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**The Park of 9**  
**Street life and community in Pretoria, South Africa**

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## BIO SKETCH

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## ABSTRACT

Discussions of growing inequality in post-apartheid South Africa are often too broad to make room for questions of how people live under current conditions of uncertainty. The novel ways in which they respond to international and national processes, while constructing new relationships and forms of community, are often overlooked when the realities of contemporary South Africa are considered. This paper addresses how a group of men, who are essentially invisible to the state, live in a public park in Gezina, Pretoria, negotiating the ambiguities of street life and community through acts of everyday communism and illegal public gambling. The park is taken here to be a 'conceived commons', owned officially by the state, but informally by the men who occupy it.

## **Introduction: considering community in the Park of 9**

*Nothing could be more idle than to occupy oneself with demographic details... A sociological analysis of the city finds its proper field in the psychic forms of interhuman life in an urban environment.*

Don Martindale, 'Prefatory Remarks' to Max Weber *The City*.

I found The Great asleep in the park on a balmy February afternoon. He slowly stirred and turned

towards me, smiling maybe at the idea that I had come back eager to see more. He told me groggily that no one had been gambling that afternoon. But after we sat a while talking, a man in leather boots and wide-brimmed leather hat sauntered off the street and towards us on the grass. The Great pushed himself to his feet, “Just wait, here comes The Cowboy. He always wants to gamble”. The two men greeted, spoke and laughed together for a few minutes, and then sat down to shuffle a deck of cards, which The Cowboy produced from his jacket pocket. Then they began. I had provided the R20<sup>1</sup> with which The Great bet and he told The Cowboy, who was offhandedly lying down on his side, that he was teaching me how to play. I lit a cigarette each for the three of us and sat back watching. Just then, a young man came from across the park, continuing with laughs and shouts a conversation he was having there. He crouched between me and The Great, quietly asking something of him. Without looking up from the hand he had just been dealt, The Great leaned forward off the large canister he was sitting on. The visitor opened the lid of the canister, rummaged inside and closed the lid again after pulling out a tea bag. He then jogged back across the park, resuming his conversation with shouts, as The Great sat down, re-ordered his hand and began to play again.

As the game continued, The Great recalled, “He hit me, here!”, slapping the side of his neck<sup>2</sup> to signify the loss he had suffered at their last encounter, while he tossed another card onto the ground. The Great told me that no one in the park knows his real name; they refer to him only by the nicknames he gives himself, including those of well-known soccer players. ‘The Great’, for instance, was the handle of a 1980s player for the Soweto club Moroka Swallows. The Cowboy, casually reclining, quietly laughed and warned me to “Be careful of this one,” as he took a card from the deck, slowly bending it and then snapping it into his hand, exclaiming the conventional “Ei!” Examining the cards in front of him, he coolly discarded one. It was a winning card for The Great, who with a wry grin dropped his hand on the floor to show that he had won. He collected his winnings and placed his next bet. The Cowboy, no longer as cheery, pushed himself upright to respond to the bet and shuffle the deck. “You see? You see?”, he exclaimed, “Now he’s hitting me here, hitting me here [also slapping his neck]! This one, he’s a criminal.” The Great and I chuckled, as the pair began the next hand. For the time that my sponsorship lasted, ours turned out to be quite a lucrative relationship. The Great would win more often than he lost, with the two of us splitting profits 50/50; and his gambling was a quick way for me to gain access to the park.

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1 The South African Rand (ZAR)/US Dollar exchange rate was around \$1 = R7.50 at the beginning of my research and was R8.60 by the end of it.

2 Being ‘hit’ is to lose money while gambling, and is always expressed by the men in the park by energetically slapping the side of their neck. Here The Great was referring to a loss he suffered against The Cowboy.



Panoramic view of the Park of 9 from Flowers Street. Photograph courtesy of Anjuli Webster.

### *A Conceived Commons*

The park in question lies on the southwest corner of Flowers and Johan Heyns on the southern end of Gezina, Pretoria. During the initial stages of my research Johan Heyns Street had been HW Verwoerd Street, but has since been renamed. Verwoerd, who held a chair in applied psychology and later in sociology, was prime minister at the height of apartheid. Some of the most violent laws against blacks were passed during his term and he is often referred to as the ‘architect’ of apartheid. Even before the name change, The Great explained to me that the men in the park did not want to acknowledge Verwoerd’s name. Instead, they continue to refer to it as 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue and to the park as the ‘Park of 9’. It is for this reason that I think of the park as a ‘conceived commons’<sup>3</sup>, that is, a communal public space which the men themselves – those who use the space – have identified in their own way. The park is, in this sense, organised not by the state that owns it, but rather by the men who occupy it.

The Great tells me that there are forty men living in the Park of 9, but my own surveys would suggest that the regulars number closer to twenty five men, all black, with a further five to ten drifting in and out. It is these park regulars that I address here. I could not keep track of those who move in and

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew van der Vlies has argued – and I agree with him – that in post-apartheid South Africa there is a void in the national commons, leaving the people unrepresented, so that “they seek, in various and embryonic ways, to assert themselves as unified claimants on the commons that has been and is being denied them, to find, in often messy and imperfect ways, what it means to have something in common with the people who surround us all” (2013: 19). Van der Vlies is writing about the national commons, but a similar void has led the men in the park to claim it as theirs.

out. Of the regulars, I was closer to and more familiar with some than others. Most of these men spend the nights sleeping under blankets, along with their possessions, on the street pavement outside of the Turtle and Parrot bottle store a little further down Steve Biko. A few of them also sleep underneath a steel roof structure in the park itself.

