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Becoming cornered

Migration, masculinities and marginalisation in inner-city Johannesburg

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CHAPTER THREE

Theorising becoming cornered: masculinities and structural violence

Introduction

‘Yes, this corner will give us a good view, from this side we can capture that tower there or those men working in construction on the other side. . . . See that white man wearing overalls and going down the drain with the other black guys? That would be a good one’, Josh said, as he mounted the camera on his tripod. Khulu stood behind him to ensure no one came from behind to snatch the camera. It was in the heat of the day on a Tuesday in May 2019, and I had set out to shoot some videos on the streets of Johannesburg. We decided to mount the camera at this specific street corner three streets away from Uncle Kofi’s Corner.

I had assembled a small team to help me with the process. Thembeni was an unemployed 23-year-old woman who had just finished a course in filming at AFDA, registered as the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Dramatic Performance, a subsidiary of the New York Film Academy. Born in Zimbabwe but raised in South Africa, she had permanent residence status, but still could not find a job. I had requested her help with the camera work. She was accompanied by her friend Xolani, an unemployed 24-year-old Zimbabwean man, who lived in the same neighbourhood with her in the West Rand. An ex-prisoner who had been arrested for fraud, he shared with me the many challenges he was facing in his attempt to get a paying job. In addition to not having the needed ‘papers’⁸ that would allow him to work and stay in South Africa, he also had a bad reputation that attracted stigma from many angles.

Our team also included Khulu, a Malawian man in his mid-40s who provided us with security services. Although he never told me so, I heard from multiple sources that Khulu was an ex-soldier and that he had served in the Malawian army. At the time of my study, he was unemployed. He had been out of work for a long time, and I never learned how he made money to pay his bills. He stayed alone in the room behind the church where Uncle Kofi kept his stock, shoes and ice cream-making machine. A good friend of Uncle Kofi’s, Khulu spent most of his time at Uncle Kofi’s Corner chatting with other men or at his church on the other side of the neighbourhood. However, on this particular day, Khulu had suggested that we use Josh, a Zimbabwean self-employed photo journalist, to do the shooting since it was dangerous to have a woman (Thembeni) carrying a camera in the inner city. Thembeni’s dress – bright pink Air Max sneakers, Adidas sweater and Levi jeans – would mark us as outsiders. So we asked Josh, who lived in the same neighbourhood, to carry the camera. Josh was in his late 30s and was married with two children. Although of a stronger build than Khulu, he insisted we have Khulu act as security guard, hinting at some ‘expertise’ that he did not explicitly

⁸ This is street lingo used by migrants to mean a valid passport and visa that allows one to legally stay and/or work in South Africa.

verbalise. Voicing his fear of walking in the streets, he exclaimed: 'We definitely need Khulu on this one'.

When we arrived at the corner, Josh said that he liked the multiple angles and views that we could film. As the leader of the project, a documentary that I was doing as part of my PhD degree, I agreed. We decided to use Xolani to test how the videos would come out. Prior to this Xolani had offered to be part of my documentary and had joked that he wanted to appear on the big screens of Hollywood. Standing in front of the camera, he shouted, 'I am ready!' as he rubbed his hands as if he was trying to keep warm. All the while he wore a big grin on his face, revealing his gapped teeth. Before he began to talk into the camera, something caught his attention and he ran down the street adjacent to where we had set up, leaving the rest of us wondering what was happening. Just then, I saw three men appear at the same corner. The one who was in front was tall, dark and had scars on his face. He briefly glanced at the corner and then quickly retreated, followed by Xolani running after him, as he shouted something that I could not decipher.

Everything happened so fast that I did not have time to register that we were about to be mugged, as Josh and Khulu informed me and Thembeni, to our bewilderment. After a couple of minutes Xolani came back panting and laughing at the same time. In our shared native Shona, he said:

The camera was gone, aunty. Those young boys had come for the camera; their leader, the one who was in front, is actually my cousin. When you were about to start shooting I saw from the corner of my eye, a group of men coming. . . . And then I was like, 'Aah, isn't that Demetrio?' When I shouted 'Demetrio!' he too was shocked. He didn't expect to see me, he was disappointed that I had chased away his bird [blew his chance to make money]. This is his territory, [but] I told him 'No, this one is my aunt, you can't drown her like that'. He tried to argue but eventually he let it go. However, I had to give him money because if I didn't he would go send other robbers I don't know, from another territory, to make it appear that he was not part of it.

As Xolani was explaining this to us, Demetrio appeared with a group of four or five young men from another corner and gave us the thumbs up from the other side of the street, then disappeared. Xolani explained that Demetrio had murdered many people in his line of work: 'That one does not fear death, he kills in an instant. To think, he is really young. Even then they had been following us for some time and were waiting for an opportune time to strike'. It took me a while to come to terms with what had just happened. Not only would I have lost a university camera; there was also a possibility that I or someone from our team

could have been harmed. Everyone thanked Xolani profusely for saving the day. I was grateful particularly that he could negotiate with the robbers and avert a possible robbery or violent interaction.

The incident confirmed the claims that my interlocutors at Uncle Kofi's Corner always made: that I was safe at their corner but not out on the streets. Indeed, I had felt safe during the whole course of my fieldwork, to the extent that I was not sure how violence was relevant to my study apart for its manifestation in symbolic form. Furthermore, the incident made me re-examine and conceptualise the experiences of my study participants at Uncle Kofi's Corner in relational terms, and consider how space played an important role in shaping such practices and experiences. While I had thought of Uncle Kofi's Corner as a manifestation of the structural exclusion of certain groups of migrants by the South African government and broader society, I also thought of it as an urban oasis for marginalised men and women. These observations compelled me to consider how the 'corner' could be an insightful concept to metaphorically and analytically capture the experiences, practices and ideas of my interlocutors that appeared to straddle clear-cut boundaries.

