning points, such as marriage, finding faith or employment, are consistently identified as significant catalysts for initiating this transformation.

Giordano and Pyrooz, however, place limited emphasis on the importance of subcultural change, which is particularly salient for individuals entrenched in triad societies. Lee's (2022) assertion that passive renunciation – for instance, abandonment by triad peers – is insufficient for sustained desistance aligns closely with HT's experiences. The decentralized nature of modern triad structures often allows members to persist in criminal activities independently, underscoring the

importance of addressing deeply ingrained subcultural influences. For HT and other triad members, the pervasive influence of triad subculture – instilled from a young age through affiliation and upbringing in triad-controlled neighbourhoods – creates a lasting imprint on their values, behaviours and routines. This makes desistance particularly challenging and requires more than a mere disassociation from triad identity; it necessitates a holistic transformation encompassing values, lifestyle and social networks.

Although scholars like Giordano *et al.* (2002) advocate for the severing of all ties to gangs and criminal networks to achieve disengagement, HT's trajectory demonstrates that complete disconnection from triad and criminal networks may not be an essential condition for gang desistance. Disengagement involves more than just ceasing gang behaviours; it requires addressing deeply ingrained subcultural influences and replacing deviant values and routines with prosocial alternatives. Positive support networks, including mentors, are crucial in facilitating and consolidating new roles and lifestyle changes, enabling desisters to adapt effectively. Although maintaining connections to triad and criminal networks poses a risk of relapse, a comprehensive transformation can allow desisters to manage these risks, particularly when engagement with triad members occurs in a purposeful, structured manner conditioned by new values and priorities, as was the case of HT as an assistant pastor ministering to triad members.

Many studies have attempted to examine the role and value of religion in facilitating desistance, exploring how religious beliefs and practices influence identity transformation, moral development and the adoption of prosocial lifestyles. However, the causal relationship between religion and desistance is complex. While religion and spirituality can provide critical support for identity transformation and value realignment, their influence often depends on the social environment in the church. Giordano *et al.* (2008) examine the critical role of religion, particularly spirituality, as a 'hook for change' leading to significant value and behavioural transformation. Religion undoubtedly provides a blueprint for redefining self-identity and fostering value realignment. However, as remarked by Giordano *et al.* (2008), simply relying on religion and spirituality does not lead to desistance in isolation. Instead, the process requires complementary factors such as supportive networks, mentorship and practical, structured opportunities through which to reinforce these changes.

In the case of HT, the efficacy of religion for his desistance lies in the particular supportive social environment and networks provided by the church, which included individuals who shared similar backgrounds and life experiences, such as his church brothers and Pastor Lee. This shared history fostered mutual understanding and trust, essential for encouraging meaningful change. Mentors and peers with similar struggles served as relatable role models and provided practical guidance, enhancing the process of value and lifestyle transformation. By replacing the influence of triad brothers with this particular church community, HT gained emotional reinforcement, moral guidance and a redefined sense of purpose. But it was also HT's role as an assistant pastor, ministering specifically to former and current triad members, that actively reinforced this, not only providing

him with a new identity and purpose but also reinforcing a sense of responsibility and offering deeply rewarding experiences. This played a critical role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of HT's desistance.

HT's journey to desistance highlights the dynamic interplay between value transformation, supportive social networks, mentorship and taking on meaningful roles. Successful desistance requires replacing deviant values and lifestyles with prosocial alternatives through structured opportunities for personal growth and validation. HT's transformation exemplifies this process: adopting new values (Evangelism), redefining his identity (from triad member to Christian), transitioning his social circles (from triad brothers to church brothers) and taking on a new purpose (assistant pastor instead of criminal). These interconnected changes enabled HT to shift from a criminal, materialist and self-centred lifestyle to one that was more spiritually driven, centred around altruism and service, thereby underscoring the importance of holistic change for sustainable gang desistance.

Epilogue: Final reflections of a reformed gangster

After completing HT's life history, I translated it for him to read for the purpose of reconfirming the accuracy of its empirical material and analytical framing, both of which he was happy with. I also conducted a final interview with him afterwards, during which I asked him several general reflective questions, starting with why he chose to be a triad member. He answered that

> being a triad was not my choice but a way of life. Being the eldest brother of a broken family living in triad territory, joining the triad was the only way to survive and protect my young siblings. And once you joined triad society at a young age, you adopted triad norms and values. It was hard to resist, especially when you got recognition from your triad brothers that you don't get from others.

I then asked him, 'Who were the most significant people who helped you change your life?', to which he replied,

> I would say, my wife is the [most important] one. Without her, I think I would have continued my drug consuming life and would probably have died from a drug overdose or suicide. A second one is Pastor Lee, who is my lifetime mentor, who changed my values and my vision of life. Though he is now in Heaven, I keep his motto [of 'life saves lives'] as mine and continue his vision of serving reformed triad members and drug addicts.

I followed this up by querying HT whether 'you ever regretted joining triad society?' He replied:

> No, I will never regret what has happened in my life, because I believe that everything is in God's plan. Without the triad experience, I would never have become an assistant pastor in church. Without my tragic experience as a drug addict, I could never understand drug users' feeling and the challenges they face. My career, as a supporter of drug addicts, has made my life fruitful and meaningful. In addition, I made some genuine friendships during my triad life. Without going through life and death situations, you can never truly know who you can trust. I treasure these friendships. That's the reason I don't give them up, and continue to nurture them, despite the fact that I am no longer active in triad community, and I no longer engage in criminality.

My final question to HT was 'What would you say is the most important lesson that being a triad has taught you?'. He replied,

> during my triad life, I went through lots of ups and downs. When I was a successful and reputable triad, I made a lot of money and had many girls. However, this never lasts long and I ended up losing everything, including my business, my triad brothers, my Dor (triad reputation). Most of the triad members I know are like that. I am not the only one. Some of them ended up in prison, while their territories, wealth, and businesses were taken away from them by their [triad] brothers when they were in jail. Some of them ended up spending the rest of their lives in hospital and fighting with chronic illness, and eventually losing the ability to maintain their Dor and businesses. The lifestyle and drug using habit of many triad members leads to this. My triad and drug addict experience made me realize that the purpose of a life should not be measured by fame and wealth, but rather, how one can contribute to helping others. Serving and supporting those in need is far more meaningful, and brings me more long-lasting satisfaction than being a reputable triad member. I am blessed.

Note

1 See volume introduction and https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.

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Figure 10.1 Street-connected children in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2015.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 10

Sharif's Story: From Gang Member to Human Rights Worker in Bangladesh

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'Hello, can you hear me okay?', I say, echoing a customary greeting on Microsoft Teams. There is a pause, a blurring on the screen, and then Sharif's face comes into focus, behind him the reassuring background of his office in Dhaka. 'It's so great to see you', I say, beaming. 'You too', he replies, smiling – and just like that we return to our familiar and comfortable relationship as colleagues, although more friends now. It's been over eight years since we first met during my doctoral research, and we have spent hours discussing all sorts of issues, including Sharif's life and his human rights work. This is however a new phase of our discussions and one that constitutes a real privilege for me, as I now have the time and opportunity to explore and enquire about Sharif's life in more depth as part of the ERC GANGS project,[1] to ask the questions I didn't get the chance to ask previously, and to engage in reflective and often immersive listening, and to properly co-craft his life history. The bits of Sharif's story that I know already are enlightening and fascinating, raw and honest; it is with great anticipation that I approach this new phase of our research.

This chapter thus draws on a series of life history interviews that I carried out with Sharif via Teams in 2023, but also on prior discussions I had with him in Dhaka in 2015. I went to Dhaka to carry out research for my doctorate on street children's involvement in organized crime (Atkinson-Sheppard 2019). Elements of Sharif's life formed an important part of my doctoral research, but his contribution to my understanding of the topic of street children and organized crime involved much more than just collecting his life story. This is both because of Sharif's life on the streets as a child and his engagement with criminal groups, but also because of the life he lives now, as a human rights worker and an advocate for street children's rights. His experience and understanding are thus expansive but also

reflective; he is able to position himself as a real advocate of vulnerable children's lives because of his first-hand experience of living a similar life, and I have learnt enormously from him. In many ways, though, I have learnt even more from his strength, courage and resilience. He is one of the kindest, most thoughtful and humble people I have ever met, and hearing him speak and having the opportunity to revisit his story in more depth is one of the greatest privileges of my career.

'So … ', I say, somewhat tentatively, 'shall we start at the … beginning?' We have discussed the GANGS project, the methodology and notion of life history interviewing, which, as argued by Mintz (1979), is a useful and tangible way to discuss and account for an individual's life and the key decision making within it. The reality of conducting such research, and moreover online, is however daunting. The mode of research and our decision to conduct the research online were driven primarily by practicalities. Sharif lives in Dhaka, and I now live in London, and because of a variety of other constraints, we decided to proceed with online interviews rather than to try and see each other in person. We conducted interviews on a weekly basis, doing so for several weeks until we reached a natural end point corresponding with the completion of Sharif's story, to date at least. It was unlikely that we could have spent the same amount of time face-to-face, and having meetings on a weekly basis also meant that the time between the meetings became an important time for reflection for me and decompression for Sharif. The ten hours of interviews that we carried out were also supported by thirteen written reflections that Sharif produced about his life. He also reviewed drafts of this chapter on several occasions, adding things that I had missed or clarifying events, dates and experiences.

The landscape of gangs

There have been lengthy discussions about the relationship between gangs and violence, leading to a somewhat fractured debate; some scholars consider gangs as informal and disorganized, focusing on the violence that gangs commit. Other scholars consider gangs via a more critical lens, reflecting on gangs as 'integral' social institutions (Brotherton 2015) and complex social groups (Brotherton and Barrios 2004), seeking to humanize gang members (Vigil 2003). Research into gangs is inherently global, with researchers having studied gangs in most countries around the world (Hagedorn 2008). However, to date, there is still limited research in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh.

In this regard, Sharif's life history challenges many of the dominant themes of gang research. First, Sharif encourages us to consider the ways in which young people become involved in gangs. In opposition to a lot of existing research, Sharif did not come from a family embroiled in gang crime, nor did he come from a 'broken home'; he did not witness abuse among family members, and he did not grow up amongst criminal peers, rather he chose to leave his family home in the aftermath of war, a decision he hoped would help his family survive. For Sharif, affiliation with gangs in the streets was transitionary – and necessary; without such affiliation he would have struggled to survive. Sharif's story also helps us to

understand the impact of war on children's lives, their families and their futures. The trauma Sharif experienced is complex, and desperately sad. Yet the effects of war and trauma are both under-researched topics with regard to the drivers for involvement in gangs and organized crime in South Asia. Extant research which connects war and gangs often does so via a lens which considers wars *on* gangs, political and social activities focused on detection, prevention and incarceration of gang members in an effort to tackle and reduce gang crime (Müller 2015). Far less research considers how war leads *to* gangs amid a backdrop of conflict, trauma, displacement and survival. This is particularly the case regarding Bangladesh. Certainly, very little has been written to date, for example, about the 1971 War of Independence in Bangladesh and its effects on children then and the lasting effects of the conflict on adults today, which is something that Sharif's story puts squarely in the spotlight. This chapter begins by providing some brief background about Bangladesh before tracing Sharif's life history and identifying its major twists and turns and turning points. It highlights the extreme adversity that he had to overcome and how he now uses his experiences to help others, including advocating for street children today, before offering some concluding thoughts about the significance of his trajectory.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a South Asian country that is amongst the poorest in the world. It is almost completely surrounded to the West and North by India and shares a small border with Myanmar to the East. It is one of the world's most populous countries with over 164 million citizens. Nearly a third of Bangladeshis live in cities, and the country is particularly vulnerable to climate change, man-made and natural disasters. It is also a relatively new country, only emerging as a nation following a war of independence with Pakistan in 1971. This war was related to the broader historical governance and conflict across the Indian subcontinent. India's independence from the British in 1947 led to the creation of Pakistan, following the partition of India into two separate countries. Pakistan was identified as a Muslim-majority state with two components, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Tensions between East and West Pakistan were fraught, leading to the 1971 War of Independence that saw East Pakistan secede from Pakistan and become Bangladesh. The war resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, including Sharif's father, an event that was foundational to determining Sharif's life trajectory, as the next section details.

War, conflict and the streets

Sharif was born in rural Bangladesh, in a large town, close to the border with India. His family was made up of his mother, father and seven siblings, five brothers and two sisters. Sharif spoke fondly about his early life and his childhood memories, explaining how his family was financially stable and happy. During the war and

its aftermath, everything changed, and Sharif and his family did all they could to survive. For Sharif this involved his father being killed, leaving home at fourteen, working as a 'Freedom Fighter',[2] being captured by the Pakistani army, travelling to India, unsuccessful entries into refugee camps, interrogation by the Indian police, coping with his sister's capture and rape by the military, desperate attempts to reunite the family and eventually living on the streets and becoming associated with criminal gangs. His story is thus complex and vast, embedded within a wider context of conflict and trauma, some of which is described here.

Sharif witnessed changes, in politics, in the news and within his community in the run-up to the 1971 war, but it was only when the Pakistani army advanced through Bangladesh, reaching his hometown one evening that he fully acknowledged the country was at war:

> The Pakistan military occupied an air base close to my home. Their huge aircraft came one afternoon, we watched them land. It was terrifying. The military fired at houses creating panic. The next morning military convoys entered in the town. Around 600 people were killed on that first day, including my father. My father had a good job, and we had a very good life and suddenly, my father was dead, on one fine morning and that was it. We became beggars, from palace to hell.

The conflict went on for nine months. Sharif described how 'every day there was killing. And houses on fire, thousands of women were raped, including my sister. Whether the statistics is correct or not I don't know but they say that approximately 300,000 women were confined in the military camps and were raped thousands of times.'

At the start of the conflict and following the advice that his father had given them before his death, Sharif and his older brother left the family home:

> My brother went to one house, and I went to another, I stayed with a woman who didn't have any children, but I knew her well, she always looked after us. My father told me to go there because her husband was a non-Bengali, she was a Bengali. It was well known at the time that the military would look kindly on non-Bengali citizens. So, my father thought this could help me survive. It did help. No non-Bengali or military even went to that house. They did go to my house though, they took everything, money, gold and they forced my family to leave the house. I stayed the night at the lady's house but then I left the house to try and find my family. That morning I saw dead bodies still on the ground. I saw my neighbours, Bengali neighbours, they were killed. I was looking for my father too, because I heard that my father had been killed by the military. But I never found him … My brother came to find me, and we made a plan to leave the town, we didn't know what else to do. We managed to escape from the town, we went into nearby villages. There were dead bodies everywhere … In 24 hours we had gone from having everything to having nothing at all. We couldn't even imagine what had happened. I remember feeling like my brain

> wasn't working. From then on, we had to fight for our survival, we had to fight to escape the military, every day.

Sharif and his brother knew little about what happened to their family but realized they wouldn't survive if they stayed in their town. He explained how:

> We travelled to a village about six or seven kilometres away and then went to India, we really didn't know what to do but felt that it would help to keep moving. We came back to Bangladesh when we received a letter from my mother. My mother believed that we were both alive and had faith that the letter would reach us. We did get it! We were so surprised to hear that the rest of our family were alive, we couldn't believe it … During that time though my brother trained to become a Freedom Fighter, this meant that he was given free food. I was allowed to join too but not as a fighter, I was too young, instead I was an informer. I was 14 at the time. I agreed because daily survival was the most important thing to us, and a free meal was a big part of this. We left quite soon after though we were scared that we wouldn't be allowed to go, and we knew we had to find our family.

Our discussions revealed a transitional, frantic and desperate time, during which Sharif and his brother were struggling to survive and avoid persecution. Many families were broken apart, towns and villages were destroyed and thousands of people, including women, were captured by the Pakistani army. By this time Sharif's mother and his brothers and sisters had joined him in the village. They had very little money or access to food, so they relied on the kindness of the village members to provide them with food and shelter. Sharif described this time as a direct contrast to his previous life, one he spoke fondly of, associated with love, safety and contentment. In particular, he described how

> I only had one single shirt, but it was torn in so many places. I had only one *lungi* but it was torn and I had to tie it together to keep it from falling down. Everything was uncertain. To earn a meal a day was survival. We didn't have any real plan, just to survive each day and get to the next one. That was our life then.

On one occasion Sharif was looking for an opportunity to go into the town to try and find food or work, and he explained how he hoped he might meet some of his father's old colleagues to see if they could help the family. However, while doing so, he was approached by two paramilitary officers with guns. Paramilitaries – who were linked to the Pakistani army – were widely feared in Bangladesh, and were 'on the lookout for Freedom Fighters, students and political leaders, prominent people. They often killed anyone, even if the person wasn't involved in any anti-Pakistani activities. They'd often go into villages and steal food like goats, cows, chickens, and vegetables, pointing their guns at the owners.' Sharif believed that the officers were suspicious of him, and because of this,

> they took my shirt and told me to go behind a tea shop, they attempted to shoot me, they beat me and forced me to go with them into town. I was sure they were going to shoot me. Then they took me to a building of a doctor – a collaborator of the military – and locked me in a room, I could hear them discussing what they were going to do with me. But it was a Friday and I heard the call to prayer from the mosque and thankfully everyone hurried to go for Friday prayers. One of the iron bars on the window was broken. I escaped from there.

After his escape, Sharif returned to the village but did not say anything about his experience to his mother or family, because 'they were all so afraid of being caught, they would feel pain for me but that was the reality of our life every day'.