The park is where they hang out – socialising and catching up on sleep, cooking and cleaning: they eat and drink, share news, stories and jokes. They argue and sometimes fight. They leave in search of work and after work, or failed attempts to find work, they return. Uncertainty is the defining social fact of life in the park. This uncertainty takes the form of precarious living conditions, a poor sleeping situation, unreliable formal employment and a distant, but volatile relationship with the state. Most of the men in the park no longer own or have never owned identification documents: this is a hindrance to their chances of engaging in formal economic activity. Indeed, as I will show, the most genuine interactions they have with the state involve attempts to avoid the police when they raid their illicit public gambling. Gambling animates daily life in the park and is a considerable source of harassment. So a major aim here is to show how the men in the Park of 9 deal with uncertainty.

Gezina lies between two mountain ridges running through Pretoria; the one separating it from Pretoria North and the other linking the affluent southern suburbs of Arcadia, Hatfield, Brooklyn and Waterkloof. It is almost directly north of the city centre and includes its principal street, Steve Biko Road. Gezina is a mixture of suburban, semi-industrial and commercial zones, with a vast array of business establishments (pawn shops, furniture stores, fast food chains, pool halls, street vendors, petrol stations). The area is known as a hub of the automotive trade: second-hand car dealerships line Steve Biko Road from south to north. The men in the park, however, do not benefit economically from these establishments. Rather, they fashion their own forms of labour and income in the Gezina streets. Many of them, including The Great, guard cars there. A few of them sell cigarettes around the park, while some stand outside the hardware store further down Steve Biko, advertising themselves as handymen – painters, plumbers, gardeners.

My initial forays into the park were nothing if not awkward. I was immediately plagued with guilt for living in a comfortable apartment a minute's walk away, while the park's inhabitants, some of whom I later called my friends, faced conditions of extreme poverty. There was also a tangible sense of personal threat caused by the fairly obvious drug trade happening around me and the scarred, worn and distrusting faces of most of the men hanging out there. Later, my presence in the park became easier and more natural, thanks in no small part to the friendship I developed with The Great, who believed

that I brought good luck to his gambling exploits. I do not claim that I became immersed in the cultural flux and social order of the park, but rather that after a while my presence there no longer prompted long stares and silences. Rather, I was eventually greeted with quick glances over the shoulder, with men hailing me, “Sho soldaat<sup>4</sup>, The Great hy is nie hier nie [The Great isn’t here]”, or I might be offered a cigarette or a seat by the men I now knew. I had less than a year to conduct research, so such re-definitions of roles were encouraging. I could sit and listen to conversations, but I also became involved in them – Zulu, Sotho and Ndebele were the main languages spoken, but conversations also turned towards Afrikaans and some English for my benefit. I also learned to play the card games that I had just watched at first. During this time, I undertook some semi-structured interviews with The Great and one each with Rasta – a dreadlocked and constantly jesting man in his early twenties who often added music to conversations in the park from his phone with whom I became quite close – and Madala – a wrinkled man in his late sixties whose eyes always seemed to have a smile behind his thick and dilapidated spectacles. So hanging out with the men in the park was variously informal – watching, discussing, joking and gambling – in addition to the more formal interviews. I came to reflect closely on those subtle gestures between people that are so natural to their relationships that they become almost imperceptible. These acts, between the men in the park and between them and me, are the mundane blocks from which significant relationships are built.

Before I explore these foundations of social life, however, I want to tell the story of my closest friend, The Great. I do not suppose that the reasons men live in the park can be captured fully from their own accounts. There are certainly broader processes involved. But my aim here is to provide one intimate portrait that reveals some of the realities of life in Park of 9. I offer a series of ethnographic vignettes which highlight the importance of sharing among the men in the park. This includes seemingly small acts, such as bumming cigarettes and lighting two cigarettes with one match, but also more substantial actions, such as borrowing tea and sugar, or one man buying the bones for the evening meal to be shared by all. David Graeber (2011) writes of the “sociology of everyday communism”. I hope to argue here that ‘everyday communism’ allows the men in Park of 9 to make and extend their community through time. Everyday communism, as practised by these men, also forms and maintains distinctions between insiders and outsiders in the park. Speaking reflexively, I too experienced the gestures of everyday communism in the park, along with the awkward sensation of straddling the

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<sup>4</sup> Soldaat, meaning soldier, is a reference to a pair of army boots and a long army coat I wore in the park during the winter months, and is a nickname I was given by The Great.

insider/outsider distinction. This focus foregrounds a question: Who in the park has access to what and under what conditions? To answer this question we need to understand how the gambling that goes on there is one response to the sense of uncertainty the men feel. In a way they see their own lives as a kind of gambling. It is the activity in which uncertainty and risk are most visibly engaged with and talked about in the park. Gambling often has social consequences and is crucially used as a metaphor for daily life by the men in the park; they constitute their own reality through it. Is gambling also a form of everyday communism? Certainly it is an apt lens through which to view their shared situation.

