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Respectable 'illegality': Gangs, masculinities and belonging in a Nairobi ghetto

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Conclusion

My ethnography has focused on the multiple meanings of gangs in the everyday practices of young men in Mathare, a Nairobi ghetto, and has analysed these meanings in relation to wider cultural, political, and economic frameworks and developments. In particular, it has looked at the daily struggles of young ghetto men who faced multiple marginalities (Vigil 2003) in their attempts to become senior men and how this was related to membership of a working gang. Accordingly, this book has aimed to move beyond the dominant representations of gangs in Kenya and elsewhere as criminal, political and mono-ethnic networks of idle young men. I thus hope to have contributed to debates on gangs in Kenya and worldwide, African masculinities, and articulations of ethnic and local belonging. By looking at what pushed young men to join or leave working gangs, how this was tied to struggles over positions of manhood, and why and how gangs and individual gang members took part in junctures violence, this book goes beyond the stereotypical, but highly pervasive, depiction of these young men as thugs for hire. As a consequence, I found that along with the much-researched concept of political violence, which is heavily intertwined with ethnicity in the context of Kenya, other factors like work, gender and belonging turned out be crucial in gaining insight into the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare, and into the participation of these gangs and individual gang members in violence.

Respectable 'Illegality'

In the Introduction, I formulated the main challenge for my research as understanding why and how young men in Mathare both join and leave working gangs. I launched the term working gang for groups that focused on alcohol production and the drug trade, because the members themselves referred to their income-generating activities as work. Referring to illegal practices in this way is not uncommon among groups that are engaged in them. The local conceptualisation of distilling alcohol as work fully captures the notion of "respectable illegality". The young distillers were acutely aware of its illegal status, but they imagined it as reputable as it enabled them to perform (young) male duties and earn respect from community residents. Though illegal, their line of work was safer than stealing and backed the alcohol industry in Bondeni (Mathare). Indeed, most households in this area depended on businesses that were directly or indirectly connected to this industry. The notion of respectable illegality has thus been helpful in highlighting how the local framing of working gangs as more reputable than other type of gangs came about.

Their respectability in popular view to some extent explains why numerous young men chose working gangs above other gangs, but the underlying question as to why many young men in Mathare joined gangs in the first place requires attention to be paid to other factors. This research highlighted the dire circumstances in which people in Mathare live, revealing that the most obvious reason for young men in this ghetto to joining a working

gang seems to emanate from economic necessity. Nevertheless, such explanations risk reducing complex social motivations and decision-making processes to monetary logics (*see also* Bourdieu 1992). Economic necessity, for instance, does not explain why young men chose different types of gang, why certain young men did not choose to become gang members at all, or why all gang members were so adamant about eventually leaving their particular gang. I have tried to develop a broader view of the current and future social possibilities and constraints that young men imagined when making decisions and acting on them, especially pertaining to joining and leaving working gangs. These young men navigated present-day contexts with their eye on particular circumscribed social horizons (Vigh 2006). Kingi and all of the other young men who featured in this book were driven by a shared desire to improve their social status and actualise the position of senior manhood. This predominantly shaped their social navigation trajectories, within which both joining and leaving working gangs were considered to be key steps. Accordingly, I have shown that the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare were predominantly shaped by notions of work and dominant standards of masculinity, rather than by ethnicity or political affiliations. Ethnicity did play a role as a boundary marker in many other group-making projects that also involved working gang members from time to time, albeit in highly unexpected ways. Vigh's concept of social navigation proved to be very helpful in positioning the volatile role of ethnicity in these young men's struggles to retain focus in a situation of constant uncertainty. I will return below to the way in which I tried to enrich this concept by adding a focus on negotiation by reading life histories against the grain.

In contrast to the prevailing views on gangs operating in Kenya, working gangs in Mathare were multi-ethnic, organised in terms of specific income-generating activities (e.g. distilling alcohol, dealing drugs, managing bus stations, brokering stolen goods), and tied to small localities within particular ghetto villages. Especially striking was the role of working gangs in structuring the processes of becoming men in a community that was dominated by women. These processes were popularly imagined as following the gradual attainment of specific social, cultural and economic capital (*see also* Bourdieu 1986). One of the main pathways to gradually achieving such ambitions was by joining a working gang, as these gangs were popularly conceptualised as age-sets that helped young men to progress from junior to senior manhood. Most young men moved out of their family's one-room house after circumcision at the age of 16 to begin life as a junior man. Working gangs allowed young men to cater for and garner adequate capital with which to eventually establish themselves as senior men. The working gang also enabled these young men to maintain meaningful relationships with their families by working for close female relatives and performing security and other forms of community service in their neighbourhood area. Interestingly, notions of work, respectability and community service are not generally associated with gangs in the dominant discourses, whether in Kenya or worldwide. I, however, focused on the everyday role of gangs in ghettos, and studying these groups from local viewpoints revealed the fluidity and overlap between gangs and between gangs and other social groups of young men such as football teams, youth groups and even CBOs. This view thus helped me to approach the experiential level of the social processes of working

gang formation, and to go beyond representations that prevail in both the media and academia. Accordingly, this perspective highlighted the quite different roles of gangs and gang members in the local setting.

The notion of respectable illegality has also been useful in unearthing another layer of people's discourse on licit ways to earn an income in Mathare. As described throughout this book, the police and community residents engaged in rather fraught relationships. At times, their interactions proved to be profitable for both parties, but the majority of residents regarded the police as a powerful, yet illicit and extremely dangerous, authority. Police action, such as killing criminal suspects on sight, and police involvement in illegal activities, such as taking bribes from alcohol and drug bosses, made this form of authority highly perverse in the local view. This perversion rendered the dominant binary between legality and illegality hollow and meaningless, and this bolstered local value systems that deviated from state regulatory authorities and logics. Re-evaluating certain illegal practices as respectable also created a space for residents to implicitly condemn police brutality. For instance, local residents often took pride in following strict moral codes while counter-posing themselves to the corrupt police. In doing so, these residents negotiated the dominant discourse on morality and, in the process, reimagined such codes to fit their own experiences. Interestingly, this goes against mainstream views of ghetto residents that hold them as embodiments of moral decay and barbarism. Chapter 6 also showed how, at times, such derogatory dominant notions served to other self-proclaimed natives by newcomers in Mathare, and I will come back to this below.