Drawing on the stories of various participants, in this chapter I highlight the main concepts and theories that I used to analyse the experiences of the people I spoke with in Johannesburg's inner city. I return to some of the scholarship discussed in the introduction, acknowledging that masculinities scholarship has evolved and that research from South Africa now contributes to international debates, in conversation with dominant theories emerging from the global north. But as I noted in the introduction, (international) migrant masculinities are hardly addressed in current discussions and theorisations.

In this chapter, I develop the concept of 'cornered masculinities' to explain how the experiences of migrant men and women may enrich our understanding of masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa and beyond. I use Uncle Kofi's Corner and Tino's Corner, my ethnographic sites, to conceptualise cornered masculinities as a type of street masculinity. To advance my arguments, I bring into conversation literature on structural violence, urban anthropology and masculinities, including the terms 'hegemonic masculinities', 'problematic masculinities' and 'alternative masculinities'. I begin with a discussion of how marginalisation in the form of structural violence can be understood as 'cornering', and how gender and masculinities play a critical role in shaping the process of becoming cornered. The subsequent section details how space (corner) can be understood as a frame for masculinities, and the final section explores how corner spaces conjure multiple and creative responses through processes of becoming.

Becoming cornered and structural violence

The inner city of Johannesburg attracts a heterogeneous group of people for different reasons, hence calling for conceptualisations that take into account the dynamism of everyday life and the singularity of events (Biehl and Locke 2017). The inner city is also a precarious place where everyday violence and criminality contribute to shaping the practices and ideas of marginalised men and women. As shown in the story that opened this chapter, certain mundane activities (carrying a camera) and spaces are distinctly marked along gender lines, dictating what men and women can do and where they can go, thus limiting their options to being or becoming. Such limitations also come in the form of a failure to fulfil what men (and women) expect of themselves or are expected to do by society. For example, men at Uncle Kofi's Corner explained that because men were expected (and expected themselves) to provide for their loved ones, they were affected in specific ways by economic and legal precarity (see also Hunter 2010a).

I conceptualise such ideas, practices and experiences as becoming cornered, following a statement made by Khulu in response to a question I asked him about why there was so much violence in Johannesburg. 'A black man is a cornered man', he said, and continued: 'He is put in a place that is hard to manoeuvre, and he cannot do anything. He retaliates like a wounded animal'. He elaborated further that, owing to many marginalising structural factors, men have limited options to move around. Khulu's statement suggests that men, particularly black men, respond aggressively, 'like a wounded animal', when they are left with no other option. Such cornering occurs as a consequence of limited possibilities for manoeuvring or escaping the social, economic and legal circumstances that confine them. I understand cornering in a geographical sense as well, with the street corner as a marginal, albeit reclaimed, space within the city that has been staked out to serve as an enclave of masculinity. By identifying their many struggles as 'corners', I turn to Carter, Donald and Squires's (1993, as quoted in Massey 2004, 5) argument that 'place is space to which meaning has been ascribed'. Such corners provide spaces where both journeys and intersubjectivities intersect. I also understand cornering in a metaphorical sense: the corner results from migrants' exclusion from the mainstream economy. Men feel they are backed into a corner when social and personal expectations of masculinity are confounded by limited possibilities for achieving economic success.

Violence becomes justified through a lens of masculinity as men assert themselves or express their aggression. Logically, violence would be directed to the next weaker subject, whether women, children, migrants or other men, and can come in different forms, including the criminality exhibited by Demetrio. This

understanding of violence aligns with the concept of a crisis of masculinity, as explored in Chapter 1. However, aiming to move past the association of a crisis of masculinity with individual behaviour, such as exists in the notion of problematic masculinities, some scholars have argued that interpersonal violence is a result of structural violence. Such studies conclude that, while the violence is experienced at an individual level, often it is linked to the way life is organised (social structures) (Farmer 2004; Anderson, 2015), such as 'patriarchy, slavery, apartheid, colonialism, neoliberalism, as well as poverty and discrimination by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and migrant/refugee status' (Lee 2016, 2).

As my interlocutors pointed out, although economic circumstances in inner-city Johannesburg were tough, as migrants they felt themselves additionally marginalised. However, despite such marginalisation they continued to try and find ways to escape the inhibiting structures. These efforts to escape structural limitations call to question deterministic assumptions made by some structural violence theorists. For instance, Parsons (2008, 175) asserts that with structural violence 'individuals are forced into particular situations where their choices are predetermined for them by a structure not of their own choosing'. My interlocutors, however, exhibited some degree of agency even though they could not totally escape social structures. My intention here is to explain how such efforts can be understood as agentic attempts by men to escape violence and precarity.

Men usually found ways to redefine and reconstruct themselves to match their lived realities. There were times when I was inclined to sympathise with some of my interlocutors' vulnerabilities, for example with Tino, my cousin, but if I began to do so he would push back; he did not see himself as vulnerable or as a victim, but rather as a man who makes a plan, a man who defies boundaries, and as the 'go to' person in Johannesburg for anyone who finds themselves in a corner. Here, I do not intend to underplay the vulnerability of migrants in Tino's position or those worse off, but rather I seek to highlight how men understood and practiced their manhood in their everyday lives despite the bigger structural factors. The same structural factors that limited them became springboards for redefining and reconstructing themselves as 'tough,' 'respectable' and 'hardworking' men. In this way, it was the space of marginalisation, or the corner, that brought them new meaning and redefined who they were (becoming) as men. Building on the way that these men theorised their own lives, I anchor this study in the concept of cornered masculinities rather than in terms of structure and agency. The richness of the cornering metaphor exceeds economic constraint and can be extended to include the ways that men are discursively cornered through the circulation of dominant tropes of masculinity linked to patriarchy and religion, for example, as well as the so-called crisis of masculinity and anti-immigrant narratives. In the following section I explore the concept of masculinities and how it relates to my study.