### **The Great: the profligate pretender**

As a new resident of Gezina, I first met The Great one afternoon while trying to organise a guard for some cars that would be parked outside my apartment that evening. In a rushed conversation, he introduced himself by the name he always uses for potential employers, Ernest. We agreed on reasonable remuneration for an evening's work. After I had paid him that evening, we did not see each other for a while. A setback in my research a few weeks later, however, forced me onto the streets again, looking for an entry into the life of the suburb I wanted to research, partly because I lived there. The heat of a February afternoon yielded nothing but fruitless conversations, anxiety and doubt over whether I would ever come to grips with what was happening on streets that I had expected to be speckled with ethnographic gold dust. On my walk home, I ran into Ernest on his usual corner of Steve Biko Road and Flowers Street, languidly sitting on his paint canister guarding the cars with a newspaper rolled up in his hand and smiling furtively from under his peak cap. Driven by the suggestion in his impish grin that he knew all there was to know about Gezina life, I approached him with a cigarette and accepted his invitation to sit and talk a while. I was stunned by how lucid certain realities of Gezina became in his conversation, even if I was too anxious to take notes that afternoon. After some time, The Great and I walked to and through the park only a block away. I had barely noticed it before.

We were greeted by uncomfortable stares and silence. While I felt awkward as an outsider, I sat beside The Great and another man, whose greeting was as gravelly as the ground on which we sat, where he tossed a worn box of cards. When The Great asked me for R20 in a whisper, I realised how quickly he had taken advantage of my mention in our previous conversation of being interested in studying street life in Gezina and saw me as a potential sponsor for his gambling. Since I was in no mood to exaggerate the obvious tension my presence had created in the park, I quickly produced the

money and watched how the two men dealt the cards, accumulated and discarded them while splitting and reforming the money in a host of different divisions and combinations. The Great lost my R20 in the end and walked me back to the street corner before saying goodbye. My friendship with him (I never called him Ernest again) and experience of the Park of 9 began on that clumsy afternoon.

### *Inside and Outside the Park of 9*

On many walks around Gezina and during all the hours spent in the park since, I listened to The Great's 42 year-old story and especially about the four years he had lived in the park. Born in Mpumalanga province, The Great lived in and around Hectorspruit for most of his life. He was 27 when his mother, with whom he lived after his father's death, passed away. He then left Mpumalanga for Pretoria. His two sisters, both of them married, had also moved away from home. It was they who had taught him how to gamble. They were employed as domestic workers and he would visit them during the day where they worked to play card games. His remaining family felt he was not capable of running his parents' household and gave the responsibility to "some Mozambican man" who The Great said was "looking after my daddy's house until I can come back". This homecoming has proved difficult, however, with The Great struggling to put together the money that would prove to his family he could run things. His efforts ranged from working at a supermarket in Garsfontein, fixing truck engines in Pretoria north, gardening at a Silverton home and doing handyman work all around the city. After spending 11 years roaming the city, never staying in one place for very long (he lived in Mamelodi, Ga-Rankuwa, Shoshanguve, in friends' houses and on the street), he joined a friend one evening at a dice game in the Park of 9. As he started to spend more time and money gambling in the park, The Great slowly got to know the men and the social organisation there. Growing into the life of the park, which has come to be the closest thing to a home for him in Pretoria, involved employing specific devices to navigate this new and potentially dangerous – physically and socially -- environment. For instance, he never used his real name with the men in the park. His introduction to the park was "very difficult and dangerous", he said.

The Great tells a story from this time that illustrates the lengths he went to in building relationships of trust with the other men. One evening a dice game was raided by a police van driving by. The Great, who was still new to the area and not yet adept at avoiding such raids, was caught by three officers while trying to get out of the park. After being beaten up viciously and jeered at for



smelling like beer, the police asked him who had been the nox-man<sup>5</sup> of the game. Knowing that the police were looking to pin the guilt on someone quickly<sup>6</sup> – indeed the relationship between the men in the park and the state is made clearest by the hasty nonchalance of the violence that the police inflict on them – The Great admitted to being the nox-man, although he was not. The police threatened him with prison unless he paid over his winnings. These were only about R40 he says, but he paid them over and in doing rid the park of a police presence for the rest of the evening.

The story of The Great's false confession and bribery of the police illustrates both how he made the transition from outsider to insider among the men in the park and how relationships there are formed and negotiated through gambling. In this case, by admitting his part in the dice game, The Great placated the police who are a frequent and often violent source of disruption to life in the park. In this way he proved that he had the men's interests in mind and could be trusted. I sat with another friend, Phillias, many afternoons while he excitedly read out the newspaper advertisements of government departments (finding them to be the height of comedy). More than once he laughed, recalling how "stupid" The Great had been to be beaten up that evening. The Great grins in his turn, but insists that only after taking the fall for the dice game did the men in the park start to accept him.