This study aimed to contribute to scholarly debates on gangs by following Wacquant (2002; 2011), Vigil (2003), Hagedorn (2007) and others who plead for more ethnographic research in gang studies. However, as described in the Introduction, this field continues to be dominated by a focus on gangs in North and South America, and even if a more global view is developed, Africa is still largely ignored (*e.g.* Hagedorn 2007). I have added to this work by focusing on gangs in East Africa, which is a region that is notably underexplored in gang studies. This helped to nuance the prevailing perception that considers all gangs in sub-Saharan Africa[1] through the lens of religious and political rebellion, casting these groups as somehow different from gangs in other regions of the world. This book has shown that working gangs in Mathare share many commonalities with gangs worldwide in that they can be regarded as groups that organise access to (illegal/semi-illegal) work and other socio-economic opportunities for young, poor and urban men (in this case) who live in dire contexts that are marked by very few legal work prospects (*see also* Bourgois 1995). As a consequence, it is imperative to include gangs in sub-Saharan African ghettos in the emerging global agenda of comparative gang studies.

The gangs in this research were, however, also unique in two unforeseen (at least by me), yet crucial, ways. It is also along these dimensions that my study of Nairobi's gangs can contribute to wider debates on such groups. Firstly, these Nairobi gangs operated in a matrifocal society and were largely controlled by women, thus bringing gender to the fore

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[1] Save for perhaps South Africa and Nigeria (*e.g.* Kynoch 2005; Harnischfeger 2003).

when it comes to analysing these groups. Secondly, these gangs were part of the social relationships that structured the processes of becoming senior men according to popular notions, as noted above. Consequently, leaving the gang was as much part of becoming a gang member as joining one, and both were locally taken as significant processes in actualising the position of senior manhood. Gender as such is not a new trope in gang studies (*see also* Bourgois 1996). Nevertheless, the roles of women as bosses and 'cheerleaders' of gangs of young men, and how this has a bearing on the latter's imaginings of gendered senses of the self, which is so central in this study, give new dimensions to the role of gender in this field. Moreover, the modes in which gangs play a role in and structure situational and relational processes of becoming men requires further academic exploration. These emphases are all the more urgent in a global context that is currently witnessing rapid urbanisation (particularly in southern countries), an increasingly younger population, and a growing number of households led by single mothers (COHRE 2008). The declining access to opportunities for young men within the formal realm in the global south calls for in-depth analyses of how the self-organisation among young men within informal economies can often become quite productive in terms of economic growth, social cohesion and community development, to the extent that it may even benefit the so-called formal economy (*see also* Sullivan 2012; Schneider et al. 2010).[2] Having said this, I have also illustrated that clear distinctions between formal and informal and legal and illegal are in fact hard to make (*see also* Roitman 2006).

The blurred boundaries between legality and illegality in this research may also point gang research, particularly in Kenya, in new directions. As well as suggestions to analyse gangs from local viewpoints and through notions of work and gender, and instead of just looking at political affiliations and ethnic identifications, this book has also highlighted the role of gangs in community development and service delivery. This is illustrated by their volunteer work in sport, garbage collection and security provision. The latter of these in particular needs more exploration. Kenya is known for its high crime rates and a volatile political climate. The country's security crisis is painfully exposed by recent attacks (allegedly by militants from Al Shabaab), other junctures of violence between groups, and the disorganised, controversial and corrupt official response to these events. The process of Security Sector Reform (SSR) that commenced in 2003, and which became ever more urgent after the 2007/8 post-election violence, has still not translated into tangible results on the ground, as the unlawful killings of young and poor men continue to persist (MUHURI & OSI 2013). This book showed that working gangs – and not only ethnic-based gangs – in Nairobi's ghettos provided security to their communities in the absence of a functioning police force, and can thus also be regarded as non-state security actors, which are often locally dubbed as vigilante groups (Anderson 2002). At times, these groups even protected local residents from state security actors (such as police). Their relative legitimacy in these ghetto communities (as compared to the police) calls for further research on the relationships between different actors in plural security provision

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[2] This may apply, for instance, to the way *chang'aa* profits enable people to buy goods and services in the formal economy.

(including private actors, Diphoorn 2013) in Kenya from the perspectives of gang members and other ghetto residents. This is especially urgent in relation to community policing policies, called *Nyumba Kumi* ('Ten Houses' in Kiswahili), which are currently being implemented by the Kenyan government (*see also* Gitonga 2014).

Anxious men

Despite the fact that gangs offered work opportunities to young ghetto men, they were expected to leave the working gang and establish themselves as senior men around the age of 30 at the latest. However, leaving a gang has become increasingly difficult in recent times. This book brought out how this had an impact on the already tense gender relations in Mathare, and how young men navigated these shifts. I described how, during their gang membership, these young men became fathers, got married (not necessarily in that order) and gradually took up other positions that were widely associated with senior manhood. Nevertheless, gang members were never fully considered to be senior men in the popular discourse as long as they continued to be part of the gang. The founding of the first alcohol gangs in Mathare in 1994, and later the drug gangs in the early 2000s, helped young men to carve out pathways for themselves to garner social and other types of capital that would help them to leave the gang. However, the economic slump after 2008 increasingly hindered their trajectories out of the gang, thus trapping gang members in a more permanent state of 'lesser manhood' (see below). Accordingly, anxieties about manhood among both men and women put mounting pressure on gender relations in Mathare, and relationships between women and young men in particular became more and more unhinged.

