

Gangs: Spatialities and Socialities in South Africa

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Abstract

The “making” of gang relationships has remained at the periphery of research, yet it is critical in understanding the continuity and sustainability of gangsterism in different contexts. This paper examines the ways in which young men involved in gang violence forge and sustain their relationships in the streets of a black township in South Africa. I argue that the “making” of gang relationships is never easy; rather, it is characterised by violence within and outside gang membership. The article asserts that, within gangs, violence is a technique which sustains their relationships, as it acts as a source of social and emotional support—especially in a context characterised by fractured families as well as social and economic marginalisation. The paper draws from an ethnography of walking the township streets, being in gang streets, talking to gang members, engaging with and observing young men involved in gang violence.

Keywords: gangs; crime; violence; identity; masculinity

Introduction

The spatial presence of gangs continues unabated, yet dominant scholarship negates the ways in which they forge relationships in particular contexts. Gangs imbue a particularly expressive way of doing and functioning at a collective level. In this regard, the “making” of gang relationships and how such relationships are sustained are of importance in understanding the continued presence of gangs over time. In this paper, I argue that gang relationships are never easy to “make” and “unmake.” Such gang relationships are forged through violence within and outside the gang as a collective group. The paper asserts that relationships made within gangs do not only depict violence, but are sources of social and economic support in the absence of family care. The paper draws from an ethnography of being in the streets; in particular, street conversations with gangs in their spaces of operations within the townships in which they reside. Gang relationships are “made” in the streets, which are inundated with violence. Hence, the street—as a space of “making” gang relationships—is a space in which power is enacted and violence is displayed.

Violence, Power and Domination

Gangs “make” particular spaces by dominating them. The domination of such spaces is power, which is ascribed and embedded in a specific place. In this regard, power is gained and maintained through violence. It is also routinised through violence and can be lost at times through violence. Violence is not just about metering pain and invoking emotions, but it is about the consolidation of power in and of places in which gangs operate. Violence is linked to and associated with power, domination and ideologies. Thus, power dominates particular people, but also in differentiated spaces. This power, intrinsic to gangs, is also socially deferential because it can be at a very localised level, and/or an individual and/or a collective level. However, in all respects, gang violence “makes” and “unmakes” power and spaces in dynamic ways.

Violence is ideologically underpinned by certain social, economic and cultural specificities. It is an instrument of ideology, and it instrumentalises the object of gang ideology. It is contoured in particular structures of domination. These structures are in themselves imbued and predicated with certain forms of violence. While violence is carried by those with instruments of domination, those with less perceived power can counter the dominator. Violence is inevitably material. It hierarchises social communities and communities within communities—those of gangs. Violence instrumentalises structures. It defines social and economic inclusion as well as exclusion. Violence is characterised by a struggle for recognition and control of people and the community of which people are a part.

Violence functions at a discursive level. Gangs flourish on violence, hence it is central to the collective gang group survival. Thus, while it fractures the community and the

people, it also binds gangs together. The sedimentation of violence is social and economic dominance. It is social because the very violence which destroys structures, can work to build social relations—especially among gangs. It is also economic, because it creates particular networks which are sources of survival. In this regard, gang violence forges particular identities; that is, gang identities. Gang identities function both as a “category of analysis” and a “category of practice” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). While the former refers to the ways in which gangs understand themselves, and the ways in which they get by in their everyday life, the latter depicts how a gang provides a vantage point in which they are identified as gangs operating in a particular community. Thus, gang violence “makes” and unmakes “identities.”

