

# Book review

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Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard, *Surviving gangs, violence and racism in Cape Town: Ghetto Chameleons*, Abingdon: Routledge Advances in Ethnography, 2017

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*Every so often a different perspective on current topics emerges on the gang research scene that changes the orientation of scholars for decades to come. A new way of seeing and understanding the current gang discourse emerges in the work of intrepid researcher, Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard's book, *Surviving Gangs, Violence and Racism in Cape Town: Ghetto Chameleons*. The book answers questions regarding what young men in gangs on the Cape Flats do, how they associate, and how they use mobility to move and change their cultural repertoires in gang and suburban spaces.*

*Ghetto chameleons* is structured into 14 chapters divided into four parts over 289 pages and is a deep dive into longitudinal ethnography with 47 young men (of which four were given in-depth attention) over a period of 12 years. In her own words, the book is an attempt to answer a challenge posed by her supervisor, Andrew D Spiegel, who claimed that white people cannot do research in townships. It is clear that Lindegaard, through the book, answered that challenge admirably well. Throughout the book, Lindegaard adds layers to the initial ethnographies of the four men she studies and analyses, drawing the reader into the world she describes.

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The scholarship on gangs and violence has been thick and predictable with ethnographic accounts of gangs and gangsters. The most recent book, *Gang Town* by Don Pinnock<sup>1</sup> took a new approach to biological criminological understandings of gang violence with an analysis of epigenetics as a means to explain the extreme violence of some gang members. Van der Spuy<sup>2</sup> questioned where his analysis leaves us:

The question is what, if anything, makes areas on the Cape Flats, as the title *Gang Town* implies, so extraordinarily gang-ridden and subject to a kind of violence that goes beyond run-of-the-mill "altercations", so well explicated in a book like *Homicide?* Pinnock's answers – a kind of culture of violence, availability of

firearms, widespread drug usage and low quality unsuitable school education – in a sense explain everything, but leave us wondering precisely what the key variables are.

South African scholarship on gangs has been varied and nuanced. Some scholars have focused on structural analyses of gangs,<sup>3</sup> while others<sup>4</sup> have contested the early explanations provided by those who support the structuralist analysis of the Cape Flats gang problems. Kynoch<sup>5</sup> explores links with Cape Flats gangs in other parts of the country as well as their political connections. He is supported in this work by Glaser<sup>6</sup> who discovers the political role of the ‘Hazels’ and the ‘Dirty Dozen’ gangs in Soweto in the early 1968–1976 period.

But it is the work of Jonny Steinberg<sup>7</sup> and later Steffen Jensen<sup>8</sup> that places the prison gangs and street gangs on the Cape Flats squarely in focus by examining their genesis, development and relationships through using ethnographic research approaches to illuminate the characters and methods of these gangs.

Internationally, Jensen and Rodgers<sup>9</sup> question the roles allocated to the gangs by police officers in Nicaragua and South Africa, and provide us with an opportunity to consider policing approaches to gangs. Several other studies<sup>10</sup> make the same point about police approaches being heavy-handed and having the unintended effect of providing the glue for social solidarity within gangs. But Lindegaard shifts our attention away from what the police do. Her book focusses instead on what young men do, post-apartheid, in predominantly Black and Coloured areas of the Cape Flats and how they see themselves.

### **Unpacking *Chameleons in the Ghetto***

Lindegaard’s work finds its own expression in view of the depth of the characters she follows with her ethnographic approach. She employs

a colourful methodology, including handing her participants cameras to record their daily lives (and that of others) in the ghetto, and skilfully uses these images in her book.

The use of metaphors – such as chameleons for young people who code-switch depending on where they find themselves and how they use mobility to traverse their surroundings – is effective. It provides a new way of seeing what is hidden in plain sight when it comes to gangs and violence and how young people make sense of what they are up against. As Lindegaard explains:<sup>11</sup>

This book is about young men I got to know during my ethnographic fieldwork in Cape Town who behave like chameleons. They move between Black and Coloured townships and White suburbs on a daily basis and change their ‘colour’ to fit in and be safe.

Lindegaard’s chameleons are born post-apartheid. There are a number of other metaphors that are used by young people to label other layers of young people who don’t neatly fit in. We are introduced to *coconuts*, *gangsters* and *chameleons*, all metaphors for young people surviving on the Cape Flats through their own creative mobility. These metaphors are chosen by the young men to describe themselves which Lindegaard appropriates for the purposes of the book. Lindegaard breaks down the social meanings of these terms for her reader. Coconuts are young people who attend former ‘Model C’ schools, speak well, are unfamiliar with the slang of the townships in isiXhosa and are not streetwise. Gangsters are young people who are increasingly in conflict with the law and hang out with people who are involved with violence and crime. Chameleons attend the (mainly white) former ‘Model C’ schools outside the community and become chameleons upon re-entering the community on the Cape Flats.

## Mobility, suburbs and ghettos

A thoroughgoing theme in the study is the examination of mobility. The author introduces us to concepts of residential and transitory mobility by emphasising how young men use their mobility in dealing with the associated risks of living on the Cape Flats and moving between schools in white suburbs and ghettos.