Masculinities

Even among the men on the corner, not all could do the same things or go to the same places. There were men like Demetrio who controlled territories and threatened to rob us; from places of marginalisation, they transformed certain corners into centres of power and control, determining who could enter their space. There were also men who, like Josh, were scared at times and would ask other men, like Khulu, to protect them. Men like Demetrio also became reference points, used by my study participants to frame themselves as 'better', 'different' men. Then there were women like myself and Thembeni, who in our vulnerability endorsed some type of masculinity, allowing, even expecting strong men to protect us. In this section I engage with the masculinities concept in ways that allow me to capture the flexibility, multiplicity and open-endedness that I observed in the practices and experiences of study participants. I approach masculinity and gender more broadly as a lens to understand participants' lives as heterogeneous.

Several definitions have been put forward to define masculinity, but the general consensus that discredits the sex role theory of gender remains that 'men are not born, they are made within particular social contexts' (Ouzgane 2006, 2; see also De Beauvoir 1949). This framing emphasises that masculinity is what one does rather than what one is (Butler 1990; Cornwall, Edstrom, and Greig 2011). Contemporary studies of masculinity across disciplines continue to rely heavily on Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of masculinity (see for example Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Butler 1990; Cornwall, Edstrom, and Greig 2011). In her germinal work *Masculinities* (1995), and in subsequent work (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; see also Matshaka 2009; Morrell 1998; Ratele 2016), Connell argues that, rather than being a unified concept, masculinity should be understood as simultaneously multiple and hierarchical, with dominant and conventional forms of masculinity being hegemonic, and other forms of masculinity being subordinated, complicit or marginalised. Regardless of the many critiques and reworkings of Connell's work, current social theory holds that gender is socially constructed and the definition of a 'man' changes across space and time (Itulua-Abumere 2013; Matshaka 2009).

Recent theorisations – often grounded in research conducted in South Africa – call for a situated contextualisation of the concept of masculinity. This entails taking into consideration specific political and economic environments as they are shaped by both historical and contemporary processes, such as apartheid and continuing inequalities (Ratele 2016; Morrell and Jewkes 2012). On a similar note, feminist geographers have highlighted the importance of space and place in shaping masculinities (Christou 2016; Herz 2019; May 2015). Understanding

masculinities as 'relational identities that are constructed in everyday life', as espoused by Herz (2019, 432), is imperative if we are to understand their multiplicity and fluidity. Across diverse disciplines and research sites, there is agreement that context matters in terms of time, space and social setting in shaping masculinities. In the next section I examine how the concept of hegemonic masculinities has been taken up within the South African context.

Hegemonic masculinities: problematic and positive masculinities

This study aims to contribute to discussions about destabilising the current masculinity scholarship in South Africa, which is anchored in two dominant narratives emerging within gender-transformative interventions.⁹ The two that I have already highlighted in the introduction include 'problematic masculinities', as associated with 'the traditional man', and 'positive' or 'alternative masculinities' associated with 'the new man'. These narratives usually draw on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, as defined above. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has long been associated with problematic masculinities, for example, in explaining the use of violence as a form of dominating others (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012). However, several scholars have argued that the concept is too quickly associated with violence (Dube 2016; Ratele 2013b; Morrell et al. 2012), offering counternarratives instead. Jewkes and colleagues (2015) use the concept as a tool to identify attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality; Morrell and Jewkes (2011, 2) identify alternative or positive masculinities that are 'constructed in opposition to hegemonic masculinities'. An example of alternative masculinities is 'men who care', suggesting that men who engage in reproductive care work, such as childcare or community development efforts, might indicate shifting gender norms (Morrell et al. 2016; Morrell and Jewkes 2011). As enticing as that sounds, I problematise this assertion in Chapter 7, by illustrating how migrant men also engage in caregiving practices that do not reflect shifting gender dynamics. Below, I build on the critiques of the hegemonic masculinity theory with the aim of advancing my argument on cornered masculinities who employ the open ended *kukiya kiyi* as a survival tactic.

Disrupting hegemonic masculinities

Despite several critiques of the concept of hegemonic masculinities over the years, it remains a useful analytical tool to gain insight into masculinities (Ratele 2017). One critique of this concept that I seek to incorporate into this thesis is how

⁹ Gender-transformative interventions include projects run by NGOs with the aim of changing gender relations, specifically targeting gender inequality.

hegemony claims or assumes a certain fixedness. Like other structuralist theories, the concept is limited in that it tends to present individuals as victims of circumstances (Risman and Davis 2013; Rebughini 2014). As already highlighted in the case of structural violence, structuralist gender theorists have argued that ‘structures (such as patriarchy) and cultures determine, shape and heavily constrain human action’ (Risman and Davis 2013, 8). This way of thinking presents patriarchy as a fixed structure that cannot be changed, thereby discrediting the malleability of the social system and undermining the plastic, creative power of men to manoeuvre around this system (Biehl and Locke 2017; Rebughini 2014).

In contrast, Nyamnjoh (2015, 7) offers the concept of ‘frontier beings’, defined as ‘those [people] who contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces’. This concept acknowledges the versatility, dynamism and creativity that arise as individuals negotiate their identities in different contexts. Smith and Winchester (1998) and Coles (2009) similarly assert that in this process of negotiating, alternative masculinities are produced. However, unlike the concept of alternative masculinities that is promoted in development-oriented gender-transformative frameworks, such theorisations of masculinities do not assume or claim finishedness but rather conceptualise masculinities as always becoming. As Smith and Winchester (1998, 329) put it: ‘Creativity and becoming may arise out of the tension in the binary discourse; alterations in the boundary may diffuse or reinforce gender characteristics’.

In this study, I argue that migrant men as frontier beings challenge structures, including normative ideas of what it means to be a man. Men contest, evade, (re)define and reconstruct ideas of masculinities to match their lived experiences. For example, normative ideas dictate that men should not express emotions or, if they do, these should be masculine emotions such as courage, anger or pride (Ratele 2013b). However, in this study I encountered men like Josh, who were open about their feelings of fear. He was not willing to take the risk of moving through the streets of Johannesburg without someone like Khulu to ensure his safety. While taking risks and fearlessness were associated with life in the inner city, fear could also be seen as a form of being a cautious, responsible man, according to men in this study.