It is, therefore, critical to understand that violence is power—and power can be violent. This is the politics of understanding and grasping the notion of violence. This is so because the state thrives on violence, and so do the individual non-state actors. While scholars assert that modern states justify the legitimate use of violence (Torpey 1998), what is lacking in this argument is that even individual groups and non-state groups legitimise and make claims of why they engage in violence. Gang relations make violence, and violence makes gang relations. It is within these gang relations (where violence is justified as a way of getting by), that gang members survive through the very violence which is understood as a tool that fragments the community. While the state succeeds in legitimising its use of violence by expropriating the means of doing violence from its citizens (Torpey 1998), non-state actors (like gangs) do sequester community members from doing violence, and justify their actions within their space of operation and beyond. However, despite such assertions that violence can be legitimately used by the modern state, it can be argued that violence remains illegitimate to control people and places. This speaks to communities affected by gangs and gang operations. Thus, for Arendt (1970), “violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate.” In this regard the state can justify why it uses violence to push its own political agendas, but it will never be a legitimate reason, especially for the recipients of that violence. However, Giorgio Agamben (2005) in *State of Exception* argues that the “state of exception” is when the state suspends the legal order with and for a state order. Agamben (2005, 1) asserts that the state of exception exists where a “point of imbalance between public law and political fact” is omnipresent. The disjuncture between politics and law defines violence, and so does the “state of exception.”

Gang violence is about a power struggle, and this is mediated by violence. The ultimate winner is the one who metes out violence the most. Hence, power and violence are in the same continuum of existence. It is about “domination of man over man by means of violence” (Arendt 1970, 52). In all these assertions, the struggle for power is defined as violent. This is so because violence seeks to command and dominate. The recipients of it are encouraged to be obedient and loyal to the perpetrator.

Power is instrumentalised to achieve violence. Hence, violence is an instrument of power. The instruments of power instrumentalise violence to achieve power. In this

regard, violence is instrumental. It serves as a spatiality of power on which the existence and continuity of the gang lean. It is rationalised against those who seem to resist the power that characterises it.

Violence is not just about the present, it is more about the future. Gangs employ violence to serve and correct the future and not the past. Thus, gang violence is not just about the present community, but it is future oriented. The future is also about power. While it is suggested that violence can create power, it can also destroy it. Thus, in creating power, violence has to destroy it first. This is so because there has never been an absence of gangs in the communities studied in this paper. Power is always in existence, whether weak and/or strong, gang power always exists.

Understanding Gang Violence

In South Africa, gangs continue unabated. The majority of blacks experience gang violence in the townships in which they reside (Maringira 2020). There are a number of explanations for the continuity of gang violence in black townships: social, economic and continued marginalisation of blacks and the coloured population (Davids 2020). South Africa's history of colonialism, and subsequent apartheid policies and practices helped to give rise to the emergence of gang violence. For Kynoch (2005), the nature of the township way of policing has exacerbated criminal gang activity, with vigilante groupings being widespread and focused on the social ordering of the black township for crime control. Such practices were less effective; instead, they promoted gang activity mostly in black townships (Steffen 2008). Since the 1920s there have been documented records of gang violence in South Africa (Kynoch 2007). The situation was exacerbated during apartheid when "non-white" marginalised communities were exposed to deep-rooted poverty and other risk factors which promoted youth gang violence (Altbeker 2009). This is what Brewer and Brewer (1994) depict as "racial policing," in which police were mostly present to combat illicit beer in the townships, yet gangsterism was rife. Cooper and Ward (2012) accordingly observe that despite the demise of apartheid, young people in marginalised areas, especially townships, continue to resort to gang violence in order to survive. Ross (2015) talks about how marginalised areas are settled and secured, particularly those which are inhabited by poor people. In post-apartheid South Africa, impoverishment (coupled with access to guns) continues to shape the lives of many who live in the townships, who often resort to gangsterism (Maringira and Masiya 2018). According to Cock (2005), the accessibility of guns and their use have continued in post-apartheid, especially in black townships. The ownership of guns has also been closely associated with being a man, and in the townships, having a gun is associated with status (Maringira 2020). Therefore, guns have remained embedded in the everyday life of a black man in the townships, some of whom then resort to gang violence. As revealed by the majority of gangs, it is important to note that having a gun is a much easier exercise than abandoning it. Once they carry guns, young black males continue to be haunted by the mentality of perpetrating violence—even to people they know and live in close proximity with (Maringira 2020). For Cock (2005),

this is synonymous with militarism, where the everyday life of these young men, including gangs, is guided by the desire to do violence.