While I never went to those lengths to be accepted, I never really escaped from the ambivalence of being both an insider and an outsider in the park. Although my presence there became less awkward over time, I could still be reminded of my status as an outsider, sometimes quite explicitly. For instance, one evening in spring (I had already spent more than half of the year hanging out in the park), as The Great and I walked through the park, Eric stepped into our path from the circle around the fire and demanded of The Great, "Wat maak die wit man weer hier?" [What is the white man doing here again?]. Eric, a grave individual in his late thirties who worked as a handyman in the area and commanded a good deal of respect from the others for his no-nonsense approach and famed ability as a fighter, had never been comfortable with my being there. When The Great claimed one evening around the fire that I brought him luck, it only served to exacerbate the tension between us. And so Eric and The Great now had a heated confrontation, fuelled by the drinking that had already taken place that evening. Eric swore to kill me if The Great did not take me away. The Great was not as perturbed as I was and he led me a little distance away from the fire, where we sat down to smoke and converse. At

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5 The nox-man provides the dice for a game and oversees the bets called by the players. While none of the money goes directly through him, his function is to keep order in the game. He handles accusations of cheating and the like and sees that it does not erupt into violence – which I show later is so often a feature of dice games.

6 The raids in the park – both those I witnessed or was a part of and those I heard of – never resulted in serious legal action. Rather, they usually ended in verbal and physical harassment of the men in the park and a bribe.

times, however, I was able to use techniques of my own to blur the insider and outsider distinction. Sharing, for example, is a key way for the men themselves to mark social boundaries in the park and it allowed me to bridge the gaps between myself and the park regulars and build some kind of relationship with them. I shared many cigarettes during the course of my research, even with Eric with whom I sometimes discussed his work and shared a laugh. During the winter I sported a formidable beard, which he found ridiculous and mocked me for looking like a *boer*<sup>7</sup>. But no methodological nuance would have allowed me access to the social realities of the Park of 9 without my simple and strong friendship with The Great.

By the time I met him, he was already an authoritative figure in the park. Not long after his false confession to the police he had found a more regular source of income guarding cars outside a machinery store on the corner of Steve Biko and Flowers. While he admits to having had better paying jobs in the past, he has held onto this one for the last four years. Given the frequency of The Great's job changes before he came to the park and his desire for more economic security, it is curious that he stuck it out on a Gezina street corner, guarding cars for less than he made elsewhere. Perhaps this is related to the community he and others built as regulars in the park, a subject to which I turn in the next two sections.

### **A sociology of everyday communism: sharing in the Park of 9**

*Small community has been the basis of human life and for this reason is of special interest in anthropology's effort at discerning that which is basic.* (Peacock 2004: 39)

A great deal of what I did in the Park of 9 involved the smoking of cigarettes. It is only retrospectively that I now appreciate what a stroke of luck it was for me as a fieldworker to be a smoker when hanging out in the park. Sharing or bumming cigarettes and matches began most of my conversations with the men in the park and of the relationships I built with some of them as well. Indeed, my friendship with The Great began with smoking. Later it became a standing joke that I smoked too much. The Great often adopted an instructor's tone when we were together. I had asked him to teach me how to play 7-card, but his teaching extended to other issues including cigarettes. One afternoon he scoffed at me for using my own match to light a cigarette after he had already used a match to light one I had given him – “We save matches here,” he said. After that, I rigorously imitated the elaborate sharing practices that

<sup>7</sup> The men in the park use *boer* not to refer to farmers (its direct translation), but rather to white Afrikaners and particularly those with right-wing tendencies.

surrounded smoking in the park. Matches are always shared, as The Great taught me, by lighting at least two cigarettes with one match. A cigarette is always shared by at least two men and it is uncommon to see someone finish a cigarette alone; the last few drags are always given to someone sitting nearby. I never opened my box of cigarettes without offering them to those around me, who would always accept, and the men in the park, me included, would often buy loose draws<sup>8</sup> for our companions if we were buying for ourselves. So natural did these types of sharing become to me while I was in the park that only on re-reading my notes did I realise how frequent they were. It was striking that this habit masked their frequency. David Graeber (2011: 89) holds that understanding the moral grounds of human life -- and of anthropology -- must begin with small things: actions, sentiments and gestures that ordinarily we would never stop to notice, but which nevertheless saturate everyday sociality. I agree with him.

Re-reading notes also made me notice how much of social life in the park resulted in, or was prompted by, sharing. The sharing engaged in by smokers could be seen as being universal (Graeber 2011: 97); and it has been observed amongst street people the world over (e.g. Snow & Anderson 1993: 173). Not all sociality is based on sharing cigarettes, but sharing cigarettes is a reliable mechanism for developing sociality<sup>9</sup>. Sharing in the park went further though. For instance, the old paint canisters in which many men kept their clothing, blankets and other personal items were also used to store basic food stuffs like tea, coffee and sugar. These foodstuffs, although held individually, were shared around the park to the extent that they could almost be seen as common goods. Every day I would see men jogging across the park to ask someone for a tea bag or the like. Moreover, on most evenings the men would cook pap and bones<sup>10</sup> to be shared around a fire for supper. The pap came from one of the men's personal stores, while another would buy the packet of bones from a man (whose name I never learnt) who passed through the park every evening selling bones and venison meat.

These moments of sharing are hard to describe because of their brevity. But the pattern is so frequent and pervasive in the park that they become the most constant characteristic of relationships there. It is most noticeable when the principle of sharing is breached. One afternoon while I was

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<sup>8</sup> These are single cigarettes, usually bought from men walking around the park with a carton or from the vendor on the north-eastern corner of the park.