Ratele (2016) argues that concepts of hegemonic masculinity are not the same among marginalised men as they are among rich, white men from the global north. Hegemony among the marginalised is limited ‘because poor men (like poor women) have their masters, have other men and women who lord over them, are subordinate to the upper classes of rich men and women’ (Ratele 2016, 12). Here, Ratele points to the idea of intersectionality that positions men differently, depending on skin colour, nationality, level of income or education, and language, among other factors. The intersection of such factors may result in

certain groups of people, such as marginalised migrants, becoming simultaneously hegemonic and subordinate, for example as cornered men. Hence it is imperative for the theory to be 'situated within the existing economic and political power relations in a society of interest with its specific history' (Ratele 2016, 11). Ratele's work prompted me to focus on the ways that masculinities were shaped by particular historical, temporal and spatial contexts of contemporary inner-city Johannesburg. Doing so allowed me to show how migrant men both belong and do not belong at the same time. As frontier Africans they are 'flexible and defy dualisms, binaries, dichotomies as they exist in a world of incompleteness and infinite possibilities' (Nyamnjoh 2015, 6).

Demetrio's criminal and risky behaviour can be understood as hegemonic, particularly in this part of the city where physical strength and criminality carry a certain 'cultural currency' (Ratele 2013b, 253). As Xolani explained, the scars on Demetrio's face bestowed a higher status on him, setting him above other young men in his circle: 'Those scars tell us of your journey, that you are man among men. . . . You have fought lions . . . and in prison people will respect you based on that'. Ratele (2013b, 253) posits that young black men exhibit fearlessness from a place of fear – fear of other men, fear of the state, and fear of being thought less of a man because they lack other social currencies that may signal socially valued markers of masculinity, for example money. He thus argues: 'black young men victimise each other from a location of powerlessness' (Ratele 2013b, 253). While Ratele's theorisation is based on his observations of South African men, it also applies to many migrant men, including those I characterise as 'cornered'.

Beyond hegemonic masculinities: conceptualising cornered masculinities

In this study, 'cornered masculinity' is a spatial metaphor that draws attention to structural violence and the various forms of marginalisation. This is a type of street masculinity, whereby men distance themselves from anti-immigrant sentiment and harsh economic conditions; they form social enclaves that are exclusive to migrants. In these spaces, men implicitly and at times explicitly develop localised codes on how to relate to women, men and children. Such masculinities are not only relational but are processually constructed. For example, in one shared code men distinguish themselves as hardworking men who employ ingenuity or *kukiya kiya*. However, in the process of doing *kukiya kiya* they must also maintain their self-conferred status as 'better men' who avoid violence and criminality, challenging public discourses on problematic migrants and masculinities. In this way they construct their masculinities in relation to dominant narratives, other masculinities and femininities.

Adherence to such codes also confers a certain type of citizenship, what I term 'street-corner citizenship'. This type of citizenship is particularly important because many study participants, due to their lack of legal papers, did not qualify for the rights and resources offered by the state to legal migrants. Similarly, they found the rights-based rhetoric offered by NGOs somewhat abstract and impractical. In maintaining street-corner citizenship, men strived to live up to often-implicit rules of engagement and they reworked codes in ways that could be interpreted as (re)cornering. Their actions, when approached with a theory of becoming, helps us to see beyond the presumptions of improvement and progress embedded in gender-transformative theories. In the following sections I review social scientific research on street-corner masculinities and gender and space to provide a basis for my understanding of cornered masculinity.

Street-corner masculinities

Historical and contemporary studies show that street-corner men, or cornered men, are susceptible to structural violence, resulting in negative health and social outcomes such as poverty, violence, HIV and crime (Anderson 2003; Fast and Moyer 2018). Relevant to my argument are two strains of research on street-corner men, the first casting them as problematic and the second as victims of structural violence. In 1943, Whyte published a groundbreaking sociological study entitled *Street corner society*, which focused on an Italian American slum in Boston's North End, an area he called 'Cornerville'. Although criticised for calling the neighbourhood a slum and for painting the Italian American community as gangster-like, Whyte's work became a model for urban ethnography. Liebow's *Tally's corner* (1967), based on fieldwork among African American 'streetcorner men' in a segregated neighbourhood in Washington, DC, demonstrated that such men 'were not passive, as stereotypes had portrayed them'; rather, they were like every other American, with their own dreams and aspirations (Silver 2017, 8). This ethnography, which I find inspiring, examined streetcorner men as fathers, husbands, lovers, friends and breadwinners. In an attempt to conceal their failure and economic frustrations, they performed an 'exaggerated machismo' affecting their relations with women friends and family (Silver 2017, 8). 'Linking face-saving conduct and micro-interactions to larger macro-structures, Liebow made the men's frustrations tangible' (Silver 2017, 8).

Liebow has been criticised for overemphasising class while failing to look at race. Anderson (2003), inspired by Liebow, does include racial marginalisation in his analysis in his ethnography *A place on the corner*. Anderson explores how status and social grouping played out among the racially and economically marginalised men who frequented Jelly's, a street- corner bar and liquor store located on the South Side of Chicago (Silver 2017). Although Anderson focuses

primarily on African Americans and not migrants, my work builds on his in that it also explores how race, specifically being black, features in the interplay of migration, economic marginalisation and masculinities.