The family continued their struggle for survival. The Bangladeshi army and Freedom Fighters started to retaliate against the Pakistani army, with support from the Indian army. During this time, the family contacted their paternal grandfather in southern Bangladesh, and he made the arduous journey to reach them and took Sharif's mother and younger siblings back with him to a southern part of the country, amidst conflict, crossfire shootings, destroyed railways and decimated villages. Sharif and his brother decided to flee to India, to Kolkata, a journey that took them around twenty days. Sharif explained how he worked whenever he could but struggled with navigating the trip, epitomizing the vulnerability of two teenage boys travelling alone for the first time:

> We knew so little, we had never been to India, never been alone even outside of own town, and we considered the Indians to be our enemy but actually they really helped us, they fed us and allowed us to use their buses and railways. Around 10 million people fled to India, it was a huge thing. We ended up going home in the end though, back to the village. We tried to stay at a refugee camp but because we didn't have any family identification we were not allowed to stay. Some of the Indians couldn't work out who we were, they thought we might have been spies for the Pakistani army, because of this we were also interrogated by the Indian police. We got away because of the letter from my mother though, we showed it to them, as a kind of evidence that we had been badly affected by the Pakistani military and had lost so much. It proved we were not the enemy.

The journey back to the village was an onerous one. There was little transport, so Sharif and his brother walked long stretches on foot. They also suffered the real and persistent threat of the paramilitary groups and the Freedom Fighters. Sharif was scared of misidentification (by the Freedom Fighters as a member of the Pakistani military or collaborator to Pakistani military) and there was also consistent threat of crossfire. He explained how 'we were caught several times, between firing but finally we managed to reach our village'. Things continued to prove challenging for Sharif and his brother; they moved from house to house but were asked to leave by several members of his extended family and community. This was due to shortages of food but also social stigma: 'the traditional village culture is not really supportive of widowers or their children when the blood

relationship is sundered [as was the case after his father was shot]'. Meanwhile, Sharif's mother felt that she had outstayed her welcome with her late husband's family and decided that she and her daughters needed to return home, journeying from south Bangladesh back to the north.

On reuniting in their old home, the family's first task was to find Sharif's sister, who had been separated from them during the war. The family had received a letter from her saying that she was working as a housemaid relatively close to their hometown. It took weeks, but Sharif finally found his sister:

> When we found her she was so badly traumatised and in terrible health I couldn't recognise her. I was rushing from house to house calling her, trying to find her but then she shouted at me, followed me, but I didn't know it was her, she was shouting, screaming. When I found her, I started crying. I couldn't believe she was real … She suffered so much at the hands of the Pakistani military, she was raped and beaten and many things we still don't know. She had lots of mental health issues, including schizophrenia. At the time the police helped us a lot, she had endured sexual abuse and was pregnant, but the police helped us to take her to the hospital and she had an abortion. She then stayed in the hospital for over six months but after that we brought her home. Thankfully she is happy now, she got married to a really good man, who knows about everything that happened to her. She has two kids now and they're all doing really well. We didn't tell anyone about it though because of the social stigma, her husband knows but her children don't, and I've never tried to talk about it because of the pain it might cause her. So, we always avoid the issue but it's always there.

Returning home was difficult for the family in many ways; not only were they trying to help Sharif's sister, but their house was ruined. It was challenging for the family to survive and this led to Sharif leaving the family home and living on the streets for a year. Sharif explained how his older brother acquired a job earning a meagre salary, and that this was the family's only revenue: 'Managing with that amount of money was hard, and it was huge pressure on him. You know, we were a good family, a good family, but the hardship we faced during and after the war broke us, it broke everything.' The pressures on Sharif's brother to provide for the family led to him to shout at Sharif, pleading that he too earn an income. Sharif explained how he tried every avenue he could think of to do so:

> I was trying. I was looking, But I didn't know where to go, whom to go to ask. It really affected my mother, she felt such pressure to feed us, as her children, but she couldn't find out how to. She did all she could to pick the vegetables, but it was never enough. I was old enough to understand everything then, I felt it from my heart and at that time I felt like such a burden on my family. it was so uncertain, I didn't know how long the family would continue to bear me as a burden, it was unclear how and if I would find a job. It was so bad that at one stage I considered suicide. I thought about it about how the railway track

> was not far from our home, there were so many trains coming and going and I thought I could jump in front of the train.

Sharif's desperation led to a pivotal decision in his life:

> The reason I left my family is because my sister had a kind of social stigma, and my mother was a widow which was also socially unaccepted. I really had little other choice; my mother couldn't provide for us. It was the only choice I had … One evening just before sunset I left the house; I didn't have any plan about where I would go. I was 15 at the time so I didn't know many people, but I knew where the train station was, so I travelled there, and I went to a railway tea stall. The stall was owned by my friend's father, and I was so hungry I begged him for a biscuit and a cup of tea, he laughed and then asked what I was going there. I explained I had left my family home, and you know what, he offered me a job right then … You know the job really helped me; it gave me shelter [protection]. It prevented me from committing suicide. Right before that I was thinking about places to commit suicide but as soon as I got the job, you know, I forgot about it. Today I am alive and that job was my lifeline.

Sharif worked at the tea stall from 5.00 am to 12.00 midnight; he explained how the job was tiring and difficult, particularly in the heat of the Bangladeshi summer. However, he was happy to work because for the first time since the war, he felt as though he was able to provide for himself: 'It was a kind of satisfaction that I took responsibility for my own burden. My family at least got some relief. They didn't have to feed me, to think of my survival.'

Life on the streets, gangs, agency and survival

Life at the railway station was all-encompassing; Sharif described it as though he had been 'sucked into a fairground ride which wouldn't let me get off'. Sharif had to navigate survival, including accessing shelter, food and overcoming fear:

> It was summer, it was really hot, the roof where I used to sleep was concrete. And it got really hot, even at night. I had one bed sheet and one pillow, and the bed sheet was very old. It was very difficult to sleep in this way, it was so hot, noisy, sometimes it rained, and I had to move under the roof, near to the tea stall and when it rained it was impossible to sleep … At the beginning I was very afraid because I knew railway stations in Bangladesh are full of gang criminals, this is still true today. I was afraid in one way but I was safe because I didn't have even a single coin in my pocket so there was nothing they could ask of me.

Sharif also explained how he struggled with health issues: 'Lots of kids get sick on the streets. We were always suffering from some health problem; someone was sick every day. We were living in a dirty place with no way to keep clean. We ate food in very cheap, open places that were very dirty and drank open water.'

At the same time, Sharif's relationship with other children in similar situations was an important one, particularly from a survival perspective: 'There were lots of groups of street children. Most were abandoned by their families and didn't have anywhere to settle or to go home to. They were like me. We helped each other. But we didn't have our own shelter, we didn't have our own place to live, we didn't really have any decisions to make, or expect to survive.' The groups of street children also helped one another, providing support and solidarity:

> The other boys understood me. They knew that I had hardships, like they did. They knew I must survive by myself. Even getting food every day was difficult. The boys, they understood this, and they gave me a new way to live which was sympathetic to me. We all had the same fate. Since we were sleeping on the same floor everyone felt like friends and everyone was keen to help each other.

However, the lack of autonomy led Sharif and his peers to be vulnerable to the advances of crime groups:

> It is difficult to imagine how vulnerable it was really. Even if you want to keep yourself away from involvement in crime it is obviously difficult. You cannot really do it. A street boy like me could not decide; you didn't have anything to decide. There was nothing you could really control. When you are like this, you are subject to be controlled by others.

Association with gangs blurred the boundaries between support and coercion into criminal groups:

> Two of the boys came to sleep with me, when they didn't have any other place to go or were not doing crime activities that night. They started convincing me to give up my job, because it's a hard job and it wasn't paid much money, so they said come and join us. They were friendly to me, and I felt like they were concerned about what I was doing at the time. I know they were a kind of criminal, but they were also human beings and they felt bad for me, they could see it was difficult for me. They said if I went with them for a night, it would only take three to four hours, and I would be paid well, much more than the tea stall, enough to survive for week.

Sharif described his involvement with criminal groups in a variety of ways, as a survival mechanism, as an opportunity for solidarity, but also as an experience which added to his extensive experiences of trauma: 'No one can talk about some of the things [involvement in crime]. No one could realise how bad it was at the beginning, and how much I have carried over in my next life from this experience, the guilt, the pain. It is really difficult for me to explain; really difficult for someone to understand.'

The nature of crime committed at the railway stations was organized and often had links with wider members of society, including politicians and the police.

There were clear hierarchies in place, and street children like Sharif often worked at the lowest echelon of these groups. The groups had leaders and subgroups:

> It is the leader's job to get the boys together and then to share the responsibility of who will do what. There is a small leader of the group and then bigger bosses. The orders come from the older bosses. The number of older bosses depends on the part of town, say a part of the town has a leader and he has subgroups. But it depends how big the area is and how economically viable the area he is leading.

The main driver for crime at this time was money, embedded within the wider context of a country struggling with the aftermath of a war. Theft from trains was common, but criminal gangs also engaged in *dacoity* (violent armed robbery), burglary, property theft and trafficking of goods from India, as Sharif explained:

> Many of the boys were involved in smuggling from India. It was easy for them to go to the border and purchase the goods. The money was provided by the leaders, and they each got a percentage. In every case the leader decided how much money we got out of each offence. Some of the groups were involved in snatching purses. Some were involved in snatching the luggage from running trains and gradually they stole ornaments, a watch from a person …

Fighting between groups did occur, but not regularly. However, there were disputes between gangs, with Sharif explaining how this often related to tussles for leadership or power. In some instances, gangs collaborated with the police; a senior gang member might bribe the police to arrest another gang member to ensure they achieved the 'top spot' in the group. The 1975 ban on alcohol also led to an underground economy related to the brewing and selling of alcohol.

Soon after arriving at the railway station, Sharif became aware of a group of men involved in stealing goods delivered by the trains. He explained how

> Generally, they came at about 10 or 11 at night, they were members of gangs, and they came to my tea stall. They drank tea and discussed their nightly activities. This is where they did their planning, they would have one man managing the goods, one going to the railway security and another going to the police. They usually slept on the top of the railway building close to me and before they went to sleep, they talked among themselves, they were similar ages to me, maybe older, but I became good friends with them.

In many ways, these young men became Sharif's support network. He explained how they were kind to him; they all shared similar experiences, including struggling to survive at the railway station. The relationship between the group and Sharif developed over time. He described how on many occasions they discussed their involvement in crime, their strategies and activities without really realizing that he was there. The activities of the group included what Sharif described as

> Breaking into the goods wagon, they had a long piece of iron and used to this to break into the wagons containing wheat, rice and sugar. There were tonnes of goods within the wagon, but they need the gang to work together to steal the goods. They had a very good team, they put members in different places around the station, and there was also a leader, a commander.

According to Sharif, there were several such groups working the station, all of which had a clear hierarchy consisting of a leader who was the 'senior gang member, senior in age but also character, they were clever, they had to manage the police, politicians and everything'. The activities of these groups were 'planned, very planned operations, the gangs only had an hour to move the goods, when the police were not at the station, so they had to work quickly'. Sharif explained the state-crime collaboration in more depth: 'Generally in a country like Bangladesh political leaders are the most influential, they have the power, they have the most influence over society, they manage police officers, everything really, they get a share of money from them, from the gang.' There are also hierarchies in regard to the dissemination of profits, as Sharif explained: 'Most of the gang members are only getting food and small amounts of money, the lion's share goes to the leader, who then gives it to the political leader, the police and the railway security force.'

This was closely related to the notion of 'shelter' which Sharif explained to mean a form of protection (Atkinson-Sheppard 2017). Shelter here is related to the ways in which gangs are protected in society, including protection from criminal prosecution: 'Giving shelter means that the gangs have the influence to stop the police from arresting them. If they do get arrested, they will quickly send some of their friends to ensure they get bail and are able to leave court and begin working again.' Shelter is also provided to gang members in the form of money and access to wider society and means by which individuals can navigate social hierarchies, as Sharif explained:

> The leaders don't live on the streets, they live in society, they give shelter [protection] to influential people. The leader is like a person in a circus, he commands everyone to play. He is not playing himself on the streets, rather he is playing on the back screen. Many of those leaders are socially accepted and they are known as committed to society, they do a lot for the society. People in society give them shelter [protection]. The leaders contribute in regard to religion and social responsibility. They are the contributor to the religious places like mosque, church, temple etc. Many of the temples are built by their funds, their financing. The leaders don't get arrested by the police, they are socially and religiously accepted. However, compared to what amount of money a leader is earning, he was contributing only a little to the religious establishments, most they keep for themselves.

This was particularly pertinent to Sharif while living on the streets. His associations with gangs provided Sharif with solidarity, support and a way to earn an income, essential for his survival. Furthermore, he explained,

> if you disagree, they force you to do it anyway and if you refuse to do it then you have to leave the place permanently. This is difficult because to look for food everyday requires a place to stay. If you stay in one place at least you can try and earn money for food, moving around means you stay hungry.

He also described how

> I felt like I escaped death so many times, but I realised that I didn't ever get a new life. This meant that I didn't fear anything. It's like, if a person survives an accident without injury and is happy to have a new life it means you fear your death, but I didn't have the chance to think and when you are not thinking you don't fear death. You don't have any fear. We lived on the streets, we slept through the monsoon, we had no toilet or drinking facilities; everything threatened our lives. To drink water was threatening, to live on the streets was threatening, to eat food was threatening. There is nothing more to fear.

These discussions highlight a level of suffering rarely discussed in gang research. There have been numerous considerations of poverty as a driver for crime (Merton 1938), but relatively little has been written about survival in its most acute form. Sharif's story helps us to understand the perspective of a child living alone on the streets, which is significant because today there are millions of street children around the world, many of whom are incredibly vulnerable, like Sharif, to the advances of gangs and organized crime. The focus and pressure of survival also meant that Sharif felt little in the way of guilt at the time:

> These vulnerable kids, they do not have the chance to feel guilt. They barely have time to think. Now, as an adult all I do is think, think about today, tomorrow, think about what will happen to me and my family in five years' time. But when I lived on the streets I could barely even see tomorrow. All I could focus on was my survival. What other choice did I have?

The omnipresent issue of survival led Sharif to seek an opportunity to buy fuel from a gang (involved in fuel theft) and sell it at an increased price:

> One day I took a kind container, and I purchased the fuel and travelled by train to Rangpur and then I sold the fuel, the money was very good, compared to what I paid for the fuel. The fuel was used for the buses and trucks. On the second or third day I was caught by the police. One officer came to the compartment, and he asked me what was in my bag, but I gave him some money as a bribe, I gave him maybe five *taka*, he was tough though and he took my bag away. I managed to escape from another part of the train. But then I heard later on that the police officer sold the bag of fuel and didn't take it to the police station.

This example provides an insight into one of the ways in which Sharif worked to earn money. It demonstrates corruption and reflects how street children use

opportunities to make money, either individually or as a group. Sharif explained that working with his group was usually more profitable than working alone, illustrative of the significance of state-crime collaboration discussed earlier.

This is similar to discussions of organized crime around the world (e.g. Hagedorn 2008), but also gangs and organized crime in Bangladesh today. My doctoral research mentioned previously considered the historical context of gangs in Bangladesh but was largely focused on the contemporary nature of organized crime. Sharif's story helps to provide context to this and to explore the development of crime in Bangladesh. However, it illustrates historical concurrence, not divergence. The themes in Sharif's story of vulnerability, work, survival and criminality were omnipresent in my contemporary study. The need for street children today to work to survive, many of whom do so in criminal gangs and as the 'illicit labourers' of criminal enterprises, is very similar to Sharif's experience in the 1970s. The influence of mastaans or organized crime bosses is more embedded and expansive now; however, the association between criminality and corrupt members of the state is still evident and as relevant now as it was then (Atkinson-Sheppard 2019). At the same time, Sharif's story humanizes this landscape, opening up the discussion about children like Sharif who come to the streets as a result of challenging and complex lives, struggle with survival and who are incredibly vulnerable to the advances of criminal groups.

Leaving the streets and a family reunited

Sharif's life on the streets became increasingly challenging; he grappled with his ubiquitous survival needs and threats from gangs and the police. Sharif continually thought of his family and wanted to return to them. This affected his interactions with the gang, as he explained: 'While I was living at the railway station, I always thought of my family and knew that if I fully devoted myself to gang crime, I could never return to them. But I didn't share this with the group, I didn't want to have any disagreement with them, otherwise I would not be able to survive at the station.' His desire to reunite with his family and the risks on the streets led Sharif to question his life at the station and led to his decision to leave the streets:

> Fortunately, I have some kind of foresightedness, I knew there was a different type of life and things in the group became more and more difficult. Every day there was some kind of threat, from the police, or from the leader. I knew that if I want to leave the group then I must leave this place. And I did. Luckily, a man helped me. He had lost two children in the war [of 1971]; both had been killed by the military. He was so kind to me, and I started living with his family. He was a train driver. My background from my life before the streets meant that I always read lot, even when I was sheltering in the broken coaches, I read old newspapers. That was something which gave me insight onto a different kind of life.

This insight helped Sharif in many ways; it affected the ways in which he lived on the streets as well as his involvement in crime:

> Because of my family background I was also slightly distanced from the other street children, my father's job had been a good one, he had been to India to study, my father was recognised as a contributor of the nation in the liberation war, in my town there is a plaque with his name, this gives me pride. My mother was special, she was always teaching us not to do wrong things. I didn't have quite the same mentality as the other street kids, but when they came to me, I was very nice to them, and they were generally very nice to me. I was forced to do that [crime] but actually I wasn't quite the same.

Sharif left the streets with the help of the train driver and his family. The process was complex and challenging and illustrative of the suffering that many people in Bangladesh were facing at the time. Sharif explained how the train driver lived close to his family home and that both 'families suffered similar pain'. He described how

> My father was killed by the Pakistani Military, while the train driver's two sons were also killed by a collaborator of the Pakistani Military. Both of his elder sons were slaughtered. The train driver's wife was suffering from serious mental health issues. Their surviving sons were about the same age as me, I guess he wanted me to play the role of his dead sons and help look after his other children. I think this is why he was keen to help me. At the time, I really needed his help. I wanted to stay away from crime, but it was hard to avoid the gang, especially since I had to live at the station. They were aggressive. I didn't know what to do. But when the train driver started speaking to me, I thought, here is a chance. Guaranteed food and shelter and a way to escape and disconnect from the gang. The decision also helped me to find a way to reunite with my own family in future.