<sup>9</sup> Cigarettes are the most constant marker of interactions in the park. They never made there the radical evolution in function from commodity to currency that Radford (1945) witnessed in Second World War PoW camps. But we may note that in the park too, daily life was constructed under oppressive conditions of material scarcity and vulnerability. Reed also noted the importance of sharing cigarettes in shaping the ambiguous and aggressive relations to the state of the inmates in a Papua New Guinea prison, where they are used to establish and mark associations and identities (2011: 25).

<sup>10</sup> This is an inexpensive and filling meal consisting of a cooked bag of stewing bones with chunks of meat, eaten with pap (meal).

playing cards with The Great, an enraged man approached us, accusing The Great at the top of his lungs. It turned out he thought The Great – who immediately took up a defensive-aggressive posture – owed him R2 for a loose draw the man had bought him a week before. This was the only conversation I witnessed that grabbed the attention of the entire park, which went eerily quiet. While the man tried to take his R2 from the money lying between The Great and me (with which we were gambling), Phillias and two other men came from across the park, where they had been starting the evening fire, and grabbed him under his arms, pulling him away and warning him that he was out of order.

The man's allegations against The Great and the reaction of everyone in the park towards him show clearly the communistic nature of sharing: it is astonishing and even insulting that any account should be kept of something like 'bumming' a cigarette. And in much the same way, no shared tea bag or cup full of pap was ever tallied or tabbed. Graeber is careful to distance his discussion of this sort of everyday communism from 'communism' as a utopian political project leading to the withering away of the state or to collective ownership. Rather, he identifies a more mundane kind of communism which he defines as any human interaction that functions on a principle of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs" (2011: 94). He argues that this type of communism "*is the foundation of all human sociability*" (2011: 96, original emphasis) and that all social systems, including economic institutions, are built on a base of already existing communistic relations even though they cannot be organised along communistic lines alone.

My encounters in the park made me more acutely aware of the foundational importance of this type of relations. The daily activities of the men there are not shaped by the sort of market relations or interactions with state bureaucracy that are characteristic of contemporary city life – they pay no tax, mortgage or insurance, they have no bank accounts, their purchases at stores are limited to essential foodstuffs when they can afford them, and so on. Social relationships are thus less entangled with formal institutions and the communism identified by Graeber, while not the only form of social organisation, becomes far more evident. Moreover, the uncertainty that characterises life in the park calls for greater innovation when approaching day-to-day situations. Outcomes are not as predictable as they may be in a formal economic routine (Hart 2010: 142) and so the men are forced to approach them with constant invention. In a context of acute uncertainty, the men in the park, who are essentially strangers often from vastly different cultural, geographical, and even national backgrounds, become something more like neighbours or even brothers by sharing in the way they do.

In the earlier stages of my research, the only kind of relationship I could initiate, outside of my

friendship with The Great, was as a donor to the men begging from me in the park. Cigarettes were given rather than shared; this kind of giving is transient and the pleasantries are superficial. There is no reason for the two parties to see each other again. As I spent more time in the park, however, this type of interaction was slowly replaced by one of sharing. The relationships were no longer one way. I was now offered as many cigarettes as I offered; I sat and shared in meals and beer around the fire. In this way my relations with the men in the park shifted from being a blatant outsider at first to something less easy to define but more intimately involved through sharing.<sup>11</sup>

I had other insider and outsider relationships in the park apart from these. There were often men there, and sometimes women, who only spent an afternoon there every now and again and yet others whom I would see for one day and never again. These passers-by visited the park usually to catch up on sleep on the grass banks or to watch the gambling and sometimes join in a game. I never once saw a regular share anything with these people, nor did any of them sit around the fire taking part in casual conversation. The drug dealers in the park, whose position outside of the community I will discuss later, also never shared with the men I hung out with; rather they smoked their own cigarettes, drank their own beer and sat in their own corner of the park. This is consistent with Hart's assertion that communities regulate themselves internally and informally – that is, through tacit customs, conventions and regulations rather than state-made laws – and regulation in such communities usually relies on “the sanction of exclusion” (2005).

The Great once said to me that he would never make a friend in the park, because you can never truly trust someone fighting for his own economic survival; yet he often expressed familial sentiments when referring to the men in the park. For instance, my landlord, who was suspicious of the amount of time I spent in such an unsavoury public space, once asked The Great what I was doing there. He seemed to think that I had a drug problem. The Great laughed about “that fat white man” and gave me a guarantee: “We [the men in the park] will never tell. We stay together and they [anyone not intimately involved in the goings on of the park] must never know anything.” How though, in a situation where conditions are so uncertain, can this communistic ethic be maintained?

### **The ‘merry-go-round’: gambling in the Park of 9**

The Great said of gambling that money is “like a merry-go-round; it always comes and always goes”.  
And if sharing is the core of relationships in the Park of 9, the most popular activity there is gambling.

<sup>11</sup> I do not claim that I ever stopped being an outsider. I mean here rather the encouraging redefinition of role expectations I referred to earlier in the introduction.