In Africa, a few urban anthropologists have explored street masculinities in the context of marginalisation, emphasising the importance of space in shaping masculine identity. For example, Fast and Moyer (2018, 6), researching young men living and working in the streets of downtown Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, analyse how they 'fashion[ed] themselves and create[d] meaningful social spatial worlds out of struggle, pain and exclusion'. They highlight how young men used urban spaces, locally known as *maskani*, to conjure momentum to counter the precarity that characterises their everyday lives. For these young men, *maskani* were sites of becoming, serving as 'constellations of spatial and temporal connections which allowed some young men to imagine and pursue new possibilities such as growing into responsible manhood' (Fast and Moyer 2018, 6). Simultaneously, *maskani* also served as sites of 'coming undone' when young men found themselves unable to move towards imagined futures, sometimes resulting in drug addiction or mental illness (Fast and Moyer 2018, 7).

Matshaka (2009), in her research on Zimbabwean migrant men who sold handicrafts at traffic lights in Cape Town, South Africa, explores how men reconstructed their masculine ideals to fit their everyday experiences of marginalisation. By engaging in street trade, the young men saw themselves as 'industrious, responsible and innovative economic agents' (Matshaka 2009, 78). In contrast to their image of themselves as hardworking, industrious entrepreneurs, they labelled local Xhosa men as 'lazy criminals', challenging dominant discourses linking 'street masculinity' to violent identities (Matshaka 2009, 79). In distancing themselves from violent and criminal modes of street masculinity, they othered South African men as problematic and imagined themselves as 'better'. Similarly, in my own study, men constantly reinvented themselves in the face of their everyday realities, coming up with altered scripts to live by that would distinguish them from 'other' street masculinities. I therefore conceptualise cornered masculinities as entailing continued reinventions and (re)constructions, relating them to the notion of space as constantly evolving (Massey 2005).

Masculinities and space

On the first day of my follow-up field work in May 2019, I arrived at Uncle Kofi's Corner around mid-morning to find only Uncle Kofi and two other men. During the course of my conversation with Uncle Kofi, he remarked that his shop was going strong: 'We even have a WhatsApp group now', he exclaimed jubilantly. With excitement, I responded, 'Wow! But Uncle Kofi, how can you have a WhatsApp group and not include me?' He laughed and promised to tell the

administrator to add me. The following day when I returned, I asked him why I had not been added. At this, the group of men who were present exchanged odd looks and laughed. Kofi responded, 'Do not worry you will be added', because, as I was to learn, he did not want to tell me that some men did not want me to be added. Later in the day, I heard Ronald say that some people in the group were asking, 'Which Linda is this who wants to be added?' He asked to have a selfie taken with me, him and the other men around. After taking the photo he sent it on the group and said, 'Let us see who is going to say "no" after seeing you'. In the ensuing minutes, several men from the WhatsApp group commented on the photo and my request to be included in the group. One responded, 'Ah, Linda Amsterdam is back'. Another one also responded, 'Yaa, that one is one of us'. A few who were not there during my first leg of fieldwork requested to know more about me. Eventually I was added to the group, only to discover I was the only woman in the group. Soon after I was added, two men exited the group for reasons unknown to me.

Posts shared in this group covered topics such as politics across Africa, religious debates and current affairs, such as xenophobia, and some were of photos of semi-naked women. However, with time the posting of photos of women became minimal, after one man told Khulu to respect me. Debates that were usually instigated by Khulu ceased the moment he exited the group. This experience helped me see how Uncle Kofi's Corner was constructed as a place for men, through practices and language that excluded women; my inclusion into the space was a negotiated process, and my presence altered the space. I use this to illustrate how masculinities can be understood as evolving and negotiated in relation to social spaces.

Hopkins and Nobel (2009, 814), geographers who study masculinities, write: the 'fact that masculinities are socially and culturally constructed and shaped by social relations is clearly demonstrated by looking at the ways in which masculinities and male identities vary over spaces and across time'. In describing the masculinities within South Africa's goldmines in the early 20th century, Breckenbridge (1998) refers to the Mines and Works Act of 1911, which marked the underground mine as a place for men only. Although a few women were present in the mine areas, there was a 'gulf separating the men of the mines from the "town women"' (Breckenbridge 1998, 676). This separation was made official following the enactment of Native Urban Areas Act of 1923,¹⁰ which saw several female immigrants from Mozambique, being removed from inner-city townships. Despite laws forbidding women, men generally were scared of 'town women' and this limited intimate relationships between the sexes and spurred same-sex relationships. With time, the men in these mines enforced 'powerful and enduring

¹⁰ This act controlled the immigration of black people into urban areas.

notions of appropriate male behaviour' (Breckenbridge 1998, 678). In this scenario the state played a role in producing male-only social places.

In describing enclaves of masculinity in the context of a crisis of masculinity, Arthur (2006, 107) posits that 'in the absence of assuming a masculine role at work or at home, men are undertaking masculine identity projects through the consumption of symbolic products, services and leisure' in specific spaces. Smith and Winchester (1998) explore how middle-class men in Newcastle, Australia, form men's groups as a space where they can negotiate the boundary between home and work, particularly the competing demands that come with these spaces such as childcare at home and deadlines at work. In order to deal with the pressures related to their roles in these spaces, men formed a men's group as a place to talk and be listened to. Some anthropological studies of gender have attempted to document the exclusion of women from certain domains, thereby highlighting how enclaves of masculinity (Mangezvo 2016), such as coffee houses, pubs and sports, can be critical spaces in shaping male friendship or 'male bonding' (Gutman 1997, 393).

These ideological and legal frameworks illustrate the link between the use of space and gender, as seen in this chapter's opening story; there are spaces where certain people can or cannot go and things that they can or cannot do. However, the decline in the labour market for men, compounded by the feminisation of the labour market and the calls for men to engage more in domestic work, saw the binary of work and home disrupted. This has been the case for my study participants who, as migrants, found themselves unemployed in a place where family and kinship networks had also been disrupted as a result of migration. Uncle Kofi's Corner itself can be viewed as a hybrid space where some men like Uncle Kofi ran economic ventures while others who were homeless used it as their home, thus blurring the gendered work/home divide. Smith and Winchester (1998) posit that the pressures emerging from domestic and economic changes have resulted in men forming social spaces exclusive to them, to talk and support each other or to assert their position.