Life with the train driver's family was a welcome relief from living at the station. Sharif quickly began to play a prominent role in the family. He helped to look after the younger children. He described how he 'felt at peace mentally'. But that he also missed the gang, particularly their friendship and solidarity. He reflected on the close bonds he had with many of the gang members and the protection he was awarded from being part of the gang. He was also fearful of any ramifications of leaving the group. Yet it was his continued desire to reunite with his family that ensured that he remained at the train driver's house and did not return to the streets.

It took Sharif some time to find his family, as was common for many people in the aftermath of the war. The train driver's home provided him with the stability he needed to begin the search process, and eventually he was able to reunite with his family, support his sister and distance himself from criminal gangs. He worked, again at a tea stall, then as a tutor, and then at a bicycle

repair shop. Sharif was then re-admitted to his previous school and was able to complete his primary education. Later, he started working at a husking mill as an apprentice, and at the same time he was admitted into secondary education. Sharif struggled to attend college and could only do so once a month, but he studied during the evenings. He passed the final public examination and was admitted to a university. The university was 50 kilometres away from his hometown. Sharif took up boarding with a family close to the university. In exchange for two meals and housing, Sharif taught the family's two children maths and Bengali. During his time at university, Sharif applied for a job as a community health worker. After two years in this job, he was approached to work on a Danish-funded development project supporting the rights of children with disabilities. After this, he worked for a short time for the Bangladeshi government before becoming a human rights worker. Sharif now dedicates his life to helping marginalized populations, including street children. He is one of the most compassionate and driven people I have ever met and has changed the lives of many around him.

Concluding thoughts

Sharif's story is one of great courage, perseverance, serendipitous connections and ultimately, social survival. The way in which Sharif became involved in criminal groups challenges many of the dominant themes of 'gang research'. This discourse criminalizes and stereotypes young people, like Sharif, who come to the streets and crime in the aftermath of war, trauma and untold suffering. Sharif's story also helps us to recognize the vulnerability of street children, their lack of agency and autonomy and their need to survive. As Sharif explains: 'their lives are decided by others'. At the same time, Sharif, both through sheer force of will as well as the serendipitous kindness of strangers, managed to overcome this lack of agency, and it is perhaps this, more than anything else, that we should retain from the snapshot offered here of a life lived in a way that many of us will never know or experience. A life that most of us might think we would likely never survive, but which also gives us hope, insofar as it has a happy ending. While the social connections that Sharif made and encountered throughout his trajectory and lived experiences are definitely important, more important, I think, is the sheer strength of character and resilience of Sharif. In this respect, he continues to, and will continue to, inspire me and all of those around him, and I hope that this glimpse into his world will help to inspire many others too.

Notes

1 See https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.

2 The term 'Freedom Fighters' refers to the members of the Bangladeshi military, paramilitary and civilians who formed part of the resistance movement during the 1971 War of Independence.

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Figure 11.1 Antonio Fernández, a.k.a. 'King Tone', *c.* 1997.

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Chapter 11

The Prison and Post-Prison Life of Antonio Fernández, a.k.a. 'King Tone'

David C. Brotherton

> There's no greater accomplishment to a man than when you land and they receive you with gifts. Right, you get it? I'm rich, I'm so rich, that I've reached the point that I'm finally not a threat anymore when they see me. I'm not a scary figure. You don't gotta worry whether I'm coming as peaceful, or that dude you gotta pay a bill to. Like, when you see me, you always know I'm coming with a good message. A salvation message, a message of progress. And I think that's what we are, people who are gonna change not according to pay grade but through being successful, people who don't just wanna find money.

With the above quote, Antonio Fernández – a.k.a. 'King Tone' – looks back on his thirteen years of post-prison experience.[1] In his eyes he has reached a point of development and stage of life that this former leader of one of the largest and most organized street gangs in the United States, the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN) of New York, from 1995 to 1999, never imagined. He was imprisoned in some of the United States' most infamous carceral facilities administered by the Federal Government's Bureau of Prisons (BOP), doing time for drug dealing, as reported in the *New York Times* (Fried 1999):

> The head of the New York State branch of the Latin Kings street gang, who had claimed to be leading members away from violence and drug dealing to self-improvement and community advocacy,[2] pleaded guilty yesterday to conspiring to traffic in heroin and cocaine. As more than 50 followers and supporters watched in the Federal District Court in Brooklyn, Antonio Fernández, 32, a Brooklyn man known as King Tone, admitted the crime in a plea deal under which he is expected to be sentenced to 12 1/2 to 15 1/2 years in prison. That is about half the prison time he would have faced had he been convicted at a trial.

During the court procedure (at which I was present), the judge, Reena Raggi, disagreed with local Manhattan prosecutors who sought to portray Fernández as a drug dealer using his position as leader of the Latin Kings to ply his trade. In

responding to Fernández's guilty plea, she pointed out that: (i) he had 'played no significant role' in the drug trade, and (ii) there was 'no evidence … of any kind of violence … [being] involved in (his) drug dealing' (Shapiro 1999).

In this chapter, based on multiple life history interviews[3] carried out with Fernández since his release from prison in 2009, as well as archival data pertaining to his life course, I explore the pathway of this contradictory historical social actor as he reflects on his experiences both over more than a decade of prison time and afterwards. During his period in 'total institutions' (Goffman 1961), where he spent a quarter of his life, he learned to be patient, not to rise to the bait of inmates and/or correctional officers, to educate himself, to strategize, and to negotiate with both friend and foe. The deep irony in Fernández's case is that his notoriety, unlike that of so many of his gang contemporaries, did not derive from his criminal misdeeds but from his efforts to transform his street organization into a new kind of social movement (Brotherton and Barrios 2004).[4] This counter-intuitive characteristic of his group and his own personal history goes against the canon, contradicting the dominant assumptions of most criminologists and gang 'experts' who remain convinced that gangs cannot change, at least not in this fashion (see Klein 1971; Hagedorn 1988; Brotherton 2015).

Fernández's life history problematizes such assumptions, as we encounter his post-imprisonment search for employment, and efforts to rebuild his confidence and assume a new identity in the burgeoning movement of 'credible messengers' and anti-violence interventions. The analysis of his conceptions, motives and action of resistance and survival goes against the grain of received wisdom, and potentially has much to tell us about the possible futures of gang members. To explore this particular development and evolution, this chapter is divided into three thematic sections. The first considers the lessons that Fernández assimilated from prison and that became important in his post-incarceration life. The second explores his initial post-prison reintegration and the impact of the constant gaze of the State. The third focuses on how he 'got a break' and was able to create a 'second chance' for himself. A final section offers some concluding reflections.

Lessons from prison

> Through the story of my life, of always having to do things better than the other inmate, cuz there was a spotlight on me …, I learned … that … you work through it from the lens of … I'm in the penitentiary industry with all these COs shitting on me! So … I became a problem solver … in a place where most people … were killed. So, you had to solve the problem immediately because they were gonna mentally destroy you, where you wouldn't believe in a resolution anymore. You wouldn't even believe in common sense.

Fernández cites a range of lessons learned from his time in the federal penal system. Even though he has been out for more than a decade and a half, his prison experience burns deeply in his soul, shadowing his life at every turn as the

countless acts of dehumanizing treatment produce traumas that can take years to heal if they ever do (Simmons 2022). For the first two and a half years of his sentence, he was placed in a segregated prison where he was frequently viewed as an informant by other inmates, since the official reason for him being there was 'protective custody'. According to the BOP, Tone faced retaliation from his own group, but for Tone his placement had other intentions: 'they set me up, this is all deliberate. They want me dead. I shouldn't be here.'

He wrote the above in a letter to me in 2000, complete with a drawing of himself with long hair and a beard, resembling Jesus Christ. In the letter, he detailed the effects of isolation, noting the physical and psychological abuse by correctional staff, much as Woodfox (2019) describes his ordeals in Angola prison in Louisiana:

> If those who are doing … 3–6 years are telling you a horror story, imagine … that's where you go to live! You're never gonna get a letter. You're never gonna get outside influence [visits – author]. And nobody could check on you. I seen people eat they shit. I seen people fucking cut other people's pieces off their bodies. I seen officers lose their patience to the point where they drop grenades in a cell! Do you get it? A blast grenade in a 12x6 cell! Do you know what's force feeding? … That's a daily sound for me. Beat downs? Haha, what the fuck?

During our interviews, Tone recalled that he was moved every six months so the authorities did not have to account for his time isolated in the Security Housing Unit (SHU). According to prison rules inmates cannot be kept isolated indefinitely, especially if they have no history of transgressions against the facility or its staff, and there is little evidence of internal threats against an inmate's life. Tone interpreted these extreme measures against him as being about power on the outside not just the inside. It was about the politics of the street that had become the politics of the state, and about the government's efforts to take out would-be radicals,[5] especially those with proven influence over the subaltern (Weide 2022b).

Over time, though, Tone figured out how to adjust to these torturous conditions and to remain resilient in the face of vindictive targeting. Since all these actions by guards and administrators were part of a pattern then they had to be part of a system with its own logics, cultures and practices, and Fernández concluded that the system's main goal was to extinguish King Tone physically and symbolically, and everything he represented, much like the system had done to radicals in the past. At the same time, he revelled in the opportunities to know an array of prison intellectuals (Rodriguez 2005) from whom he learnt how to sustain his survival:

> I set about a transformation of me, finding out the skills I needed … and how to really study and see people, the society, the social things going on in the prison. I just mastered how I could imagine … from that short term of getting out of Pollack [prison] and being in the SHU and being transferred to so many prisons and knowing all the major gang leaders. While they were trying to destroy me, I met the most powerful minds in the motherfucking universe!

Resilience in the inferno

Tone described what it was like to live in this 'biblical court of my life'. He had spent time in his younger days in New York City's Rikers Island prison, but this was incarceration and deprivation of liberty on another level. Nonetheless, he refused to be reduced to a number: 'For months they tried to make me say my number and not my government name.' All around him he saw needless, irrational and humiliating sanctions against his fellow inmates, and heard the human suffering and madness that become everyday background noise. As he sat alone in his post-industrial concrete cell, he contemplated his options to rise above it all, to stay alive – stay sane. He decided that the workings of the institution, his becoming an inmate, the groups and subcultures within which he was intrinsically involved, were all food for thought while interned in the vast federal carceral bureaucratic complex that sucks over $9 billion per year from taxpayers to maintain its eleven penal institutions, 36,000 employees and 130,000 inmates.[6]

Submission and conformity were the names of the game, relinquishing one's identity and being known only as a cypher was the demand of a system that could not allow any challenge to its regime and obsessive control of time. Tone, therefore, resolved to absorb the punishment while contacting inmates that he respected like Oscar Lopez, the renowned Puerto Rican nationalist, whom he met in Terre Haute prison, when the latter protected Tone against gang enemies: 'Oscar Lopez saved my life along with other strangers that seen me on HBO.[7] Because I stood by Luis Felipe's side, because I was involved in the political movement, because I cared about PR [Puerto Rico]. Little did I know that connection in the street would save my life when the BOP tried to get me killed.'

Oscar went on to mentor Tone, advising him that to survive he needed to become involved in the Unicorn prison labour programme, as this would provide him with an alternative space to the yard where he would be inevitably threatened. And then there was the teacher who showed him how to construct whole written sentences despite his severe dyslexia, how to pass his GED and free the mind while he waited for his release date – providing he did nothing to add to his sentence. 'And … that's how I conquered all the lies', Tone explained, before going on: 'People who met me as I traveled through these prisons said, "the motherfucker don't lose his cool". "He's about his business, and he's not a snitch. He's got his paperwork". You get it?'

Resistance and strategizing

> Pollack was a high security facility … the hardest and deadliest of the factions and groups. So, of course, you had your deadliest gangs *La Eme*, *La Familia* … Vice Lords, GDS, Kings, everything under the People and Folks. Then you had Skinheads, Dirty White Boys, ABs [Ayrian Brotherhood], then the DC, the 350 Deep … And then you also had the Muslims, the Gays, the American Indian community. But it all was a gang chain … if you were Muslim in a federal penitentiary, you were in a gang. If you were a Christian, you were in a gang.

> Every group was considered something that could manipulate the system to be a security breach.

A major lesson for Tone was how to work with what he calls the 'power groups' or the prison gangs across the many facilities where he was interned. While he had many allies across the complex landscape of alliances of these organizations, it was difficult to know exactly what and where the conflicts were occurring, especially for newly arriving inmates. 'Who does it benefit', he asked, 'that we are constantly at war? Why are we helping the administrations maintain their power at our expense?' Tone sought to pursue another way of co-existing. Instead of accepting prison as a space that encouraged interpersonal tensions, amid the endless frustrations and privations of confinement and the deadening boredom of doing time (Matthews 1999), Tone sought to implement a remarkable transformation:

> There were a lot of wars and lockdowns. But me and the leaders of each power group got together, and we did a respect treaty … we set a limit on each group lending to the other group. If a member was getting high on heroin and their leader didn't know, if there was snitching go and tell the leader 'Yo, your dude is copping off of us. Later it's gonna be a war, let's fix it now'.

In coming to terms with both the strength and weakness of these groups, Tone was using his knowledge of the interplay between gangs on the street, and the different versions of mediation and diplomacy that were a major part of the street politics (Hayden 2004), and that he had practised prior to his incarceration. As he put it: 'from that experience we learned we can't keep our usual hostage to power groups. They served their purpose … then you must grow up and grow out to a better life. And let those that are starting the process like every immigrant, do the best so they can get out. We should not be oppressing each other.'

Back to values and principles

> After 3 years of this I was a wiser man. My morals changed. I questioned some of my principles and I re-established who I was … What was it really? What was the movement? Was it fame? Was it glory? What was your principles, the values, why you did it? … that's when I came out and I was free from the bondage of being a Latin King.

Months and years of self-contemplation left Tone thinking deeply and reflexively about the larger meaning of his life. He began to question some of his past decisions and think through where this had left the movement to transform gangs into social organizations to which he had given much of his life. Tone, essentially, began to see the bigger picture. The larger historical project of the United States that he now viewed as 'settler colonialism' (Glenn 2015), forced him to question how he might go forward with such forces opposing him. How could he be most effective when he got out? What should his priorities be, to his group, his people

or the broader society? How could he practice his values, live within his principles and still survive on the outside?

Welcome home!

Tone didn't quite see it all coming, although he knew his return to civil society, his 're-entry' to the world of so-called 'second chances', would be tough and unpredictable due to issues of stigma and discrimination. Pager (2003) has called it the 'mark of the felon', but where does this leave the gang leader whose face is broadcast so widely on HBO, NBC and CBS screens, featured in articles from the *New York Times* to the *New York Post*, and even been represented in books by social scientists (Brotherton and Barrios 2004; Brotherton 2015)? To many state agents on the outside, the nuances of gang involvement are not important. But on the inside, where you spend years together behind the walls, your comportment is viewed up close and across time, leading to perhaps more discerning judgements by administrators. As Tone put it: 'Look, where [I've] been … there's a safe space. When they moved me … to places where my power group and other power groups were having some difficulty … so I could make the yard safe … the wardens loved me, lieutenants loved me.'

This was in sharp contrast to the vicissitudes of Tone's return into the 'free world' and his efforts to desist from crime and/or avoid the webs and nets of criminalization. His experience is in many ways singular but much of it resonates with what so many formerly incarcerated gang members experience in their 'coming home' phase (Middlemass 2017). Although in comparison with where they have been it may well be a world of opportunity, it is also one with countless pitfalls. Increasingly surveilled and policed by multiple state agents, repressive laws, security cameras, databases, AI recognition devices and countless release clauses. No social worker waits on the other side. There is generally no offer of psychological therapy for the years of abuse and trauma. Hence, the quality of Tone's social support was critical in his period of re-entry.

State agents don't like second chances

When Tone was released from his final federal prison, he thought he would be sent to a half-way house somewhere near his wife, P., whom he had married in 2007 while incarcerated. This would have made most sense for someone who needed help to find his pathway back into mainstream society. Yet instead, the BOP sent him to a state jail in Woodbridge, Virginia for several days before releasing him to return directly home. This was to be his last involuntary stay in a carceral institution, and Tone remembers how happy he was when he was finally 'free' to join his wife and family of three children (one of whom was born while he was incarcerated), two parents and three sisters, all of whom were waiting eagerly for their 'Pochy' (Tone's childhood nickname) in the Virginia home they had moved to be close to him. He was also looking forward to connecting with the local community, and finding a job. But as he revealed, none of this happened quite as planned:

> Leaving the jail, getting to my wife's house, they were waiting … in front of her house and put me in the cop car like I did something wrong. They took me to the precinct … stripped me naked and took fucking pictures of my whole body. I was standing like a doll, with no clothes, in front of men I never met. And they just be taking pictures of everything … and … instructed me on how it was gonna be … After that encounter, I tried to go get work and then through my daughter I found out that gang intelligence members were going to community members, community high schools, and informing them that I had been released into the community, and that I was a threat to recruit. So, it was a way to get rid of me, not to let me survive.

The state had clearly decided that Tone constituted an enduring threat to society, and that he needed to be reminded of his status as such. There is little doubt that this was a very purposeful process. Following a carefully planned and long-drawn-out degradation ceremony (Garfinkel 1956), which involved police agents picking him up on his way to his family residence and registering him at the local precinct, agents from the gang task force visited potential local community sites of employment to ensure he would not be hired. For good measure, they put up signs in the local neighbourhoods to warn residents of who exactly was coming to join them as a fellow resident. The series of actions taken by the police resembled the witch-hunting mentality and practices of the so-called 'Megan's law', which allows states to release to the public the presence and whereabouts of sex offenders who have served prison time and their requirement to be placed on a registry. As Tone bitterly remembers, they were showing him 'how it was gonna be'.

