Moritz Döbele (iD)

M Döbele, African Studies Centre, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford ROR *Oxford, England.*

E-mail:
Moritz@mail-doebele.de

Incompleteness as epistemic freedom: rethinking gangsterism in Cape Town

Abstract

This article offers a decolonial critique of knowledge production by bringing postcolonial philosophy into dialogue with the life histories of gangsters from the Cape Flats, South Africa. In particular, I highlight the disruptive potential of Francis Nyamnjoh's ethic of incompleteness as both a methodological and epistemological approach to postcolonial social phenomena. Applying this lens, I argue that it unsettles moralised and legalistic understandings of the gangster, dissolving rigid categorisations and instead revealing gangster identity as fundamentally incomplete. The gangster figure, in turn, resists fixed classification and is continuously reconstructing itself anew at the intersection of global and local forces, traditional and modern influences, economic and historical trajectories, and racial dynamics. Through this analysis, I advocate for epistemological decolonisation in pursuit of 'convivial scholarship'.

Keywords: incompleteness, convivial scholarship, postcolonial theory, decolonisation, gangsterism

Colonialism starts in the mind (Nandy 1989). It is a cultural and cognitive process, a domination of the mental universe, "the control through culture, of how people perceive themselves and their

relationship to the world" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2005: 12). Tamale (2020: 2) sees decolonisation as a process of agency, the prerequisite for becoming "fluent in our [colonised individuals] cultural knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity". It is about removing "the anchors of colonialism" (Tamale 2020: xiv), and "learning to un-learn in order to re-learn" (Tlostanova 2012: 7) to, in turn, gain a liberated and self-determined sense of "epistemic freedom", where colonised individuals are given room and have agency to assert their autonomy to convey messages about themselves. Epistemic freedom entails cognitive justice and the "right to think, theorize, [and] interpret the world" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3), delinking thought and culture from ethnocentrism, from European universalism as the enforcer of regimes of thought. Decolonising, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), entails "de-Europeanising" the world, which is a process of simultaneously "deprovincialising Africa" and "provincialising Europe" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This encompasses "demythologizing" or "decivilizing" (Cesaire 2000 [1955]: 35), conventional, hegemonically produced ideas of Africa, recentring the continent as "a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 4).

Following wa Thiong'o's (1969: 285) "quest for relevance", in which a liberating perspective is sought within which colonised individuals are to rediscover their relationship towards themselves and others, Francis Nyamnjoh (2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2022b, 2022a, 2023) points us to the ontological paradigm of incompleteness. According to Nyamnjoh, scientific knowledge production is skewed towards Eurocentrism and has simplistically detached Africans from their social realities, boxing them into neat, confined, often condescendingly formulated binary categorisations. Classifications such as "witchcraft," "savage," and "primitive," employed by theorists such as Evans-Pritchard (1976) or Tylor (1958) and used in thinking and conceptualising African societies, are not only overly simplistic, abstract, and divorced from everyday reality. They are employed strategically and patronisingly, essentialising African cultural contexts as complete, static, and permanent to justify Western superiority and preserve the Occident's self-image in a coercive form of knowledge production (Said 2019). This encultured, cocooned way of theorising about the world around us has infiltrated the colonised mind of humanity and is reproduced in writing and human interaction. Aligning with Sukarno's (1955) call to "mobilise all the spiritual, all the moral, all the political strength of Asia and Africa on the side of peace" at the Bandung conference in 1955, Nyamnjoh opts to not

confront the foundational epistemic basis for our thinking with hatred, but by "disabusing it of its obvious inadequacies" (Nyamnjoh 2017a: 255) in a convivial and humane spirit by embodying the ontology of incompleteness.

Drawing on Tutuola (1993), Nyamnjoh critiques the epistemic colonisation alluded to above by stating that human consciousness, one's awareness, and capacity to think of oneself and one's environment, can "inhabit any container" (Nyamnjoh 2017b: 256) regardless of its shape or form, imbuing it "with endless possibilities of being and becoming" (Nyamnjoh 2023: 9). Incompleteness refers to the reality of being unfinished and deficient in specific elements. Our encultured imaginations are unbounded in attributing meaning to things we perceive. Hence, Nyamnjoh requires us to conceive of reality as fluid and incomplete, constantly reconstructed and recreated. He argues that we should be guided by flexibility and malleableness that takes into account the eclectic, unclassifiable ephemerality of the state of everything – "the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable" (Nyamnjoh 2017b: 258). The tendency of most Western epistemologies to simplify reality down to one dimension in an entitled, positivistic manner extracts the beauty of its limitless incompleteness and the only constant of social reality: change (Nyamnjoh 2017b).

Nyamnjoh (2023) advocates for a multidisciplinary understanding and engagement with different forms of knowing, in which social scientists ought to recognise their analytical shortcomings. In this framework, traditional knowledge becomes a legitimate tradition of knowledge, promoting fruitful, even-headed conversations with other forms of being, knowing, and living. Therefore, according to Nyamnjoh, we should be morally and scientifically compelled to (re-)embed our voyage in search of truth in the appreciation of its ultimate incompleteness. Our views are to be held in a humble spirit, convivially focusing not only on what exists but also on what is possible (Prof Francis Nyamnjoh, Interview, 2 April 2024). The paradigm of incompleteness contributes to a theoretical basis for active decolonisation that topples the conventional epistemologies that derive from ambitions to dominate through linear and complete thinking.