Gang violence is further fuelled by global social networks (Standing 2003). Since 1994, some South African gangs have forged connections with global gang networks in relation to the drug trade and the illicit acquisition and sale of ivory, rhino horn, and so forth (Pinnock 2016). In some instances, the judicial system and policing have been viewed as ineffective in combating gang violence (Kinnes 2000). Gangs have advanced their ability to survive and thrive through their links with law enforcement agencies (see also Kinnes 2014). According to Maringira (2020), the continued lack of policing has necessitated a loss of trust in the ways in which gangs are policed. This has, therefore, contributed to a rise in gang violence, particularly in black townships. In this study, we therefore pay attention to a specific black township in South Africa, established during apartheid. This black township was initially dominated by hostels and barrack-like homes meant to house men migrating from the rural parts of South Africa to the city (see also Kinnes 2014). The township is characterised by one-room informal dwellings, often built with corrugated iron sheets (Maringira and Masiya 2018). In writing on the continuity of gangs, Brankovic (2012) notes that the violence is not just historical, but it continues in the present. The violence in such spaces has always been and is still institutionalised in forms of social power which limit young people to explore available opportunities. The quest for a decent life seems to be influenced by the disparity between neighbourhoods, with the poor townships sitting alongside more affluent, mainly white and coloured suburbs.

Journeying Gang spatiality

Doing research in spaces which are characterised by violence and crime has its own challenges. A context characterised by gang violence has its own problems in terms of linking up with and talking to participants. This was compounded by our interest in understanding the ways in which gang relations are produced and sustained over time. Hence, our conversations and observations principally focused on young men (we did not meet young women) involved in gangs in some or other way. All were aged between 18 and 45. Only one of the participants was 58 years old. He, however, viewed himself as a young man. He has never married. He does not have a child. He adamantly considers himself a young man. Interestingly, he hangs out with those between the age of 18 and 45. Our research required us to also “hang around” the township, in the streets. In order to interact with members or participants involved in criminal groupings who steal, rob and sometimes assault or kill, we first connected with a community leader, whom we will refer to as Sam. We had previously worked with Sam during a different project on violence in the townships. He was able to connect us with youth gangs as we moved around the township on field trips—especially in the streets. Sam introduced us to the community leader as “friends from the university.” He was informed about our research and gave his consent. He opined: “What you are researching here, is the major problem we are facing in this community for many years, and the problem will continue.” He

offered to assist us if we needed it. In walking around the streets, we could see that the space was reminiscent of violence. Broken bottles littered the tarred road. Sam explained that these were used by gang members when they clashed, especially at night. We were introduced to a one-armed former gangster by the ex-soldier. We were careful to not probe too deeply during this conversation, because it was apparent that the injury was the result of violence. This was confirmed by Sam, who said he had lost his arm in a gang shootout when he was fighting “there” (pointing to a street).

We met some gang leaders and subsequently accessed other members through them. Samukelele, who was our entry point, made this possible. Sometimes we accessed gang members through their mothers. For example, during a fieldwork visit, we wanted to talk to a gang member, but he referred us to his mother. She agreed to talk to us but stressed that we should not take her son to the neighbouring street because it was in the territory of another gang, against which they were fighting. What was interesting to us was the ways in which mothers became aware of their children’s gang activities and acted as defenders for them. Through conversations and interactions with young men in the streets we examined the ways in which they became entangled in gang groups and how they sustained these relationships.

Streets Corners: The Making of a Gang

The street is characterised by the ambiance of living in it. The life lived in the streets is embedded with “street culture,” which Anderson (1994) calls the “code of the streets” governed by a set of informal rules including the “making” of interpersonal relationship and violence. In the street, violence is “approved” and often legitimised by the “codes” of the streets. The streets reject decency (Anderson 1994). The “code” of the street is a social resource which pulls together different gangs and social characters of the streets. The street code blurs the good and the bad young men. All are defined as gangs of the street. The notion of “code” in the street reveals how the street is never a fragmented space, but rather a space in which life is coordinated by those who live in it, forging particular socialities.

