CHAPTER 9

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URBANIZATION

Youth Gangs and Street Cultures

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SIMON SLEIGHT AND JASPER HEEKS

CITY streets have long hosted groups of young people labeled as gangs. Unique to no single period or place, gangs nonetheless proliferated in the modern era, seemingly synonymous with rapid urban growth. For the late nineteenth century, the almost simultaneous emergence of recognized gang cultures in multiple city settings is especially striking. In February 1870, newspapers in Melbourne first noted the public outrages of "larrikins", bands of mostly male working-class youths with a liking for showy attire, affray, and petty theft. Across the Pacific, groups of "hoodlums" troubled the San Francisco press from April 1871, charged initially with disrupting the picnicking activities of polite society. The following October, several of Manchester's "scuttlers"—lads aged in this instance from twelve to sixteen—were brought before the court for public disorder and fined for hurling stones during pitched battles along the city's Rochdale Road. To the south, Birmingham's "slogging gang" attracted similar public attention just six months later, while in 1874 the term "cornermen" was first applied to criminal factions in both Dublin and Liverpool. Back in the southern hemisphere (and indicative of a transnational circuit of gang reportage), journalists in South Africa were also anxious by this time about local varieties of Australian larrikins, said to be using foul language and upsetting women about town.[1] The popularizing of further collective nouns would follow, alongside more detailed analysis of gang members' cultural repertoires—their appearances, speech, and practices—and speculation on cultural similarities and differences. Writing after his round-the-world tour in 1895, for instance, American author Mark Twain opined that "Novelties are rare in cities which represent the most advanced civilization of the modern day" and

contended that an array of impulsive youth—including larrikins, "loafers," "roughs," "toughs," and "bummers"—were essentially alike.[2]

Encompassing multiple urban communities for the period circa 1850–1930, the international phenomenon of youth gangs and the fashioning of associated youth cultures are addressed in what follows. A number of interwoven aims are pursued: to outline the urban contexts and territorial configurations sponsoring the efflorescence of gangs; to scrutinize the values, interests, and activities that gang cultures yielded; to ponder global patterns and cleavages; to furnish a detailed case study of the cultural dynamics and international influence of Australian larrikin gangs; to reflect on pertinent approaches and sources for historians new to the theme; and to broach non-criminal aspects of associational street-based youth cultures. Mark Twain's thesis is also tested—did similarities in the nature of gangs around the world outweigh any differences in the period concerned?

Following literary theorist Raymond Williams, for the purposes of our analysis we eschew notions of "culture" that privilege cultivated learning or high artistic forms. Instead, we define culture as "ordinary": a lived expression of everyday meaning, not the preserve of elites. "Youth culture" hence applies here to those rough and respectable cultural pursuits adopted, adapted, and generated by young people, a group encompassing those regarded as youthful within their shifting social worlds. Grounding our discussion within the specific urban settings we wish to explore, the deployment of "street cultures" within our chapter title is deliberate, referencing those public modes of being and activities that characterize our case study groups—urban youth gangs—and relate in one way or another to conditions of city living for the period concerned. As Williams further insists, "culture and production are related."[3] We agree. It follows that one should not regard culture as free-floating and seek instead to identify the influence of tethers—factors such as work and housing—in constraining and widening the scope of cultural practices. We begin in this vein by outlining as concisely as possible the commonalities and specificities of the urban environments in which, from around 1850 to 1930, so many gangs appeared and were sustained.

Urbanization and Urban Conditions

Rapid urbanization stimulated youth gangs and their street cultures. In 1899, American statistician Adna Weber published his detailed international survey on *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century*. The evidence presented was stark. Whereas in 1851 Britain alone hosted more than 10 percent of its population in cities of more than one hundred thousand inhabitants in size, by the early 1890s it had been joined in that category by seventeen other nations, of which eight—including Britain—hosted more than 20 percent of their citizens in cities similarly defined. The vast majority of these rapidly urbanizing countries were Western (also counting the Australian

colonies as a single group). Retaining the one hundred thousand figure as a minimum criterion, a later team of demographers calculated that by 1925 around 20 percent of the global population was urban: a surge that again masked an unequal distribution given that 39.9 percent of those residing in "developed" nations were city dwellers, compared with just 9.3 percent of people in countries deemed "less developed."[4]

Behind the numbers were human stories, and the tramping of feet. Seeking financial betterment and yearlong employment, people moved en masse from rural areas and smaller towns toward cities. In turn they started families, further boosting the urban population and giving it a notably youthful face. As a case in point, in 1870 one contemporary observer noted that the boom city of Melbourne was "perspiring juvenile humanity."[5] More than two-fifths of the city's population was fourteen years of age or younger at this time, a proportion echoed in many British conurbations, in bigger American cities, and selectively beyond.[6]