Nyamnjoh additionally endorses "convivial scholarship" (Nyamnjoh 2023: 34-43), which celebrates reality as incomplete and "challenges us to embrace humility and the nimble-footedness that we need to do justice to distant realities" (Prof Francis Nyamnjoh, Interview, 2 April 2024). It acknowledges that

no one holds the complete truth, but that truth is co-created and in constant flux. This way, we allow marginalised individuals to autonomously re-envision and reconfigure the way they see themselves, granting them epistemic freedom.

> Conviviality encourages us to reach out, encounter and explore ways of enhancing or complementing ourselves with the added possibilities of potency brought our way by the incompleteness of others. (Nyamnjoh 2017b: 255)

To personify this sentiment is to "cultivate critical consciousness" (Tamale 2020: 2), in which we unlearn and relearn stereotyped, racialised notions with openness toward others, allowing us to lean into the opportunities embedded in what others can create themselves to be.

To grasp the power of Nyamnjoh's paradigm, this article strives to exemplify how this ontological framework can be methodologically, conceptually, reflexively, and personally applicable to an empirical research setting. I strive to harness and actualise the paradigm's applied potential by mirroring it onto Capetonian gang identity. Using this as an example, I endeavour to make a broader argument supporting a decolonial epistemological foundation that embraces incompleteness and recognises its productive potential in academic spheres and beyond.

The conceptual incompleteness of gangs

The Cape Flats is a vast expanse of flat terrain, made up of a conglomeration of townships and informal settlements that stretch from Cape Town's mountainside suburbs to the shores of False Bay. It is the Mother City's former human dumping ground, a product of Apartheid's forced removals that intensified racialised spatial segregation (Pinnock 2016: 10-33). In this setting, gangs ubiquitously exist, holding significant importance to urban male youths, who find in them sources of identification, protection, and economic possibilities born out of socio-economic and racial inequalities. Unable or unwilling to see what unfolds there, the narratives held about Cape Town's dark "other side" are oftentimes invariably essentialising and hollowing out the complexities in Cape Flats street gang identity.

On the Cape Flats, gang identity comprises historical, racial, economic, political, gendered, and social elements. It is historical insofar as it is born out

of the harsh (post)Apartheid conditions of township life. After first surfacing in District Six, a former residential area located in Cape Town's city bowl, in the 1930s, gangs were exported to the Cape Flats by the Group Areas Act of 1950. Mass forced relocation to this area led to the solidification of gangsterism, which provided safety, security, and identity for adolescents in a new environment in which they were trying to find their footing (Pinnock 2016: 10-33). The regime did not want "non-white" people, of whom they had a pejorative view, near the city bowl and close to white neighbourhoods. This exclusion from the city constrained their chances and denied their hopes for upward social mobility (Jensen 2008: 196). Many families and friendship circles were torn apart in this process, and thousands of people were moved to the Cape Flats, where amenities and infrastructure for a dignified upbringing were mainly absent. Nationwide racialised marginalisation was further intensified by the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 and the Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959, in which "Bantustans" or homelands were established for the designated "non-white" population to confine their political participation and entrench spatial segregation (Beinart and Dubow 1995). Economic mobility was, moreover, formally restricted by the Bantu Education Act of 1953, an act that intended to institutionalise racial subordination through education by designing a curriculum that trained black individuals to become manual labourers and blue-collar workers exclusively (Moore 2017). This bred uneven socio-economic conditions, high unemployment, and urban disintegration, as well as a deeply rooted cultural traumatisation and an internalised disenfranchisement in large parts of South African society.

These circumstances have woven an emasculating and ostracised identity into the racialised South African social fabric in which retaining a powerful position is sought through alternative, and sometimes criminal, means. Across the literature, many linkages exist in how gangs across the African continent function. Some have origins in protest narratives to counter hegemonic power relations, thus making postcoloniality a distinctive feature of their identity. Dziewanski (2021: 182) describes gangsterism as a strategy for survival, an unavoidable reality to be accepted, and a way to avoid becoming a victim of violence in one's adolescent years. Gangsterism is additionally gendered in the sense that being a gangster is often associated with masculinity, supplying "nourishment for masculine assertion" (Steinberg 2004: 25). Identifying and living as a gangster, furthermore, usually has an economic element to it, as it enables one's capacity to elevate one's financial status amid poverty. Gangs are

sources of identity, providing a community and a group where individuals find belonging (Lindegaard 2017: 27-9). Rooted in the inherited socio-economic and historical conditions of the Apartheid system, South African gangs serve as a surrogate family, within which a multifaceted identity is created.

Nyamnjoh's paradigm of incompleteness can offer a more representative, empathetic, and inclusive lens to apprehend gang identity in South Africa and beyond. Dziewanski (2021: 17-38) offers a fascinating critique of how gangs are conventionally legalistically conceptualised. He suggests that they are frequently described as brutal, delinquent forces that exercise illegitimate power and control, causing chaos and disorder. Negative connotations and stereotypes, such as in the South African context, the idea of *swart gevaar* [black danger] (Durrheim 2005) and *skollie* [coloured delinquent] (Jensen 2008: 2-7), predominate in political discourse on gangs and are used to justify control. The "gang" is presented as a problem that personifies evil and is disruptive to social cohesion. Neat and reductionist, 'complete' categorisations of gangs as villains allow little room for local nuances and present a simplified basis to streamline interventions and provide legal foundations (Dziewanski 2021: 31-36).