On entering the township, we noted that young people were present in the streets and on the street corners. Initially, we found it difficult to walk up to them and approach these young people. We walked along the streets, very much interested in what these young people were doing and saying. Later, along with Sam, we felt reassured and more confident in the streets, talking to the young people, standing and moving among them. When we approached a group of five young men on a street corner, we greeted them. One of the group members responded: “We saw you when you were approaching this street, and we realised that you are walking with outsiders.” Sam told us that this was the leader of the gang which operated in that street. Sifiso was his name. We told Sifiso about our research and he said that because we were walking with a respected person from the community, Sam, we were welcome.

In our observation, the streets are institutional. The streets are socially structured and differentiated in particular social categories. The streets have commanders. There are those who speak on behalf of others. There are those who listen. There are those who tell others what to do and not to do. The commanders are responsible for delegating what must be done at particular times to particular people walking past in the streets. They command young “gang recruits” to mug people in the streets, and the spoils are given to the commanders or “Generals.”

It is never easy to be a “General” of gangs. A “General” must have a history of killing as part of his profile. He must have been imprisoned for a period of more than 10 years. In our conversation with the “General,” we learnt that he had served 15 years in prison. He was proud of it. The journey of becoming a “General” is through being a criminal. Whenever the gangs are smoking drugs in the streets, the “Generals” instruct how the drug passes from one gang member to the other. At some moments, we observed that one of the gang members took only a slight smoke. The “General” ordered him to take more of the drugs in preparation for the expedition they were going to undertake.

Thus, taking drugs in a group is a way of accepting the “unwritten rules” of being part of a gang. This illustrates the “expressive character” of gangs, in which collective character attains a “normative character” (Decker 1996, 244). In this regard, drugs are ways of life and are metaphors that represent power, status, and forms of social identity. Our participants looked scruffy, with uncombed hair, and scarred faces and hands. We asked the “General” how they used the money: the response was that money from gang activities is “bloody money.” What this meant, Sifiso responded, was “this is money which we get through killing, money we get by force, hence we spend it on entertainment.” Thus, gang identities are made and sustained by acts of violence, such as manslaughter. It is seen as a way of being a man, through the making and doing of violence. The young gang members see themselves as different from others; they are those who don’t kill.

One participant, named Mandlenkosi, said that in the community, young people tend to revere the “General” because he lived a better life and wore the latest sneakers, jeans, and t-shirts. In some way, we argue, this is “artificial” living in communities which are ravaged by poverty. Thus, wearing “sneakers” in townships forges particular relationships; it is a form of street social capital in which other young men in gang groups view the “General” as a role model. The young people emulate the “Generals.” These are street identities, in which the “street code” is displayed and deployed even through dressing. For Anderson (1990), this is “streetwise,” being in the street and understanding the demands of the streets on gangs’ way of life. The “codes” of the streets include the “gang myth” (Decker 1996, 245) in which gangs are always armed, ready to fight, with the assumption that the other gangs can attack them. For Anderson (1990) this is the *savoir faire*, knowing and understanding street life: how to walk in the street, talk, and dress in it. It is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). While middle

class people might frown upon the street, gangs, who live and “work” in it, cash in on it. According to a member of the group:

I am learning from him. He is the Master of this street. Even when you were coming from that side, he told us that you are a good target from the way you walk and talk to each other.

The street is depicted as a space with a “master.” Hence, not everyone who operates as a gang has the skills of “mastering” the demands of the street: that of doing gang violence. This “learning” from the “General” presents to us the ways in which these young people connect to each other and how their gang relationship is maintained in the streets. The social relationship is the “code” which binds the young men who live and operate in the street. Thus, the street is a form of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The street is a space in which street knowledge is shared and skills are transferred to one another. The skills shared include tactics of seeing people from a distance and being able to detect if they are outsiders from the way they walk and talk to each other. Gangs thrive on “associational characteristics” (Decker 1996, 247). Their strength is derived from the strong bonds and affinities which they build in sharing the social resources around them. Their “expressive goals” are bounded by the group, and derived therein. For Sandberg (2008), the knowledge of the street, on how people tread in it, is “street capital.” It is the “embodied experience” of being in the street. In the street, the different forms of knowledge and skills of doing violence are reified and constituted. Hence, we questioned the “General” on what sets him apart from other gang members:

They like how I survive police shootings and I successfully commit robberies. I have tactics to survive. These guys (gang members) they come to my house and they sit around me and we smoke and I tell them what to do, how to do it and also what not to do ...