No more violence

> I used to slaughter animals as a job making 150 dollars a week. To support my new family. It was the only way I could live … I couldn't work at Kentucky fried chicken but I could kill an animal? … So I had to go kill a sheep … I grew up on psalm 63, where they said he was led to his slaughter like a lamb but he did not say a word … So now, I'm driving this sheep to the slaughter house, the Muslim is teaching me how we go through the process. He says to me, don't get scared because when he smells the blood, he's not gonna fight no more, he's gonna freeze and he feints but his eyes stay open. As he freezes the lamb actually cries tears like he's got human eyes, and they're as big as fuck, right? So, I'm draggin' this animal that's frozen that's not making a sound, he's crying, without a sound. Then you turn him over and they slice his neck, they say their prayers to Allah. I did that murder. I call it a murder, cuz I thought about Jesus, I thought about the metaphor. And it all made sense to me. Why they can be slaughtered without making a sound. So, I went into the barn and I got on my knees … and I said if I kill another animal I'm going to New York. That's it, and I'm going back to Kingism [i.e. becoming a Latin King gang member again]. I walked out that place. Y'all niggas got me fucked up, I'm not gonna do this as a life!

In the above, Tone recalls the desperation he experienced in finding work amid the punishing details of his parole conditions which numbered more than the usual: 'one of the first things I understood that was gonna make my return home hard was they gave me ten extra parole stipulations that were different from the normal 32 that kept you home, and it was all gang affiliated like you could never wear black and yellow, you could never have a knife on your pocket.' Everywhere he went looking for work his reputation preceded him. In addition, an undercover cop from East New York moved into an apartment near his residence to keep an eye on him. His treatment by the state recalls narratives of the Cold War, with the now widely accepted social construction of gang members among law enforcement becoming a form of 'phantasmagoria' (Muñiz 2022).

But for all his desperation Tone could not do the bloody work of a slaughterer. Against all his stereotypification, he was not a man without conscience, deeply held convictions or compassion. Nor was he a 'super predator' (Benett, DiLiulio and Waters 1996), and never was. This experience, through an animal's tears and condemned state, reminded him of his own former status. It also emphasized that he needed to live by his own code to truly attach himself to society. Whatever conduct he engaged in on the street and the adaptions he made to his environment in prison, he always attempted to live his life in a manner that he perceived as righteous. Deciding that he could not endure the indignity of this kind of work, even though it had saved him from the parole violation of 'failing to secure employment', Tone decided to move on and take his chances.

Dignity and perseverance pay off

Despite the odds against him, Tone felt he had no choice but to continue his search in the labour market in the suburban backwater of Virginia, where many of the residents commuted to jobs in the US capital. Calling upon God for spiritual guidance and support, he hoped against hope that something would materialize:

> I told God my decision, and the next day I captured a job in Smoketown Road, in K. chapel, as a maintenance man, paid 15 bucks an hour. God gave me a job … people won't believe this, but the dude hired me. I went in and said I don't have any experience … I said I know the basics, but I don't know math, and just told him the true story. I told him I'm an ex-prisoner. I told him who I am.

Although Tone did not stay long in this job, it gave him confidence, and faith that things would work out. At the same time, what subsequently helped Tone was the remarkable social network that he had built during his many years of leading the streets and spreading his gospel of gang transformation, and more specifically an encounter with some of his former Latin King peers. The circumstances and details of the encounter reveal the hidden resources of the organized poor and their capacity for solidarity (Stack 1983). As Tone tells

it, he was standing one day on his balcony when he spied a couple of Latino guys looking at him intensely. He expected the worst, as they could easily have been personal enemies or from a group with a grudge against his former gang. Instead, the two men turned out to be Latin Kings, comrades who were overjoyed to see their former leader free at last. Inviting him to a street boxing match a few blocks away Tone was soon embraced and greeted with respect by the local Latin King chapter. As a result, he was no longer searching job ads alone, but had all his brothers thinking hard how best to resolve his situation. One brother knew of a priest who was looking for a new handyman and, *voilà*, Tone suddenly secured a new position!

The importance of social support

Tone's arduous and sometimes seemingly impossible pathway to 're-entry' did not happen alone, as is the case for most members of the disposable classes in search of their second chances (Smiley 2023). As mentioned above, Tone married whilst in prison, after gaining the attention of a fellow inmate's sister. As he tells it, his wife P. is not from his social class – although she shares the same ethnicity – and this gives him the boundaries he needs not to go back too much to his natural support group of gang members:

> Of course, stability is important, and more stability from someone who is totally the opposite. I knew that coming home even in the friendship of a partner, had to be totally different … Where it was teamwork, no outsiders. I had to like, totally flip that … So how do you start that? You start by finding someone who could live life that totally doesn't look for that same thing. Now you're seeing life through a different lens. 'Hey Yo, you cute, but you dumb'. Her thing was that if you good, then you a power.

P. opposes much of his past associations with his group and does not necessarily see or appreciate the accomplishments of his street politics days. She contends that the story of her own upward trajectory from the barrio working-class into the administrative middle-class, demonstrates that social mobility can still be achieved the old-fashioned way, through hard work, discipline and ambition and does not tolerate many of Tone's old ways, for example, his smoking of joints that helps to calm him, or his routine meetings with his old confederates. However, her support of his search for a regularly paid forty-hour work week, and his genuine efforts to increase his skill set, are unquestioned. She encourages him to use whatever lessons and talents he has amassed from his former roles in leadership and organizing tasks so hailed by outsiders and insiders alike. 'It is goodness itself that gives you the power', P. avers. There is no ambiguity in her assertion and no other way into P.'s orbit of acceptance or any excuse for failure.

Relationships ain't easy for ex-cons

Hewing the line, however, is not easy. Tensions and conflicts within Tone and P.'s relationship abound as they try to make it work, including when P. became the primary bread winner. Struggling to mutually understand and accept each other's ways, their predilections, expectations and personal histories tests the relationship, it has had to develop in a particularly stressful environment. As Tone reflected: 'We struggled because we argued, we screamed, cuz really each person … becomes our own parole officers. Without me even understanding how much a year in prison can be damaging to your mind, your soul, and what it takes to shake it off.'

As Tone struggled psychologically and emotionally with the past, P. fell pregnant. Tone, now in his fifties, was ecstatic with the promise of his first son and his fourth child. He'd never really had the opportunity or stability to raise his other offspring, and though always struggling to live up to his financial responsibilities, he is conscious that his children have all experienced his absence as abandonment, with all the psychological consequences that follow. This time, he said, he had to 'do it right', and be there for his newborn son '24/7', regardless of the difficulties of married life, employment and his infamy. As he explained during an interview: 'My son is [now] 9, and … he's my heart. What did that do for me? It made me a daddy … gave me that feeling, that really intimate feeling that changed me from a gangster. What my daughters did for me is they made me feel remembered. My son made me human. He really made me love life.'

Getting a break!

Tone's time in Virginia was ultimately well spent. He worked for four years for the church pastor, a period that was essential for him to build a firm personal, social and economic foundation for his future life, while at the same time learning how to heal from both the short- and long-term effects of incarceration. Like most returnees he did this without therapy or support groups, but importantly he did have his immediate family, a wife and newborn child plus a daughter from his wife's previous marriage now all in one household. In addition, his mother and father were still in Brooklyn, as were his two sisters. Beyond this, he also had many friends, some of whom persistently encouraged him to use his experience to be a role model to others. Mulling over this, Tone decided in 2013 that it was time to relocate back to New York, in order to explore whether he could not be a mentor for youth on the streets he knew so well. With P. feeling the limitations of suburban life as too constraining, they embarked on the next stage of his journey, which he likened to chasing a dream:

> I was a maintenance man, I got my courage, I was successful. My partner had a good job that she could move, and then we said you know what, let's explore. I wanna give myself a chance in New York. So, we packed up everything and left

> Virginia, and we went into New Jersey. This is in 2013, and uh, went there with no job, nothing, we were like the gold miners. It was my dream, I had to do it.

Time to move on

Tone's capacity to dream and envision a different way of doing things, of contributing to societal change has remained undiminished by the challenges he has encountered. The latter have not produced a cynic or a fatalistic, embittered social actor but rather the opposite. His ability to resist the extreme alienation and powerlessness that comes with imprisonment, is testimony to his capacity not to be 'broken'. This was accomplished through different forms of social agency, such as his role in prison gang mediations, and his educational progress, which, while giving him a measure of satisfaction, still left him yearning to be able to resume what he felt was his life's calling: working with the have-nots and those who are socially reproducing their marginality.

While a leader of the ALKQN, Tone felt he had made enormous progress in this respect, introducing democratic structures and experimenting with a range of self-help projects that met the basic needs of his members. With only meagre resources but through the collective power and sheer will of his membership, he confounded those who dismissed the ALKQN as just another violent, criminal street gang, and his own actions as that of a precocious pretender. He had seen people transform themselves with sufficient social support and mentorship, while he himself had been embraced by many who saw in him an example of a new brand of radicalism, one that resembled the prophecies of Franz Fanon (1965) and his belief in the possibilities of the 'Wretched of the Earth', or Paulo Freire (1970), the radical Brazilian educator who understood that without self-value there is no pathway to education. Members of his group, caught in the narratives of the time, were seen as emblematic of the 'underclass'. Pathologized by both the left and the right (Young 2011; Wacquant 2022), members of this *declassé* strata were seen to be like the 'corner boys' in *The Wire*, kids who naturally would never amount to much. Dismissing such fatalism and armed with his prior experiences, sense of accomplishment, reconstructed self-confidence, and gratification that he had not yet been 'destroyed' (Miller 1997), Tone and P. set out for the wilds of New Jersey.

King tone is back in town

> I did a radio show with J., about my dream of growing up with the work I was planning … I announced my return … and used a radio station to give me a kind of feeling of where the people were at … they could call into the show and it was overwhelmingly like, 'You're back, do your work, get back out here, do your thing, we love you'.

Once in New Jersey, Tone soon established his presence, as the above quote highlights well. He had opted for New Jersey as it kept him close to those

who knew and respected his past exploits, yet it enabled him to be far enough away from New York City and especially East New York, Brooklyn from where he hailed. He reasoned he needed this distance to provide him with a level of protection from potential developments that could come with gangs, including being dragged into conflicts, tempted to return to active duty, vendettas, as well as over-policing. This was the era of 'stop and frisk', with large numbers of Black and Latino youth – and sometimes not so young – frequently caught in the constant racially profiled dragnet of primarily Black and Brown neighbourhoods. In addition, there was always the potential for unwanted attention by the notorious New York tabloid media.

Meeting someone who can help me move forward

A range of people responded to Tone's publicly announced return, and through various progressive channels he was able to find work in an anti-violence programme, ironically in his old stomping ground in Brooklyn. Its location was problematic, however, as he soon determined that it was mainly Black youth who were attending the programme's activities, as Latino youth were loath to cross a racially coded dividing line (see also Jankowski 1996; Pinderhughes 1997; Weide 2022a).

Over time, Tone's reputation in his new role began to spread and he came to the attention of the Deputy Commissioner of Probation for New York City, who requested that Tone and I make a presentation to probation officers in a one-day training of the department's staff about his street outreach programme. The event was well-attended and Tone's lessons on outreach and his insider-knowledge on gangs became a major talking point among the attendees. Soon thereafter the Deputy Commissioner L., turned to Tone for help in a situation of some urgency, as he explained:

> That was when I started training with L. Me and L. had an encounter with a young man, after a kid got killed. I went in and helped re-engage the kid. He [L.] really got interested and told me about his "Credible Messenger" Initiative. Then I started working part time with Nu leadership and Dr D., which then led me to meet Eddie Ellis.

What Tone is recalling above is his first encounter with the 'credible messenger' concept, which can be traced to the foundation of the inmate-led Think Tank established by ex-Black Panther Eddie Ellis at the maximum-security prison of Greenhaven in Upstate New York in the late 1970s (see Brotherton 2023). It heralded the start of a long and productive relationship with L. that continues into the present. Ellis is a particularly important connection for Tone as his work highlights the 'symbiotic' relationship between the prison and the community in the production and reproduction of gangs, and the legions of 'disconnected' youth of colour from working-class and poor backgrounds (Nu Leadership 2023). Such connections and influence offer new ways for Tone to develop his expertise

in the fields of youth and gang outreach, mediation and community organizing, and to widen his presence within the plethora of anti-violence initiatives that are increasingly turning to the potential of transformative mentoring (e.g. 'My Brother's Keeper' under the Obama Administration – see Austria and Peterson 2017). Ellis was one of the first to argue that such mentoring was a bulwark against the mass incarceration policies at local, state and national levels that were creating the new Jim Crow (Alexander 2010), and that the solutions to the cycles of individual and social pathology within the most segregated and impoverished communities lay within them. Tone could not agree more.

Making a successful intervention, but principles are principles

As Tone has continued to develop his knowledge and skill sets, increasingly incorporating the language of the contemporary discourses on violence-prevention, his messages of empowerment and reconciliation among gangs received a positive response from youth warming to his unique personal and political blend of street gang leader, ex-inmate and social radical. Nonetheless, Tone felt increasingly constrained, as he generally played second fiddle in his interventions and work to a community organizer who preferred to guard his career-linked position rather than share the power. This compelled Tone to seek other employment opportunities:

> They had a director … who was more like he knew the 'hoods and the buildings. That was his love, but he had no kids in the programme and didn't approve of it so he couldn't meet the benchmarks. And he wouldn't listen to me, cuz I'm the street guy, right? And he hated that I was the real director … and he was the face of it! They came to the place where they actually knew me. I got caught in the middle cuz I ran the kids.

What Tone needed, he reasoned, was his own programme where he could develop his own ideas based on his values and principles, train and manage his own staff, and acquire the resources required to 'do the work'. Now firmly ensconced in this rapidly growing field with expanding initiatives across the country (Brotherton *et al.* forthcoming), and increasingly making a name for himself among practitioners as well as the web of funders and providers, Tone was offered the opportunity to lead a community-based initiative in a so-called 'hot spot' zone of Newark, New Jersey. Like his previous employment in East New York, the area was predominantly African American, a further test of whether his lessons and approaches with Latino populations would continue to work regardless of the race/ethnic make-up of the target subpopulation.

In short order, Tone found that the answer to this question was a resounding yes. With the requisite funding, he set up shop in a neighbourhood where control of the streets was in the hands of the local 'Bloods' street organization. His strategy was to reach out to the local gang leadership, but also make contact with ordinary

community members, providing services that everyone in the neighbourhood could access and use. As he recounted:

> We got a first-floor apartment … the living room, we made the circle room and the middle room we made it a debrief room, and then we made a kitchen, shower, like a real house. And that is where the community came. If they were hungry, if they were tired, when one of the guys just needed to relax, right? We made it a home environment … What we found was the office wasn't needed for my guys who were out there doing the gangbanging, but their parents and their neighbours needed the resource of my copy machine, the resource of my kitchen, the resource of the place to get information … We became like a lighthouse for their parents!

Over the course of the next two years, the intervention gained increasing traction in the neighbourhood by creating job opportunities for many of the local gang members, while also having a local judge assign court-mandated youth to his programme for intense supervision and mentorship. The impact of his programme was rapid, surprising even Tone, with numbers and levels of conflict decreasing while signs of community cohesion increased. It appeared as if his innovative means to get the gangs talking to one another were bearing results. These tactics had long exemplified Tone's *modus operandi* of seeking the elusive goals of peace and co-existence during his days as the ALKQN's leader in New York City, his time in prison and now in his new guise as the leader of a community intervention with 'deliverables'. These included a commitment to produce a certain quantity of inter-group meetings to resolve differences while improving levels of communication and trust between those parties deemed to be at the highest risk of conflict. His answer was to bring all of the programme's resources to bear on the problem both directly and indirectly to resolve both active and potential conflicts. The results were impressive:

> Then they had a group [gang] where they had a cause to beef. So, we drove them somewhere where they could talk …, outside their neighborhood, under the cover of the job. In this way we could put this in the can. We could go meet in this different site … And we resolved the issue. I mean, that shit was going beautiful. Ask anyone! I think we had to do 175 of these meetings in 3 years. I probably did 200 in 9 months!

All was going well until a certain programme was added to the mix and Tone found himself at odds with its methods if not its goals. This was based on a carrot and stick approach, and the targeting of those considered to be the main orchestrators behind acts of violence. Tone fundamentally opposed this programme whose basic paradigm was violence reduction through behavioural changes while rejecting notions of 'root causes', as well as working closely with the police and intelligence services as 'partners'. Tone considered this a travesty of a community-

based intervention, but he was made to participate in the 'call-in' sessions which were a fundamental activity of the programme (see Kennedy 2011). For Tone such tactics and the ideology behind them were the antithesis of what he saw as his life's work, and he ended up resigning:

> So … when they sent me to the call-out I went alone … when we get there … in one of the churches they have a police command post, a truck, they have 20 dudes in helmets, they have a police motorcycle club! … So, when I went back, and I told J. [the director of the organisation], 'I resign'. And when he said why, I said 'I'd rather not be here'. His team told me to stay away, I did it immediately. After I resigned, [P. and I] decided to leave and go back to Virginia. We ended up in Baltimore and … and now I'm looking for a job again. I'm in a crisis and I call you again! I said Dave, do you know anything? And you said, 'hey, did you see the paper? L. just got put in as the fucking director of juvenile justice! You gotta call him!'

Conclusion

The above is a condensed portrait of the extraordinary trajectory of Antonio Fernández, a.k.a. King Tone, as he negotiates, strategizes and works his way through his post-gang life via multiple carceral institutions, a transitionary period of release and his more long-term reintegration into civil society. Along the way he had to learn to survive, adapting to his environments while exerting his singular levels of agency that bring about the possibilities and opportunities for him to be himself. Throughout Tone's experiences he never ceases to draw the lessons he needs to pursue his dreams and make life on his terms, despite the social challenges and structural constraints. Gang life is often seen in pathological terms from the vantage points of the powerful, usually concluding that we can learn little from gangsters about ourselves, we need to avoid and keep away from them, and that they must be socialized to become their opposites. Tone's life course, however, provides a more complex picture of gang-related agency, as he provides insights that speak volumes about the way society is socially ordered and maintained with the venomous power of the security state shown in sharp relief.