However, neat categorisations do not mirror empirical realities. As we will establish, gangs change, and so should conceptualisations of them. Immaculate categories deny them their sophisticated linkages to economic activity, the different duties and responsibilities among gangsters, their role in their community, and the organisational principles that allow them to flourish (Thornberry et al. 2003). Additionally, standardisation neglects the variance of super gangs, prison gangs, street gangs, cliques, and crews (Roloff 2014), all existent in the Cape Flats. Thus, overcoming our initial tendency to moralise, we require broad definitions that can absorb the complexity of the concept of a gang, that frame gangs as incomplete, unfixed social entities with distinct internal dynamics shaped by and producing social structures (Rodgers 2016).

Identity is far too seldomly conceived of as something temporal, fluid, and socially (re)constructed over time and space within and beyond ascribed and attained classifications (Woodward 2004). Bhabha (2004), a scholar who does not follow the tradition of completeness that Nyamnjoh critiques, uses the idea of "third space" to describe a creatively negotiated and contested space that breeds new, unique combinations of identity. This third space is unconsciously and subversively appropriated to resist dominant frameworks

and gain autonomy and agency. Hybridity becomes a new, distinct identity, which becomes hybridised with other newly distinct identities in a cyclical reinforcement. This makes identity an unfixed phenomenon, impossible to classify tidily. Relating this to postcolonial, African identities, Mbembe (2001) introduces the concept of *"Afropolitanism"*, emphasising the fluidity and interconnectedness of African postcolonial identities, in which global and local, cosmopolitan, ethnic, and national components interconnect. To fetishise the particular, according to Mbembe (2001), is to disregard and simplify the interplay of the components entailed in Afropolitanism. It is to reproduce an exclusionary, simplistic imagination where a particular culture is seemingly bounded, stagnant, and stubborn, entailing an inherent inability to grow through renegotiation and external comparison (Tsing 2005). "In an ever-unfolding universe of limitless flows and encounters, to define and confine is to delude and impoverish with predictable sterility" (Nyamnjoh 2023: 77). To do justice to the complex hybridity of postcolonial gang identity, it is, hence, required to conceive of Identity as incomplete.

This leads me to conceive of gangsters as "frontier beings" (Nyamnjoh 2017b: 258). According to Nyamnjoh, humans, and in this case, gangsters, have infinite agency in the possibilities of their imagination in who they are to be. Liminal and ambiguous at their core, frontier beings seek conversations and question institutionalised assumptions. They flexibly and creatively embrace their myriad identities, contributing to the unfinished possibilities of their existence at the borders of the categories they traverse. They transcend dualisms and dichotomies, subverting boxed assumptions in a fluctuating belonging and becoming, a constant state of "incompleteness in motion" (Prof Francis Nyamnjoh, Personal Interview, 2 April 2024) in interdependence with their cultural environment (Nyamnjoh 2023: 57). Their identities have multiple cultural, religious, ethnic, and digital layers. Frontier beings find themselves between "multiple borders, geographic settings, languages and cultures, often with a startling degree of fluidity, aptitude and success" (Nyamnjoh 2023: 73).

Former gang members, who formed part of my research participants, live as frontier beings, in which their identity lies at the intersecting borders of social status enhancement, economic enrichment, masculine affirmation, survival strategies, rebellion against the establishment, and historical processes of disenfranchisement in the Capetonian context. At the crossroads of these different dynamics, the identity of a gangster dynamically comes to life.

An incomplete methodology

Having established how the incomplete imagination is conceptually instructive in viewing gangs, I now turn to how it has the potential to enrich a case study methodologically by showcasing its application in my research setting. Despite not embarking on a fieldwork journey that entailed typical anthropological research methodologies, such as deep hanging or participant observation, my research aimed to produce a certain ethnographic consciousness, embracing a heightened sensitivity to historical and social context, the language and ideas of interviewees, and the cultural dynamics of the interviews (Ortner 2017). The life histories of pseudonymised former gang members, presented in the following section, stem from recorded qualitative semi-structured interviews in Cape Town (Guilford 2024a and 2024b; Thendi 2024a and 2024b; Siya 2024). In the short time available for interviews, my methodology focused on how former gang participants spoke about their lives and identities, leading to a contextual, narrative-style empirical section of this article. Despite not participating in the daily activities of gangsters, I believe I incorporated a quasi-participatory listening style, employing Rosenberg's (2005) idea of "non-violent communication" and Nyamnjoh's idea of incompleteness, striving to access "the world of others through experience and through the construction of that world" (O'Reilly 2011: 111). Within this framework, interviews become an intersubjective process of co-creation in which a researcher ought to mediate between worlds, which Rabinow (1977) refers to as "liminal modes of communication". I was constantly challenged by navigating the ambiguous grey space between an outsider who is not foreign to the subject matter but observes and translates experience into academically relevant language and an insider who tries to grasp the meaning of phenomena by experiencing research participants from the inside-out, and through relationality, humility, and empathy.