One of the leading concepts in studies of African youth and masculinities when it comes to capturing a state of social confinement among young people in Africa is 'waithood', which was first coined by Singerman (2007) and further developed by Honwana (2012). This term denotes 'waiting for adulthood', and implies a liminal space in which young people are neither dependent children nor autonomous adults. However, this notion seems to be inadequate in terms of describing the situation of young, male gang members in Mathare, notwithstanding some clear parallels. It might be more important to point out where this concept has shortcomings for my study, and probably also for the study of African youths in other settings. It is precisely through the more problematic aspects that the concept can open up new directions in theorising differences between experiences of marginalised young people in African countries. Although Honwana stresses that waithood is not about passivity, the term cannot properly shake off this suggestion. Using such a notion would thus risk reproducing dominant views that young ghetto men are idle and passive. Another problem is the way the concept is tied to gender. Honwana again acknowledges that both genders experience waithood in dissimilar ways. She also states that women are considered to be adults sooner than men, for instance through childbirth, yet they are still dependent on men achieving adulthood in the long run. This collides with the obvious fact that many women in Mathare, but also in other Nairobi ghettos and areas in Kenya, are relatively independent from men, both in terms of finances

and social status (*see also* Silberschmidt 2001, 2004). Furthermore, this term suggests that deep insecurity about the future, waiting for better opportunities, feeling stuck – despite a relentless effort – and the inability to build meaningful lives all seem to be unique to young people (Honwana 2012).

This brings me to this concept's biggest flaw when it comes to this research, namely the suggestion that waithood concerns an interstitial phase between childhood and adulthood. I have shown in this book that junior manhood (16-30) is a social phase on its own in Mathare, and is not just a liminal space between two social categories. Junior men in this ghetto were adult men who were husbands and fathers, and who performed other (junior) male duties within the family and community set-up. Furthermore, junior manhood was a phase of opportunities, relative freedom (it allowed young men *kuraha* –'to have fun' in Sheng) and creativity (*ujanjess*), however entwined this all was with a desire to step out of the gang and achieve senior manhood. The notion of waithood cannot, for instance, quite capture Malik's position, as explored in Chapter 4. Malik desperately wanted to become a father and husband again after divorcing his wife and thus regain some of the social capital he had lost, which was capital that would have helped him to achieve senior manhood in the long run. At the same time, he navigated his predicaments by boosting his social status as a junior man, fellow *baze* member, political contact, businessman, football player and project leader. All of these positions helped him to enact notions of junior manhood and gain respect within the community. Indeed, he was still young enough (26 years-old) to be fully recognised as such, despite his anxieties about his divorce.

Problems emerged when young men could not make the transition to senior manhood as they grew older. Nonetheless, these men continued to be husbands and fathers, friends and football players, and perhaps even youth group leaders and community volunteers. However, they were frustrated, scared, even insecure, and could not perform certain duties within their families and communities as a result of their status as lesser men (Connell 2002, 1995; Willemse 2009: 226). These men were in danger of – increasingly – being taken as weak and foolish (*fala*). They could not negotiate the bride price for their daughters (or other female family members), and nor could they take up other roles associated with senior manhood. Nonetheless, *mafala* were still considered to be adults and, to some extent, valuable members of the community. Vigh uses the term 'social moratorium' (2006: 89-116) to indicate the shrinking space that young men had in Guinea Bissau to set their lives along culturally circumscribed pathways. However, this notion does not fully describe the situation of young ghetto men in Mathare, because it does not bring into view their particularly troubled relationships with women. Indeed, these young men were engaged in conflict over power with women of all ages, even more than was the case with older men, whereas the notion of social moratorium is often used to highlight generational tensions within (crumbling) patrimonial structures.

A major thread running through this book was how these young men's fears of growing redundancy with regard to women shaped their social navigation struggles. These men may best be described by the term 'anxious men', referring to those who feared

becoming lesser men. As such, this concept has close connections to the idea of social death (Patterson 1982; Vigh 2006: 33). The notion of lesser men captures the social position of *mafala* very well, whereas the concept of anxious men denotes the state of their growing fear of being taken as lesser men, and as *mafala,* by their communities. It was this fear that shaped most decision-making and positioning among the young men focused on in this book. Young men who approached their mid-twenties without achieving certain milestones such as fatherhood and marriage felt increasingly disconnected and out of place. This is illustrated by their frequent use of the word 'island' to describe their fear of detachment from their communities. Their anxieties about becoming trapped in the gang space and being considered *mafala* while approaching the appropriate age of senior manhood were becoming ever more intense. In the previous chapters, I described the multiple hindrances young men encountered in trying to leave the gang in recent years, as compared to the position in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their anxieties do not, however, indicate that young men were locally considered to be redundant or disconnected; instead, it denoted the qualms that young men had about losing more and more social, political and economic ground in relation to their community and society at large, but especially with regard to the women in their lives.

In this research, I explored how and why, from the perspectives of young men, the recent economic decline affected the two genders differently in Mathare. Following consecutive rises in food prices and ensuing drops in *chang'aa* profits over the past five years, it became increasingly hard for young men to establish meaningful lives outside the gang. The historically stronger position of women in Mathare was reinforced by NGO interventions at the same time as rising food prices caused *chang'aa* profits to drop (2007-now). Through NGO connections, women were able to diversify their sources of income, whereas men were deeply affected by the drop in *chang'aa* profits. Moreover, surging unemployment rates heavily impinged on industries such as construction (one of the few options outside Mathare for men), but less on domestic jobs (one of the few opportunities outside Mathare for women). Inside Mathare, political pathways to power were blocked by the few older men in this ghetto (such as the councils of village elders), leaving only certain avenues – such as gangs, micro-businesses and community development – open when it came to building social status and achieving economic independence. Most young men thus felt increasingly left out. Furthermore, their anxieties were profoundly aggravated by the unlawful killings of young ghetto men by the police that have become a systematic phenomenon since 2002.