City-born youth found themselves in the vanguard of an accelerating modernity, surrounded by an increasing range of urban pleasures and pitfalls, and subject to the amplified concerns of "child-savers" who perceived city living as harmful and sponsored schemes of removal to rural areas. Urban living conditions were indeed often harsh, with crowded and unhealthy accommodation around points of arrival and high population densities wherever rent was relatively low. For city youth, work insecurity was also especially common, and youthful solidarities sometimes cohered around types of work enjoyed to a greater or a lesser extent—newsboys fraternized with one another, for instance, so too did young women employed in canning factories. Unless formally apprenticed to a trade, during times of employment repetitive tasks and poor pay were norms across an array of jobs from light manufacturing and shop work to street selling. Deskilling, or the breaking up of work-related processes into discrete tasks overseen by individuals, could sponsor frustration. In *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889–1939* (1981), Stephen Humphries found that the desire to escape a "life of monotonous and low-paid labour" was highly significant in sponsoring gang membership. His conclusions were based on hundreds of interviews gathered across Britain. Frederic Thrasher's fieldwork in 1920s Chicago led him to identify a broader range of drivers. Here the stated determination to escape sometimes violent family life was coupled with an intention to form meaningful bonds within a context of educational inefficiency, religious formalism, political indifference, poor pay and monotony in work, unemployment, and "lack of opportunity for wholesome recreation." Deteriorating housing and sanitary conditions exacerbated these stimuli for gang membership, Thrasher found.[7]

With their paid labor concluded, or without employment, urban youth could socialize at home (most likely with siblings and parents in crowded rental properties) or look to a wider range of longer-standing and emergent city spaces for amusement. Their public presence boosted due to the slow enforcement of compulsory schooling legislation in the late nineteenth century, young people's socializing frequently took

place in streets, parks, and markets, or else—for Western youth—in such spaces as low theaters, billiard saloons, and early forms of cinema promising cheap entry.

Some social commentators identified excitement and the promise of city attractions such as these as causal factors for urban growth.[8] A number then went on to link the conditions of modern urban life to crime and youthful "deviancy," a word popularized and given a specific urban edge in the early twentieth century. For American sociologist Louis Wirth, writing in the 1930s, the heterogeneity and concentration of life in large cities led to frequent but impersonal contact, to status confusion, and to an emphasis on outward appearance. Individual dysfunction and social malady followed all too easily, Wirth argued: lacking the common ground of smaller-scale village or town life, ethical systems were in flux and anonymity could sponsor alienation. Out of earshot of these discussions, young people fashioned their own cultural responses to the opportunities and hardships of urban life in cities ranging from Liverpool to Lagos, and from San Francisco to Trinidad, and historians debate whether economic want or disposable (albeit limited) income and free time nurtured gang formation.[9] To understand the resultant street cultures, we next need to consider the granularities of space and of territory, deploying illustrative evidence of cultural practices as we proceed.

The Territories of Youth

Urbanization and its accompanying spatial and population changes helped generate youth cultures informed and defined by their urban territory. Thrasher most famously presented the notion that cities are seedbeds for gang formation in his classic work, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (1927). Thrasher's qualitative comparative analysis and taxonomy represented the culmination of eight years' observation and interaction. Although the project was parochial, frequently imprecise, and particularly reflective of contemporary political and academic currents, Thrasher vividly described youthful imagination, collaboration, and organization as part of the first forensic study of juvenile gang development and gang life. For Thrasher, gangs were a phenomenon of adolescence and he defined them as follows:

> The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.[10]

Urbanization and urban spatial dynamics played crucial roles in Thrasher's natural history of gangs. He drew on the contemporary urban ecology theory of Chicago

sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, who conceived of the city as a dynamic organic ecosystem with discernible patterns. The effects of Chicago's rapid urbanization, industrialization, and experience of multiple waves of immigration were identified as generating fertile conditions for gangs. First, a changing urban landscape encouraged gangs to emerge in the interstices of the growing city, and Thrasher stressed the impact that the built environment had on structuring the possibilities of outdoor activity. Second, Thrasher considered gangs not merely as products of the city, but of a specific and clearly defined part of the metropolis, the "zone of transition." This zone was a poor, deteriorating, and unsightly area of industry and transitory populations set between the central business district and more stable residential wards. For Thrasher, youth gangs and other collectivities were a natural response from the city's new arrivals to the social dislocations caused by urban life. High population density and overcrowding forced large numbers of young people to socialize on the streets and form their own micro-societies.[11]

Urban growth provided opportunities for juvenile gangs. Throwing stones was a popular amusement for youth across the world, but in late nineteenth-century Birmingham, "[s]logging each other in gangs became the new self-organized distraction, pastime, even sport."[12] For Philip Gooderson, Birmingham was "maturing and expanding," and slogging gangs were an example of "Young Brum" "exploring its new streets, its new social space."[13] For Melbourne at a similar time, Simon Sleight examines the interstitial, in-between possibilities for gangs in an urban landscape replete with vacant lots, laneways, and building sites. On the corner of Fitzroy and Gertrude Streets to the north of the city center, for example, Melbourne's larrikins hauled around leftover blocks of stone from the construction of the adjacent Granite Terrace in 1858 to form a stage. Here city youth would act out and sing scenes from popular theater with the aid of an old songbook published in London. The many spaces between the slabs of stone became "a favourite playground for boys of more than one generation," observed "A Fitzroy Boy" in 1896, his anecdotes substantiated by records of complaints from local residents regarding "young hopefuls" occupying the location for large portions of the day, swearing and enjoying outdoor suppers of pilfered crayfish and alcohol.[14]