The above excerpt reveals that becoming a gang leader (“General”) is achieved by what is locally seen as “tactics of survival,” through cunning and by employing and deploying skills of survival when committing crimes. Hence, knowing tactics which are in themselves violent, is a resource which is violent. Thus, a “General” has social status, which is also a form of social capital (Bourdieu 1986), enabling him to get recognised by other gang members. However, being a gang “General” and being recognised as such, is never easy; it comes with the experience of having being imprisoned for a long period of time. It also comes with the experience of escaping the police. The young gang members have to travel the journey similar to that of the “General” if they aspire to be like him. This is evident when gang members sit around the “General” at his home. The young people aspire to such a life and being surrounded by subordinate males. According to Mfecane (2016), forms of masculinities can be contextualised in particular places and spaces in which they are constructed and acted upon. Thus, “General” masculinities are dominant in both the street and the community within which they operate. The masculinities are foregrounded not only in the experience of being a gang member, but on the future prospects of living and surviving as a gang.

Gangster recruitment is a well-organised practice. It is about familiarity and neighbourliness. One of the gang leaders, named Koko, said he recruited young people in his street because he already knew them from his childhood. Koko noted:

All my gang members are guys I played with when we were growing up, we went to the same school, we used to share our lunch, biscuits, etc.

This reveals the “intimacies” of doing violence; that is, gangs who do violence have a history of familiarity. It is also about the social proximity to the place in which they do violence. It is a place in which they “grew up together.” It shows that the sociality of a gang group is not only about the present—it has to do with the past, which in some way is re-configured in the present spatiality. However, there are other practices which make the gang group stick together and tend to strengthen the familiarity of the collective gang group. Koko notes:

If you want to become a leader of your own gang which you have control over, you bring together young people and bring drugs and share with them. They easily become loyal to you because they believe you have the experience that they need to also become successful gang members ...

The idea of sharing promotes power, group identity, and sociality. The ability and capacity to share is an exercise of power and authority. Koko provides and decides whom to share with, which in essence is how power is enacted. Where the majority of young people have grown up with absent fathers, gang relations and sharing are understood as an alternative source of a social support system. Lack of familial support promotes involvement in proto or fully-fledged gangs. Young people often have difficult familial relationships and suffer abuse by their guardians or parents (Maringira and Gibson 2019), so sharing drugs is an alternative social relationship for them. For Pinnock (2016, 286):

... gang groups: are substitute families. They are also sites of entertainment, a source of protection from the dangers of being alone. They are schools for street survival and, very often, make the beginnings of gang entanglement.

It is important to note that gang leaders “make” a “protection racket” (Tilly and Besteman 1985)—that is, they create a threat and then seek to protect their group members from such a threat at a price. Such a practice is called “racketeering” (Tilly and Besteman 1985). The price to be paid is either social, and even economical. It is social in the sense that members are required and expected to be loyal to the gang leader. Hence, in essence, loyalty is a price to be paid to the gang leader. It is also economical, because gang leadership produces a source of money for the leader’s survival and that of the group as well. Gang economy is both individual and collective. The individual gang leader thrives on the making of violence, thereby promoting the gang as a collective group. Threat is, therefore, a resource for and within the gang group. Thus, in as much as gangster groupings are in themselves criminal, there are ways in which

young men have become a “family.” Hence, gangs denote at least three things: family, entertainment space, and learning space. The entertainment for gangs within the groups is characterised by the sharing of humour and jokes, which make long days short and liveable. Gangs become forms and spaces of socialities. Combined, these are the issues which “make” the young people in the streets who they are and what they believe in. A young gang member, named Khumbulani, noted ways in which a young man gets entangled in gang practices. A potential new member can be identified by the kind of life that he leads: if he is living a life that is considered decent, as compared to other young men who are in gangs, they may become jealous of him and devise ways to make a thug of him. Khumbulani notes:

Let’s take for instance, me as a boss of this area, and you are just new in this area, I will ask myself why he is living a decent life and I am living a thug life, he goes to school and so on. With my gang we will tell him—that either you join us, or you [are] against us, if you are against us it’s done, you are a permanent target. If you don’t want to be a permanent target the only choice you have is to join us. If you refuse to join us, when you go to the shops, you will be targeted and when your mother comes back from work with groceries, she will of course be robbed. Your father comes back from shebeen² he will be beaten up, you are the only son in that house, it becomes compulsory for you to join us.