The primary limitation of this methodology is its constrained non-participatory scope bound by ethical and institutional regulations. I recognised that increased longitudinal participatory ethnographic case-study research within the incompleteness framework could add increased robustness in emic perspectives to the study. Longitudinal participant observation has the potential to uncover important details about daily routines, family relations, changes, and patterns over time, revealing discrepancies between narrations of stories and actual behaviours (Bernard 2017). Furthermore, additional quantitative data could complement the contextual insights of this study, making it more

statistically generalisable and providing a more coherent format for policy recommendations. However, I chose to lay my methodological focus on oral histories because they are effective in bypassing hindrances to a more egalitarian production of knowledge and in understanding cultural practices and social complexities based on participants' experiences (Herzog and Zacka 2019). Oral histories are potent sources of knowledge, central to decolonising the archive, learning, and reality. Effectively used, they empower researchers to include a more substantial dimension of the voices of African people and allow research participants to shape their own stories. They are a more inclusive form of academic enquiry in which literacy is no longer a precondition for knowledge-making, and disenfranchised groups in society can add new dimensions to their histories even when these are recorded by those from different societies (Geiger 1986; Armitage 2010). Secondly, oral expressions are cultural, performative productions (Tonkin 1986) in which the employment of tone and vocabulary gives access to a hidden reservoir of implicit cultural wisdom that can be incorporated into academic writing. Lastly, oral histories exemplify incompleteness and the complexity and diversity of experience. They effectively elucidate the diversity of narratives my research participants expressed. In trying to understand the identity of a Cape Flats gangster, an individual saturated with the legacy of Apartheid, oral methodologies affirm agency in the self-creation of their identity. I attempted to circumvent the difficulty of personal narratives being distorted through ideas of social desirability and power relations by paying close attention to contradictions in research participants' accounts and triangulating testimonies with secondary sources. When necessary, I treated potentially distorted self-representations as meaningful, interpreting them as reflections of underlying values, personality traits, or societal norms.

As much as the oral histories I gather are culturally produced and incomplete, this article is an argument (Blasco and Wardle 2019), a social production distilled academically and culturally, in which I intentionally orient my audience toward specific claims. This funnels my research participants' experiences and oral histories into black-and-white writing, in which their narratives are inevitably subverted and simplified (Clifford and Marcus 2010). I try to navigate this puzzle, which remains endemic to the way we are taught to think and theorise throughout academia, by, in part, employing Abu-Lughod's (1993) idea of "writing against culture", using many direct quotes and creating a narrative through storytelling in which personal histories of gang members are brought to the fore. Due to my positionality as a researcher and

an encultured white German who grew up in South Africa, I strived to remain self-reflexive about my moralisations and judgments, sincerely questioning preconceived assumptions by interpreting stories and fieldwork experiences as they are presented. My research is partly aimed at escaping the essentialising view of gangsterism, but it can only do so in a minimal way. The power dynamics embedded in my (human and academic) relationship with participants significantly affect how research participants convey messages. However, it was required for me to move beyond mere reflexivity and take active responsibility. Involving participants in shaping the research process, being transparent about my goals and intentions, and having ongoing conversations about power and ethics with research participants throughout the research process were essential to ensure ethical research practices.

It is for all the abovementioned reasons that this article embodies "debt and indebtedness" (Nyamnjoh 2023: 8) and is written by an encultured human being striving to bring forward an ethnographic consciousness through oral histories. It remains fundamentally (methodologically, epistemologically, and ontologically) incomplete.

The incompleteness of a single story

According to Johnson-Hanks (2002), a universal "life cycle model" to present a biography simplifies the complex fluctuation and context-specific meaning attributed to specific life stages. Additionally, lives progress at undeniably different paces. I strive to methodologically focus on what life stages are deemed relevant by my research participants and what they emphasise as moments of transition in order to gain a more layered, human-centred understanding of the local meanings attributed to the life of a gangster on the Cape Flats. Most of them had found religion and tended to present themselves in a new light, distancing themselves from their former self. They spoke from a "renewed and transformed mindset" (Jayden, Interview, 18 March 2024). They often sought redemption, which affected how they moralised their past lives, posing significant questions about the biases their oral histories might entail. However, this approach invites an ethic of self-construction, in which neat classifications of life phases become malleable and subject to different possibilities in their interpretation.

Despite the academic conventions of following an analytic, rather than descriptive, writing style, these testimonies have been deliberately left to stand

alone, to harness their power authentically, in alignment with my methodology and argument. They are far from non-analytical. They are subject to the deep analysis and mediation of the encultured internal worlds of my research participants. I urge you to read them as such: as speaking, through emic analysis, to the incompleteness of gang identity.

Born into crime

Guilford (Interviews, 25 March 2024 and 27 March 2024), a warm-hearted, creative, and humorous man, was born in the Northern Cape as one of five children, all of whom spent time in prison. When he was a toddler, his family moved to a cramped home in Hanover Park, one of the most gang-ridden areas in South Africa. "We don't know the struggle is real," he recalls, "we are just kids struggling." His recollections speak to the internalised normality of the Apartheid system. Domestic and gang violence, with his father being an abusive alcoholic and a prison gangster, was common for people who grew up in similar areas to him. "I was born into a crime," he remarks.