In describing why he came to Uncle Kofi's Corner almost every day, one participant in my study, Fatso, said: 'It's good to come out here and meet other men. It helps to clear your head'. Because it was situated on church premises, several people passed through Uncle Kofi's Corner. The church, which was also a shelter for people who were homeless, was open to anyone; however, women were less likely to make use of the service, especially sleeping there, in part because they feared being exposed to assault on the streets by robbers, drunks and drug addicts, and/or abuse from men. Also, one participant suggested that migrant women who were faced with homelessness or unemployment were more likely to return home. For men, return migration would have negative implications for their masculinity, so they would rather 'die trying' on the streets than be

thought of as ‘failed men’. Over time, certain people such as non-migrants and women were excluded from the corner, except for a few who had befriended Uncle Kofi. The few women who did pass the time at Uncle Kofi’s normally did so because they saw it as a safe space where they could wait to meet up with people or wait between appointments in the city. Similarly, I decided to undertake my study there because of the imagined and observed safety for women.

Although men risked being attacked as well, the pressures to provide and to not give up easily meant they had little choice but to hit the streets. This points to the gendered aspect of becoming cornered, both physically and metaphorically. While the circumstances that surrounded men congregating at Uncle Kofi’s Corner were mostly unfavourable, the space was a platform for self-expression as migrants, mostly undocumented, were able to congregate without fear of being judged or attacked. Ronald, who frequented the corner, explained that Kofi: ‘accepted me as I am . . . and took me as his brother’. In his description of this space and Uncle Kofi in particular, Ronald contrasted this place with other spaces in the inner city, echoing the statements of many other participants. This is explored further in Chapter 4.

Uncle Kofi’s Corner and Tino’s Corner were not very different from other street corner spaces explored in similar studies focusing on urban anthropology and structural violence particularly in contemporary Africa (Matshaka 2010; Fast and Moyer 2018). Such spaces have provided platforms from which men can assert themselves, for example, through controlling who is allowed or not allowed in those spaces. In addition, in looking at space and the ways it shapes and is shaped by gender dynamics, I also use space as a lens to frame masculinities. I agree with Massey’s (2005, 12) conceptualisation of space as something that refutes ‘always ready constituted identities’. Instead, space is a multiplicity of possible becomings, a product of interrelations constituted through interactions of the spatial, the geographical, the temporal, the social, the local and the global (Massey 2005, 9).

Important to this study is how men understood and constructed their masculinities in relational terms, for example, redefining their otherwise ‘failed’ masculine identities. Instead of bemoaning the structural factors affecting them, they found ways to make do and in doing so reasserted their identities as men who can make plans. These identities, however, were not static or fixed but, like space that is ‘always under construction’ (Massey 2005, 9), they were in the process of becoming and were never finished or closed (Biehl and Locke 2017; Massey 2005). Below I explore the multiple ways that men redefined and reconstructed themselves in their efforts to make do in the face of limited options.



Sharing a plate of *mabhonzo* and pap at Uncle Kofis Corner

Photo Credit: Linda Musariri



Tino's outdoor salon by the traffic lights

Photo Credit: Linda Musariri

Becoming creative in corner spaces: *Kukiya Kiya*

When I returned in May 2019 for follow-up fieldwork, I observed that Tino had added another venture to his corner salon. In addition to plaiting hair, he was now selling second-hand clothes and books. I commended him on this new venture and he informed me that the clothes business was for his wife Anna. Surprised at his mention of a wife, I asked when he had gotten married and why he had not told me about it. The last time we had spoken about his marital life, he mentioned he could not raise money to pay *lobola* (bride price) for Monica, his long-term girlfriend who was based in Zimbabwe. He responded, 'Aah, Monica refused to elope with me, siding with her family that I needed to first raise money for *lobola*. I told you I would find someone who doesn't care about this *lobola* business and make her my wife. *Kukiya kiya, gogo*'.

At the close of business, after Anna had finished her shift as a waitress, she joined Tino and they packed their clothes in a big plastic bag. Bidding farewell to his friend Bouncer, who took the opposite route, Tino, Anna and I started off to their flat, which was a stone's throw away. Tino carried the big bag full of second-

hand clothes in one hand; in the other was a blue plastic bag with three combs, left over synthetic hair, and an almost empty box of red wine. Anna carried Tino's black plastic chair. The corner, which had been bustling with activity as Tino's Corner Salon, was back to being an ordinary corner where people from all walks of life stopped as they waited for the traffic lights to turn green. I was intrigued at the ingenious and distinct ways my interlocutors mapped urban space.

Tino had described his endeavours to make a living as a migrant without the requisite papers as *'tiri kungo kiya kiya'* (we are just making do). 'Making do' entailed having multiple streams of earning an income, including a mobile salon. Originating among my Zimbabwean participants, *'kukiya kiya'* is a Shona slang term that originates from the English word 'key' and literally means locking up (Gukurume 2018). However, metaphorically, *kukiya kiya* is a verb that describes the process of trying many keys to open a door. Jones (2010, 286), in his study among Zimbabweans, identifies *kukiya kiya* as 'cleverness, dodging, and the exploitation of whatever resources are at hand, all with an eye to self-sustenance'. Within the economy of Zimbabwe, *kukiya kiya* marks a modern-day 'decent man', a man who makes a plan in the face of powerful economic and political structures that circumvent his self-expectations as a man. Jones further explains that *kukiya kiya* as a practice led to a 'generalised culture of evasion: evasion of social institutions like the state, bureaucracy and the law; and evasion of cultural norms and hierarchies' (ibid.). I take Tino's mounting of a mobile salon and refusal to rent a proper space as a form of evasion, of both the bureaucracy and the financial obligations that come with a formal salon. Grabbing his chair and running away from police is another form of evasion. His decision to take Anna as his 'wife' without meeting the traditional requirements could be understood as another form of evading specific norms that would otherwise inhibit him from fulfilling his expectations as a man.