While the state wanted Tone dead, he has nonetheless made it in the post-gang stage of his journey. Although he found himself in a crisis when I last interviewed him, he remained resolute, believing that his decision to leave his New Jersey job was warranted by his principles and values. Though not sure where he was headed, he was resolved to keep the faith and to continue to 'fight the oppressor', telling himself and P. that it would all work out. And, well, it did. As Tone explained during a subsequent exchange:

> I had to think for 3 days. Finally, L. let me through and said, 'shit, come in, we'll talk'. Then he told me the dream of where he was gonna work, and that I have to

introduce myself … to the whole staff, to the whole building, the whole facility. After that he contracts me as one of his leads … that's the story of where me and L. really solidified our relationship of how you heal a system and the streets and … you need a messenger on both sides.

Notes

1 The author first met 'Tone' in 1997 after a mass meeting of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation in St. Mary's church in Harlem, New York. I was invited to the event by Luis Barrios, an Episcopalian priest and psychology professor who had become a confidante and advisor to the group as it sought support in transforming itself into a quasi-social movement (see Brotherton and Barrios 2004). After the event, Tone asked what I wanted to do with the group and I replied, 'write its history'. To which he responded, 'Ok, that's fine. But promise me two things: tell the truth and don't go to the media with your stories.' Over the ensuing years we have built a close, trusting relationship and engaged in multiple collaborations.

2 Antonio Fernández became leader of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation in 1994 and began its transformation into a pro-social organization that he self-described as a 'street organization' (see Brotherton and Barrios 2004). In 1999, he was sentenced to 12–15 years in prison for conspiring to sell narcotics after a campaign by New York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to destroy the group. Fernández was released from prison in 2007 and immediately became involved in the 'Credible Messenger' movement to develop progressive anti-violence interventions in inner-city areas.

3 Thanks are due to interviews with Antonio Fernández carried out between 2017 and 2019 and transcriptions provided by Aidan and Mia Brotherton and Andree Hoolihan.

4 On the day of his court appearance, Ron Kuby, Fernández's lawyer, stated that his client's goals included 'radical politics, Latino pride and a self-help programme' (Shapiro 1999).

5 Note that Tone's mentor, Luis Felipe a.k.a. 'King Blood', had received a sentence of 150 years in the highest-level maximum-security prison in the United States, ADX at Florence in Colorado, where it was stipulated that he would spend his first forty-five years in solitary confinement.

6 The Department of Justice website officially describes the BOP's function as follows: 'The mission of the BOP … is to protect society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prisons and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, cost-efficient, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens' (https://www.justice.gov/jmd/page/file/1398296/download).

7 This refers to a documentary called 'Latin Kings: A Street Gang Story' directed by Jon Alpert and first aired on HBO USA in 2007.

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Figure 12.1 Gaz during an interview in Makeni, Sierra Leone in 2022.

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Chapter 12

The Paper Poet: From Crime to Career in Sierra Leone

Kieran Mitton

Introduction

In the early 2000s, as Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war reached its conclusion and the world's eyes were fixed on demobilizing rebel fighters, teenagers across the country were quietly organizing into 'cliques' – urban social clubs centred around a shared love of music and street culture. Influenced by US gangster rap and a post-war resurgence of Sierra Leonean artists, they quickly cohered around 'Crips', 'Bloods' and 'Black' gang identities. By 2010 they began to displace ex-combatants and traditional street muscle – the (in)famous *rarray boys* – as the 'governors' (local authorities) of many urban neighbourhoods. They were no longer merely mimicking gangs; they had become embedded in their communities as the power on the streets, and the go-to muscle for business and political patrons seeking their violent labour. Government and police officials talked in the press of a zero-tolerance response to these 'domestic terrorists'. Painting cliques as wicked and wayward youth, their harsh rhetoric obscured the long-standing political and socioeconomic forms of marginality that had not only fostered the growth of these new gangs, but lay behind various iterations of urban youth resistance and rebellion over the decades, including ex-combatant and wartime groups.[1]

It was in 2017, as I spent time with rival gangs across the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, that I first met Gaz, the leader of a large Black clique on the Western peninsula of the city. In the heart of his hood, surrounded by his street 'soldiers' and neighbours, Gaz showed me around. An imposing figure, tall and muscular, he was articulate and passionate about life on Sierra Leone's streets. It was a matter of making ends meet rather than getting rich or die trying. Gaz dealt drugs, among other hustles, but with no lucrative narcotics market in the country it offered little more than a subsistence income. He spoke fluently about the challenges of poverty facing young people, and why some had become gangsters. And then he spoke about his newly discovered love of poetry. He was writing poems daily, on his basic mobile phone, scrambling to put into words everything he had to say. It was giving

him hope of personal redemption, of a way out of the streets. He wanted to leave gang life behind, and he wanted to bring others with him.

This chapter sets out Gaz's life story, as he tells it, and his struggles to change. It draws from our regular conversations since that first meeting, and in particular from a visit in the summer of 2022, when I carried out a series of formal interviews with him. Gaz had recently relocated from Freetown to Makeni to pursue a farming project, and now thirty years old, he was in many respects back to where he started, having grown up in Makeni. His parents lived beside him in a small quiet settlement and the life of the streets seemed far away. For several days during the rainy season we sat on his veranda and he told me his story in detail. From time to time his young daughter would come to play, and with his baby son often in his arms, Gaz took us through the many stages and roles he had traversed – from his early life as the son of a soldier, to becoming a gang leader in the big city, to trying to escape through poetry and even moving to Dubai and finally, to throwing all his energy into farming. Gaz talked of the 'rough path' he was taking, his mission to change his life framed against a background common to many young Sierra Leoneans – poverty, inequality and a daily fight for survival. He was still struggling to make ends meet, but still determined to change.

In simple terms, it may seem reasonable to view the transition from gang-life to post-gang life as one in which an individual chooses safety and security over the precarity and hardship of the streets. But what Gaz's story shows us is that, at least in the immediate term, choosing to leave his gang – where he had a source of income, a position of respect and a relative degree of stability – was a huge risk. It was fraught with challenges of how to make ends meet and locate (self)respect outside of the streets. His life after the gang has been marked by multiple setbacks, disappointments and a high degree of contingency. In fact, talking of 'post'-gang life as a completed story of transformation is misleading. For Gaz, change is an ongoing journey that has kept momentum only through sheer personal determination. By any measure, his story is certainly one of success, but it is also one that reveals the great pressures and strain faced by those taking the 'rough path' out of gang life.

The soldier's son

Gaz was born in rural Makeni in 1992. His mother farmed and sold cooked food, and his father was a soldier deployed in the brutal civil war that had begun following the 1991 invasion of Sierra Leone from Liberia by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels.[2] Gaz grew up around the barracks, along with his elder brother and sister and two younger sisters. Most of this time, his father was away fighting while Gaz attended school, undertook gruelling farmwork and played football. Nicknamed 'Bigger' by his friends, he recalls being fearful of being conscripted as a child soldier because of his conspicuously strong physique. Relief came when the war ended in 2002, but tensions with his now demobilized father soon arose:

'If you are a child of a soldier, you fear the discipline of a soldier. Every child of a soldier is afraid of the soldier's belt … Our father was just too strict … Even when I was becoming more mature, he was just too harsh. He was a bully.'

As teenage Gaz grew taller and stronger, so too did his resistance to his father. There were frequent fights, and on more than one occasion he was kicked out of the family home. By the time it came to sit his high school exams, he was struggling to focus:

> All that stress, it was the time I started this spirit of confrontation … My father would go and grab a machete. He was too bloody … I came to realise that it had been happening since I was young, and now if it'd gotten to this level, I needed to leave these people. Let me go and fight for myself. I'd grown enough. And two captains cannot captain one ship.

In 2008, sixteen-year-old Gaz dropped out of school, packed his belongings into a plastic bag and moved to the coastal capital, Freetown. The family had stayed there briefly near the end of the war, and he had loved city life. He still had some friends he could stay with, and his older brother ran a barber shop in the Battalion Junction area. His brother took him on as an assistant, and then – after his brother decided to enlist in the army – Gaz took over the business. This was how Gaz became a regular fixture on the very streets that he would soon come to rule.

The Emperor of Exodus Lane

When not cutting hair, Gaz lifted weights. He became a frequent visitor to a gym on nearby Exodus Lane, run by an ex-combatant who had been wounded in action. The gym was close to the local '*ghetto*', an area where young people on the streets would hang out and drink and smoke marijuana together: 'The street guys were seeing me as I was developing my muscle, and I was smoking with them. When you have that kind of physical structure and they see you on the street, you gain some recognition and respect. That's how it happened. I became affiliated with the ghetto and the gangsters there. I fell in love with the street.'

Gaz came to know a group of former soldiers – 'bloody, violent people', in his words – who acted as local muscle for hire. Known as 'Bone Family', they did the dirty work for local patrons seeking to intimidate competitors, particularly when it came to land disputes. Gaz and his teenage friends feared these men but also sought to emulate them. They created 'Giverdam Squad', a kind of social club known as a 'clique': 'When it started, Bone Family were doing more of the gang thing, and we were doing more of the clique thing. The clique was teenage guys, young boys, just coming together and organizing dance and music shows … this was before we got into the real gangbanging. Bone Family were running Exodus Lane, and we were just their auxiliaries, a small unit.'

Bone Family began to use Giverdam in high-paying 'missions' – the lucrative dirty work. The ex-soldiers would keep the lion's share of money, but initially at least, Giverdam were too afraid to object. 'We just accepted it. And we were just proud to be affiliated with Bone Family.' However, as Gaz grew in stature, both physically and in street reputation, he and his clique began to question the arrangement: 'We began to see we had more power. If we faced them we could overpower them. Because for the really dangerous work, they would ask us to do it and they would stay back. We started to call them cowards. We would do the mission and they would take the money … So we started to overpower them.'

Giverdam soon took over Exodus Lane. They became the go-to gang for land disputes, experts in what they referred to as 'bulldozing' – destroying structures on contested land, for a price. Giverdam were no longer just a clique but a street gang with regular illicit income and defined hierarchies. All sporting black bandanas, its members were 'street soldiers', its senior leaders included the '5–0' and the 'CO', and Gaz himself was crowned with the top job of 'Emperor', also widely referred to as the 'godfather'. This was a microcosm of what was occurring across much of Sierra Leone around 2010. Cliques were polarizing around US-inspired Crips versus Bloods rivalries. The national press began to take notice, warning of unprecedented inter-gang killings and mass brawls at music concerts and football matches. In some neighbourhoods, it became dangerous to wear a rival clique's colours. Sierra Leone's Minister of Internal Affairs called for the return of hanging to deal with the gang menace (Mitton 2022: 52).

For Gaz, however, it was a time when his rising reputation on the streets was a source of pride:

> I realised that in the street the strongest carry it all. In other words, the theory of Charles Darwin – 'survival of the fittest, only the strong survive' – this theory works more in the street. When you're tough and physically built, people will be afraid of you even before you act. Everyone wants power. Even on the streets. As my muscle was developing rapidly, anytime the boys wanted to move around, go to the beach, they would come and bring me for protection. So I started feeling like a big guy.

Being head of the gang also meant being a target for rivals and being held responsible for trouble caused by his street soldiers. They fought violently with local Bloods and were frequently arrested, imprisoned and injured: 'We'd created a lot of enemies around the whole community, clique to clique. If one of our guys took a stroll and met another group, they would try to take their revenge. It was like a war. The community were not happy with us, with our way of living, the problems that were happening.'

Gaz grew worried that his parents would learn about his gangster life in Freetown, particularly his mother with whom he had always been close. The truth eventually came out when he intervened in a dispute between his sister and her landlord, a drug dealer who had been violent towards her. 'I beat the landlord; I knocked out four of his teeth with one jab. He hung on to me, bleeding, pleading.'

Gaz was arrested, and word got back to his mother. He became increasingly conflicted about his notoriety and activities:

> People were afraid of us in the community because we are gang members. Nobody fucks with us. Nobody has ever intimidated me. I have the big morphology. I don't get scared. If you see me, you know it's a no-go area, I should not fuck with this guy. My involvement in the clique created that … But the bulldozing, the personal missions, like being asked to beat up a lady – a love rival of someone, beat her up, take her phone – during those missions I didn't feel good.
>
> For me, the word I want to use is shame. Sometimes, going with that squad, 24 guys or so, moving as gangsters through the community – everyone would be looking at us, we would draw attention. They were wondering where we were going, saying we are going to cause trouble somewhere. So many times I would feel shame – not afraid, because I knew I needed to survive – but shame. While I was at the barber shop I was very happy, I did it with pride, but this was not like that. No gangster act I did with pride.
>
> You have some people in the streets who lead themselves into the badness, they are doing it with no restraint. They are enjoying themselves, you know? As if it is something acceptable. I've done so many bad things on the street, but I never did it with pride. The only reason was that I was doing it to survive. But I've worked with so many boys who were doing it with pride.

The further into the life Gaz went, the more he began to question not only the morality of his actions, but his position in society and that of the cliques. With arrests and stints in the overcrowded and dilapidated Pademba Road Prison, and brutal treatment in the notorious 'Benghazi' police cells, he became all too familiar with the injustices of the justice system. He recounted one incident in which he had clashed with a police officer after a local chief tried to seize his land:

> They [the police] threw me into their truck. The whole community was on my side. They chased the police truck. We went to Benghazi. It was hard. It's a place they do torture. They pepper sprayed me, and then I was beaten and kicked, every morning and night for three days. I would eat only in the evening. I wouldn't normally have been taken there, but because I assaulted the officer, stripped him of his crown, they wanted to teach me a lesson.

The lesson Gaz learned from this was that those with political power and money could act above the law, and they often were the law. It was one rule for the elites, and another rule for those at the bottom – the marginalized urban poor. When he was paid to commit crimes by politicians and businessmen, he was the one taking all the risks, often for very little reward. Gaz began to see this not as employment but as exploitation. In this realization, he echoed the disillusionment of generations of street and ex-combatant groups over the past decades.[3] It was one of the factors that led him to change the way his gang operated, and galvanized his determination to leave the streets.

The 'Paper Poet'

In 2014, Gaz's younger sister passed away. She had been ill for six months, and Gaz had donated blood to the hospital twice in the hope that they could save her. Travelling home from the funeral, he was shaken by the words of his mother, who had lamented that she had no children in university, and that Gaz had become a street criminal:

> After the funeral the cry of my mother was still playing in my head. My sister, she was gone, but the cry of my mother remained. I thought that maybe I can still change that for her. There is nothing too late. I believe in that. I'm not too old to change myself for good. I had this conscience that I need to make my mother proud. She needs something to be proud of.

Gaz sees this as the important turning point in his life. Already frustrated by the injustices of the street, it pushed him to make a change. He knew of a charity in Freetown named WAYout that trained street youth in music production and other creative arts. He became a regular attendee, and it made him feel good to be going somewhere in the mornings, just like other people who were heading to work each day, rather than sitting around in the ghetto. It kept him occupied, focused on his goal and away from the patterns of street life. And then one day he became involved in a poetry class, and his creative fire was lit. Gaz soon became prolific in writing, channelling feelings about his life, his relationships and the wider world, into poems he would type on his mobile phone. It seemed to offer him a way to be someone else, someone other than the feared gang boss. But while his newfound passion lifted his spirits, the old weight of the daily struggle for survival kept him grounded in the streets:

> Honestly, while I was on the street, it was never easy to just say 'I've discovered poetry, let me change my life.' I didn't know any other way to survive. When I discovered poetry I was still doing gangbanging. To go to my poetry class I needed to pay for my transport, and I didn't have anyone in the city to pay for that. And if I went there, I would spend the whole day there, so I still had to do my thing to make money. I started to cut down some things. Firstly, I stopped things like enter-shack [house robberies]. The only thing I was still involved in was selling drugs, and bulldozing missions, to survive. But those petty things I quit them completely.

Those around Gaz, particularly the clique members under his command, were curious about his turn to poetry, but they were less than enthusiastic about the changes he began to make to their way of doing business. For bulldozing, the convention was that a client would negotiate the price with the gang, offering for instance a certain number of bags of rice and some cash, and then pay a

deposit. The remainder would be paid upon completion of the job. But Gaz had had enough:

> The thing that pisses me off – I think this is very important – is the mentality of the society towards street youth. They can never think of us or consider us in times of goodness. I remember when President Koroma awarded the road-making contract for the Peninsular Road – the company reached out to each local community for them to provide guys who would be workers for them. None of us clique members were involved. Instead they gave it to other boys. I never took note of it that much then, because I was deeply involved in the street. But I began to get this consciousness – why is it that these guys only come to us when they are thinking of negativity? Of perpetrating badness? They come and hire us to perpetrate their evil acts, but when it comes to good things they never consider us. Why?
>
> So I started to think that this is bad. We should not be known in our community for perpetrating badness. I started to say we need to change this mentality. They only come to us when they need us to do bad, which they would never give any of their relatives or kids to do. They send us, and if we get hurt they will never show up. If you get caught they will just leave you there. So in my thinking, I thought if anyone comes for a mission and gives us a deposit, we'll keep the deposit and never execute the mission. And they can go and report us to the police – I want to see the police who is going to come and arrest me because I didn't do the crime that someone paid me to do!

Few others in the gang agreed. The final payment was always greater than the deposit, and as his CO (the number two in command) pointed out, failing to finish jobs would earn them a bad reputation. No one would want to do business with them in future. Gaz laughed recalling that conversation, but acknowledged they had a point. Money was everything on the streets. And junior members suspected it was easier for their leader to talk about walking away from this payment, and from gang life in general, because he and his 5–0 continued to run their drug-dealing business:

> They started undermining my rules. They started saying things like 'godfather, are you a born again?' They would say 'You're not born again, this is the streets! We don't have any work, no payroll. If we don't do mission, we don't eat!' [laughs]. They were saying 'how are we to survive?' I began to understand that if I continued pressing them into this, I would lose my respect. They knew I was not going back to like before, so they were starting to think about how to survive without me.