The streets are a “field” (Bourdieu 1990) of gang practice. For Bourdieu (1990), a field is characterised by a set of social relations, structured by certain forms of power. Violence organises social gang relations. The street, therefore, is a dignified space in which street power is enacted. The street, as a field, produces the social world of gangs, with prohibitions and “street legitimacy.” The streets as spaces of violence create a conundrum: many young people join gangs in order to protect themselves and their families, who may otherwise become targets of attack. Another way of recruiting young men into a gang is for example when a gang member deliberately walks an unsuspecting young man through a rival gang’s territory. This happens when young men living in the same streets want to clandestinely recruit others who seem to be resisting the gang culture. Zanele, a gang member, related:

If I am in a gang and you are not, my gang can make me take you to another gang territory so when we get there we are chased and we run away back to our territory and the person I went with to that gang, will now be associated with our gang.

In such circumstances, the young man would have been recruited into the gang. When members of the other gang see him, they threaten him. The production of gang violence is “street habitus,” which is inevitably produced as a way of life in the street space. Violence is “street capital,” which is utilised to discipline and even control gang members in and out of the gang membership. Therefore, the recruit, for his own safety, sticks to the gang’s area and the gang “General” where he has protection. For young men, violence is unavoidable and is linked to their sense of self and belonging to particular groups: violence, and doing it, makes them socially visible in the

neighbourhood. Street life is, therefore, never linear, but socially circular, as there are cyclic ways of life produced by gangs themselves to deal with the social adversities of the street.

The idea of being a gang does not happen easily. Young gang recruits are beaten up by their “masters” to test their commitment, or can also be given a gun to kill to prove their allegiance. In this regard, being brave is not a given, but is regimented and embedded through an inscription of violence in their bodies and psyche. As noted by the “General,” “we do this to increase trust, since the recruit now knows the gang, he needs to prove he can be trusted.” Street practices are not only liberating for gangs but also constraining. Once the recruit has committed a crime, he has to evade the police and will rather stay part of the gang network for security.

While becoming a gang is characterised by the loyalty of doing violence and killing, leaving the gang group is viewed as disloyalty and indiscipline. Gangs are easier to join than leaving them. Thus, even though gangsterism has its own rewards, it also has its sanctions. For Somizi, “there are gang vows, that together we shall kill, and together they shall die.” Stories of killing other gangs and other people mythologise their social world. This reveals commitment and belonging to the gang group. As noted by a gang member, Mandla, “leaving gangsterism is hard because you would have created many enemies for you, because you don’t take note of the person you are doing bad.” Mandi, another gang member, emphasised: “I can’t leave it, if I leave, I will die.” This was explained further by Vuyo, a gang member, who noted that fellow gang members worry if one attempts to leave, because they assume that he will sell them out to authorities. For Mandi, “it’s easy to join but hard to quit.” The worry for Vuyo was that “friends will say you can’t just leave us like that, because you were killing people with us.” As such, gang leaders vehemently dissuade any member from trying to leave, sometimes making serious threats against the person’s life and family members.

Thus, gang bonds are forged through the doing of violence and commitment to violence. Acting out violence becomes a node through which members socially connect with each other. Killing creates dread for those who, in later life, want to leave; they experience fears that continue to haunt them. The gang provides a safe haven to deal with their fears.