As in suburban Melbourne, the coalescence of gangs and associated street cultures into territorial configurations was a universal phenomenon. The connection between gangs and place is most evident in their names: "Bengal Tigers" (Bengal Street, Manchester), "Calton Entry" (Calton, Glasgow), "Millers Point push" (Sydney), and "Cordova Street gang" (Vancouver)—to note just a few. Scholarship on late Victorian British gangs, drawing on demographic information in court and police reports and geographical associations found in witness statements, has further emphasized the significance of territory. Heather Shore argues that territory was a new defining feature of London gangs and the commentary surrounding them. In Manchester and Birmingham, moreover, territorial ties were found to have superseded those based on ethnicity, religion, or trade. The founding of football teams also promoted stronger

links with "turf." Gangs often displayed intense local pride and rivalries were fierce. Territory was staunchly defended, and even the slightest infringement, regarded as a deliberate provocation, was met with violence. In Manchester's Ancoats neighborhood, youths would travel in small groups to deter attack, but dozens could be rallied to maintain gang honor. Elsewhere, rivalries were spawned in the densely packed slums of towns in Trinidad; "amalaita" gang conflicts in Durban were distinctly spatial and had rural antecedents in the territorial nature of cattle herding; and hostilities between gangs of boys in Mumbai—brought to the fore each year during the Muharram Islamic festival—intensified and became more territorial in the 1880s and 1890s.[15]

The urban "youthscape"—the overlapping, underlying, and competing terrain produced by young people—featured key sites for gangs.[16] Street corners, public houses, rum shops, and temples held strategic significance. Certain open spaces were designated as battlegrounds to which multiple groups would venture for skirmishes. Music halls played host to hostilities and rowdy behavior, while vacant ground—as we saw in Melbourne—was the perfect spot to while away time free from adult supervision. Gangs' claims on urban territory brought them into conflict with adults and the authorities. Juanita De Barros positions "centipede" (*santapee*) gangs at the center of struggles for urban space in Georgetown, British Guiana, in the early twentieth century. Centipedes' distinct use of streets, bridges, and parks for recreation, festivity, and to support their livelihoods contributed to intra-class and racial tensions in an expanding city and clashed with elite designs and perceptions of public space. De Barros reveals the military influences on gangs, who had organized structures with captains and colonels. In 1924, for instance, the "Peppersauce Team" fought the "Berlin Team," whose name may have alluded to Berlin's "enemy" status during the First World War. In a similar vein, scuttlers in north west England re-enacted battles from the Franco-Prussian War and Russo-Turkish conflict in the 1870s, and dance societies in Tanzanian coastal towns performed the "bom," which mimicked German military drill.[17]

Intersecting with territorial and topographical configurations of youth culture, urban contours of race and racism also strongly influenced gang cultures. In the barrack ranges of Port of Spain in Trinidad in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the inequality of a racist plantation society caused young people to form gangs (bands) for drinking, gambling, and fighting. More than just mirrors of circumstance, though, these gang members were social actors who constructed a defiant subculture and used the annual Carnival to ridicule and undermine their economic and political oppressors through masquerade and song. Similarly, amalaita gangs of African houseboys in early twentieth-century Durban adapted Zulu rural cultural and organizational forms in response to racial oppression and economic hardship. Drawing on oral histories, Paul La Hausse interprets amalaita gangs as aggressive and defensive forms of migrant association that served to reinforce the rural roots of members faced with the new conditions of town life. Alongside the amalaita, the *isihabahaba* were another youth

subculture of domestic workers in Durban that exhibited wariness toward their new urban context and sought alternative forms of social security. The isihabahaba used vocabulary associated with herding power relations, appropriated female styles of dress, and participated in homosexual practices in order to avoid sexual contact with the small numbers of urban black women, who were referred to as prostitutes.[18]

African youth in Durban made themselves known physically and sonically in the city's streets. Within a context of conflict between young migrant workers and white residents over private and public spaces, and new regimes of etiquette and discipline, amalaita occupied and ran through the streets at night, performed the *ingoma* Zulu dance, and announced themselves by playing harmonicas. Stick-fighting traditions were transferred from the countryside, and amalaita engaged in ritualized fights and demonstrations. Groups of youths also carried sticks as weapons and used them to attack trespassers and Black police officers, who were targets for gangs' socioeconomic frustrations. Public space was thus a platform for presentations of youthful resistance. Lynette Finch interprets Australian larrikin gangs' visible use of the street as a means of demonstrating their opposition to middle-class morals and commercial interests during a time in which previously multifunctional public spaces were remade into open boulevards for shopping and strolling.[19] Street-based defiance and display were hence also integral to larrikinism.

Common Threads?