Residential mobility produces and increases social disorganisation, the risks of crime and consequently, increases in crime. Transitory mobility involves leaving the townships and participating in activities in the suburbs, such as schooling and leisure. In her thick description of residential mobility, Lindegaard offers an analysis of class and race-based segregation between townships, ghettos and white suburbs through the lives of her subjects which she follows. She also sets out the consequences of this mobility for her coconuts, gangsters and chameleons.

## Talking cultural repertoires

In Chapter three, a distinction is made between gang, township suburban and flexible cultural repertoires. This discussion is an important contribution to the literature especially on gang studies because of the way it adds to our understanding of street culture and individual choices, cultures and interactions with others. Lindegaard draws on the work of Swidler<sup>12</sup> in defining cultural repertoires as a toolkit that includes a range of actions, habits, skills and styles. Lindegaard's gang repertoires refer to young men who initiate conflict and are involved in or affiliated with gangs. Involvement is specific and points to a range of repertoires with respect to designer clothing, language, music and style. All of these indicators firmly establish the gang cultural repertoires of the youth she describes.

Township repertoires relate to young people who do not disregard conflict and fight back, who are streetwise, but are not necessarily involved in gangs. This is a very useful insight,

which is often missed by scholars and shows the very fine distinction of young people on the periphery of the gang, but who are sometimes labelled as gangsters. In Lindegaard's study these youngsters rarely left the townships.

Suburban repertoires see young men escape and run away from the conflict, like one of her subjects who is not considered streetwise. These individuals often speak English (which they acquired in former 'Model C' schools) in the townships and wear certain types of clothes (often including brightly coloured clothes). They carry books, listen to classical music, carry musical instruments, and are marked as privileged and studious.

Flexible cultural repertoires see young men avoid conflict and confrontation. They also avoid being seen as either streetwise or not. This repertoire, according to Lindegaard is characterised by a shifting between, and adapting to, both suburban and township repertoire.

Chapter four invites the reader to engage with a real-life event of one of the research subjects who becomes involved in violence and a fight. For any ethnographic researcher the tantalising descriptions of the violent event allows for a reflexive stance and deep analytical thrust into the 'relationships between mobility and cultural repertoires' as presented by Lindegaard. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu,<sup>13</sup> Lindegaard provides an analytical tool for understanding how young men position themselves and are influenced by horizons of time and space, with respect to townships and suburbs. In observing and theorising the conflicts of the young men in her study, Lindegaard engages the structure and agency debate so aptly delineated by Bourdieu.<sup>14</sup>

## Outsiders researching locals? Methods and ethics

Chapters five to seven provide us with the field observations methodology used to

conduct the research and addresses the risks in the research process. The strength of the methodology lies in the large sample of young men that Lindegaard followed, and her ability to undertake multiple ethnographies of individual young people. She conducted 130 interviews with the 47 participants, including some inside prison, overcoming numerous challenges, like language. Much happened to the participants, which the author includes in her analysis and she shows how things change over the extended period of her study: some of her participants were incarcerated, while others moved out of the townships.

One of the most interesting sections in the book is the discussion on her position as a white foreign female who was an outsider, researching in black and coloured townships. Her persuasively reflexive stance shows an awareness of her limitations, but she acknowledges that at the same time her outsider identity provided her with the type of access that local researchers could not expect to have. Conversely, it should also be noted that there are limitations with what locals will share with outsiders, and locals can also provide outsiders with information that leads to incorrect assumptions. Lindegaard engages this complexity, and this section of the book provides an interesting exposition of how outsiders (particularly the foreign outsiders) process and analyse the information that their participants give them.

Lindegaard's argument here is persuasive and she answers the challenges posed by her supervisor. She also provides readers with a nuanced discussion of the ethical dilemmas that she faced as a researcher in this environment, for example, knowing about or witnessing violence that participants perpetrate. This is something that Marks<sup>15</sup> also discovered in her research on public order police, as well as Venkatesh<sup>16</sup> who became a gang leader for a

day. Lindegaard chose not to report the violence she witnessed as it would have affected her ability to continue with her research.

The interesting thing about Lindegaard's book is that it appears to be a straight forward ethnographic account of what she calls chameleons, coconuts and gangsters. However, as you continue reading, the book hones in on the lives of four of the participants. As you dive deeper the reader becomes accustomed to names, lives and associations of some of the participants. The simplicity of these observations skilfully provides the foundation for Lindegaard's analysis, which becomes more complex and nuanced as she presents patterns that emerge from the research. For example, in Chapter eight of the book, she shows how the young people are positioned as racist, coconuts, chameleons and gangsters. As the characters start to take on a life of their own, which any effective ethnographic study does, Lindegaard manages to draw her reader into their lives and, in so doing, entices us into the next few chapters.