I discussed in detail, and from different perspectives, how the double bind of depending on women for work and being expected to provide for women led to mounting anxieties among young ghetto men. Chapters 4 and 5 analysed the different social navigation strategies used to counter such anxieties and enact masculine ideals, which varied from persuasion to the use of force. Malik's narratives in Chapter 4 reveal just how much some young men were willing to invest (both in terms of money and time) to counter their anxieties, reverse assumed redundancy and enact the position of the provider against all odds (*cf.* Silberschmidt 2004:45-47; Hunter 2006:102; Miescher and Lindsay 2003:20).

Looking at young men's anxieties about becoming superfluous was also useful in exploring why and how tensions within the intimacy of marriage played out between groups of women and young men in the public sphere of Mathare. Friction between gang members and their predominantly female bosses has even culminated in full-blown physical clashes with casualties and the destruction of property on both sides. This research revealed that some young men felt that persuasion did not always help them to attain higher social positions as men, and they at times charted other and often more violent strategies. Engaging in direct acts of violence was, to a large extent, aimed at forcing a shift in the, in their eyes, oppressive and anomalous gender relations. Dominant media representations often depicted these men as detached, idle, frustrated and prone to violence, and therefore a threat. Contrary to such perceptions, engaging in violent strategies was more often than not aimed at reinforcing their sense of belonging to their family and community. Regarding their participation in such violence as strategic, and as part of their social navigation struggles, enabled a view that held these men as agents instead of mere victims of power configurations.

'Focus' was a term often evoked by these men to explain their own successes and failures and appraise their peers (*see also* Chapter 3). Having a strong ambition, described by them in terms of fatherhood, signified to these men the opposite of giving up, and, as such, denoted life, whereas 'giving up' implied death. This significantly adds to the concept of social horizon, as it highlights how culturally-circumscribed aspirations were negotiated by young men and had an impact on their view of current shifts and future opportunities. This was especially striking among men who held onto this ambition seemingly against all odds. Most men in this research alternated between two apparently oppositional positions of manhood, namely having focus (*mjanja*) and giving up (*fala*), while making decisions during moments of radical uncertainty (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Vigh 2008). Many concepts developed to capture social navigation in contexts of enduring crises (such as "judicious opportunism", Johnson-Hanks 2005) put the emphasis on the way agents recognise unfolding social possibilities and constraints, and seize opportunities in the moment. I have shown that these young men did appear to make impromptu decisions addressing immediate concerns, but, strikingly, they never lost sight of the ambitions to which they oriented their actions. On the contrary, they constantly contemplated how acting in the now related to ever-shifting future possibilities and constraints and would affect their goals. As a consequence, young men's reflections on their actions and how this pertained to their aspirations – and to shifting possibilities and limitations in the now and in the future – should be part of analysing their social navigation in the moment. If not, research may be in danger of reproducing the stereotype of the young African man 'living in the now.'

This study aimed to contribute to research on African masculinities by demonstrating both the power of dominant masculine ideals and the fluid and context bound negotiations of such norms by young men in the everyday. As such, I was also able to bring into view their enactments of both dominant and alternative subjectivities (such as ghetto pride), thus permitting a more textured understanding of how seemingly conflicting positions of manhood were imagined by young men in shifting temporal and spatial

contexts. Accordingly, focusing on young men's anxieties was helpful in analysing processes of becoming men from an experiential level, especially pertaining to ageing. This may also shed new light on how to study popular imaginings of the political and social category of youth in Kenya (and elsewhere). The only times young men in my research referred to themselves as youths was when they discussed politics, criticised the ruling (predominantly older) elite, and argued for the right of youths to access power (*see also* Chapter 2). Interestingly, their discussion of politics also included NGOs and CSOs, notably in terms of how these organisations recognised and mobilised young people in civic education and business programmes (for instance, the 'Yes Youth Can!' campaign by USAID). Nevertheless, the term youth and the concomitant discourses carried little significance in their everyday relationships with their families, the community and each other. From circumcision onwards, these young men referred to themselves as men, and in general reflected upon their decisions and other actions by drawing on popular discourses on manhood. Consequently, more research is needed to understand the way these discourses speak to each other and are negotiated by young men in the everyday, both in Kenya and elsewhere.

Lastly, all of the young men in this book not only had to negotiate being cast as ghetto boys (even after achieving a position of senior manhood, like Kingi) and non-citizens in the dominant discourse, but they also risked being killed as such. As noted, their wives, mothers and communities hardly considered these men to be superfluous or disconnected – on the contrary. Yet, the fear narratives instigated by the state and media representations fell onto fertile ground among the wider public, as exemplified by the complete lack of a public outcry over the systematic killing of these men. Accordingly, young ghetto men marked the symbolic boundaries of Kenyan citizenship. Not only was the ghetto an othered space, and as such a bordered space, as described in the Introduction, but young ghetto men in particular were also othered. As a consequence, their position within the context of the nation state can be regarded as a bordered position (*see also* Van Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002; Popescu 2012). The notion of a bordered position may thus be helpful when it comes to underscoring the confluence between spatial and social marginalisation processes, and the ensuing restrictions and oppressions that these young men in particular experience in the everyday. These young men were cast as enemies and even taken as a threat to the nation state, and killing them marked out who belonged to the Kenyan nation and who did not (*see also* Appadurai 1999) in the most physical and brutal sense of the word. In response, most young men imagined a sense of belonging to the ghetto, which they typified in terms of motherhood and school, as Malik put it (in Chapter 4), and not to the nation state. This was, in fact, part of the alternative subject position of ghetto pride, notwithstanding a continued longing shared by many young ghetto men to also belong to the Kenyan nation state. This was worded by Malik (in Chapter 4) as follows: "One day I will drive a car!" This position of non-citizenship tied in with local discourses on morality in which national discourses functioned as points of reference. Nevertheless, these dominant moral codes were transformed to meet local experiences, as also noted above. Taken in the dominant discourse as criminals who threaten the nation and deserve to be