As youth gangs held the streets and defended their turf, there was a vital aesthetic element to their identity. Gang members across the world were intensely fashion conscious. Hoodlums were known as swaggering felonious dandies, Parisian "apaches" sported colorful shirts and silk scarves; amalaita added beads and bracelets to their big pants and heeled boots; and writer Clarence Rook's 1899 London hooligan composite, Alf, was similarly sharply dressed and streetwise. Outfits were produced from accessible materials and items (often tailored by female relatives or girlfriends), bought through payment plans, or pilfered. Youths were dressed to kill, and clothing could double as a weapon. Scuttlers' thick belts, for instance, were wrapped round the wrist and whirled at opponents. Large ornate buckles would inflict serious damage to the head and would be taken as spoils of war. With donkey fringes and Mohican haircuts, the younger generation stood out in the crowd and set themselves apart from their elders. Uniforms also served as collective symbols of gang identity. Variations in fabric and color existed between groups: velvet and plaid caps either side of the Thames in turn-of-the-century London, or black or red ribbons in Durban a decade later. In the 1920s, street gangs in Tokyo would target university students, and the leader of the "Rabbits" gang wore a Keio University cap and pin taken from victims along with his gang tattoo. Tokyo schoolboys were also warned not to mimic gang styles to avoid

being mistaken for rivals and attacked.[20] Many gang members took great pride in their sartorial sense, which signaled status and toughness and grabbed public attention.

Journalists dissected gang members' ensembles, cartoonists exaggerated and satirized appearances, and police and press notices spread stylistic details far and wide. Chris Brickell notes the influence of international print culture and imported identities on young people in New Zealand, for instance, while according to David Ambaras, Japanese *yotamono* youths derived gang names and slang from American films in the early twentieth century, with groups called the "Indians" or "Apaches." Derogatory Native American imagery traveled widely in popular culture from the late nineteenth century onward, and the label "apache" was applied in Paris and St. Petersburg. Yotamono also modeled themselves on the people with whom they shared the streets: actors, gamblers, hawkers, and construction workers. The cinema and historical novels gave new life to images of Japanese folk heroes, which provided inspiration for the yotamono just as British and Irish outlaw traditions had done for Australian larrikins fifty years earlier. Melissa Bellanta also emphasizes the global influences of the popular stage and of touring troupes on the modes of self-presentation of poor urban youth and calls for the greater use of theatrical sources by historians. For instance, female larrikins modeled themselves on the mannerisms and costumes of burlesque characters, and male larrikins attending theaters in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney were avid fans of the imposing and macho "coons" depicted in American blackface minstrelsy.[21] Young people asserted themselves visibly in the city, their territorial claims reinforced by their sartorial choices.

Genus Larrikin

While British and American popular culture would inspire street gangs worldwide from the nineteenth century onward, influences did not always fan out from "core" to "periphery." A detailed consideration of Australian larrikin gangs, introduced earlier, demonstrates this amply, taking us inside a street-based culture ripe with meaning and helping us understand the international influence of rowdy Australian youth.

By attacking the police and Chinese communities, abusing pedestrians and dressing flamboyantly, larrikins generated intense, sustained, and often sensational social commentary across the Australian colonies. Foreign travelers and emigrants in Melbourne, and later Sydney, were compelled to comment on larrikins, who were an urban presence with a bad reputation. One visitor from Bulawayo, for instance, was relieved not to have fallen foul of any larrikin gangs (or "pushes" in the local parlance) in Melbourne, despite hearing dreadful stories about them prior to arrival.[22]

The intricacies of larrikin gang culture are borne out in investigative writings composed by the police or by journalists. A series of articles published in January 1882 by the Melbourne newspaper *The Argus* is especially useful in this regard, and unusual

in that the unnamed reporter attempted through close observation to understand rather than merely sensationalize his subjects. The fourth piece in the series saw the reporter set out on a Saturday afternoon to gather information on larrikin customs. After observing a slanging match between groups of larrikins on the flanks of the Yarra River—featuring volleys of expletives "the publication of which would disgrace any newspaper"—the journalist continued on foot to take in scenes of raffish young people bathing in the Corporation Baths and parading the streets of suburban Hotham prior to nightfall. There the writer encountered larrikins in twos and threes, sporting "their well-known swagger" as well as dark and tight-fitting "Tommy Dodd" jackets accessorized with braiding and buttons (and inspired by a British swell character and comic stage song). Flared tweed trousers with striking patterns, heeled boots with steel caps and mock lacing, gaudy neckwear, felt hats with broad velvet bands, precisely cut oiled hair, and silver, brass, or engraved bone rings encompassing fingers and neckties completed an arresting ensemble.