During the day, the park is mainly a recreational space, dotted with the occasional man selling loose draws, people doing their washing, marijuana buyers and passers-by. The most common image is of a circle of men sitting on paint canisters or spread out on the grass around a game of cards and talking. Three different gambling games are played in the park: two card games, 7-card and 13-card, and dice. The card games, which I eventually became quite proficient at, are more relaxed and conversational. Life outside the games is discussed while they are being played – soccer results from the previous weekend, retelling and joking about what happened at the weekend, complaints about the government and especially the police, stories of work or failed attempts at getting work, and so on – and I have never witnessed any argument or accusation of cheating in a card game. In fact, the only discordant moment I ever experienced was the row surrounding the loose draw I described earlier. Rather, men teasingly recall times when they had been ‘hit’ in a card game and are even willing to show their hands to other players and spectators and receive advice on how to play them.

A winning hand (‘trick’) in 7-card consists of eight cards (including the pick-up), of which six must be two sets of three which are either a run in a suit (i.e. 5,6,7 of clubs – which is called ‘currinan’ in the park, while diamonds are called ‘dice’, and spades ‘scope’.) or three of a kind (i.e. 3 jacks). Two players are dealt seven cards and then pick up (either from the deck or the card that the other player discards) and discard one card per turn until a winning hand is achieved. Each player bets R10 per hand or R5 if a player does not have enough money with him to bet R10. There is no ‘house’ or ‘bank’ involved in the betting – the only bets and exchanges which take place are those between the two players. 13-card is a very similar game, where a winning hand consists of fourteen cards, of which twelve must be three sets of four which are either a run in a suit or four of a kind, and each player is dealt thirteen cards.

Dice, on the other hand, is a high stakes game, which I never had the nerve to even consider playing, and is characterised by higher wins and losses, and a constant threat of violence: I have often seen men cut and bloody as results of brawls around a dice board. These fights are more often than not caused by accusations of cheating. Such is its complexity and the speed of play that even by the end of my time in the park I had not developed a nuanced understanding of dice. Conventionally it is played on a large carton board, roughly a metre square. There is a varying number of players (I have seen dice games between up to four players) who bet increasing amounts of money as the game progresses (the highest bets were R150, but I have heard tell of R400 bets). Each man has his turn to roll the two dice and bet money on their own rolls as well as those of other players. The different combinations rolled

determine the outcome of the betting and the game. They may allow a roller to roll again, force him to pass the dice on to the next player, win him the money that has been bet or win the money bet for one of the non-rolling players. The bets are overseen by a nox-man, who also provides the dice for the game and is meant to ensure that no cheating takes place. Bets are called and agreed on through the nox-man; he oversees raises of the sums being gambled with and confirms that the players are happy with the bets. The high stakes often attract players from outside the park and more attention from police. As a result, some of the themes that I address here – the relationship between the men in the park and the state, the nature of the community of men there and the dynamic between those who belong to that community and those outside it – play out more visibly in the context of dice games than anywhere else.

### *Dice by Candlelight*

After spending the lunchtime hours playing 13-card with The Great, Madala, Rasta and Phillias, I was invited by The Great to come and watch a dice game in the park later that afternoon. I entered the park, as I usually did, by the vendor stall on Flower Street and, after exchanging the customary gruff greetings with Big Mos (one of three marijuana dealers in the park, who commanded a good deal of authority) and Eric, I realised that the game had already begun behind the services centre (a 3m square walled structure housing the park's irrigation systems and the like) on the western end of the park. The sounds around the dice board became apparent as I drew nearer.

As mentioned, the large square carton board provides a flat surface on which to roll the dice. This game involves a great deal more money than others played in the park, is played at an often frenetic pace and often attracts men who are not regulars of the park. As a result, it is always played under risk of accusations of cheating<sup>12</sup> and hence of violence. The surface, which allows for fairer rolling, is thus crucial to the maintenance of order around the gambling, although this order is sometimes broken.

On arrival, I drew a cigarette and offered one to Rasta who was watching the game, while The Great, without looking at me, accepted another which I slid over his shoulder. I had not met many of the men playing and watching before and was greeted by a series of sceptical and silent stares in the first few moments, something that made Rasta chuckle quietly alongside me. Lighting my cigarette I stood back with him and some others watching the game. The men were playing dice in its most

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<sup>12</sup> The accusations I have witnessed vary from men playing with tampered dice to men playing with the aid of witchcraft and *muti*.

common form, a game I was then struggling to grasp. Clearly it was the highest stakes game and it attracted the biggest audiences. A quick glance at the numerous R100 notes exchanging hands across the board and the energy of the ten or so men surrounding the five intently crouched over the clattering dice confirmed this. It was entirely unlike the more deliberate, conversationalist card games I had become used to. The Great was having a bad night and his pleading with the dice as they rolled across the board, “Sweetheart! Come my sweetheart, please my baby!” were often followed by a frustrated, “Agh shit man! Shit!”

After watching for some time I met a young man, Xolani, who like me had been patrolling the edge of the game. Being similar in age and both from the Eastern Cape, conversation with Xolani was easy and, after realising we were both very new to the gambling in the park, we discussed its meaning and purpose before sharing stories about various places in the Eastern Cape. A shrill whistle suddenly interrupted us, splitting the air and stifling the drone around the dice board. In the time it took me to realise that the whistle had come from Eric perched on the fence at the bottom of the park, a position I had imagined was casual, the entire game disappeared in front of me and all the men, gathering their particulars quickly, were agitatedly glancing towards Flowers Street as they began to jog gently towards the opposite end of the park. Naively recalling that dice playing was illegal, I was the last to realise that a police van had parked on the Flower Street sidewalk.