Guilford was a passionate soccer player and Manchester United supporter in his youth. His eyes lit up when I spoke to him about playing sports for his school and the local club, with his friends on the streets, the soccer fields, or dirt pitches in Hanover Park. He started committing petty crimes, such as stealing from a local shop, between the ages of 6 and 9. However, in his teenage years, his childhood idol, the local football legend Benni McCarthy, was swapped out for admired local gangsters who drew magnetic attention due to a lack of male role models in society, their wealth, their contributions to the community, and the mysterious, heroic stories passed down from boy to boy. Beyond the minor petty crimes, he was accustomed to the violence that reigned on the streets of Hanover Park. He explains:

> I was raised in a way – It was more like a ritual or something. When you see like one of the big boys is gonna be shot dead, you mustn't run. You must stand and witness how they kill him.

I asked why.

> I don't know. We were just kids, man. (He chuckles sarcastically.) It's the way the environment in the community is working. They want you to harden up from a young age until you reach their age. ... They take your tears out of your eyes while you're a kid already.

He absorbed this culture to the point that when one of the older gangsters told him to go to school, he responded: "No. I don't want to go to school. I want to see how you put a bullet in his head."

As an early teenager, on Boxing Day in 1999, Guilford felt honoured to, for the first time, share a table with the *OGs* [renowned gangsters] and his brother, whom he idolised deeply. He recalls his brother's 'right-hand man' advising him to go home, telling him that there was something peculiar in the air that night. "Gangsters can see far, very far…" he emphasises. Just minutes after speaking to his brother and leaving the house, he heard multiple gunshots. He rushed back to the residence, where his brother and the *ouens* [gang members] were hanging out, but it was too late. Just as he had been told, he stood and looked on as his brother let out his final breath in his sister's arms.

This traumatic event had a significant impact on Guilford's life. His mother, who was a religious "pray warrior," was the first victim of his pain. "The god that you serve is not a real man. My brother is dead … This religion stuff don't work. Why? Because my brother just got shot dead," he told her. His mother had always loved and accepted him, but she remained honest, reminding him that the life he was living had only two possible outcomes: prison or death. At the time, he didn't care. "If I die, it will be the easiest way to get to my brother again," he thought to himself.

A fusion of "revenge, pain, trauma, agony, anger" led him to become a member of the Mongrels gang at age 13. He soon wanted to retaliate, making a name for himself, and follow in his brother's footsteps, dealing drugs and committing crimes.

> No matter where you stay, I would get it [drugs] to you. Done. I can get you drugs, guns, now – 60 seconds. You just call … I was Julius Cesar. (He laughs loudly.) Ah, joh, I've never had so much money in my life, man. At 16. … I was a businessman.

But soon enough, his criminal activities put him on the police's radar, and at the age of 16, Guilford was convicted and imprisoned in Pollsmoor prison. Despite studying hard and obtaining his high school diploma in prison, he continued to enhance his social capital and remained committed to continuing his brother's legacy by becomming a 28s prison gangster. According to Guilford, "prison is the university, it is the college, it is the church" for coloured manhood.

After serving 10 years for murder and subsequent shorter prison entries and exits, thanks to his mother, he decided to opt out of gangsterism. She had told him, "you got yourself in, so get yourself out. … You're the only one that knows the door in and knows the door out." The door out was faith and a desire to find peace, forgiveness, and redemption. "There was a life bigger than money and power. … There's a life called Jesus Christ, there's a life called God, and there is a life called your dreams and your visions."

Guilford now holds a community development diploma, is passionately religious, and is pursuing his passion for rap at a music school. He gives talks about his life, has spoken on radio shows about his journey, and works on outreach projects. He remains dedicated to the members of his community, most of whom are still born into crime.

Kill or be killed

Thendi (Interviews, 20 March 2024 and 3 April 2024), a now warm, intelligent, funny man, grew up in Breede Park, in Cape Town's city bowl. He says, "I grew up as a white kid … I never felt that oppressioness." He lived with white foreigners for whom his parents worked as domestic workers. He had plenty of friends at the school in Green Point that he visited. Nonetheless, he was confronted with racist slurs like "flat nose," "k*ffir," or "darkie". At the age of 8, his parents decided to move to a primarily black area on the Cape Flats called Crossroads.

In Crossroads, he first struggled to belong and remembers being made fun of for his accent, which resulted from having learnt English before Xhosa. His brother Lebo, who "was aware of the 'black life'" growing up in East London, did not have difficulties belonging and was a self-made gangster, well-known in Crossroads. At age 12, Thendi was confronted with a situation on the soccer field, which granted him strength, status, and confidence. To play football that day, a sport which Thendi wasn't very talented at but had a great passion for, he had to fight over a jersey. There were a limited number of these, and he was up against a boy who had bullied and hit him in the past. Emboldened by a friend who said to him that no one was going to fight his fight, he refused to give in this time. He toughened up and fought fiercely, coming out of the battle victorious and securing his place in the team. One's "surroundings, they shape and form you towards a certain way … the only way for me [to survive] was to toughen up", he reflects.

He started gaining status by forming the Tender Lover Boys (TLB), a crew of teenagers who were "all about the girls and the nice clothes" rather than focusing on crime. Yet, he was still unsatisfied with his position within the community:

> One of the things that frustrated me most was that wherever I went, I was seen as Homie's [Lebo's] brother. Not as myself. So, I had no identity of my own. I was in the shadow of my brother.