Continuing his observations of larrikin youth culture, in inner-suburban Carlton, the peripatetic *Argus* journalist next observed bands of young men on vacant allotments, boasting about fighting with policemen, performing a dance routine featuring steps recently acquired, and singing with the aid of a concertina. By 8:00 p.m. the writer had reached Melbourne's city center. In front of a theater he observed dozens of larrikins chewing tobacco, expectorating, and flirting with larrikin girls, while outside a nearby pub he watched larrikins denigrating passersby with ribald observations and pithy insults, treading on women's dresses, and knocking off the hats of any pedestrians who objected. At Mace's boxing saloon, farther along the street, a revolving stage featured youth demonstrating boxing and dancing, watched by a rowdy audience. Come 11:00 p.m. and the unflagging journalist studied larrikins and larrikinesses disputing the ownership of a stolen purse beneath a veranda at the Eastern Market, before thirty minutes later a fight erupted between two couples, which ended in torn clothing. He concluded his article with an encouragement to readers to go beyond the newspapers' court reports in seeking to understand larrikin culture, noting that no charges had been issued—let alone any arrests made—pertaining to anything he had seen.[23] That much of the noisy and antisocial behavior so carefully noted was not in fact illegal went unremarked.

As a result of the summarizing and recirculating of articles such as this, journalists in different cities writing on the cultural expressions of gangs became very well informed about larrikins, presenting news of the latest incidents and offering international comparisons for the benefit of their readers. Looking abroad helped local journalists to define local and national identities and shape transnational categories of youth. The transoceanic circulation of people and information helped the subject of larrikins go global, and after 1870 firsthand encounters and news coverage spread talk of Australian larrikins rapidly. Exchanges within the British empire took news of Australian larrikins to each inhabited continent, and mention was also made of "the world's worst juveniles" in Argentina, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. A close

analysis of overseas responses to Australian larrikins from the late nineteenth century uncovers some of the extended conversations about urban youth gangs and their associated street cultures.

Cities were characterized by their street gangs, and vice versa. In 1908, an article in the *Pearson's Weekly* (London) listed eleven slang terms for youthful ruffians used across the world: "hooligan," "larrikin," "hoodlum," "apache," "santapee," "copperhead" (New Orleans), "lazzaro" (Naples), "budmash" (Calcutta), "peaky blinder" (Birmingham), "tough" or "Bowery Boy" (New York), and "scorpion" (Gibraltar). Later that same year, a more detailed comparison between cities was made in the *Mexican Herald* (Mexico City). According to an article on "Rowdies and Hooligans," as lawless youths troubled residents in Melbourne, London, and New York, groups of similar young men on street corners were not to be found in Mexican cities and towns, owing to the swift and efficient actions of the police.[24] The same writer also detailed the insults offered to women in the streets and parks of Madrid, noted the progress made by the police of Buenos Aires in making their city safer, and took considerable pride in overturning the tag of "barbarous Mexico" with pointed comments directed toward "boastful communities" overseas.

In Britain, press coverage of Australian larrikin gang culture in the 1870s reassured the public that local miscreants, though troublesome, were not as bad as their colonial cousins. For example, a roving Cumbrian reporter composed the following from Melbourne in 1872: "The curse of Australia is its youthful population, or 'larrikins.' They are wholly uneducated, and for rowdiness and independence beat anything Europe can produce, either the London street boy or Parisian gamin."[25] Larrikins' infamy in Britain was assured when a letter from cricketer Lord Harris— one of the most influential figures in the game at the time, known for his decency and sportsmanship—recounted the moment he was "struck by some 'larrikin' with a stick" as spectators rioted in Sydney in 1879.[26] The vituperation towards larrikins soon escalated. Larrikin opportunism as police were diverted from city beats by Ned Kelly's bushrangers led the Melbourne correspondent at the *Globe* to describe the larrikin as "the most obnoxious kind of ruffian in the world. He is as brutal as he is cowardly, foul-tongued, and skulking."[27] Within a year, writer and politician James Inglis had gone further and called the Sydney larrikin "the most detestable creature on the earth's surface."[28]

Such striking depictions of antisocial behavior informed the impression of larrikins in Britain and prepared the ground for use of the term to designate local youths. Echoing the description provided by the correspondent at the *Globe*, an article in the *Portsmouth Evening News* referred to the groups of "cowardly brutes" that had committed an unprovoked assault in London as "ruffians of the Larrikin class."[29] While there were localized complaints of unruliness nationwide over the coming years, larrikins were also associated with an apparent increase in juvenile gang activity in London. In October 1881, a week after the *Pall Mall Gazette* compared the street-fighting gangs of Clerkenwell and Islington to larrikins and

hoodlums, the *Spectator* referenced the larrikins who "make the streets of Islington impassable on Sunday evenings" as it again implored the Home Secretary to deal with the deteriorating situation.[30]

The phrase "London larrikins"—used to describe socialist-associated mob disorder in 1886—was later deployed as part of the panic over territorial street gangs in the aftermath of the 1888 Regent's Park murder, a stabbing committed by one of the "Tottenham Court Road Lads." This was a full decade before the adoption of the term "hooligan" by the press to label the city's gangs in August 1898.[31] The influence of the so-called periphery of empire on the core was underscored by comments made by the Lord Mayor of London in January 1889. After two gang members were charged with assault, the Lord Mayor regretted to say that the larrikin element had made its way from Australia into the metropolis.[32] In the 1890s, "London larrikin" gangs regularly occupied urban space, fought one another, and terrorized other citizens. Activities came to a head in 1898 after a sequence of court appearances and incidents across the capital, but most notably in south London. Here, the exploits of the notorious "Hooligan" gang captured the national imagination and a new youth descriptor was born.