All sense of anthropology and fieldwork immediately forgotten, I caught up with The Great who was breathing heavily and in quite a panic near the end of the park, but still laughing at me. From our position in the thick shadows provided by the wall that runs the length of the park, separating it from the apartments and businesses on Voortrekkers Road, we watched the police. He had learnt a lot about their movements since that first experience and seemed confident that they posed no real threat. While I fidgeted behind him, an adrenaline rush told me that confidence at a time like this would be reckless. The van lingered for a short while at the bottom of the park and then left. After a short wait, the men re-established their game. The Great was by now fed up with his losses and I went with him to investigate whether the police had truly left and to fetch some candles for the dice board (the dark was setting in). Along with many of the personal possessions of the men sleeping in the park, the candles are kept in the roof of a structure meant to provide shade in a play park at the southern end. Our time away from the game was dominated by The Great’s lamentations over his losses. “They’re eating me tonight. These guys, they’re stealing from me, man. I don’t know how, I can’t see them, but I’m telling you they’re stealing from me.”



On rejoining the game, which had already re-established its frantic tempo, we lit and placed some candles on the board, and stood back to join the onlookers in conversation and commentary. The Great teasingly suggested that the next time I came to a dice game it should be at night, next to a fire and by candlelight: “Now it’s not dangerous, now we just play. We eat, we eat, we eat!” I listened intently to the men crooning to their dice before they clattered them across the board, “Come now my love, my sweetheart”, clicking their fingers every time they did so and then energetically exclaiming the numbers they hoped to roll, “Eish! 3210! (a well-known model of Nokia cell phone, and reference to a roll of 3 and 2)”; “Ei! Four one!” Comments from player to player concerning each other’s play were also common – “Ja, jy, jy speel soos Bheki Cele<sup>13</sup> nou [Yes, you’re playing like Bheki Cele now]!” and the game reached a crescendo when a young player who was doing very well – I had not seen him in the park before that evening – stood up in boisterous exhortation, “My money is *my* money! That is my money!” The same player, after an eventual losing streak some ten minutes later, stood up in a fluster, muttering to himself about being robbed, and left the group to go and sit alone underneath a nearby tree for a while. There he spoke to himself and gestured for a few minutes before returning to take his place at the board.

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This short account illustrates some key aspects of the dynamics between the men in the park and specifically how those dynamics play out in the context of gambling. A key component of taking a risk is to expose oneself to unforeseen outcomes. As a result, the theme of exposure and concealment is crucial to a discussion of the how the men gamble in the Park of 9. Dice is in some ways an exception to other forms of betting in the park, since far more care is taken to keep the game from the view of the police. I was unaware of the extent of this care until I reflected on Eric’s strategic but casual position at the bottom of the park during the evening just described, from where he could quickly warn the players of any police presence. Indeed, on The Great’s advice, I have only attended night time Dice games since that skittish jolt in the face of the *gomogomo* (police).

Despite its heightened concealment, Dice is perhaps the most eagerly watched of the games played in the park. And so, concealed from the greater park, but exposed to a compact, select and eager audience, Dice remains and even exemplifies a site where complex relationships between insider and outsider in the park are negotiated and appropriated towards various ends, as I have mentioned earlier. Spectators are considered to be not involved or not fully aware of what is going on – as was confirmed

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13 This refers to South Africa’s former police commissioner, now under investigation for official spending irregularities, suggesting that someone’s playing looks dodgy.

by my cool reception, the minimal interaction between those gambling and those watching and the loosely established physical boundaries between crouching gambler and standing or walking observer. The audience are just recipients of the players' performance, as when the young man stood up and exclaimed at large about his money. Players and audience are aware of the performative risks, in particular the risk of personal embarrassment.

The content of the performances themselves is also interesting. The names given to the various combinations rolled (3210) and the pleas with which the men roll the dice (sweetheart, baby), for instance, speak to how the gamblers express aspects of everyday life in the context of the game. The structure of the game and its performance are open-ended enough to allow the players to bring in elements from their lives outside. These elements are as varied as the nationalities and ethnicities of men in the park, involving contemporary politics and modern technologies<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, constant feminine references as the men roll their dice were the most explicit mention of women I heard the men make. Aside from a few conversations with The Great, when he said that he would never have a wife, only a 'cherrie'<sup>15</sup>, and the few and intermittent visits by women to the park, the presence or mention of women there are very limited. Considering that most of the men are homeless, sleep outside the local liquor store or in the park itself and spend most of their days hanging out or working informally, the irregular presence of women in their lives surely extends beyond my observations. The men express this in their gambling in a very animated and deliberate way.

While gambling in the park involves material stakes – the risk of losing money – the simultaneous social stakes make the dice board, and to a less palpable extent the circles around card games, a location which provides insight into how the men in the park confront and make sense of day-to-day existence. These social stakes refer to the performative risks – the animated rolling of the dice, the various verbal expressions, how men deal with loss or success in the face of the other players and those watching, and so on –together with the obvious legal and monetary risks of gambling.

