It was late in the evening of a winter's day in 2009 and I was travelling home on a bus that was winding its way along the Old Kent Road in south London. The bus stopped and four young men boarded. They were, I'd say, between 16 and 17 years of age, they were black and dressed in the de facto uniform of the urban street warrior: hoodies, baggy jeans and trainers. They were noticeably aggressive as they pushed their way through the bus. One, I recall, punching a fist into the cup of his other hand, muttering as he passed me: 'I've got a fucking rage.' As a calculated performance in what Jack Katz (1988) terms ‘the seduction of evil’, these young men were quite successful. Everyone, myself included, felt suitably intimidated.

At the rear of the bus sat a young woman of Asian appearance. She was slender and could have been no older, I guess, than 23. The young men settled noisily in the seats around her. One sat next to her. A couple of stops further along some people vacated the bus and the young Asian woman, evidently intimidated by these would-be gangsters, gingerly stood up and made her way forward and sat down on a seat next to one of the exit doors. At no point in time did she say anything to the young men or even look at them. I can say this with absolute certainty because I was watching them with intense criminological interest. A stop later, the young men left the bus. However, just before the door closed behind them, one boarded the bus and smashed his fist hard into the young women’s face. Then he left. The violence was as shocking as it was unprecedented. She had, from the beginning made very clear she was intimidated by them and they, in turn, had gone out of their way to intimidate everyone else. Like everyone else, I found myself literally paralysed by what I had just witnessed. Hitting women was, by and large, precluded in the street culture I grew up in (at least publicly) – it was not the kind of thing men were supposed to do.
In this instance, at least, other weapons were not used. However, in cities like London today, street violence is weaponised with the result that a number of young men have lost their lives at each other’s hands, pointless casualties of Britain’s street wars. I came across one of the victims in the vicinity of my house in New Cross Gate in 2008. He was a young black man, no older than 17. He had been shot and was about to be placed in an ambulance by paramedics. One of his neighbours (whom I knew) asked him how he felt. His response was deeply philosophical: ‘That’s life, innit’, he replied. Unfortunately, innocent victims have also been caught in the crossfire, as was a young Polish nurse who was walking home through a local park where I regularly walked my dog. On this occasion two men decided to have a gun fight and a stray round killed her in the crossfire. In the same park I often met and spoke with a 14-year-old boy. He was the proud owner of a Staffordshire bull terrier that liked to play with my pit bull terrier. The police subsequently raided his house and retrieved a haul of weapons including a semi-automatic pistol. He is currently in prison.

These cases have been blamed by many on what has been defined as Britain’s ‘gang wars’, itself the outgrowth of a new ominous ‘gang’ and ‘gun culture’, now apparently rampant in Britain’s inner cities. In this chapter, rather than contest the novelty of the violence, or the sensational ways in which it is reported, I will reflect on how best we might make sense of it.

While by no means losing sight of the fact that some of the violence and a number of the fatalities can indeed be laid at the door of the urban street gang, my aim in what follows will be to contest the reductive logic at play in this explanation by establishing that the violence we are looking at here cannot be reduced simply to a problem of gangs. Nor are many of the terms currently deployed to make sense of the violence, such as ‘gang culture’ and ‘gun culture’, helpful either. To make sense of the violence, we need to examine, I will suggest, the violent culture of the street world of which gangs are a part, and to do this we need to study street culture and the imperatives around which it is organised.

In terms of structure, I will begin by examining the problems attendant on blaming gangs for the kind of violence described above. I will also show why terms such as ‘gun culture’ or ‘gang culture’ are not really helpful either. I will then examine what I will term the culture of the street world studying the three imperatives around which social life within it is structured. These I identify respectively as the search for pleasure, the search for respect and the search for money. If these identify the ends to which social action in a street context is principally