Britain was not the only place where the influence of Australian larrikin gang culture was felt. Numerous and detailed reports were reprinted in New Zealand, and "larrikin" quickly entered popular usage there in 1871 through stories about urban areas in Otago. Larrikin gangs in New Zealand also distinguished themselves from others with their clothing, bad language, and violence, and historian Chris Brickell considers larrikinism a new mode of youthful self-expression and autonomy in an increasingly unsettled and class-conscious society. Cultural influences came from Australia, and Brickell notes how larrikin masculinity in New Zealand was informed by Ned Kelly's frontier rebelliousness. Boys in 1894 role-played the outlaw in Auckland's Albert Park, and a new generation of larrikins was inspired by the world's first feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906).[33] Larrikins in Melbourne had long been inspired by Kelly's violent escapades, following the unfolding chase, capture, and execution of their folk hero from the late 1870s, and the reception of the subsequent film foreshadowed further associations between early cinema and gang-related activities.

Just as with their counterparts across the Tasman Sea, there would be reaction to New Zealand larrikins elsewhere in the British Empire. In 1882, a reader responded to an editorial in the *Ceylon Observer* and defended the good people of New Zealand, who were being tarnished by the exploits of their youngsters. In Cape Town in 1888 it was also recognized that "the larrikin" was not now solely an Australian product as the city was "becoming infected with the same plague."[34] There the "Woodstock Lads" would congregate, throw stones, and take possession of the streets at night. Residents implored the police to protect them from the tyranny of wild colonial boys, described in correspondence as "Our Larrikins." In several southern African cities, and also in Mauritius, gangs of white and Black youths vexed adults by making music, playing

dangerously, and wearing respectable clothes that, in the minds of their detractors, hardly suited their raucous behavior.

Approaches to Urban Youth Gangs and Street Cultures

Since the early 1970s, youth gangs and their cultural practices have often been understood globally with recourse to the hugely influential sociological work of Stanley Cohen. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1973), Cohen popularized the term "moral panic" and applied it to the representation of contemporary British youth. The first page of his opening chapter summarized his overarching thesis and merits quoting at some length:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially-accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.[35]

Cohen went on to argue that "over reporting" by media outlets was a common response to perceived youthful deviancy. Exaggeration of the severity of an incident, the numbers involved, and any associated violence was commonplace, he maintained, and sensationalist language and melodramatic flourishes heightened a sense of fear.[36]

Holding Cohen's ideas in mind for the late nineteenth century, perhaps it is no coincidence that the rapid emergence of youth gangs globally occurred at just the same historical moment in which printing presses the world over ran hot, with many more newspapers than ever before coming into existence, each with an editor hungry for eye-catching copy and jostling to become a leading social authority. Contemporaries at the time perceived a link, too. Statistician Adna Weber commented in 1899 on "the blaze of an Argus-eyed press" in probably exaggerating urban viciousness and criminality,[37] while in Melbourne references were made in parliamentary debates during 1874 to "a sort of mania" among newspaper editors concerning larrikins.[38]

As foreshadowed by these commentators, caution should be urged with deploying the "moral panic" concept as the natural point of entry for understanding youth cultures. Students writing on gangs often push the idea too far, picking up on the use of "creation" in Cohen's book title to determine that gangs are (and were) media myths.

Instead, it is more productive to approach the real-world cultural practices of youthful gang members and the reportage on their behavior as occurring within a repeating circuit. Hence, we find seventeen-year-old bootmaker Richard Turvey, noted by a Melbourne paper as proclaiming himself "King of the Richmond Larrikins" in 1871, and John-Joseph Hillier, dubbed by the *Salford Reporter* as "King of the Scuttlers" in 1894, subsequently appearing on local streets wearing a jersey bearing the moniker stitched in capitals.[39]

If the notion of "moral panic" as a mode of analyzing youthful gang cultures requires prudence, then the merits and shortcomings of other conceptual apparatus also warrant consideration. Spatial approaches, advocated earlier, offer an opportunity to ground gang activities with a finely understood urban terrain, but if applied bluntly they can underemphasize change through time in favor of geographical factors. Linked to space, factors of scale also command careful thought. Those commencing research need to weigh up the relative merits of pursuing a detailed case study of individuals involved in gangs, an assessment of a particular group or city, a national comparison, or an international survey. More complex is the researcher's stance on semiology versus materiality as framing devices for understanding youth cultures. The former approach—advanced most prominently by Roland Barthes and applied to British youth in Dick Hebdige's influential *Subculture: The Theory of Style* (1979)—reads surface signs in order to infer meaning. For Hebdige, this entailed interpreting outré style as a form resistance to the dominant political system. The latter methodology—preferred by Bellanta and Sleight, among others—seeks to locate such facets as appearance within the material contexts of production and advocates determining how clothes were manufactured or purchased, for instance, as well as where and when they were worn.[40]