In one specific instance, in his early teenage years, when he lurked around a neighbouring area or *lokasie* [location], as he called it, he was caught in a fight with a local gang, who beat all his friends up in front of him. Because of the fear of retaliation from his brother, they left him alone. Wanting to gain recognition, he formed a clique, which, as opposed to a gang that is often associated with coloured individuals, was a less hierarchical, organised criminal brotherhood. He was principally occupied with house break-ins, car thefts, and hijackings. Despite his brother wanting him to stay away from the life he lived, Thendi became more and more violent. "You are driven by the impacts of the social space," he believed.

> Some forces in life shape our choices that we make … Crossroads was a John Wick [fictional character from the John Wick film series] society. It's a place where killers rule, killers stay, and killers live. If you're not a killer, you die. If you are not dying, you live under the thumb of someone else. So, it's either you be on your knees, or you're standing. … So, I chose to die standing; I chose to become what I became because of the situation, because of the circumstances I was placed in at the … time, because it required that.

While drinking in *shebeens* [township bars] or at home, he crafted plans with some of his partners in crime, swept up in a whirlwind of violence and narcissistic self-conviction. His mindset can be seen in the following quote, a depiction of what he and his brothers theorised about:

> When we die one day, we're sending all these people to hell, so when one day we are in hell, we will have a lot of foot soldiers. They'll be under our authority. We would mobilise there and dethrone the devil.

Living up to these ideas, he became a full-blown criminal involved in drug trading, shootings, and money laundering in his mid-teens. Over the years, he gained prestige while being in and out of prison and joining the 26s prison gang.

His longest prison sentence lasted six years. After completing his last prison sentence, he decided to roam the streets as a lone wolf. Standing alone later gave him a new identity, in which he could make his own decisions and face the consequences of his actions, he said. Operating independently, he occasionally got into fights and shootouts in competition with gangs. This eventually became incompatible with his future ambitions. Influenced by his wife and mother, he realised that this life was not for him anymore.

> My brother, I wanted to die. ... I was at a point where I saw my life is going nowhere fast. And I saw that everything that I tried so far to bring me to where I aspire to be did not. It's a failed project.

After roughly 20 years of gangster life, these realisations, along with getting sick from smoking drugs, prompted him to move out of his neighbourhood. Thendi is now a born-again Christian and a happily married father who works as a cleaner and does violence awareness and prevention training at schools. "Trauma," he says, "is not going to disappear. It's a spiritual thing that is transpiring."

Searching for purpose

Siya (Interview, 4 April 2024), a roughly 45-year-old black man, greeted me with a friendly, kind-hearted smile. He currently works in the finance world at the V&A Waterfront. To an outsider, Siya may have seemed like an upper-middle-class family man who worked a 9 to 5 job, minded his business, and enjoyed life in the company of his friends. Yet, if one were to look under the white shirt he was wearing, one would find scars from attempted decapitations and stab wounds and, tucked into his belt, a knife and a gun, which, he later told me, he carried with him wherever he went. Yet this Siya was a Siya that was mainly revealed only to friends and family. He operated under a fake name at work to hide his past identity.

Siya was originally from Somerset East in the Eastern Cape and moved to Cape Town in the late 1970s with his family. Of all places, as a young black boy, he ended up in Bishopscourt, a wealthy area in the Southern Suburbs. His parents were both domestic workers, living on their employer's premises. After attending Michael Oak Waldorf School in Kenilworth, Siya switched to the private, multi-racial St. Joseph College. He continues, saying, "I should have never gotten involved in gangsterism." Yet, ultimately, he did ...

Siya was a switched-on kid with a strong sense of justice. He didn't tolerate bullying. "Imma fight every day until you learn I'm not here to fuck with. Ever," he recalls. In Grade 9, when he was roughly 15, he stood up to a bully on behalf of another boy – a fight he won triumphantly. Later that day, a car pulled up in front of the school. A big, muscular man stepped out, and in his shadow was a man, the father of the bullied victim, who approached Siya. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you for what?" Siya said in confusion. "Thank you for standing up for my kid." The mysterious man replied. "If you ever need anything, you can always contact me."

Quite startled by the incident, Siya didn't think much of it. Years later, when his life took a dramatic turn for the worse, that man would again play an important role. Within a very short period, he says:

> My mother dies. My white mother dies. And my white father loses his fucking mind. He changed into a completely different person. Basically, I just said fuck you and left the house at 21. I had nowhere to go and ended up in Athlone [area on the Cape Flats].

He stayed with the father who had spoken to him after the fight in support of his bullied son, who turned out to be the leader of the Hard Livings gang, who then controlled areas around Lawrence Road in Athlone. Siya had no safety net and hardly any meaningful family relations, and he was desperate to fill this void and revive a sense of purpose. He turned to gangsterism.

> It wasn't so much the family component. It was: they looked after me at my most vulnerable, at a time when I was still supposed to be at home, going to university and doing those things. They looked after me. They said: come here and you'll be fine. And I was.

He started by dropping off and picking up drugs and money for the gang leader he now lived with. Moving up the ranks by showing his abilities with the blade and being a reliable member, he moved into higher criminal circles. He worked for The Firm, "a consortium of Cape Town's gangs" (Schärf and Vale 1996: 30) in Sea Point, the former red light district of Cape Town, and obtained money through extortion. "I was too innocent and too young. I actually had no fucking idea," he proclaims, "but you shouldn't have high killing skills with a bad temper walking around." Recalling killing roughly 10-12 people with his bare hands or with knives, never shooting someone, he was accused of murder and attempted murder, but his case mysteriously disappeared.