Spatiality and Territoriality: Gang Control

It is important to note that gangs thrive in specific and marked territories in which they operate and control. Since gangs depend on mugging people in the townships and stealing from people going to and coming from work, and even those visiting the township, territoriality is integral to their operations. In a black township, on which this paper is based, gang names are one of the ways in which gangs claim territory, by inscribing their gang group names on the walls. In the streets which we walked, we observed that names like the Fancy British, Tupac, the Americans, the Afghanistans, the Moroccans, and so forth, were inscribed on the walls, on the roads, halls, shops and

public buildings like the police station. There was also an abundance of bawdy graffiti scrawled on the walls which depict the gangs smoking and drinking. The inscriptions are claims denoting control of territory. It is a metaphor of power over the space. Gang violence is not only inscribed on people's bodies, but on objects and in particular on the landscape. Thus, the landscape bears the violence enacted by gangs. This is not just the inscription of power on the walls, but importantly it is about claiming a place through writing on the walls. In this regard, gang violence is made visible through graffiti scrawled on the omnipresent "durawalls." For those entering the townships, the graffiti of violence depicts what gangs do in the township and the spaces they occupy. Graffiti which depicts gangs tells us about particular identities which are also masculine, inserting power not only on people, but power over the landscape. The reading of the landscape tells us two issues at least: that power is made visible through the graffiti, and power defines who the gangs are in a particular space. The graffiti on "durawalls" marks and defines the territories in which gangs dominate.

In claiming the territory, there is a sense of belonging to a particular place. Gangs claim spatial presence and being to a place. Drawing from Fontein's (2010) ideas on the relationship between people and places as well as objects, gangs do have a "materiality" and "affective presence" to the territory in which they lay claim. Thus, violence is intricate with regards to the attachment to a place. This is so because violence is also about the "materialities of belonging" (see also Fontein 2011, 712) to a place, in which violence is deployed. Gangs are attached to places in which they operate. They create the territory, fight for it and defend it. As noted by one of the gang members, "this place, (pointing to the street) is our place, we belong here, we fight to protect it from other gang rivals." There is a "territoriality of gang violence," as gangs attack any other gang that intrudes their territory. However, seasoned gangs and gang "Generals" tend to move beyond their own streets, to invade other streets. Invasion is not easy, as this is characterised by gun fighting and knife stabbing. For Decker (1996, 244), these are "adversarial relations" in which gangs fight for territorial control. It has been noted that the more the gangs are involved in rival fighting, the more they remain a cohesive group, for the purposes of thwarting the threat of their territorial control (Decker 1996). In claiming and re-claiming territories, gangs lose their lives. Amandla, one of the gang members showed us the scars of knife and gun violence which were inflicted on his body during fights. "You see all this, this one is a knife, and this one is also a knife, but this one is a gunshot." This is the "spatial clustering of violence" in which different violent tools are used to achieve the doing of violence (Decker 1996, 245). When he was pointing to the gunshot scar, he sounded boastful: the scar looked as if it was his symbol of pride, a metaphor of being a man. There is a kind of experience that Decker and Van Winkle (1996) call "neighbourhood attachment," which is a feeling of belonging to a place which defines group identity, especially among gangsters. However, attachment to a place is a source of gang power and violence.

Combating Gangs: Policing the Streets

One of the critical questions is: Why are the police unable to combat gangsterism? The participants asserted that the police use violence to deal with violence, an approach which gangsters rejected. For the gangsters, a more community friendly approach is needed to deal with youth gangsters. We also questioned the community leader on ways the police can combat gang violence in the community in which they lived. Their emphasis was on the police's inability to deal with gang violence in a more peaceful way. For Ndlozi, a community leader, "police should be trained to promote less violent means in handling gang violence":

Police should be a police service. In order to achieve this, I think all police should go on a social worker course, you know, something like that to understand that they are not there to inflict violence or use violence. Police must not come with the attitude that I am going to send you to prison—I am not here to fix Cape Town.