killed, these young men flipped the meaning of the border position of young ghetto men to claim the moral upper hand. Instead of perpetrators, they took themselves and fellow ghetto residents to be victims of abusive authorities, and they took great pride in protecting their community against such a predatory state. Gangs were one of the few social spaces where these young men were able to enact ghetto pride without too much interference by the state and other authorities (such as women's groups or a council of elders that collaborated with the state). I thus hope to have paved the way for more research on notions of (non-)citizenship and belonging in Kenya, and how these pertain to subdominant discourses on morality and to positions of manhood and class.

The jealous neighbour
As noted in the Introduction, my focus on working gangs became crucial for acquiring better insight into the rise and demise of ethnic-based gangs and into understanding mounting violence in Mathare from the early 2000s onwards. Nearly all direct acts of violence emanated from routine violence that structurally marginalised different social groups in Mathare. Dominant ethnic hate narratives at times gained performative power (Marshal-Fratani 2006) among these different groups in attempts to comprehend disparities between them. This book certainly revealed that some working gang members shifted gang alliances during conflict, hence boosting ethnic-based gangs during critical moments. At other times, however, working gangs teamed up with local residents to oust ethnic-based gangs. Working gangs and individual members thus participated in conflicts that involved ethnic-based gangs in unexpected ways, and this brings important nuances to the dominant narrative in Kenya that explains the mounting violence in Mathare solely in ethnic terms. The rise and fall of ethnic-based gangs, group rivalry between those gangs and political instigation have all contributed to the growing conflict (*see also* Anderson 2002). Nevertheless, chapters 5 and 6 also show how working gangs were involved in many different junctures of violence and for a wide range of reasons. Looking in this book at their experiences, reflections and justifications of violence helped to better explain how working gangs and individual members were tied to mounting clashes in Mathare. This has brought out a multi-layered understanding of surging conflicts in this ghetto, revealing the shifts between different identifications and processes of othering at play during moments of violence. Furthermore, such an in-depth view has offered new insights into why young men joined and left working gangs during and after moments of violence, making these analyses key to answering the main question of this research project.

As described in Chapter 6, political violence has strong ethnic underpinnings in the Kenyan dominant discourse, and has been the prevailing prism through which growing tensions in Nairobi's ghettos have been analysed, both in the media and academia. This has been useful when it comes to gaining insight into political instigations of violence by political parties and local authorities in specific localities. However, this book has shown that in order to fully understand why and how episodes of violence emerge in this ghetto, and perhaps elsewhere, it is crucial to examine the historical, social, economic and political factors that come together in a particular locality at a particular moment in time. It is also

vital to investigate these elements from the perspectives of the people (such as working gang members) involved in such violence, whether as perpetrators, victims, or both. To understand this violence from the viewpoint of its participants, the context-bound histories of ethnic labels and how these intersected with popular notions of belonging and entitlement were crucial. Discourses about ethnic labels thus imagined were politically strategic constructs; the people who were supposed to belong to these constructs and reap the consequences, whether they wanted to or not, such as the poor with Kikuyu and Luo backgrounds, hardly ever fitted them. In their narratives, the young men increasingly imagined violence in terms of 'us Kikuyu' and 'them Luo' and vice versa. I argued that these ethnic labels hide more than they reveal and cannot be used as an explanatory concept on their own. The young men who killed and died in the name of an ethnic label turned out to actually know very little about the dominant history of those constructs, or about past social relationships between the particular ethnic groups to which they refer. I demonstrated, for instance, that the construction of rival groups on ethnic grounds was related to the specific histories of migration in Mathare. The 'Kikuyu-Luo' antagonism that came to dominate national discourses of citizenship and political narratives in Kenya thus gained performative power on the ground because of highly local developments.

Prevailing stereotypes cast young men as perpetrators of violence. However, I have demonstrated that junctures of violence involved members of almost all social groups in Mathare, and not just young men. Additionally, conflicts that had very little to do with electoral politics, but which occurred around election time, have been swept on the same pile as the notion of politically instigated violence. Likewise, politically instigated conflicts that took place at other times have largely been overlooked in such representations. What is more, a lot of the violence was political, but these conflicts often had very little to do with elections, even if such episodes occurred around election time. The first motives that remain out of sight when conflicts in these ghettos are merely analysed through the lens of political violence and ethnicity have already been discussed above. Groups of young men from time to time engaged in violent clashes with groups of women in order to assert manhood, reverse power relationships and reinforce their sense of belonging to the community as men. Besides political instigation, it was again crucial to bring in gender – intersecting with local notions of class, locality and age – in order to understand the violence in Mathare and why some young men took part in it.