He lived this life for roughly six years before deciding to leave. "I had reached the end of my tenure. Fuck this world. I shouldn't even be here. I should have died a lot of times, and I didn't." Yet, leaving the Hard Livings wasn't easy. After the gang democratically voted, the verdict was that he was not allowed to leave. He had to kill the individuals who objected to his leaving. Only then, in his late 20s, could he move to Kuilsriver and start a new life searching for new meaning.

Now, tailoring how he interacts with people, he has started "a well-paying career. Not a good career. That's an important distinction." Additionally, he is a renowned martial artist who has trained people overseas and the South African Police Services (SAPS). He does not talk to any of his old friends anymore, ignoring Facebook friend requests and staying away from the townships he roamed around in at the turn of the century. Sometimes, with a hint of nostalgia, he reflects on his time as a gangster: "Gangsterism just made sense. Perfect time. Perfect place. Perfect guy."

On a deeper note, he states:

> I have some regrets. I would say I regret never being able to find anything after the gang that made sense besides martial arts. … Think about the frustration of having a purpose once in your life. And now, for 20 years, there's nothing – there is just work – and I have to deal with insults, and there is no quick retaliation to those insults – which is what I used to do. Now, there is no turning around and stabbing them.

The incomplete gangster

Gang identity, in each of the cases, arises from a structural culture of violence, which adds a significant additional dimension to gang identity. According to Farmer (1996), violence needs to be seen as manifesting in institutional and physical realms. Everyday discriminatory structural phenomena, such as racism and socioeconomic inequality, significantly constrain the everyday freedoms of individuals. These "infrastructural expressions of the process of oppression" (Farmer 1996: 25) are "structural violence". The discriminatory racial, economic, and societal structures that organise South Africa are the immediate expression of such structural violence. By viewing violence through this lens, it becomes possible for violence to be understood as more than merely an 'act' and to view it instead as the condition that governs the everyday lives

of individuals. The forced displacement from District Six, the epistemologically violent reproduction of stereotypes (Jensen 2008: 7-11), violent policing efforts (Samara 2011: 124-137), the racialised production of space (Lindegaard 2017: 12-3), and the enforced Apartheid legislation and its social, economic, and political repercussions can all be seen as deeply embedded in a system of structural violence.

Each story above highlights that violence must be understood as a continuum that gives birth to itself, facilitating normalisation and, consequently, its cyclical reproduction (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). Violence needs to be (re)envisioned as entailing assaults on the dignity and personhood of individual actors of society (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003: 1). This diminishes an individual's self-worth and triggers a desire to restore it violently. The implicit legitimisation of daily violence requires us to see it as a historically, structurally, and culturally habitualised continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). As such, violence often quietly ravages its way through society and only becomes visible in individual violent outbursts. These need to be reconceptualised as the materialisations of a long line of sequential reactions of violence. In South Africa, structural and physical violence feed into political violence, revolutionary violence, and gang violence (Dziewanski 2021).

Following from this, for coloured and black youths on the Cape Flats, gangs became attractive because they provided a sense of meaning, a purpose, and a place of acceptance. Street gangs offered a sense of brotherhood – a family outside the household. A gang supplied a source of identity for marginalised individuals growing up in deprived conditions. A gang could also offer economic benefits in conditions with low chances of upward social mobility. Joining a gang and making money was a viable economic decision for Guilford, Thendi, and Siya. Ganghood propelled most of them into a higher social class. For many, gangsterism was a method of survival that provided a form of social status to uphold one's honour and served as armour that protected individuals from falling victim to violence during their youth (Dziewanski 2021: 11).

Conversely, being a gangster was an agency-affirming identity maker for all research participants. With this identity marker, gangsters perceive themselves as defying the (post)Apartheid system, emancipating themselves by transcending conventional identity classifications and creating their own cultural labels and valorisations. Gang culture grants individuals agency to transcend and resist Apartheid categories, allowing them to shape and

reinterpret their identity on their terms (Jensen 2008). Gangs enable individuals to be powerful in a system where one is doomed to be powerless. Hence, gangsters orchestrated a lifeworld in which local meaning-making and morality rise above everyday humiliation and stereotyping of persistent Apartheid burdens. The hybrid third space that forms within and beyond structures of oppression, in which gang identity exists, is harnessed and grants power and status, operating like a cultural undercurrent, which rewrites what it means to be powerful, and dynamically transforms township sociality.

Furthermore, within gangs, an embodiment of masculinity is a prerequisite for social acceptance. It is constructed as being fearless, strong, disciplined, and showing no emotion. Pinnock (2016) argues that ganghood was a necessary rite of passage in the transition from boyhood to manhood for many. However, gangs also cater to the processual transitions between stages of manhood. Gangsters climb the ranks of their manliness, gaining prestige as they fulfill tasks, defend their turf, and carry out crimes and killings. Embodying masculine characteristics that made them more manly came with status and power. Fulfilling their duties in the lower ranks of highly hierarchical gang structures can ultimately lead them to the epitome of manliness, in which they have more leverage over decision-making processes as gang leaders.