Also deserving of consideration in analyzing the cultural expressions of youth gangs is the interplay of gang activities with a range of social demarcations, among them relative age, race, class, and gender. Traditionally, scholars of gangs have been very slow to address adequately the last of these factors, especially regarding young women's connection to gang life. Seen as add-ons, absentees, or mere victims, generations of (mostly male) scholars afforded girls only background positions. Recent attempts to rescue young women from such condescension have started to redress this imbalance. The active role of young women as gang members and gang leaders has been brought to light. In New Zealand, female larrikins were an ever-growing and confident street presence as the nineteenth century drew to a close, and one well-known leader and her gang met with disapproval at a Sunday night dance in the rural town of Te Aroha in 1891. Women were also central to centipedism in British Guiana after 1895. The "Tigress of Tiger Bay" and "Daisy the Centipede Queen" were prominent gang members, and De Barros reveals that the epithet "santapee" could mean a "brawling woman" or "foul-mouthed prostitute." In Trinidad, women were not only influential in encouraging male members of carnival bands in the second half of the nineteenth century but also formed all-female fighting gangs, such as the

"Mourcelines" and "Don't care dams."[41] The exploits of sisters Alice Sugar, Piti Belle Lily, and others earned them immortality in calypso legend—an example of a nontraditional historical source useful for recovering marginal experiences.

Given the more restrictive societal codes endured by women historically, participation in gang activities, and particularly in instances of fighting or assault, casts the young women involved as especially rebellious. This is all the more so when one further considers the constraints on women in accessing some of the city spaces that nurtured gang life, such as hotel saloons. Problems of classification in historical sources have also been raised by Melissa Bellanta. She notes the tendency of Australian commentators, and later historians more widely, to dismiss rowdy female youth appearing in public as "prostitutes," a slur that has helped prevent these young women from receiving their due. Police preferences for arresting male gang members—based presumably on the assumption that they presented a greater physical threat—also underplay the street presence of female gang members in associated records, Bellanta observes.[42] Further research on the histories of gangs around the world is needed to determine parallel or conflicting trends.

For historians, accounting for the disappearance, or abeyance, of a phenomenon is far more difficult than charting its rise, given the relative lack of contemporary coverage. Individual motivations for leaving gang life have been broached, however, with marriage identified as a key point of transition.[43] It is also highly probable that comparatively few youthful gang members historically have been "full-time," usually mixing their evening or weekend socializing with forms of work. Alterations in the apportioning of time by force of circumstance or by choice could hence see an individual drift out of gang life, where permitted. Incarceration for extended periods could elicit the same effect, with such penalties also inviting scholars to consider the impact of wider social forces. Within all societies phases of judicial repression (often including the handing down of "exemplary sentences" to deter further comparable offending) have impacted on the activities of youth gangs. Physical punishment of offenders—strongly advocated in the nineteenth century—has also intersected in complex ways with gang membership. Waves of social reform warrant further consideration, too; from the establishment of youth clubs to the opening of urban playgrounds, progressively minded intervention has exerted a periodic influence. The shifting sands of economic opportunity probably also play a role, though as noted earlier, historians diverge on the effects of squalor and plenty.

Perhaps more significant in explaining the ebbing of gangs like the larrikins following the First World War is the slower transition of young people from earners to learners in the West during the early twentieth century, a change that reduced the opportunities for the development of workplace associational cultures while simultaneously increasing the number of school-based gangs. And finally, one must also consider the interruptions occasioned by armed conflict. What role did the second South African War (1899–1902), for example, play in drawing into the military male gang member volunteers from the swathe of participating nations?

Beyond Criminalization

Although we are attempting here to outline factors of potential significance for understanding the cultural expressions of youth gangs globally, it is important also to emphasize the specificity of historical settings, and to note that only fine-grained archival research can unlock the dynamics of individual gang culture and membership. We also wish to stress—contrary to much of the scholarship on youth gangs in history—that far from all youthful street cultures were inherently or continuously criminal, and hence that for most of the time members of youth gangs were not breaking the law. Early writing by sociologist Paul Corrigan noted the prevalence of "doing nothing" within street-corner culture, for instance—periods of time filled with anticipation, discussion, joking, mischief, boredom, and giving rise to "weird ideas" about future activities, such as smashing milk bottles.[44] Corrigan's case studies were fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys in early 1970s Sunderland, but the same experiences can be said to hold true in earlier times—in 1870s Melbourne, for example, or in Salford and Manchester at a similar moment.

Young people found a range of means to cope with urban life during the period addressed here, and many street cultures exhibited practical and ingenious components. David Trotman regards the gangs formed by new immigrants to Trinidad in the late nineteenth century, for example, as fraternities or sororities that acted as "oases of friendship for newcomers to strange and alienating situations."[45] Bonds were formed and based on ethnicity, Caribbean island of birth, old plantation, or current neighborhood or yard. Carnival was an opportunity for gang members and other residents to air discontent in an imaginative and subversive fashion. The masquerades, sexual displays and cross-dressing of the "jamette" carnival (1860–1899) were used to ridicule the middle and upper classes, briefly inverting power dynamics.[46] For Timothy Gilfoyle, writing on street children in New York at the same time, an independent "street kid ideology" flourished, informed by juvenile experiences in the city. Pickpocketing was just one element of this subculture, which also displayed moral and artistic facets. In 1871, for instance, street boys founded the Grand Duke's Opera House. This cellar theater's audience, staff, and actors were mostly newsboys and bootblacks, creating and enjoying something for themselves. In addition, the youths fostered their own slang, pivotal to their livelihood, and complex and tricky to comprehend for the uninitiated.[47] Creativity was hence a major part of historical youth street cultures.