Undeterred, Gaz started thinking about how he could use his position to convince gang members to change their lives. The reputation he had built on the streets meant he was able to talk from a position of authority. And he could relate to their experiences, having lived the life. These advantages were something he

felt outsiders lacked. He began to formulate the idea for his own kind of charity – 'Crime to Career' – which could help others seeking to leave street life behind. If he could demonstrate that he had changed his life through poetry, perhaps that would inspire them:

> I was just telling my senior guys that now we've got an opportunity, we the elders. You are a 5–0, you are a CO, I am the godfather. This road that I've discovered, that I'm trying to take to quit this rough path, if you guys follow me – it's all of our stories, it's not just my story – we are making an example, from badness to goodness. We will be like street ambassadors. … I had seen the light, but they had not. I know that one day they will see it, that's why I'm 100 percent relentless. Even if they are still in the negative things, addicted to drugs, I know they will get there. If I as an uneducated ghetto youth can turn to poetry, they can change too.

In a context of pervasive poverty, how far could poetry take Gaz? If it couldn't pay the bills, where would that leave him? New opportunities did seem to be opening as he began to enjoy some acclaim, and he adopted the moniker 'The Paper Poet':

> I was writing all the time. I was going on Facebook to check for different poetry groups. I was trying to read everything I could of poetry. The established poets, their poems are deep and it will take you time to comprehend what they write. There were many things that I was learning for the first time. So online I was sharing my work, reading the work of others, becoming involved in poetry competitions. In 2019 I was invited to an African Writer's conference in Nairobi, based on my 'significant contribution to African literature' – it was clearly written. I was thinking – this drop-out from the ghetto is here challenging people who have worked through the education system, so maybe this is my calling.

But the invitation to Nairobi exposed the underlying constraint of poverty, with the cost of air fare well beyond reach. The head of the WAYout street-youth charity ran an online fundraiser, but it didn't meet the target and Gaz was unable to attend the conference. When asked what he wanted to do with the money collected, Gaz asked for a laptop for his writing.

In early 2020, Gaz was featured in a Reuters news article entitled 'Sierra Leone gangster leaves streets for life of poetry'. It came with an accompanying short video interview, showing Gaz talking about his struggle to change and overlayed with shots of him and his guys walking around Exodus Lane: 'It was like taking an exam and then being promoted to the next stage. Financially I didn't benefit, I was never expecting that. I knew that if my story got out there into the world – nobody is thinking of a gangster becoming a poet. So I started capitalising on this, my strength. I needed to press it.'

Soon after the article came out, Gaz was inundated with people reaching out to him on social media. A Brazilian professor messaged him on Instagram to say

his students were inspired by his story, which he was using to teach them that 'literature is life'. A Spanish photojournalist proposed a visit to come and take pictures of Gaz to capture his writing process. The article had mentioned Gaz's ambition to establish his 'Crime to Career' project, but although there were lots of messages, little came in the way of concrete means to enable this. In the meantime, as he continued to make a living from the streets, he looked for other ways to make his project a reality. One idea took him back to his childhood – farming:

> The reason I thought of farming, related to street youth – if you really want to change these guys you need to isolate them. A lot of people have been trying to change in the city, but it's easy to slip there. Sneak out. But at the farm the distance is too great for that, so that's why I thought about agriculture.

At the same time as helping other street youth to leave behind drugs and the damaging cycles of violence, perhaps farming was something that could also provide a realistic alternative income to crime. But if the logic was sound, as ever the financial constraints made the dream difficult to realize.

The migrant

Even at a basic subsistence level, farming in Sierra Leone is not easy to start from scratch. Gaz had conducted a feasibility study and knew he would need to find land, equipment and seeds, and have enough left over to feed the street youth he planned to bring with him. Once again, he put his hope in an online fundraiser, and once again his hopes were dashed.

By 2021, Gaz was still hustling, selling drugs with his 5–0 from Giverdam, who was saving money to go to Dubai. Gaz came in on the plan. He would work there for two years and then invest what he made in his farming project. They scraped the money together and departed in the Spring of that year. It was his first time flying, his first time outside of the country, but he recalls feeling strangely unexcited. It was just as well. When he touched down in Dubai, like so many young Sierra Leoneans before him, Gaz quickly discovered that the reality of life overseas was not so sweet. He was driven to his accommodation by the Sierra Leonean agent who had helped arrange his move. Expecting to be given his own space, he was shocked to be left in a small, cramped room shared with ten other African workers. That first night, like many after, he struggled to adapt to the time zone, not sleeping until 4.00 am. He was already thinking about returning to Sierra Leone:

> I went to Dubai with the expectation that overseas life is better, but what I saw is so different. I rented my room out in Freetown for two years for five million Leones [roughly US$255]. Then I went to Dubai, I rented my bedspace – one month was two million Leones [laughs]. We think that life overseas is better, but I went there and I never had to share such a crowded room in my life – even

> on the streets I had a bigger bed, my own room. I thought in Dubai maybe they will pay me US$700-US$1,000 per month, not knowing that they would pay me US$200 per month. I had my family back in Sierra Leone and I had to send them money, as well as take care of myself – it wasn't enough … Dubai is sweet for those who have money. But to go and hustle there – for me I didn't see it working.

He did what he could to try and earn his fare back, turning back to his old barber skills to cut hair for the other migrant workers. While away, Gaz's partner gave birth to their second child. They had met while on the streets of Freetown; Gaz and his elder sister had given her shelter and protection during a difficult time. Although at first it wasn't love, he explains, it became that over time. He loved her dancing, but most of all he adored the daughter they were raising together. With the arrival of his new son into the world, Gaz had one more reason to go home. He felt the responsibility to provide for his young family, and farming began to look like the most realistic option if he was not to go back to the streets. It made more and more sense for him to move back to his hometown of Makeni. There, in his parent's community, he wouldn't have to pay rent, and around him would be plenty of good farming land. So, after four months in Dubai, he returned to Sierra Leone and put his plan into action.

The farmer, the father

In the midst of the 2021 rainy season, Gaz got together the money for some land. He bought irrigation machinery, but was still short of key equipment, fertilizer and seeds. The crops were planted late, and the first harvest proved disappointing. More setbacks followed. The following March, when the grass was especially parched and dry, an accidental fire destroyed his crops and those of neighbouring farms. The neighbouring farmers had been planning to harvest their entire pepper crops the very next day, and the fire had wiped out 16 million Leones (roughly US$815) worth of food. Gaz managed to negotiate a deal, paying six million Leones, but it was a hugely costly setback. But as ever, Gaz remained determined. He found new land with better soil, and recognizing the value of local knowledge, secured the assistance of two 'sons of the soil' – a farmer and his son from a nearby village. His resolve was not shared by many of the street youth who had joined him, and they soon dropped away:

> It's hard to get the guys to commit because they want to see instant results. What I decided recently is to just forget about other people. I'm not vexed over that, in fact. If this wasn't something I want to do – do or die – I should already have quit. Imagine – the whole of last year I spent seven million Leones [roughly US$360]. I didn't even make back one million. I know the stress, so if I called you to come on board and I know you're not benefitting immediately, then okay

> I understand if you go. Maybe in the long run you will understand, and the door is open.

Nevertheless, with the pressing need to put food on the table for his young family and parents, the temptation to return to the streets was powerful, and something which Gaz was well aware of. He had continued to deal drugs to make ends meet, raising a question as to how much he had actually moved 'from crime to career':

> The other guys are looking up to me, so there's pressure. I want this thing to continue, if they are looking up to me and I just relax off it, then everything will collapse. So I needed to do what I needed to do to keep things going. I had to sell drugs again. That's the only thing I was still doing – I wasn't getting involved in any gangster activities. But in early June [2022] I stopped dealing drugs, because I was thinking in my head – 'you are talking about changing, yet every day you are selling drugs. You are still in the crime scene.' I couldn't have it on my conscience. … I have to stop selling drugs, even if I don't survive. But I know I will survive. People still come to me for drugs, but I tell them I have stopped. And I don't think I'm going to do it again. I haven't had any help as for now, but I just want to stand for truth.

If there was a pull from below, from the street youth who still came looking to buy drugs, there was also a push from above, from the elites who tried to tempt him back into a life of violent crime. In one of our last exchanges before I began writing his story, Gaz recounted being contacted by a senior government official. He had come across Gaz's story and said he was keen to support his Crime to Career farming project. Everything would be provided for him and his workers – food, housing, cash. Gaz was always keen to find backers for his project, and at this point in late 2022 he was struggling to pay for medicine for his young son, who had fallen ill. But it did not take him long to suspect that the official's offer was a ruse. The labour he had in mind was not agricultural; he was recruiting street muscle in anticipation of the 2023 general elections – a practice which had led to clique involvement in electoral violence in previous ballots, and their subsequent demonization as trouble-causers. Gaz wryly observed: 'I thought he wanted to support Crime to Career, but I came to see that he only wanted to push me from career to crime.'

The rough path: The contingency of post-gang life

Over the years of working with Gaz, I have seen him overcome numerous setbacks that would have pushed most others to give up. A defining feature of his story – of his 'rough path' – has been this sense of uphill struggle, of taking the path of most resistance, and I often asked Gaz if this made it difficult to convince others

to join him. While he would explain that there was great appetite among some gang members to change, he conceded that the difficulties this involved, and the seeming impossibility of achieving it, held them back. It has added a moral burden on Gaz that he believes that his success or failure will determine whether others choose to follow him. For many in the cliques, it still makes more sense to stick with the street life they know, rather than risk the uncertainty and insecurity of leaving. Because for all of its difficulties, gang life offers solutions to those surviving on the margins.

Like many others in his clique on Exodus Lane, Gaz joined when he was in a situation of disconnect with his family, a school drop-out and struggling to find work that would provide him with an income to survive on the streets. The gang provided an alternative; both a practical means to survive, and a salve for the trauma of broken family relationships. The 'missions' his clique embarked upon paid for food, clothing and other essentials. The gang was a family, a collective who supported each other in the struggle for survival on the streets. Of course, Gaz might have tried to survive by continuing to work in his brother's barber shop, but gang life also offered Gaz a route to self-esteem and respect among peers. The strictness of his upbringing, particularly the bullying from his father, left deep emotional wounds. But on the streets of Freetown he was the 'Emperor'. He had made himself someone to be admired, or at the very least, feared.

When Gaz made up his mind to leave gang life, he did so knowing he was unlikely to find paid work. A high-school drop-out with a criminal record and little work experience, he would struggle to find a job in a country with some of the highest youth unemployment and poverty rates in the world. Even as he attended poetry classes, he continued to rely on drug dealing to support himself. Despite his moment in the media spotlight as the 'gangster turned poet', there was little material benefit, and desperation led him to gamble on an abortive trip to Dubai. How could Gaz leave the streets, when it seemed his only realistic means to survive? Moreover, leaving also meant losing the status that being a gang leader brought him. Gaz recounts that over time he had grown ashamed of the way his mother and community members viewed him, and this was a factor helping him find the will to change. But he also notes how being part of a gang, and being in charge, gave him a sense of purpose, pride and control. Within the streets he was at the very top, a 'godfather', but outside the gang, he would just be a ghetto youth, with all the stigma that carried. By choosing to leave, Gaz began to give up his hard-earned economic and social safety nets, stepping into a precarious situation with no guarantee of success.

When we first met in 2017, Gaz had already discovered his passion for poetry and was trying to turn his life around. But although the media celebrated his impressive transformation, Gaz rarely presented himself as someone who had been fully and permanently changed. It is an essential theme of his story, stressed time and again through the language he uses. Gaz describes himself as on a journey, having come a certain distance but not yet reached the end, not yet 'out' of the streets in any final sense. In our very first meeting, he recited his poem 'Rough Path', which captured this sentiment:

My rough path is a cracked zone
Covered with death traps
I have been chased by hunger and thirst
Threatening this precarious path
That I have been walking so long
I'm driving through with a tank filled with faith
A day I will finally quit my rough path.[4]

Still driven by this faith, Gaz's story warns against conceptualizing leaving a gang as simply moving from a situation of precarity and danger, to one of security and safety. While this is ultimately the goal, such a view overlooks the crucial 'rough path' between these worlds – when Gaz was neither entirely on the streets nor off them, neither gangster nor ex-gangster. During this liminal stage, he willingly gave up many of the certainties and benefits of gang life; although he located an alternative purpose and status through his poetry and story of transformation, access to economic security and a stable 'post'-gang life was still beyond reach. It was a dangerous in-between, with no guarantee of coming out the other side.

When I visited Gaz's farm in August 2022, he had come a long way from those early days of discovering poetry and envisioning his 'Crime to Career' project. Poetry had played an important role in giving momentum to his story of change that captured the attention of the international press, showing him as someone playing a positive role in his community. When he wrote a biography page for his poetry website, he included the line: 'His family saw him as a thug, lost and useless, and he came to see himself in the same way.' That description was a striking contrast to his situation when we held our daily discussions about his past. By then he had reconciled with his father and was living beside his parents, his children a part of their lives. He had become more religiously observant and had started to pray with his parents five times a day. A few months after our interviews in Makeni, his mother had remarked on the way he walked. 'You no longer walk arrogantly', she said. 'You walk like someone who is very humble.' Gaz said he smiled and told her that God had changed his whole heart and body.

If it were not for his discovery of poetry and the acclaim it brought, or for his relentless determination which characterizes his resilience in the face of setbacks, it is hard to know if Gaz could have taken on the risks that leaving gang life involves. When we talked about the challenge of convincing other street youth to follow his example, he noted:

> The change starts from the individual mind, and if you have made up your mind, then it will be easier to achieve. But if the mind has not welcomed the change – maybe a family member has tried to impose this change on you, that's the time you will find it more difficult. … You have people who have the mind to get up and go for themselves. You have other people that need a person to tap them and say 'let's go!' If you are lucky that you have this mentality to get up and go for

> yourself, don't look down on this other person that doesn't have that quality. If you have a chance to help him, you should go together.

Gaz aims to be the person tapping others on the shoulder, yet he knows that successfully leaving the gang is about far more than mindset. In my conversations with gangsters in Sierra Leone, they have frequently argued that there should be a 'Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration' programme for gangsters, similar to the one implemented after the war to cater for ex-combatants. The logic of this argument is simple; providing a viable opportunity for street youth to make a living away from crime would reduce the risks of attempting to change, undercutting the contingency of post-gang life that is so evident in Gaz's story. It is this very logic that led Gaz to develop his own solution, the farm project. But in the absence of support from the state, and reliant on donations from friends, family and outsiders, its success still hangs very much in the balance.

Coda: The construction of a story

Gaz has noted how the media relished the narrative of a gangster who discovered poetry and turned his life around, yet this obscured the fact that he was still struggling to survive on the streets. In working with him to tell his story, I was conscious of avoiding a similarly simplistic narrative that painted him purely in heroic terms, overcoming the odds to become a success, and glossing over the harsh realities of life on – and after – the streets. Gaz had always been upfront about those realities, and I felt that it was an important aspect of his experience; that away from the spotlight and celebration of this gangster-turned-poet narrative, he still had to hustle to find ways to survive. I understood that the reporting of his story had been very useful to Gaz. It had given him a platform from which he could try to raise funds to support his project. It had also shown those around him that his efforts to change were reaping rewards. My working with him was a part of this too. Spending time with him in his hood in Freetown, and around his home in Makeni, sent a message that he was still moving forward. In a sense, the very documenting of his effort to leave gang life behind became a part of that effort, helping him become an advocate for change in others. As Gaz explained:

> I was eager to set out my story. I didn't want to keep it to myself, I wanted my story to be heard. If it is out there, maybe it will benefit people. I cannot do this without money to support my family or myself, but my primary focus is to serve humanity – for people to benefit from my story. Any individual street youth that you change, you also help a generation. He has a father and a mother, he has a wife, she too has a father and a mother – so it's more than one life you change. If I change ten people, I know I've changed a generation.

There was a lot riding on Gaz being able to demonstrate success and act as an example, and when we began to document his life, I wondered if that might tempt him to add gloss to his post-gang story. There were naturally some aspects of his past life that he didn't want to delve into: 'Sometimes certain things in my story, I don't want to go deep into that. I have some things in my life that I've done that I can never open my mouth about. While on the streets there were ugly things that I did … I cannot open my mouth about that.' However, in practice Gaz was not only often candid about the ugly side of life on the streets, he was determined that the struggles and challenges that had marked his post-gang life should be fully included. I had told him of my aim to reflect these as best as we could, avoiding a simplistic 'success story' narrative, but soon realized we shared the same goal. For Gaz, the credibility and appeal of his example to other street youth was based on its authenticity. That meant showing precisely that leaving the gang was challenging, precarious and required determination. He had been able to change despite the challenges, not simply because they didn't exist.

As I made progress in the writing of this story, I kept Gaz updated and asked how he felt about the draft. Did he feel it captured the realities of his trajectory sufficiently? And how was he finding the overall process – was it strange having his life recorded like this, being the subject and not the author? Gaz was always very positive. He enjoyed our interviews – he said it gave him pleasure to tell his story, allowing him to reach others, which was most important to him. And on his reading of the drafts, it was another instance where I saw his passion for writing – he would read them very carefully, giving feedback on what he liked about the structure and use of language, from the perspective of an author himself. He was delighted by the final outcome, and I felt reassured that it remained, in his eyes, very much his story. Not only that it was true to his words, but that it hadn't been so far removed from him that it had become someone else's product. Instead, it provided further opportunities for him to speak about his life to a wider audience.[5]

In our recent chats over WhatsApp, Gaz has been similarly enthusiastic about his own progress on the farm. Others from the streets have joined him. Things seem to be moving in the right direction. He shares videos of himself and his team, planting and harvesting at the farm, singing and joking as they go. Still, it's a constant struggle to afford fertilizer, secure equipment and in the meantime pay for his children's school fees and support his family. As always, he is getting by, and he is still writing and sharing new poems. His determination remains the constant in his story, the consistency in a context of uncertainty and constant change. The lines of his poem, 'Crime to Career', still encapsulate the message he is trying to share with the world:

Crime life is full of pain, no aim, no gain
Life na tar groun go make u body drain
I'm writing this from who feels it, knows it point of view
Not just saying bla-bla like politicians telling lies on radio or TV interview

Gangster living was my wife
No regrets I divorce her for poetry
I hope others can copy and paste my story
And choose a better way of living a valid life.[6]

Notes

1 On the intersection of gang culture and preceding urban groups, see Utas (2014) and Mitton (2023). On the evolution of cliques, see Abdullah (2020) and Mitton (2022).
2 The conflict ended in 2002 following intervention by British forces and UN peacekeepers. It was notorious for atrocities against civilians and became the focus of scholarship that sought to understand the role of youth marginalization in fomenting rebellion and extreme violence. See Keen (2005) and Mitton (2015).
3 See Enria (2015) and Utas and Christensen (2016).
4 Reproduced with permission from Gaz.
5 For instance, he was interviewed for *The Conversation Weekly* podcast. See https://theconversation.com/stories-of-gangsters-whove-left-their-life-on-the-streets-behind-podcast-242951.
6 Reproduced with permission from Gaz.