While *kukiya kiya* among men at Uncle Kofi's Corner was associated with ingenuity in relation to socially acceptable behaviour, in a different setting *kukiya kiya* could mean a different thing, including illegal dealings. For example, Demetrio's engagement in crime was another form of *kukiya kiya* although it was not socially desirable. Therefore, *kukiya kiya* as a response to being cornered should be understood as open ended, contingent and driven by necessity. In this way *kukiya kiya* is all encompassing, including by (re)defining localised and hybridised moral codes that are not exclusive to each other. For example, a self-professing religious man could be involved in illegal dealings in non-conflictual ways, as I show in Chapter 4. In the same way, a man could profess that he loved his partner while at the same admitting he could be abusive to her, as discussed in Chapter 6.

When men found themselves in cornered positions, they had to quickly (re)strategise and act according to what the situation was calling for at the

moment. For example, Xolani was able to speak the same language as Demetrio and his gang. In order to do this, he had to draw from his subject position as an ex-convict. Similarly, despite Khulu being highly skilled in fighting, having worked in military, he never spoke about it or showed it; I would have never known if it were not for other people who informed me. To him the skill of fighting was a contingent resource that he would use if necessity arose. Batnitzky and colleagues (2009, 1280) in their study of working male migrants in London, write that their study participants would ‘strategically select and emphasise certain aspects of their gendered identities that would help them perform in the labour market’ at a particular moment. In this way they would put certain aspects of their gender identity ‘on hold’ for the duration of their stay in their host country” (Batnitzky et al. 2009, 1280). Apparent in this example, as in my study, were men’s continuous contestations and negotiations of their masculinities in a process of endless becoming (Nilan 1995; Hall 1993) in the face of structures that inhibited them.

Although I relate becoming cornered to structural violence, I insist on using ‘becoming cornered’ not only because it originated from my participants but also because, unlike structures that tend to be fixed, it allows my participants space to assume multiple identities simultaneously and creatively. For example, while men identified being black as a source of racial and economic inequality, it was also a unifying factor that brought them together beyond national identities, as I explore in Chapter 4. While being undocumented amplified migrants’ vulnerability, they used the same subject positioning to gain access to work for the NGOs that targeted them, for example as peer educators or volunteers. Similarly, female survivors of violence used their subject positioning to gain access to NGO resources (see Chapter 5). Being a hustler was at times stigmatised but in other contexts it was celebrated as street smartness, as in the case of Tino being my city guide. Just as a physical corner has different angles from which one can view, the concept of cornering allows us to explore the multiple modes of being or becoming.

While I was struck by the way violence was normalised in the everyday lives of my study participants, I was even more intrigued by the multiple creative ways that men and women made their way in precarious circumstances. For example, I was struck by Xolani’s ability to speak the street language – when he was speaking with men at Tino’s Corner – while he had earlier presented himself to me as someone from one of the affluent suburbs of Johannesburg. Like Thembeni, he had always spoken to me in English. Speaking in English especially among young people denotes ‘coolness’. On this day when I took Xolani to Uncle Kofi’s Corner, I saw him conversing easily with several men in English. Over a plate of *kwasa kwasa*,¹¹ he participated in the conversation and jokes that were shared. It did not

¹¹ Kwasa kwasa is street food mainly rice, with spicy cow feet stew and beans, that was popular at Uncle Kofi’s Corner

take him long before he went out from the church premises to flirt with girls who were passing by. To my surprise he conversed with them in Zulu. Uncle Kofi had commented: 'Your cousin, Linda, really knows this place'. When we passed by Tino's Corner, he was already drinking and sharing a cigarette with the young men around. He was not speaking in English anymore, but like the several men present, he mixed Ndebele and Shona, both official languages in Zimbabwe. Thembeni and I were surprised to see him smoking, because during the time I had spent with him in the West Rand, not once had I seen him smoking or drinking. Xolani's behaviour was not very different from my other study participants, most of whom were fluent in one or two South African languages and could easily code switch when the need arose. On the same day, I witnessed Khulu conversing in siPedi to a drunk man who was coming after us. Khulu explained: 'I spoke in siPedi because it is not as popular, so I confused him; he thought I was South African. And siPedi is of a higher value than Tswana'.¹² Khulu had stayed in South Africa long enough to understand the politics between the different ethnic groups and he used this information to leverage social capital.

These examples illustrate the multiple functions played by as well as tensions arising from corner spaces as places of limited options and as places where new possibilities are imagined and pursued. Despite the origins of street-corner spaces in structural violence and systematic marginalisation, the outcomes or identities arising from corner places should not be seen as predetermined but rather as contingent. Understanding masculinities in this way makes it relatively easy to capture the responses that, like *kukiya kiya*, were characterised by fluidity and multiplicity.

Anthropology of becoming and frontier Africans

To capture this flexibility and multiplicity, I rely on anthropological theorisations of becoming (Biehl and Locke 2017) and the concept of frontier beings (Nyamnjoh 2017). These have helped me to understand how migrant men adjusted to social and economic realities as they attempted to live up to self, societal and ideological expectations as men. Scholars across disciplines have engaged with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming or ontology of change in their articulations of transformation and in foregrounding the role of space and place in identity formation. According to Hillier and Abrahams (2013, 12), this is a 'poststructuralist ontology which recognises both the importance of structures, systems and order, and also that of agency and power or force relations between agents and their mutual connections'. Biehl and Locke (2010, 317) define

¹² SiPedi and siTswana are two of the 12 official languages in South Africa.

becoming as 'those individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions'. Their aim is to ethnographically capture those human matters that usually fall between the cracks of dominant epistemologies, concepts and interventions. In their explanation of the anthropology of becoming, Biehl and Locke explore the everyday efforts by poor men and women in urban settings – in Brazil and Bosnia-Herzegovina – as they try to escape political and economic crises.