Interestingly, the trope of the jealous neighbour was often evoked by working gang members (and residents in general) to explain all kinds of conflict in Mathare. This notion proved to be useful in this research for unravelling how, when and why conflicts emerged, because it added an often overlooked dimension of violence in Mathare, albeit one that is well understood by local residents. The dimensions described by this image included both the power of jealousy (emanating from feeling excluded) and the opportunity that violence may provide to improve one's own position. The notion of the jealous neighbour has helped in unpacking different layers of the reasons behind participation in, and the meanings of, violence in Mathare from the perspective of young ghetto men. Illustrated by Kingi's ordeal, the jealous neighbour was not just an abstract notion that people imagined

to explain witchcraft spells (*juju* in Sheng), conflicts and other ill fates, but could be a very real person. This book revealed that the term neighbour was a rather fluid concept referring to many different types of relationship, including family relations, friendships and business rivals. Without a clear core, this notion served to explain many different relationships and conflicts (*see also* Willemse 2009). In the process of negotiation, its content was thus, to a large extent, established in relation to what it was not. For instance, in Kingi's cases, its content was determined by the fact that both the neighbour and Motion were not considered to be natives in Mathare, whereas in Odhis's case the meaning of this notion was transformed to pinpoint that Motion was not regarded as trustworthy as a fellow gang member. However, this does not mean that anything goes; all of the relationships described by this trope had in common the fact that they were bounded by a deep level of intimacy and proximity, both in space and time.

Peter Geschiere (2013) has beautifully captured the link between intimacy and uncertainty, and how this pertains to jealousy, trust and situational notions of witchcraft. I have not particularly focused on witchcraft in this book, yet the way Geschiere has analysed the dangers involved in intimate relationships, and how this could even lead to direct acts of violence, helped me to grasp an important aspect of neighbourhood relationships in Mathare. People in Mathare engaged in relationships that were imbued with danger, yet they were also based on trust and interdependency. The ways both potential dangers and encounters of trust constituted intimacy in Mathare were never self-evident, but highly situational and relational. Accordingly, approaching such seemingly conflicting and potentially conflictive relationships called for an in-depth contextualisation of such relationships and their shifts. Through such analyses, and by following the logic of young working gang members, I have been able to bring into view their ostensibly contradictory and highly fluid positions during conflicts. I thus discovered another layer to the binary between popular positions of manhood, *mjanja* and *fala*. These positions intersected with notions of natives and visitors in unexpected ways, and this again helped me to bring nuance to the dominant trope of ethnicity.

The rather recent notions of natives and visitors emerged during the rise of Mungiki gangs and the influx of a lot of young men from Western Kenya in the early 2000s (from which local Taliban groups later emerged). Both of these groups were powerful and large, and they increasingly foregrounded ethnicity in socio-economic and political relationships (especially in relation to each other). This prompted the emergence of the notion of visitors among self-proclaimed natives. Chapter 6 described how young men who took themselves as natives blamed these visitors for 'bringing ethnicity to the ghetto.' It also considered how many alleged visitors with Luo backgrounds imagined natives as 'real ghetto residents' with Kikuyu backgrounds, or as people who were inculcated by a putative Kikuyuness, by which they essentially meant criminality. This chapter revealed that notions of visitors and natives did not intersect neatly with putative ethnic and local identifications (or with actually being raised in Mathare or not). In popular use, the notions of what separated a native from a visitor shifted per temporal and spatial context. Motion, for instance, was taken as a native in 4B and a visitor in Bondeni, and though the notion of

natives seemed to be conflated with the *mjanja* position of manhood, Motion was also widely taken as street-smart. Moreover, Odhis was considered to be a visitor by most, but a native through his wife by Motion. Accordingly, ethnicity does not fully capture such shifts, and nor do class, age, locality and gender. Such identifications often intersected both with each other and with notions of visitors and natives in unforeseen ways in attempts to claim belonging and legitimise violence. This binary helped me to understand, for instance, how Odhis could have been considered a Kikuyu by Motion, and how Petero could foreground his Luo background at one time and his Kikuyu origins at another. This all shows that the way young men negotiated dominant discourses and imagined intersecting and shifting notions of us and them, 4B versus Bondeni, distillers versus bosses, Kikuyu versus Luo, young men versus women, *wasee* versus *wazee*, *wajanja* versus *mafala*, ghetto versus ghetto *punk*, natives versus visitors, and neighbour versus neighbour, cannot be generalised in any way; they have to be contextualised in terms of space and time to understand both the ambiguity of the notions of us and them at play and their context-bound meanings and material effects.

The common thread that runs through all of the violent conflicts that have occurred over the past decade in Mathare is a growing sense of exclusion among many different social groups. Working gang members felt excluded by (predominantly) female gang bosses and other women, and drew on intersecting gender, class and age identifications and, at times, ethnic hate narratives to claim belonging and entitlement. Newcomers, meanwhile, felt excluded by self-proclaimed natives who were considered to be in control of local resources and pathways to power, and they drew on ethnic hate narratives and dominant discourses on morality to explain wealth disparities and scold 'real ghetto residents.' Self-proclaimed natives felt excluded by visitors who othered them in ethnic and moral terms, and conjured up a strong sense of belonging to the ghetto in return. Interestingly, natives also drew on ethnic hate narratives in othering visitors. The list is long, illustrated by the summing-up of different notions of us and them in the above, and working gang members identified with – and were cast as – belonging to many different groups (e.g. visitor, alcohol distiller, junior men, provider). This caused some working gang members to feel doubly excluded. All of these different notions of us and them traversed each other in particular ways during specific moments of violence. These kaleidoscopic intersections thus helped to explore why social and political relations in Mathare were marked by a growing sense of exclusion, and why some gang members felt more excluded than others. This also helped to tease out differences in choice-making among men who were similarly positioned within particular power configurations.