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Figure 13.1 Detail from the mural 'Building Bridges of Solidarity: Breaking Down Barriers' executed in 1997 by Eric Norberg and Mike Ramos for Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth (HOMEY) in San Francisco, USA. As a youth involved in HOMEY, Sito helped paint this mural.

Photo by Genesis Manyari, reproduced with permission.

Chapter 13

SITO: A LIFE INTERRUPTED

Laurence Ralph

Lying in wait

It is still hot outside when Luis Alberto Quiñonez – whom everyone calls Sito – reaches Grant Avenue, in San Francisco's Chinatown, around 6.30 pm on Sunday, 8 September 2019. His girlfriend, Arianna, is with her mother, who has been evicted: She had paid her rent late one too many times. 'If you don't move out today', the landlord tells her, 'your shit will be in the street.'

'Don't touch her stuff,' she demands, stepping between the landlord and her mother. 'My boyfriend's coming right now.'

He has driven an hour from Oakland in his 1998 Nissan Sentra. Once he arrives, Sito begins loading his car. After several trips back and forth between Arianna's mother's old place and the new one, Sito makes his way back to Curtis Street, on the southern outskirts of the Mission District, for the final drop-off. It has been years since Sito spent an entire afternoon there, in the Mission. The sun has already set when he carries the last box through the narrow hallway of Arianna's mother's new apartment. Sito finds one of the few spots in the living room where he can actually see the hardwood floor.

'Gently, gently,' says Arianna's mother as he puts down his box.

The sofa is still wrapped in plastic and tape, but Sito collapses on it anyway.

Just then, Arianna emerges from the kitchen with a glass of water and sits on Sito's lap. She holds the cup as he sips from it. Sito circles his arms around her waist and rests his chin on her shoulder. Arianna, her mother, and Sito sit in silence, listening to cars pass by outside.

'Okay, I'm ready to see my room now,' Sito jokes.

This chapter was previously published under the title 'A fair shake: Grief, murder, and the contradictions of juvenile crime' in *American Anthropologist*, 127(1):140–8, March 2025. Reprinted with permission.

Arianna turns and slaps his chest – lightly, affectionately – with the back of her hand. Arianna's mother looks at the couple with a smile. In that moment she feels her daughter has truly found her first love. Arianna and Sito are both nineteen.

'Let's all get something to eat,' Arianna's mother says. 'My treat.'

She offers to take them to Bac Lieu, a Vietnamese restaurant on Mission Street that Arianna likes – a thank-you for breaking their backs in difficult circumstances.

They decide that the couple would go to Arianna's place to change out of their sweaty clothes and then meet her at the restaurant in an hour. Sito opens the front door and holds it for his girlfriend. 'See you soon,' Arianna says to her mother.

Driving down Curtis Street, Sito has just put his blinkers on to make a right onto Brunswick when he sees a light flash on his dashboard. 'Fuck!', he says. 'I need to get some air.'

Sito is from the Mission; he knows the nearest gas station is an Arco off Naples Street, just a few minutes away.

They drive past the Cordova Market, the corner store with murals of Jerry Rice and Willie Mays on the outside, and then make a right into the Arco, parking next to the air pump.

Sito grabs a few quarters from the cupholder.

'I love you, babe,' he says, exiting the car.

Arianna had texted her mother for the address of the restaurant, but she hasn't received a reply by the time Sito gets back in the car. 'I'm going to call her,' she tells him.

Sito tries to exit the Arco while a stream of cars blows by on Geneva Avenue. He makes a hard right into heavy traffic, causing Arianna to drop her cell phone underneath the seat.

'Sito! Pull over. I can't find my phone!'

He makes the next right, onto Athens, and pulls over on the street of small houses.

Arianna bends over, hands searching across the floorboard for her cell. 'Found it!'

Meanwhile, a person in a hooded sweatshirt steps up to the Nissan's driver's-side window. In an instant, he raises an automatic pistol to the glass and starts firing.

Bright muzzle flashes split the night like lightning. Despite the shattered glass raining down, Arianna can see the shooter's dark round eyes and rigid brow. Arianna pulls Sito towards her, away from the incoming fire, taking two bullets in her own arm.

By the time the shooter is finished, twenty-one cartridges have battered Sito's Nissan, inside and out. Seventeen of those bullets cut through Sito's neck, shoulder, chest and stomach.

It had never occurred to Sito that someone might have followed him that evening and watched him carry a houseplant, a flat-screen TV and a heavy dresser into Arianna's mother's new place. Nor had it occurred to him that someone might have tampered with his car's tyres.

But his killer had been following them for some time, just lying in wait.

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Sito was my stepson's – Neto's – half-brother. We only met once, and I am sure he would not have considered me part of his life. But in death he has become part of mine.

His murder forced my family to grapple with cyclical tragedies of gang violence, vengeance and an indifferent criminal justice system. After exploring this loss through the eyes of fathers and mothers, brothers and friends – moving from living rooms to courtrooms – I've learned that there are no easy answers when it comes to vengeance, healing and justice. There are only more questions. I often think about this central dilemma: *How does a victim's family heal from homicide?*

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Two months after we attended Sito's funeral, Sito and Neto's father René asked me to come back to San Francisco. The police had just charged a seventeen-year-old suspect with Sito's murder.

René had arranged a meeting with the incoming district attorney, and he wanted me there. Knowing that I had written extensively about governmental corruption, he thought I had the skills to determine whether or not the new San Francisco district attorney would bury his head in the sand. I suspected René also liked the idea of the DA seeing an Ivy League professor in the room advising the family.

My wife's ex-partner, René, had been a constant presence whenever she and I visited their elder son Neto after he moved back to the Bay Area. At first, René and I barely spoke. When I tried to engage him – about family, work, the weather – his answers were short, and the conversation quickly sputtered out. I was left with the impression that I had said something wrong. Before long, though, our exchanges grew less awkward. As I became more comfortable, I even looked forward to hanging out. Now, walking into the DA's office, I didn't want to disappoint him.

A fair shake

'You know who he is, right?', René had asked me over the phone before our meeting, referring to the incoming DA.

'Don't think so,' I replied, distracted.

'Chesa Boudin.'

The name meant nothing to me, I said.

'Ever hear of the Weather Underground?'

'Sure.'

'His parents were members,' René told me. 'They went to prison for murder … long bids.'

The Weather Underground, I knew, was a radical left militant organization active in the 1960s and 1970s. Their goal was to overthrow the US government by any means necessary, including acts of terror on domestic soil.

'Oh, shit, I've met the man who raised him,' I told René.

'Bill Ayers? Small world. That's good, though … that's real good.'

It was just before noon the next day when I met René in Oakland. We picked up his wife, Maya, before heading into downtown San Francisco.

'We're not meeting him at city hall because he hasn't been sworn in yet. We're going to his private office,' explained René.

From the passenger seat, Maya sneered, 'Boudin's probably going to act like he doesn't know anything about this case. He must know something. What we really want him to tell us' – she slammed her fist into her open palm – 'is if he intends to charge Sito's killer as a juvenile or an adult.' She craned her neck towards the back seat to look into my eyes. 'He needs to be tried as an adult!'

'What do you think Boudin will do?', I inquired, feeling the weight of being asked to advise, a responsibility that seemed to grow heavier by the minute.

René answered, 'He ran on a progressive platform, and he made a vow that he wouldn't try *any* juvenile as an adult.' He sighed. 'We're going to demand to know where he stands now.' He tried to hide it, but I sensed that he burned for revenge. This was certainly a change of heart.

Only a few weeks after Sito's funeral, before anyone had any idea of who his killer was, René had confessed to me, 'I just hope the killer isn't a kid.' That reality would be very hard for him to reconcile with his desire for justice.

René understood how the juvenile justice system ruins kids' lives. He'd seen what it had done to so many. The irony was that René had campaigned for Boudin. In fact, he entirely supported the new DA's progressive position on juvenile justice.

Boudin had entered the district attorney's race as an underdog. He had worked as a public defender in San Francisco, never as a prosecutor. Boudin had a different kind of job experience. The prison system, he told the public, had torn his own family apart.

On the campaign trail, Boudin often lamented how arbitrary the legal system could be. After all, his father had received fifty-five more years in prison than his mother – for the same crime. At the time, Boudin's father, David Gilbert, was among the longest-serving inmates in the New York State prison system.

'I want to restore a sense of compassion,' Boudin had said in his campaign.

That was why Sito's family wanted to meet with him: That commitment to compassion, not something typically associated with DA's offices, had implications for Sito's killer.

If Sito's killer were tried as a juvenile, the longest sentence he would serve would be five years. Some, including Sito's stepmom, Maya, felt that was hardly enough. Other family members, including Neto, believed it didn't matter if Sito's killer served five years or fifty-five – the length of the sentence wouldn't lessen the pain.

Despite the chasm between their stances, the family could agree on at least one thing. They all wanted to know: Was Boudin planning to abide by his campaign pledge? Or would he allow a judge to determine whether Sito's accused killer would be tried as an adult, a determination that judges had always made in the past?

The family felt that this question was a litmus test of equal protection under the law. Their emotions were especially raw because they had seen Sito treated

unfairly by the justice system before: He had had a previous run-in with this very DA's office.

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After we parked and started walking towards Chesa Boudin's private office, Maya rehearsed what she would say aloud. 'As the district attorney, you have the power to make this decision.' She stopped, then started again. 'There's no need to short-circuit this process … Please let a judge decide if Sito's killer should be tried as an adult.'

When we turned onto Willow Street, several of Sito's family members were already there, waiting outside the office.

I had met most of them at Sito's funeral, but everyone had been distraught at the time. It was hard to tell now whether they remembered me. René reintroduced me to Sito's uncle Fernando; his grandmother Je-Je; his girlfriend, Arianna; and finally, the woman who had carried Sito in her womb, delivered him to the world, and cherished him from that day forward, Beatriz – an olive-skinned woman with long dark hair and gentle eyes.

I shook Beatriz's hand with a tight smile.

'Five more minutes,' Uncle Fernando announced, taking his phone from his ear.

I leaned against the metal door in front of the brick building, both relieved and apprehensive – relieved that Sito's family would have an audience but apprehensive about how they might react to what the district attorney had to say. As I stood there, the challenges of navigating San Francisco's criminal justice system – or any criminal justice system – couldn't help but be at the forefront of my mind.

It is no secret that two different justice systems operate in the United States: one for wealthy white people and one for people of colour and poor whites. In our country, those arrested and charged with crimes tend to be poor, uneducated people of colour. At the same time, the lawyers prosecuting those criminal suspects are typically upper-middle-class, highly educated and white. These prosecutors often share the belief that justice equates to being 'tough on crime'. They also commonly perpetuate a colour-blind legal system that does not acknowledge the racism that permeates America's criminal courts – and society at large.

Researching the San Francisco of Sito's youth, I found the results dismaying if not surprising. I saw my reflection in the Black San Franciscans who were 10.3 times more likely to be convicted of a crime than white San Franciscans in 2013. How could it be that despite making up just 6 per cent of the city's population, they accounted for 43 per cent of the people booked into jail?

Since I began studying how to rectify these racial disparities, I've been frustrated by the state of the legal system. As a graduate student, I learned that despite declining crime rates throughout the United States in the 1970s, our country implemented the extreme legislative policies that built the world's largest prison population. In my classes, I discussed whether American citizens should try to reform the legal system or fundamentally transform it.

By the time I became a professor, I believed that the philosophies of justice I gravitated towards could not coexist with the draconian policies that had catalysed

the era of mass incarceration. I also knew that prosecutors' unmitigated power to choose whether to charge someone with a crime, and what crime to charge that person with, was largely to blame for the rise in imprisonment. But I had hope that a crop of more progressive prosecutors could improve people's lives. By then, activists across the country had engineered a national movement to elect district attorneys who came from outside the system.

This new wave of district attorneys purported to operate under the assumption that the power prosecutors wield doesn't have to be punitive. Their discretion could also provide significant opportunities for leniency and mercy. The national media and progressive activists had heralded San Francisco's Chesa Boudin as a leader of this new school.

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Before long, Boudin, thirty-nine, met us at the door, casually dressed in a maroon sweater and dark blue jeans. He had an athletic build and a tidy beard that outlined his square jaw.

Boudin escorted us upstairs, and we crowded in. The space was set up more like a living room than an office. There was a large leather sofa and chairs but no desk. Most of Sito's family sat on the couch. René established his position, standing sentinel at the window. I perched on a wooden stool on the other side of the coffee table.

The meeting started with introductions, everyone explaining who they were in relation to Sito. Boudin's eyes turned to me. 'I'm here as a friend of the family,' I offered.

I didn't tell him that I was a professor or that this wasn't my first time in a DA's office. I didn't want Boudin to feel inhibited by my presence. I was there to help make sure Sito's family was taken seriously, despite my lingering doubt about being there. But I also didn't know if my expertise would prove helpful. I feared that it would not.

'All I really know is that a juvenile is in custody,' Boudin said. 'It's hard for me to give you an update at this point. I know that may not be satisfying … ' He trailed off.

'We're here for my son,' Sito's mom, Beatriz, began. 'We want to know what you're going to do as district attorney to ensure Sito gets justice.'

Boudin sat on the stool next to mine, facing the sofa. He placed the glass of water he'd been drinking on the hardwood floor and swallowed.

'Let me say again that I'm sorry for your loss.'

With this start, it was unclear whether he was going to address Beatriz's comment directly or try to evade. His face didn't tell me.

'I have to be honest with you. This case, although extremely important to me, is one of hundreds that I will have to deal with after I'm sworn in.' He frowned and then smiled nervously. 'I'll review this investigation as soon as I can. But I can't promise that I'll have any answers right away.'

Maya spoke up now: 'One thing we want to know is how you'll be making the decision about whether to try Sito's killer as an adult.' Maya looked directly

at Boudin, taking a long pause. 'Will you make that decision or allow a judge to decide?'

Locked in her crosshairs, Boudin straightened. 'As you may know,' he said, 'I made a campaign promise that I wouldn't try any juvenile as an adult. I did not make that promise lightly. It was based on studies about the negative impacts that sending kids to adult prison has on society as a whole … '

Just then, Sito's grandmother, Je-Je, interrupted with thunderous wailing.

I learned later that Sito's family members had debated beforehand whether Je-Je was emotionally stable enough to attend the meeting. René didn't think she was, but she had insisted on coming, and no one could deny her.

'Excuse us. This is a lot to process,' said René, still standing by the window. He turned to Uncle Fernando. 'Can you take her into the hallway and get her some water?'

Boudin's cell rang. He checked the screen. 'Sorry; that's my father,' he said. 'He's calling from prison.' His phone rang again. He looked around the room, taking the temperature. 'Let me just tell him to call back.'

'Please. Go ahead and talk to him,' René said, with the understanding of someone who had received many such calls. 'Take as long as you need.' René looked over to me, and I nodded back knowingly.

In 1981, when Boudin was fourteen months old, his parents, Kathy Boudin and David Gilbert, were arrested and convicted of homicide for their role in the robbery of a Brink's truck in Nanuet, New York. The attempted robbery of $1.6 million was meant to finance their radical activities. Members of the Black Liberation Army, who had partnered with the Weather Underground, shot and killed a Brink's security guard, badly injured others, and then killed two police officers who pulled over the U-Haul truck that Kathy Boudin was driving. Chesa Boudin's parents may not have fired any shots, but they were both convicted of felony murder, having been deeply involved in the overall crime.

Given this history, it's not surprising that San Francisco's law enforcement community labelled Boudin's vow to transform the criminal justice system as 'dangerous'. The San Francisco police union spent $700,000 on attack ads against Boudin in the days before the 2019 election. The odds were against him for sure. The local Democratic establishment, including Governor Gavin Newsom, Senator Dianne Feinstein and former San Francisco DA Kamala Harris (who would become vice president of the United States in 2020 and run for president four years later), had endorsed his opponent, Suzy Loftus.

By the time Sito's family met with Boudin, his political opponents had offered their congratulations. But the attacks on him and what he stood for were gaining steam. Jason McCabe Calacanis, a tech investor in the Bay Area, would soon create a GoFundMe page titled 'Hold the DA of SF accountable to the people of SF', seeking to raise $75,000 to hire a journalist to investigate Boudin's office and its so-called radical approach.

I did not want to add to a chorus of criticism. I was thrilled that Boudin had pledged to tackle racial bias in the legal system. But my extended family was

concerned with something more specific. They wanted to ensure that Sito's killer would be held accountable for his crimes and that the police would not discriminate against Sito because of his history with the DA's office. Focused as they were on justice for Sito, it hardly mattered that their pursuit of accountability temporarily aligned them with the same reactionary forces they typically abhorred.

My eyes fixed on Beatriz, who sat directly in front of me. She leaned towards Arianna, still only nineteen, who looked down at her feet.

'When he comes back in, you should tell him, sweetie,' Beatriz said to her.

Arianna nodded without looking up.

Boudin swung open the door. He paused before returning to his stool. 'I'm so sorry, but I'm going to have to go soon,' he said. 'This won't be the last conversation we have … '

Beatriz's eyes met Arianna's.

'I … I … I have something to say, sir,' Arianna said, adjusting herself on the sofa.