Aside from these explanations, becoming a gangster might also be a personal choice that eludes rational explanation. One's characteristics as a human being may provide specific inclinations toward becoming a gangster. Filling vacuums within one's personal family background, dealing with trauma, or appropriating gangsterism as the most purposeful profession may be an essential driving force toward gangsterism, as some parts of the stories above suggest. Individuals also function as active social agents who make choices. Individual elements, such as a deep personal desire to commit a violent crime or coping mechanisms for distinctly individual trauma, should not be underestimated when trying to understand this phenomenon.

Returning to the paradigm of incompleteness, my argument does not rest upon the idea that we ought to conceive of gangsters, who have killed and prided themselves on gruesomely violent crimes, as humans like any other. The internalised legal and encultured value systems that promote a morally condescending view of violent perpetrators have their value in informing moral judgments, as opposed to refraining from them in the name of cultural relativism. Instead, I encourage the acknowledgment that this moral judgment

is predicated on unique, culturally conditioned influences within one's identity and is inclined toward completeness. We have agency in choosing how to think, theorise, and engage with gangsters. We have the agency to accept that the Cape Flats gangster may be imbued with something different from what we imagine them to be, driven by something that surpasses conventional categorisations and complete thinking about them. This suggests an analytical ethic of incompleteness, in which understanding and respect are harnessed in the spirit of Nyamnjoh's notion of academic conviviality.

To understand gang identity in South Africa and beyond is, I argue, to simultaneously attempt to understand gangsters as culturally and historically shaped social beings from the inside out while leaning into and questioning initial tendencies to moralise from the outside inward. To embrace the awkwardness of juggling seemingly opposing ideas is to embrace incompleteness and convivial scholarship. It is to acknowledge the fertility of South African soil for gangsterism and simultaneously to condemn violent crimes in one's acknowledgment of incompleteness.

Simplified classifications, such as criminals or killers that represent complete thinking, become hollow in the face of the complex subjectivities represented in stories. There are similarities in Guilford, Thendi, and Siya's identities as they are all woven into the emasculating and racially discriminatory social and political fabric that breeds a culture of violence. They try to resist this by affirming what they are denied by autonomously reappropriating Apartheid categories and affiliating themselves with a distinct cultural system in which they reclaim power. However, there are fundamental differences in location, family dynamics, individual choices, gang affiliations and responsibilities, economic necessities, and associational motivations. Therefore, the stories of the three former gangsters above show that countless possibilities exist in understanding what it means to be a gangster. It is not only difficult but profoundly misleading to make all-encompassing, complete generalisations. The closest I can come to understanding gang identity formation is that it lies at the nexus of a complex "web of meaning" (Geertz 1973: 5). This web is woven with the threads of historically rooted racial and political hierarchies, personal motivations and ambitions, resistance, purpose and status, economic income, survival, and a coping strategy for trauma transformation. This makes gangsters frontier beings who identify to complete themselves in a process of continued incompleteness that forever unfolds.

Gangsters are embodiments of a fusion of visionary entrepreneurs, senseless criminals, loyal friends, local presidents, hopeless street kids, wealthy millionaires, and normal citizens. They can be concurrent fathers, sons, and killers. They can be a formerly colonised product of Apartheid and a renewer of apartness. They can be a legally defined criminal, a psychologically defined psychopath, or a morally defined sinner. The hybrid third space in which these identities interconnect is within which the incomplete identity of a gangster as a frontier being lies.

Choosing incompleteness in the spirit of postcolonial conviviality

"This is Water," David Foster Wallace (2009) continuously emphasises during his commencement speech, discussing the meaning of education. Education, to Wallace, is not about the capacity of what to think. It is about learning how to think. This, more importantly, entails exercising control over what to think about. How we extract meaning from experience is not only uniquely subjective, based on our encultured consciousness. It is an intentional product of our choosing. Wallace suggests that we do not often realise this, that humans have an inbuilt default tendency to deeply embody their encultured truth as the complete epicentre of the universe, being the "lords of our tiny scull-sized kingdoms, at the centre of all creation" (Wallace 2009: 118). When one thinks completely, one self-imposes limits on the possibilities of one's imagination, as reality is an ocean of infinite possibilities in what one makes it to be. Complete thinking accumulates in a degree of "closed-mindedness that's like an imprisonment so complete that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up" (Wallace 2009: 34). To Wallace, education signifies the fostering and encouragement of dynamic awareness, exercising agency over what to think.

As much as we have agency in choosing how to think, theorise, and engage with gangsters, as I have tried to exemplify, we have agency in engaging with all social humans. In conclusion, the "educated", autonomous choice of incompleteness in one's interaction with oneself and the world is how we escape the colonial mental universe. It is by embracing the art of choosing incompleteness that one not only liberates oneself from the colonised mind. It also invites others to embrace their self-creation, to enter a self-actualising space, to free themselves from the shackles of colonialism. Choosing incompleteness is choosing epistemic freedom for oneself and one's

environment. It is this educated art of choosing to convivially bathe in the interconnectedness of the possibilities of each other's mutually constitutive incompleteness that can be leveraged to integrate decolonial approaches into our thinking and theorising in academia and beyond. When allowing for incompleteness in one's judgments, conceptualisations, and perceptions, one allows these to be opened up to infinite possibilities. Many of these possibilities may not be likely, but they are also not impossible. "It just depends on what you want to consider" (Wallace 2009: 92).

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