The jealous neighbour proved to be a powerful trope, because of its shaky underpinnings. It epitomised the 'excluded', namely the one who is looking from the outside in, the one who is barred by powerful others and feels entitled to desire and even claim what these others have. Of course, the jealous neighbour was always them, and never us. Accordingly, self-proclaimed natives deployed this trope to, for instance, legitimise their own relatively stronger socio-economic positions and undermine claims of belonging and entitlement by visitors. Looking at different uses of these oppositional

notions brought the histories of neighbour(hood) relations to the fore of my analyses, and in particular the migration history of the first generation of predominantly women with Kikuyu backgrounds during and after the colonial era described in Chapter 1. The local uses of the terms natives and visitors bring to mind the academic debate on autochtony and allochtony (Geschiere 2009) and the way this has been taken up by scholars on Kenya (*cf.* Lonsdale 2008b). The theoretical framework on autochtony holds that at times of adversity the need to define the other and demarcate authentic native selves by unmasking 'traitors from inside' becomes most poignant (Geschiere 2009:13). Repeatedly, smaller and shifting circles are drawn in attempts to define the self and the other and to fix what is in flux (Geschiere 2009:31). Discourses of belonging are constantly contested and new modes of othering are brought into being to re-affirm their self-evidence. Lonsdale describes how emic terms such as 'natives', 'first-comers' or 'indigenous people' relate to notions of belonging and entitlement 'to the soil' in Kenya (Lonsdale 2008b:306; Kagwanja & Southall 2009:269), and this corresponds with notions of autochtony explored in other regions in Africa (*see also* Geschiere 2009; Marshall-Fratani 2006).

Entitlement to the soil does, however, have different meanings in a ghetto where most residents, including the first generation of women, enact a sense of displacement, or at least a state of 'being in transition.' Nevertheless, groups in Mathare have always struggled over entitlement to resources by drawing on a myriad of legitimating discourses, illustrated in Chapter 5 by the way working gang members imagined themselves as the embodiment of a putative ghettoness. Strikingly, this putative ghettoness was primarily imagined on the basis of intersecting gender, locality and class positions, and not in terms of notions of ethnic belonging. This demonstrates that recurrently smaller and shifting circles of us against them were conjured up to define selves from others and claim belonging and entitlement. Among the different discourses at play in Mathare when it comes to imagining notions of us and them, the binary between natives and visitors was indeed often a powerful trope. Yet, these ideas were not only imagined to exclude others and claim entitlement to resources, but also came up in response to being excluded, as mentioned above. I thus hope to have contributed to academic debates on ethnic and local belonging and entitlement, and to discussions on 'nativism' (*see also* Foner et al. 2014), by showing how the more recent notions of natives and visitors also emerged in Mathare in response to being othered by 'newly arrived' neighbours. This book's insights into articulations of local belonging, and the enactments of alternative subject positions such as ghetto pride, may also provide new ways of understanding how articulations of local, national and ethnic belonging, and popular notions of manhood, pertain to class positions in other ghettos and other marginalised areas in Kenya and worldwide.

Looking for scopes of resistance
The theoretical framework of social navigation (Vigh 2006, 2009) enabled me to bring out how young men, despite situations of extreme insecurity, continued to build their lives against all odds. The metaphor used by Vigh to describe social navigation, namely as the ship that sails through dark and unpredictable waters towards still invisible, and thus

imagined, and shifting social horizon (Vigh 2006), fits the deep uncertainty of daily life for young ghetto men in Kenya. Moved by high waters, rough winds and dangerous storms, these young men navigated social relationships in the moment, with the main aim being to improve their social status as men and ultimately achieve senior manhood, which was their main culturally circumscribed ambition. As such, this framework helped to bring into view how dominant discourses had an impact on these men, and the way emerging opportunities and constraints shaped their possible orientations into the future. This approach did, however, fall short when it came to elucidating how their considerations of the immediate and the imagined pertained to differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men, and how this all had a bearing on individual social navigation struggles.

I have tried to overcome the limits posed by this framework by analysing the young men's life histories against the grain. Looking at processes of subjectivation from the perspectives of the young men led me to focus on their 'negotiation' of discourses. The different ways in which these young men negotiated restrictive subject positions shaped different social navigation trajectories among them. This focus has also helped to highlight the availability of particular alternative positions such as ghetto pride. Accordingly, the concept of negotiation has added to social navigation theory in crucial ways. It allowed me to analyse how individual young men positioned themselves within the context of the highly restrictive forces that moved all of them. Looking at their processes of negotiation enabled me to approach the different modalities in which young ghetto men navigated social relationships and highly unstable circumstances. Facing divorce from his wife, Malik, for instance, shifted his focus from home to enacting ghetto pride through *swag*, which is a mode of positioning that included the othering of *mapunk* as *mafala* (see Chapter 4). Through this, he aimed to counteract his deteriorating social position as a junior man in the now, without losing sight of his ambition to eventually achieve senior manhood. Carving out this particular pathway did, however, also hinder Malik in terms of leaving the gang space, because it involved a major investment of resources. Yet, the analysis showed that he did not dare risk 'losing his value' as a junior man, and he continued on this path. Kingi and Blue made markedly different choices, despite the subject positions and ambitions they shared with Malik. They enacted ghetto pride not through *swag* modes of dressing, but by taking on leadership roles within the gang and *baze*, their families, and their wider social and political networks. In doing so, they both othered young men who were still part of the gang at the age of 30 – and especially those who were addicted to alcohol and drugs – as *mafala.* Looking at the way these young men negotiated dominant discourses, and positioned themselves and others, thus helped me to comprehend differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men.

Analysing the process of negotiation through the narratives of young ghetto men made their social navigation struggles detectable to me from their own points of view. This type of discourse analysis was useful in grasping intersubjective patterns of individual experiences, and as such of situated and embodied histories and agencies. These patterns were not generalisable in absolute terms, but they did shed light on dominant and available alternative discursive frameworks and their mediated effects within particular spatial,

temporal and social contexts. This enabled me to approach how some of these men were, at times, able to claim power and resist oppressive structures, however fleetingly, by constructing the position of ghetto pride. It also allowed me to contextualise ethnicity by analysing contingent notions of us and them based on shifting articulations of local and ethnic belonging from their perspectives.