'Please,' Boudin said softly, sitting back down.

'I want you to know that … that on the night Sito was … ' Arianna's voice cracked.

Beatriz rubbed her back.

'On that night', Arianna continued, 'a police officer questioned my mother. He told her that she shouldn't cry over Sito … And my mother said, "*Why?*"' Arianna stopped. 'The officer said, "this time next year you'll know why he isn't worth your tears."'

Arianna reached into her purse and pulled out a business card with the SFPD logo on it. She leaned across the coffee table.

Boudin met her halfway, taking the card.

'This is him,' she told Boudin.

René uncrossed his arms and pointed at Boudin. 'There's no fucking way my son gets a fair shake in this city!' He took a step away from the window towards Boudin.

The new DA slid the card in his pocket and held his palms out. 'I'm sorry this happened, René. I'm sorry, everyone.' Boudin turned to Maya. 'This might be disappointing to hear, but I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that I will not be trying juveniles as adults. I am firm on that position.' Then he looked at René. 'But I am equally firm that your son's killer will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. I can promise you that.'

'And you'll look into that police officer?' Beatriz asked.

'You have my word,' Boudin responded, standing up to shake her hand. 'Like I said, this will not be the last time we meet. If any of you has concerns, please call me directly.'

One by one, Sito's family thanked Boudin for his time and trudged out of his office – their expressions indignant and despairing. It was the last time they met.

Compassionate rage

When Sito was just fourteen years old, he was accused of murdering his former classmate – a boy named Rashawn Williams. Sito spent five months in the San Francisco Youth Guidance Center (otherwise known as juvenile hall) while the district attorney decided whether or not to try him as an adult. Sito might have been sent to prison, but he was lucky. A private investigator who had been retracing Sito's footsteps on the day that Rashawn was murdered uncovered surveillance footage of the attack. The footage clearly showed that Sito did not kill Rashawn Williams. The DA dropped the charges against Sito and he was released. No one was ever arrested for Rashawn's murder. So, that murder allegation would haunt Sito for the rest of his life.

Five years after Sito was wrongfully accused of killing Rashawn Williams he would be murdered by Julius Williams – Rashawn's little brother. Julius was twelve years old when his older brother was tragically murdered – and seventeen when he became a murderer himself.

It was Julius who waited from his perch across the street, on 8 September 2019, as Sito filled the tyres of his Nissan. From there, he had a perfect view of Sito's car.

According to Assistant District Attorney Patrick Mahoney, he was biding time, waiting for the right moment. 'Killing Sito is not opportune, obviously, when he's in the Arco station,' Mahoney said, pointing to a map during Julius's murder trial. 'It's a well-lit, populated area. But he waits here until Sito and Arianna clear the station.'

While he was on the corner of Naples Street and Geneva Avenue, Julius had five minutes and thirty seconds to think about what he was going to do. *Double-parked with his hazards on, did he think about driving away each time a car honked and drove around him?*

I wish, more than anything, he had. Instead, Julius laid low, watched and waited.

In criminal law, the term 'lying in wait' has been used to distinguish an extremely culpable class of murderers from everyone else who kills. It dates back to the Norman Conquest of England, an invasion and occupation by the Duke of Normandy in the eleventh century. The duke, who was also known as William the Conqueror, defeated the Anglo-Saxons, who ruled at the time, becoming the first Norman king of England. Resentful of their newfound subjugation, the Anglo-Saxons periodically attacked the Normans by ambushing them. Because of the cowardly nature of the crimes and the difficulty of identifying the killers, the Crown punished lying-in-wait murderers more severely.

The US legal system views lying-in-wait killings as serious crimes for similar reasons. According to the California Supreme Court, lying in wait includes three elements that distinguish it from 'simple' murder:

1. Concealment of purpose.
2. A substantial period of watching and waiting for an opportune time to act.
3. A surprise attack on an unsuspecting victim from a position of advantage.

California is the only state with a statute listing lying in wait as an extraordinary circumstance warranting the death penalty, which was significant in this case. By noting that Julius was lying in wait, Mahoney meant to prove that he committed an especially vile attack. People who committed similar crimes, he might have added, are sitting on death row. (In 2019, California imposed a moratorium on capital punishment; and in 2023, the state began the process of moving death row prisoners into the general population of prisons across the state.)

Given the nature of Julius's crime, Mahoney argued that this was 'clear and powerful evidence of lying in wait'.

Having considered the circumstances of this case, the judge agreed. The court ordered Julius be sentenced to the maximum period of confinement: eighty-three years and four months.

I believe the judge rendered this verdict to send Julius a message about the severity of his crime. Of course, he knew that a minor could only serve five years in a correctional facility by law. We all knew.

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In the summer of 2023, Julius relocated to a less punitive correctional facility near his mother's home, as dictated by California Senate Bill 823, where he focused on counselling, education and reassimilation into the community. Signed into law in 2020, SB 823 notes that the most effective youth correctional measures are enforced locally. But for my extended family, it was not that Julius was released after five years that bothered them most. It was the fact that he and his family continuously denied his involvement in the murder, despite the video evidence of the crime.

Before Julius's murder trial, I didn't know that I could experience compassion and rage at the same time. I felt for Julius. Ever since he was twelve, Julius must have painted a mental image of Sito as a villain. Others probably helped him do that, egged him on. But *Julius* became that villain by preparing to do battle with an illusion.

The Williams family has every right to be upset at the DA's office for failing to find and convict Rashawn's murderer. I understand how prosecutorial inaction led them to lose faith in the police and the courts.

But knowing *why* Julius was driven to kill Sito doesn't stop me from being outraged by the murder itself. After all, Julius didn't wait to carry out his plan for just five minutes and thirty seconds while Sito was filling his tyres at the Arco station. I think Assistant DA Mahoney got that wrong. Julius waited much longer than that – and not just the two hours and thirty-four minutes between the time he left Pittsburgh and pulled up behind Sito's car on Athens Street in San Francisco. I believe Julius was lying in wait for five years, ever since his older brother's tragic death.

Still, Julius's denial of guilt continues to dampen his future prospects. He might have been granted a reduced sentence, or at least received more sympathy from the judge, had he been able to take responsibility for his crime. As Assistant

DA Mahoney said in his closing arguments, 'As of today, Julius has shown no remorse for what he did. But making that decision to take a life, and acting on it, has had profound and residual effects. He certainly needs treatment and help, the kind … he will never receive from those who don't believe he even did this horrific crime.'

Mahoney's point brought to mind something James Baldwin once said: 'Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated, and this was an immutable law.' I suddenly realized that hatred destroys entire families, too. Regardless of what the Williams family chooses to believe about Julius, we in Sito's family must grant them compassion, if only to heal ourselves.

Conclusion

Three months after Judge Feng sentenced Julius, I visited San Francisco and took a trip to Sito's grave. It wasn't a holiday, and it wasn't his birthday – just an overcast Tuesday afternoon. I went by myself because I didn't want any distractions. I needed to speak to him alone.

When I entered Woodlawn Memorial Park, I drove up the winding road. I got out of the car, walked to his grave site on the hill, and crouched down beside it. I didn't feel the urge to speak right away. When I finally did, what came out sounded like a prayer:

> *Let our family not make the same mistake as Julius's did. They sat in hate, allowing themselves to be consumed and overtaken with a lie they created in order to cope. We must find a better way. Let us mourn your death without demonizing your murderer. Let us demand accountability without seeking revenge. Let us heal ourselves without multiplying the hate. Let your legacy be one of transforming and healing, of breaking generational cycles of violence. Please, Sito, give us the strength.*

I didn't say anything else. Instead, I picked the budding weeds around Sito's grave and wiped loose blades of grass from the inscription of his name. Then I stood, walked to my car, and cranked the engine. I was driving past a row of cypress trees when I heard Sito's voice whisper in the winds, rapping the lyrics he wrote in juvenile hall:

> *Challenging the system, might get killed for this*
> *They lock us in those cages cause they're threatened by our lineage*
> *Sending mixed signals to our youth, distort our images*
> *It's crazy how I can visualize my cell and not a picket fence*

Somehow, the whisper of his voice wasn't as abrasive and curt as it seemed when I first heard Sito's song. Perhaps it was because his spirit was rapping over the wind

instead of over a rugged hip-hop beat. His lyrics made me believe that he could now imagine more possibilities as a spirit than he could as a teenage American boy. Both he and Rashawn could.

Just then, two cumulus clouds pulled towards each other like long-lost friends, reminding me of the boys' recent reunification.

I don't usually have vivid dreams, much less recurring ones, which makes the clarity and persistence of this vision even more arresting. It takes place on a spiritual plane, a dimension unlike the physical world. Yet this place is not heaven. There isn't a significant difference between the physical world and this one – besides the fact that Sito and Rashawn exist as spirits. And on this plane, spirits communicate through emotions, not words.

It always begins the same way. Sito and Rashawn sit across from each other, close enough for their knees to almost touch. When they were alive, those boys would've probably glared at each other after getting into an argument in the school playground.

But in this dream, Rashawn looks into Sito's eyes, and Sito understands that his former classmate has been watching over him. Sito suddenly knows there is no longer any room or need for the guilt he has carried all this time. The burden can be released. Sito's own look conveys gratitude. The silent dialogue between them is not over, though. Not yet.

Rashawn is asking Sito to release him from his little brother's deed. Sito sees that Rashawn has been unable, even in death, to untangle his spirit from his brother's anger. His soul is exhausted from being anchored to hate. Sito tells him, 'I know you're not to blame'. Not with words, but with the warmth of his face. Then Sito's mouth turns upward at the corners like a child's. Knowing that his expression of forgiveness is sincere, Rashawn smiles, too.

They grew up around so-called friends who told them not to weep. To show weakness, for them, seemed a fate worse than death. But now, having faced death and come out the other side, they understand that they had been living in the shadow of fear.

Sito stands up. Rashawn rises to meet him. They embrace each other – an action that creates an incredible spectrum of light.

I wake up just as Sito's spirit unites with Rashawn's. Every single time I wake, I am left with the pain that I imagine they both feel, the pain one fallen boy has for another, a certain kinship through premature death. But the pain goes beyond that: In order for their souls to assist their surviving kin, they need to rest. They need to be given peace.

That's what I take from this recurring dream. After it came to me the third or fourth time, I wondered whom the message is for.

Is it for Sito's little brothers? Perhaps, but they're still only kids. They don't yet understand their family's history. Trying to grapple with that pain so early might do more harm than good.

Maybe it's for Chesa Boudin. But no: Even though the DA's office wronged Rashawn's family and ours by never arresting his killer, the message feels too

intimate for him. Besides, residents of San Francisco ousted him from the seat of power in 2022.

It can't be for Arianna, because she didn't know Rashawn.

Perhaps it is for Neto. But I don't think he needs this dream. He founded and is the head priest of a Santería church. He's already helping hundreds of young people find their paths with guidance from the orishas.

I would say it's for Julius, but he's not yet ready to take responsibility for his crime.

So the more I think about it, the more I feel the dream is for those who need it the most: the troubled teenagers who are thinking about taking someone's life.

I hope they cherish this dream … and eventually pass it on.

AFTERWORD

Javier Auyero

Rather than brushstrokes, pointillist painters rely on tiny dots of colour to form an image, an image that can only be seen when viewed from a distance. Viewers of a painting by Georges Seurat or Paul Signac, for example, need distance so that their eyes can do the work of blending the coloured dots together to be able to see the image. They can, of course, focus on each dot, but they won't be able to appreciate the works' light, colour, and more general and overall form.

Readers of this insightful, revealing collection share the plight of those who want to truly grasp, say, Théo van Rysselberghe's *Coastal Scene*.[1] They can concentrate their attention on single chapters – each one uncovers fascinatingly singular, more or less adventurous, more or less violent, more or less predictable trajectories. But to truly grasp the intricate relationships between gangsters, gangs and the ganglands in which they operate, readers need to look at the whole book. Much like to appreciate a pointillist painting, to fully comprehend *Gang Lives*, one needs to move between close inspection and detachment, between the intimate details of individual lives, larger structures, and historical processes.

What emerges once readers (or at least this reader) step back and observe this work *in toto*? To resort to an old, but still very relevant paraphrasis, I'd like to propose and elaborate on the following proposition: that through the in-depth, cognitively empathetic, life history approach embodied in this volume, we learn that gangsters make gangs but neither under material or symbolic conditions nor in ganglands of their own choosing. This is important because we can then understand the mutual imbrication of individual choice and objective determinants, that is, the co-constitution of gangsters' dispositions, their practices and social, political, economic and cultural structures.

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Social scientists have long taken good advantage of life histories (Passerini 1987; James 1997), mainly emphasizing their potential as windows into – but not direct mirrors of – the meanings of extremely diverse collective and individual practices – for the particular case at hand, participation in this or that line of criminal

activity, membership in this or that gang, leading to this or that trajectory, etc. The contributors to this volume, however, know that the narratives constructed out of life histories do not reveal behavioural patterns or consciousness in a straight or unmediated way (Passerini 1987). Rather, they need to be probed, scrutinized, checked once, twice, thrice, because the glass of that little 'window onto the subjective in history' (James 2000: 36) is never clear.

In the volume contributors' expert hands, the life histories they have collected tell us sometimes what gangsters do, but also, and as importantly, what they 'wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did' (Portelli 2010: 50). In this way, they exploit one of memory's central features, that of being an active process of meaning-making (Olick and Robins 1998), to explore the ways in which protagonists construct themselves as gangsters and assign meaning to their actions and lives.

To this extent, the stories gangsters tell us in this volume speak not only about gangs, ganglands, broken families, violence, crime, prisons, unequal opportunities, etc., but they also speak to the protagonists' hopes, expectations, dreams and emotions – and about the ways, oftentimes paradoxical, in which these evolve over time. Taken together, they unveil fascinating dynamics and trajectories – not a single, monolithic, narrative about gangsters, gangs and ganglands but a multi-coloured tapestry. Through this tapestry readers learn about the ways these always-difficult-to-define social groups variously root themselves into marginalized territories, about the diverse forms of violence concatenated with one another, about the key (and often pernicious) role families play in gangsters' lives, about the role of prisons in perpetuating various form of exclusion and brutality, about gangsters' pragmatics and ethics, about the complex relationships between street masculinities, durable inequality, and daily forms of physical harm, about gang life as both a survival strategy and a risky form of upward social mobility, etc.

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'Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust,' writes Philippe Bourgois (1995: 20) in his masterful ethnography of crack-dealers in East Harlem, 'can one begin to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers'. Bourgois forcefully argues something that the contributors to this volume not only know well but are putting into practice: Gang life can only be truly understood through sustained, immersive inquiry. Its complexities, enigmas and contradictions cannot be unearthed in a single interview or fleeting encounter – it unfolds through carefully asked questions and long-term observation, built on patience, trust and credibility.

Each chapter displays a level of what Mario Small and Jessica Calarco (2022) call 'cognitive empathy' – the degree to which the researcher came to understand those observed close to how they understand themselves – rarely seen in social science research. We get quite close to the gangster's point of view on his or her life but are also offered insights into not only the individual's circle of family and

friends but also on the landscape – the gangland, the world of crime, the flow of drugs, the actions of the state, the surrounding misery – in which they inhabit. We get to see this because authors not only use life histories to look inwards but also to move outwards; to link, as C. Wright Mills (1959) suggested a long time ago, biography and history. In doing so, they show that gang lives are both structured and contingent products of plethora of individual and social factors.

And we know this because each volume contributor has spent long periods of time with the main actors of each chapter. To draw on Small and Calarco (2022: 730) again, most of the chapters show a high (and again, quite infrequent these days) degree of 'exposure' – key in 'building rapport with those studied, generating trust, increasing cognitive empathy, and expanding the range of issues about the people or context that the researcher comes to understand'. But this long-term exposure and the almost microscopic attention to gangsters' daily lives – or as Clifford Geertz (1971: 21) once put it, 'exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters' – do not distract the volume contributors from paying attention to larger social, political, cultural and/or economic processes going on in the specific geographic contexts under consideration.

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In their deep dives into gangster's lives, their gangs and ganglands, the volume contributors have heeded the twin command once deftly articulated by Loïc Wacquant (2002) in his highly provocative essay on the perils and pitfalls of urban ethnography (see also Wacquant 2025): You shall not sanitize, you shall not moralize. Through a life history approach, contributors to this volume offer us non-judgemental understanding of what pushes individuals into gangs, what pulls them there, why they stay in gangs, when and how they leave, how they make gangs and how gangs make them.

At the same time, a life history approach, it is important to remark, can have certain built-in shortcomings. Many, if not most, life histories have the logical structure of what Charles Tilly (2002) once called 'standard stories'. There are a limited number of characters (this gang leader, that competing gang), who act in a bounded time and space (this or that town, this or that neighbourhood), in conscious, self-propelled and often temporally linear ways. The contributors to this volume, however, clearly know this and are aware that most of the social processes that they are dealing with – the making of this gang, the demise of that other one, the increase of violence here, the decrease there, the direction of individual trajectories – do not work like standard stories. They have not written them up as such, instead experimenting with different styles and formats to try to transcend such strictures.

In doing so, they highlight how key cause-effect relations – the making and transformation of gangs and ganglands – are oftentimes indirect, interactive, collective, often unintended and mediated by non-human environments (changing interdiction and punitive policies, attendant transformation of drug flows, etc.). They cannot be reduced, appearances to the contrary – appearances that are often

reinforced by the standard story format that conventional life history narratives often take – to being the outcomes of individual and intentional actions – hence the contention that gangsters make gangs but neither under material or symbolic conditions nor in ganglands of their own choosing. At the same time, however, what this volume also shows so very well is how if we look at different gangster life histories together, and from a proper distance – like the one demanded by a pointillist painting – then a reading can emerge that gets us closer to the highly complex relational dynamics behind gangsters, their gangs and ganglands, and in doing so, shed light on the diverse ways in which they shape (and are shaped by) the world we live in.

Note

1 See https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/theo-van-rysselberghe-coastal-scene.

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INDEX