### **Dispositions, complexities and ambiguities**

In Chapters nine and ten Lindegaard focuses in on the stories of four young men. She presents them as (in their own words) 'real persons' (even though she does not use their real names), and readers can identify with these young men growing up in the townships, and deploying the cultural repertoires she describes. We first meet Gerritjan whose disposition is that of a 'Jock, friend and racist'. The second case is Lethu, who is sensitive, soft and well-off, but is socially excluded, in another league and a coconut. The third presents Ubeid who is effeminate, determined and successful, but who is also a gangster, provider and a chameleon. The last young man, Siphon, is popular, lonely and hustles, but presents as a streetwise humble gangster.

In her analysis, Lindegaard shows how the participants position themselves through a process of intense negotiations and ambiguities, and how doing so allows these young men the opportunity to claim their cultural repertoire in their various settings. The author draws on Erving Goffman's concept of the presentation of the self when interviewing the young men in her study. Goffman highlights how events beyond the control of the individual in showing himself may embarrass or make him ashamed, and in so doing, bring his presentation of the self into question and leaves others feeling hostile. He argues:<sup>17</sup>

It makes everyone present feeling ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, out of, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomy that is generated when the minute social systems of face-to-face interactions breaks down.

Each of the characters that Lindegaard portrays exhibits this crisis of presentation of self and she draws strongly on Goffman in understanding how these moments play out.

Chapter ten sketches the horizons that the four young men see for themselves, and how they understand their motivations in choosing certain actions. Interestingly, Lindegaard here chooses to link how the young men position themselves to both their structural location (after apartheid) and the normative groups with which they associate. She shows how the work echoes the findings of Horowitz and Schwartz<sup>18</sup> who show how gangsters choose to blend into their environments and behave in respectful ways in some spaces (for example, at a cotillion), but who behave quite differently in the same space when insulted. According to Lindegaard, they argue that there is something inherently ambiguous in the rules governing the behaviour of groups of young men:<sup>19</sup>

In this context, normative ambiguity refers to the absence of higher-order rules

for reconciling contradictions between conflicting codes for conduct in situations where one or both parties feel that ill-mannered behaviour of others is a sign of calculated disrespect.

The reader is presented with these complexities in the thick description of places within which the four young men travel and inhabit. We see how they move outside their segregated places in the ghettos and townships and enter the suburbs for education, employment, crime and social interaction. In the process of what Lindegaard describes as this '*transitory mobility*,' the young men change their social positioning to fit the environments they move into and engage.

This finding is insightful, as previous literature on gangs in South Africa has not gone into such descriptive detail of its ethnographic research subjects. Through this data, Lindegaard shows how mobility has different effects on the positioning of both Coloured and Black participants and the harassment they experience in both the suburb and ghetto to ensure that in both spaces they fit in. In exposing this mobility, Lindegaard emphasises that the young men are not what they position themselves to be.

The benefit of Lindegaard's longitudinal study is that the reader is introduced (in Chapter twelve) to the changes that the young men undergo across the duration of the study. The length of time it took for the researcher to return to Cape Town – after the initial introduction in 2005, follow ups in 2006 and 2008, and return in 2017 – meant that things had shifted for the four participants. Lindegaard had negotiated the terms of writing about the four young men, allowing them to see the text and comment on it and to interpret their responses. This type of ethnographic methodology brings the researcher closer to the researched and it is unsurprising that it brought out the emotions

and anxieties that she addresses in this chapter. After she returns in November 2008 and checks in on her participants, she describes how interacting with them requires of her to walk a tight balancing routine as much has changed for the participants.

In this chapter then, we see the racist performing suburban repertoires, the coconut moving from suburban to flexible repertoires, the continuous flexible performances of the ghetto chameleon and the fatal end of the gangster performance. In addition, she documents the passages of other participants (she interviewed ten out of fifteen participants in 2006 and fourteen out of fifteen participants responded to her text in her book), which is very useful.

Chapter thirteen draws consequences for the research agenda and future research, with particular emphasis on mobility and cultural repertoires, racism, gangs and flexible repertoires. Lindegaard makes a call for research on development of a theory on mobility and crime; on violence as positioning and a theory of gangsterism as performances. The concluding chapter pulls together the threads set out in the first three chapters by following the current lives of the participants going into adulthood, and mapping how they have changed their lives – in some cases continuing their education, ceasing racist behaviour, and moving from being gangsters to store managers.

## Conclusion

Ethnographies are never easy to accomplish successfully because they involve following real people with real lives. Doing this kind of research drains the emotions of the researcher and requires patience when trying to make sense of events as they unfold, to discern what your subjects are really saying and to stay sane in the process. In a longitudinal research process like the one that Lindegaard accomplished, it is much more difficult to keep track of your

participants, and given the size of her sample this was enormously complex.

The ethnographic approach of Lindegaard brings a fresh perspective to what scholars have studied for decades on the Cape Flats. The book allows us to see that gangsters are much more than just gangsters: not homogeneous, mobile, and with perspectives about themselves that they use flexibly, depending on their environment.

The study exposes a link between crime and mobility that requires much more engagement. Much can be said about the four principal characters who appear in her research, but in the final analysis, these characters are young people with whom we can all identify with and know. Lindegaard has, through this book, called for a more general theory of mobility and crime, which is well overdue.

This book is required reading for any scholar addressing this theory and exploring the links between gangs, cultural repertoires and mobility.



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## Notes

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