The criminalization of those street cultures has been influenced historically by the age, gender, race, and class of participants, and has fallen subject to powerful forms of representation. As a case in point, newspaper boys in Rio de Janeiro often socialized at kiosks in the city from the 1870s to 1920s, settings where the authorities regularly harassed them. In July 1893, six young men and children were arrested for vagrancy and *capoeiragem* at a cafe kiosk. The youths claimed they

were misidentified, caught up in the renewed campaign against *capoeira*—a stylized martial art and form of cultural expression among the young predominantly Black urban poor, with origins in West and Central African dance traditions. In the opinion of journalists, public officials, and the upper class from the mid-nineteenth century onward, *capoeira* was a dangerous threat to society, particularly in the form of gangs, known as *maltas* or *badernas*, which wielded razors and clubs. For historian Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, however, official and news reports were affected by prejudice and contrasted starkly with *capoeiras*' own perceptions. Many members of the public and participants, she argued, enjoyed watching the scenes as *capoeiras* danced and leaped in front of processions and humiliated the authorities with their games.[48]

The types of sources consulted can also often influence associations between street cultures and crime. Autobiographies and other "ego texts" like diaries provide different insights than more numerous police or court records, for example. This is not at all to dismiss the usefulness of the judicial material, with case files able to reveal much about private lives and period speech, but it is important to evaluate provenance carefully. Alternative methodologies, such as anthropological analysis and reading "against the grain" are also fruitful.[49] Through his cultural history of African martial arts across the Atlantic, T.J. Desch-Obi believes scholars' very use of "gang" to describe *capoeira maltas* makes them "complicit in the criminalization of these cultural practices" because the "imprecision and cultural baggage of the term invites misunderstanding."[50] Desch-Obi has in mind with these comments late-twentieth century street gangs involved in drug trafficking: criminal fraternities that all too easily come to mind as soon as the word "gang" is deployed. Historians, it is argued, must be open, self-reflexive, and critical in selecting methods and tease out understandings through detailed research.

Transurban Phenomena

Modern urban youth gangs and associated street cultures originated in the second half of the nineteenth century. Well before the arrival of "the teenager" as a phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century (together with well-known, and heavily studied, rebellious youth subcultures of that era), an array of gangs claimed public attention. They came to prominence in a rapidly urbanizing world of demographically youthful cities. Crowded living arrangements and often-menial work were widespread. Within these contexts, gangs arose for multiple reasons—popping up like mushrooms in steamy paddocks, as one Melbourne journalist put it in 1910—and cohered around territory and flashy aspects of self-presentation.[51] Many places that hosted youth gangs were also port cities, awash with international trends and commerce, and all of the cities discussed here were increasingly restless hubs yielding pleasures and perils in varying

measures. Mark Twain pushed his assessment too far in arguing that gang members the world over were like-for-like, but there was certainly an equivalence encompassing underlying social conditions, stylistic elements, and modes of behavior. Local inflections were based, in particular, on different religious and ethnic blends.

Balancing the activities, and where possible the experiences, of youthful participants with the recorded reactions of adults, an international overview of juvenile street cultures has been offered. Cognizant of the shape and shortcomings of archival evidence on youth gangs and the conceptual approaches that we have outlined, youthful gang cultures have been shown to be multifaceted, and creative as well as destructive. For historians new to the theme, a rich and deepening body of secondary scholarship can scaffold ongoing research, and we warmly recommend breaking out of national boundaries by testing insights on one historical setting in another. The contours of such a transnational—or, more accurately, a *transurban*—evaluation have been sketched with regard to the global import of Australian larrikins, and this type of analysis promises to yield exciting new understandings. [52] Young people across the world responded to the possibilities and challenges of urbanization by making their own entertainment and taking action. Youth fashioned spaces for themselves and gave new meanings to developing urban geographies. In varying degrees, juvenile street cultures embodied play, politics, pugilism, and public display as young people were inspired by—and left marks on—the world around them.

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11. Ibid.

12. P. Gooderson, " 'Noisy and Dangerous Boys': The Slogging Gang Phenomenon in Late Nineteenth-Century Birmingham," *Midland History* 38, no. 1 (2013): 65.

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14. S. Sleight, "Interstitial Acts: Urban Space and the Larrikin Repertoire in Late-Victorian Melbourne," *Australian Historical Studies* 40, no. 2 (2009): 232–250; Sleight, *Young People*, 131–170; "The First Use of the Word Larrikin," *Argus* (Melbourne), August 4, 1896, 7.

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