Performative gambling as a way of symbolically condensing everyday life and understanding it differently or of making commentary on it, is of course not limited to the Park of 9. It does, however, allow me to address why gambling is important in the park. Any gambler must ultimately confront the idea of their own eventual loss (if it were truly believed that gambling yielded net winnings, it would

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14 The men in the park often identify each other's ethnic and national differences through gambling, and I often heard stories of how "that Zulu gambler" had 'hit' someone, or how risky it is to play against Zimbabwean dice players. Also political references are not limited to Bheki Cele, or technological references to the Nokia 3210.

15 A 'cherrie' can be loosely understood as a girlfriend. Such a relationship does not however involve strict sexual commitments or loyalty.

be a far more celebrated and engaged form of economic activity), which adds to gambling's significance in this context.

Graeber points out the ease with which communistic relations can slip into relations of hierarchy. Under the conditions of uncertainty which characterise these men's daily lives, such a shift is very easy. In fact, given their struggle for economic security, one would expect relations to be predominantly hierarchical. All forms of gambling there do not rely on a 'house', but rather take place directly between the gamblers themselves. Also, over time, the winnings and losses of any player, with some exceptions, tend to even out. While I had many conversations around card games of big winnings or losses, they seemed always to have happened outside of the park. This evening out of wins and losses is revealed by how the card games in the park work. While some skill, patience and awareness of which cards have been drawn and played are required for successful performance, the games are ultimately based on 50/50 chances. They take place between two players, one of which loses a given trick while the other wins it. In any game, one player may lose or win more tricks than the other, but the even chances translate into a general 50/50 ratio over time.

This situation is captured in The Great's comment about gambling in the park as a 'merry-go-round'; coming and going. Considering that the money used to gamble in the park is made either from gambling elsewhere or in their various forms of day-to-day employment, the games can be seen as a process redistributing money among the men in the park. This redistribution adopts specifically non-hierarchical forms, as evidenced by the absence from any of the forms of gambling in the park of a house or bank (which, as any statistician will tell you, always wins). Madala told me laughingly, "We have gambling. Every day we have gambling. Sometimes also we have work. So we make money and we gamble with that money; this is the way it is." And, while The Great constantly referred to work as an essential source of income, he always maintained that what he earned guarding cars he would gamble, describing gambling as a source of "sure money" and "fast money".

Drug dealers in the park never join any gambling activity, which says something. Of all the park's denizens, they make the most money and consistently, offering something in constant demand not only by the men in the park, but also by an array of buyers from the surrounding area (I have seen school children, for instance, on many occasions buying marijuana in a corner of the park). They thus occupy an economically dominant position relative to the rest. Consequently, they do not engage at all with the everyday sociality of the park (characterised by sharing) nor in any of the gambling. This adds up to a sort of economic hierarchy, as when regulars often act as lookouts for the drug dealers for

example; and it would interfere with the communistic ethos of the rest of the park.

It is also revealing that while all the regulars acknowledge drug dealing as the easiest way to make money, the great majority of them choose not to deal themselves. Rather, they take part in the everyday sociability of life in the park – working and earning money where they can, socialising, eating, cleaning and hanging out in the park (all of which occupations involve sharing between the men) – and gambling of course. So gambling in the park, as a non-hierarchical process with redistributive results, can be seen as the practice or structure through which the pre-conditions of everyday communistic relations there are maintained, even under circumstances of extreme uncertainty. Were the men living in the park left to fend for themselves economically speaking, they would face an even greater battle for survival on the street. I have often sat with The Great when he had earned a pitiful R100 from guarding cars for a week. Gambling in the park, however, allows the men to distribute, more or less equally, the money they make there and whatever is brought in from outside.

## **Conclusions**

I have given a glimpse of day-to-day realities in the Park of 9 – of the flavour of life lived in the park – drawing on ethnographic accounts of my experiences, observations and interactions. I have tried to convey a sense of the community that exists among the men there. I have told the story of how my closest friend, The Great, came to live there, including some aspects of my own relationship with him and some of the difficulties I experienced at first, in order to highlight the distinction between outsiders and insiders in the park's community. I have discussed how these distinctions are maintained and overcome. When the struggle for economic survival is never far below the surface, one might expect relationships characterised by dominance and hierarchy rather than sharing. This is not so. I have presented sharing in the park as typical of what David Graeber has called 'everyday communism' – acts and gestures so ordinary that they pass almost unnoticed in everyday relations, but which nevertheless form the building blocks of those relations. Thus the men in the park, through acts of everyday communism, change the nature of their relationships; strangers become neighbours and outcasts become brothers.

Throughout this work I have discussed the Park of 9 as a space and as a community of men. I may have implied that the social reality there is static. This is, of course, not the case. The Great's story, especially the haphazard years of wandering he went through before arriving in the park, shows that there is nothing permanent in all this. Moreover, the transience which is ever-present in life on the

street can be seen manifested in the passers-by – people who are not part of the community of some twenty-five park regulars. Towards the end of my research, even The Great, such a central feature and character in the park, was considering leaving permanently to find better living conditions. He conceded that it was a more expensive choice, but he was fed up with the hassle of summer thunder storms while living on the street. What I have presented here, then, must be seen as the product of what I was privileged to observe and to be a part of during the course of a year in the Park of 9 and not a definitive statement either about the park or the men who live there.

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