The anthropology of becoming can be extended to the study of masculinities to capture the unending process of negotiating multiple subject positions in relation to space and time. Urban anthropologists Fast and Moyer (2018) take up Biehl and Locke's (2017) conceptualisations of becoming, to explore how young men use urban space to navigate and negotiate precarious realities through establishing relations and imagining future possibilities elsewhere. Geographers have highlighted the intersection of space and power in the ordering of things and people in the city (Hillier and Abrahams 2013; Dovey 2010). Sociologists such as Hall (1992) have argued that identity is in a perpetual state of being reworked and thus becoming. Nilan (1995, 95), who observes social interaction among drama students in a film class in Australia, highlights the ongoing negotiations of differently positioned students as they attempted to constitute their gender. Nilan concludes that their masculinity is never achieved, but is a process of endless becoming, and adds that this process of becoming is necessary in (re)positioning oneself in relation to discourses of gender. In light of these studies and theorisations of identity and space, I understand the masculinities I observed at corner spaces not as finished identities but as practices and ideas resulting from unstable subjectivities in the process of being and becoming (Hall 1992; Fast and Moyer 2018; Herz 2018), and I find similarities with Nyamnjoh's (2015) idea of frontier Africans, as introduced above.

Following the concept of frontier beings and the anthropology of becoming, structures are not permanent, but can be circumvented, as men find cracks and fissures in them. I was struck by the ability of most of my study participants to speak several languages, including street language, as a survival tactic or a means to assert belonging. While language could be used to distinguish between 'locals' and 'foreigners', most of my participants were fluent in one or two South African languages and could easily blur those boundaries. Language switching among migrants particularly in South Africa has already been identified as a strategy to situate themselves in the matrices of belonging as well as to distance themselves from the 'foreigner' label (Siziba 2014), as in the case of Khulu. Seeing my study participants conversing in several languages, I learned how migrant men straddle multiple margins of being and becoming in their effort to fit into various urban spaces. I also got to see the complexities entailed as men took up different subject positions at different moments in time. I link this to Massey's (2004)

theorisation of space, in particular, the spatialised negotiations of identity.

Becoming cornered

Central to the understanding of cornered masculinity is the (re)ordering and reconstituting of space through processes of placemaking and belonging. As much as men became cornered, their spending time on street corners could simultaneously be read as them cornering urban space to satisfy their needs. Tino's Corner, like Uncle Kofi's Corner, arose out of migrants' desire to belong and assert themselves. Simultaneously, the same space can be understood as emerging from the state's effort to regulate and exclude a certain group of people. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) seminal work on desire and power helps us to frame becoming cornered as a spatial metaphor of marginalisation and the consequent multidimensional and often contingent ways that men navigate such cornered spaces in post-migration contexts (Musariri and Moyer 2020). In his engagements with Foucault's concept of power, Deleuze as interpreted by Dovey (2010,15) posits that 'it is not pre-existing beings who hold power or are subject to it, rather power is linked to flows of desire and processes of becoming'. This framing of power, it is argued, moves away from the often-negative implications of power that emphasise oppression and violence.

In a similar vein, geographers have questioned the 'asymmetrical hierarchical dualism whereby centres are loci of power and privilege, and margins are spaces of lack, disadvantage and oppression' (Andrucki and Jen 2014, 11). An example of this is the way Demetrio and his gang took over certain parts of the city and made them their own by excluding (and exploiting) other people that they deemed as strangers. This can be understood as the young men's effort to corner the space. Viewed from another angle, Demetrio ended up in that space because of the cornering effects of structural violence. Corners, thus, can be understood as both as space of vulnerability and sites 'of domination' (Vigneswaran 2020, 2) or 'other spaces of power' (Jaffe 2018, 1099).

Similarly, having spent time at both Tino's and Uncle Kofi's corners, I came to notice how men in these corners managed to (re)define centre and margin, and the values and practices suitable for such spaces, based on their collective capital. At Uncle Kofi's Corner migrants from different parts of Africa, including South Africans, had marked this space as their own territory, guided by tacit and locally coded scripts on how to behave. Men there were usually more reserved and talked about serious things, including religious matters, relationships and job opportunities. Not all of them were part of the fellowship of the church that was the grounds of the corner itself; in fact, not all of them were Christians, as there were Muslims and traditionalists among those who frequented the corner. Despite this diversity, I sensed that somehow their behaviours and language

when at the corner were guided by a Christian ethos. This was because if any behaviour was deemed as transgressive; there was always one or two to reprimand the 'transgressor'. For example, Khulu was forced to leave the WhatsApp group by the other group members because he posted messages that others thought were heretical.¹³ This can also be understood as a form of cornering, in that to be a member of this space one had to follow certain rules and practices; in a similar way, the government of South Africa had rules that had legally excluded them. Hence, cornering in its multiple forms and levels becomes another springboard for the process of becoming. Nilan (1995, 68) captures this aptly:

This endless process of becoming involves knowledge about how to talk and about how to behave, as well as the myriad contextual rules governing these social interactions. Critical to the production of talk which will ensure a viable masculine social identity in both culture-at-large and sub-cultures, is the articulation of categorical statements about self and others which establish the exclusion of those deemed ineligible for membership of one's own desired masculine category.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set forth the main concepts and theories that are central to this dissertation. Many of these will be further explored and unpacked in subsequent chapters. In an effort of co-theorising with my study participants, I have used the emic terms they came up with as they described their everyday encounters with structures that sought to inhibit them. What I might have conceptualised as structural violence, my study participants viewed as being cornered. What I might have understood as agency or social navigation were identified by them as *kukiya kiya*. I have opted for more the open-ended theory of becoming and concept of frontier beings in my attempt to avoid undermining the ingenuity and ongoing, evolving efforts of study participants who, despite many obstacles, found multiple ways to detour and manoeuvre through.

¹³ Khulu was Christian but his church was 'Afrocentric' in that it emphasised African traditions over the Bible. Some of his statements were perceived as contrary to the Bible, for example his insistence that Jesus was black.