The focus on choice-making in this book may have brought to mind a rational actor, an agent with full view of the power configurations in which he was positioned. Yet, most agents are not autonomous and rational actors, but make decisions without full awareness, out of impulse and routine, based on desires, and by following the examples of others.[3] This book described how young ghetto men constantly redrew trajectories into the future in relation to current change. These were not intentional, single or linear routes, obvious in direction and with clearly defined destinations. On the contrary, these were often unfolding, multiple, ambiguous and diverging imaginings without fixed outcomes. Young men's movements in and evaluations of the immediate were to a large extent informed by their anxieties, anticipations and aspirations with regard to actualising the position of senior manhood. These affects and desires were constantly contemplated, adapted and reconstructed, and with them so were the pathways to realising them. Intentionality denotes actively motivated actions, and includes "all the ways in which action is cognitively and emotionally pointed *towards* some purpose" (Ortner 2006: 134, emphasis in original). Despite their ambitions, which were infused with the hope of becoming a father and a senior man, their intentions in terms of their day-to-day actions were not always obvious to the young men themselves. Furthermore, most of the social outcomes of their actions were probably unintended, moved as they were by powerful and shifting social formations. It was, however, very difficult to detect if actions and outcomes by my research participants were intended or unintended (or partly both), and how explicit this was to them, as illustrated by Motion's shift in gang alliance and his later reflections (see Chapter 6). Hard divisions between one and the other can thus only serve as opposite ends of a theoretical spectrum that allows careful consideration of different shades in between.

Their reflections on decisions did reveal that the young men in this study had a strong sense of purpose and direction. They were quite aware (*rada* in Sheng) of possibilities and constraints in the now and in the future, and how this related to their increasingly unattainable ambitions. They also often feared meeting an early death and lacking the scope to make change happen in their lives. Most of these men thus alternated between 'having focus' (*mjanja)* and 'feeling powerless' (*fala*), and this book brought out that the way these men downplayed, foregrounded and integrated these seemingly conflicting positions of manhood in different contexts highlighted differences between their decision-making and, accordingly, between individual social navigation struggles.

In this book, a concept of agency came to the fore that encompassed the situational relationality between structure and actor, and which included acts of both compliance and resistance (Davids and Willemse 2014). The different modes in which young ghetto men

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[3] *See also* Butler (1993) and Derrida (1982) for discussions on the notion of 'iterability'.

negotiated dominant discourses, at times upholding while at other times challenging dominant notions and subject positions, revealed that affirming dominant subject positions could also indicate instances of agency. This begs the question as to under which conditions the upholding of a dominant subject position may allude to agency (*see also* Mahmood 2005). Kingi and many other young men in this book were highly invested in adhering to the position of the provider, and even during times of great adversity they took immense pride in at least trying to live up to this masculine ideal. As a consequence, it was not just in succeeding, but also in trying, that agency manifested itself. Interestingly, this type of struggling and hustling (dubbed by them *kung'ang'ana* – Kiswahili for 'to struggle' – or *kuhustle* in Sheng) perhaps affirmed one subject position, but also helped to, at times, resist another. Enacting the role of provider, even against all odds, was also part of enacting ghetto pride and resisting the ghetto boy position, as it underscored their identification as men instead of boys.

The method of analysing biographic narratives against the grain has guided me in analysing the narratives of these young men, and in terms of understanding how "discourse confine[s] and restrict[s] narrators, but also make[s] their actions and choices possible, rendering agency crucial in facilitating their 'being in the world'" (Davids and Willemse 2014:3). It also helped me to listen to silence or to hear (and observe) implicit messages in their words (and – bodily – practices), and understand why my research participants said things (or acted) in certain ways in relation to particular temporal and spatial contexts. The way they argued and how they, often ambiguously, positioned themselves with respect to dominant discourses was rarely clearly articulated. Nevertheless, the young ghetto men continuously reflected "on dominant discourses even when referring to common sense knowledge, whereby these discourses [were] not only acknowledged, but often negotiated and even adjusted" (Willemse 2007:28). The position of ghetto pride was hardly ever explicitly uttered, but it was a ubiquitous subdominant discourse that all of the young men drew from (indicated by terms such as *mjanja* and *kuhustle*). I was only able to fully comprehend this by listening and observing with great care, and by simultaneously understanding and unpacking the oppressive powers of the subject position of the ghetto boy and its devastating material effects.

The analytical distinction between a narrative as a text and its context, which is central to the method developed by Willemse (2007), has been helpful when it comes to understanding intertextualities and discovering which extra meanings were brought to the narrative text. Accordingly, I was able to bring out, for instance, the particular significance of the word *punk* in popular Sheng as compared to international Hip Hop slang, and relate this to the particular ways some young ghetto men imagined ghetto pride. However, without extensive knowledge of the contexts in which these narratives were developed, I could not have applied this method of research and looked for alternative meanings represented in the narrative texts through intertextualities. My long-term and multiple relationships with my research participants, and my long-term experience of working in Mathare, sometimes posed dilemmas, as described in the Introduction. Most of all, however, they have allowed me to both be deeply involved in the lives of my research

participants over many years and gain the knowledge of the contexts and individual life histories that was required to write this book. These relationships also enabled me to extend the process of intersubjective knowledge production to the phase of analysis, because I knew I could count on honest feedback from my research participants on my framings of their narrative texts.

Above all, I hope I have succeeded in bringing out alternative meanings of what it means to be a gang member for young men living in Mathare, and of the role of gangs play in the everyday life of this and other Nairobi ghettos with regard to wider cultural, political and economic frameworks and developments. This in-depth view can enrich gang studies in Kenya, which are still dominated by top-down approaches, and it also has wider implications for gang studies elsewhere.