Most of the people said the police were berating them, saying the gangsters came mostly from the Eastern Cape and they have their own familial relations. The extract reveals that there is tension between the community and the approaches employed by the police to deal with gang violence. Thus, Maringira (2020) contends that "hard" policing makes the police unpopular within the community in which they operate and or serve. Despite the increase in police efforts to deal with gang violence, Davids (2020) states that there has been limited success with such intervention mechanisms aimed at preventing or reducing gang violence. Thus, suggestions from the community leaders' crime prevention officers should instead, so it was argued, engage with communities. For Maringira and Gibson (2019) communities' social structures are important to understand violence in townships. In this way both the police and the community can find peaceful ways of dealing with youth gangsterism. As noted by Nkandla, a community leader:

Remember, police are deployed here and they leave. They don't live here forever, they are visitors. They don't know what really happens in this community. We live with the people, we know them, and they know us. We know the problem and the police are told the problem.

The extract reveals that the police are viewed as "visitors," whereas the community leaders are at the centre of dealing with the gang violence problem. While we do not seek to over-romanticise the capacity of the local community leaders in dealing with the gang violence problem, we assert that the government can tap into the knowledge and capacities of the community leaders to help to address the problem. Thus, our reading of the community leaders' voices is that local community structures are in a much better position to help the government gain a better understanding of the problem. The local community structures, such as area and street committees, know those involved in gang violence and are sometimes respected by gang members, hence they have the capacity to talk to, sit down with, and engage with the young people involved in gang violence.

The community leaders constitute different structures: area and street committees, which hold community meetings, especially on gang violence issues. On our fieldwork visits, one of the street committee leaders noted that:

I have the responsibility of mediating gang violence related problems in this street, but I also talk to other street committee leaders in other streets, and we all meet with the community leader to discuss the problems we face in this area, including gang violence ...

Dealing with gangs and gang violence involves networks of peace within the communities in which gangs operate. The response to gang violence is not always with violence, rather it involves building and sustaining relationships which help in engaging gangs to disengage from violence. The extract above reveals to us that as much as gang members do have relationships among themselves, they also have existing relationships with the community leaders: area and street committees. This indicates to us that gang relationships go beyond the gang group, hence intervention and relationships which include the community leaders, will likely be an initiative from within.

However, apart from community leadership, it was also noted that mothers are important in ensuring that their sons and daughters refrain from gang violence. We spoke to one of the medical doctors who operates a surgery in the community. We asked him how he managed to work in a community which is characterised by rampant gang violence:

I have two of my medical doctors who were killed just here [pointing on the opposite side of the road]. They used to operate that surgery [pointing to an opposite surgery]. But I survive not because of the police, but I have spoken to the mothers of these gangsters, and in turn they don't touch me at all. I am a free man here. The community like what I do for them here, and I like them too.

The issue of gangs and their relationship with their mothers is profound in our understanding of how they respect their mothers and the people they are taught to respect. In a situation where that relationship is non-existent (between gangs and their mothers), they perpetuate violence even to those whom they are expected to respect. The function of mothers is, therefore, critical in our understanding of intervention in gang violence, but importantly, on how gangs respect particular social institutions with which they have particular affinities—their mothers. The extract reveals to us that a strong social relationship exists between gangsters (especially leaders) and their mothers and it is sedimented by what they do in everyday gang activities. So, the issue for consideration is that if “street peace” is to be achieved in townships, which are ravaged by gang violence, gang intervention needs to consider mothers as actors within the communities in which gang violence continues.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the continuity and sustainability of gang violence are embedded in the ways in which gang relationships are forged and sustained over time. This paper has examined how gang relationships are produced in a specific context and maintained over time. The continued “affective presence” to specific places contributes to gang belonging, and the desire to control particular territories in which gangs operate remains an innate practice. The paper asserts that gang relationships are often easier to “make” than to “unmake.” This is so because the “making” of gang relationships is characterised by violence. The paper has also argued that gang relationships are not just violent collective groups, but they are also forms and sources of social support, in particular in the absence of supportive families. While this paper focuses on a specific place to reveal the ways in which gangs relate to each other, it offers us insights into how gangs thrive on social and violent relationships. The paper contributes to our understanding of gang violence as something which is sustained by social relationships, even beyond the gang as a collective group. The gang relationship is not only about gangs, it is also about those who are affected by the gang activities, including mothers and the community, as well as community leaders. We have identified the ways in which the police service is perceived by the communities as a fractured service—one which needs to involve community support to achieve its policing goals.

Autobiographical Note

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