



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Becoming cornered

*Migration, masculinities and marginalisation in inner-city Johannesburg*

Musariri, L.

#### Publication date

2021

#### Document Version

Other version

#### License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Musariri, L. (2021). *Becoming cornered: Migration, masculinities and marginalisation in inner-city Johannesburg*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**‘A black man is  
a cornered man’:  
unpacking structural  
violence among  
migrants in  
Johannesburg’s  
inner city**

## Finding Uncle Kofi's Corner

Entering the gates of the church, I am welcomed by a big billboard with two black smiling faces, a man and a woman who I presume to be a couple. Above them are written several things: 'Family Christian Church' stands out most to me. To my right, several cars of different models and makes are parked haphazardly, occupying a small space. Two look like they have not been moved in years, one an old-looking white *kombi* van, with floral curtains at the windows, the other a small blue Peugeot with two wheels missing. I would later learn that the *kombi* was being used as someone's home.

Along the wall is a small pedestrian gate with a big black umbrella, open and flapping in the cool breeze. Right next to the gate, there's an unmissable big orange ice cream machine, inscribed in giant red letters: 'UNCLE KOFI ICE CREAM'. There are four men seated by the stall. One is stitching a woman's shoe. My cousin Tino and I approach and, following brief greetings and an introduction, I begin to tell them about my study. Throughout my fieldwork, I found myself adjusting how I introduced my study, as my research focus and aims shifted in the face of my growing understanding of the context, but also as I learned from people's responses to my 'pitch' that how I framed my research set the scene for the way men in particular reacted to my topic.

It did not take me long to realise that telling prospective participants that I wanted to research men's perpetration of violence against women would not lead to the type of open inquiry I was hoping for. My first week in Johannesburg was marked by a dismal failure to recruit participants. My invitations to participate were often met with a shrug of shoulders, the silent shaking of heads and, at times, outright rejection. Slowly I realised that men did not like to be positioned as defendants while I played judge. One man was sincere enough to tell me: 'Oh, you are one of those who talk women's rights, children's rights, 50/50. Have you ever asked where are the men's rights?' Although I did not agree at all with this statement at that time, and I had a 'perfect' feminist answer that might have knocked him off his self-pitying pedestal, I bit my tongue. The following days saw me reframing my research.

Arriving at Uncle Kofi's Corner that day I tried to entice this group of men to accept me with this new framework in mind. 'I am here to learn about men', I said with a big smile on my face. Unconvinced, one man asked: 'What exactly do you want to know about men?' I went blank, feeling the pressure to improvise. I responded: 'I need to know the challenges men face in Johannesburg as they try to be men'. Eureka! My reply appeared to be well received, with unspoken 'Now you are talking!' appreciative glances and body language from the men gathered. The men visibly relaxed. Some asked for further information while others

remained aloof. Eventually, one man who was sewing a shoe beckoned me to sit down so we could talk. Another man stood up and gave me his chair, and went to sit by the church veranda. Tino was asked to go and get another chair from the church, which he used to sit next to me for a few minutes. Satisfied I was in good (safe) hands, Tino then decided to take leave, reminding me to call him when I was done so he could escort me to the university.

In articulating their challenges as men, participants came up with many descriptions of manhood: responsible man, black man, African man, traditional man, God-fearing man, hustler, real, born again man, modern man, *tsotsi*.<sup>14</sup> One person could assume many of these descriptions simultaneously, depending on the 'weather of the day', to quote Khulu. Over the course of fieldwork, Khulu gave me five different names in five different African languages that he preferred me to call him. It was only during the last day of my fieldwork that he took my notebook, scribbled down his 'real' name and told me not to tell it to anyone. Like Khulu, several men spoke one or two South African languages in addition to their languages of origin, and they could 'transform' to become other men at any time.

Based on stories from men who frequented Uncle Kofi's Corner, in this chapter I seek to answer the following question: what happens when normative ideas and practices of masculinity encounter corner spaces that limit their expression or realisation? I particularly examine how migrant men understand their marginalisation in relation to their ideas and practices of masculinity. Contrary to studies that argue that men with limited options turn to violence to assert themselves, so as to align with hegemonic masculinities, the men in this study did not view hegemonic masculinity as fixed. Failure to live up to hegemonic standards led my interlocutors to redefine masculinities that matched their lived experiences. Through this process of negotiating and reformulating their own standards, which recognised their own varied forms of capital, they drew from the dominant tropes of masculinities.

At other times, or simultaneously, they condemned certain aspects of hegemonic masculinities that undermined their positions as men. In what follows, I present the multiple articulations of masculinities among marginalised men. Attending to this multiplicity allows me to highlight how they contested, negotiated and redefined both ideas and practices of masculinities in relation to their own lived realities. I begin by describing Uncle Kofi's Corner and how it can be understood as a distinct urban space for masculinities. This is followed by three case studies and discussion.

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Tsotsi' is slang word common to most Southern African languages, meaning a person who is a rogue, a mischief maker, a criminal or part of a bad element.

## Introducing Uncle Kofi's Corner

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I named Uncle Kofi's Corner after Kofi, a Ghanaian shoe maker. In addition to making shoes and running a small *spaza* (convenience) shop, he also sold ice cream, making him quite popular among the school children who flocked every day to this place after school, chanting 'Uncle Kofi, Uncle Kofi'. The ice cream is also popular among men and women who stopped by and chatted as they ate. There were always men sitting in a semi-circle around Uncle Kofi's makeshift stall, which had a small black gate as a counter. The first few times I was there, I thought these men were just sitting around, doing nothing. With time I would learn that this was not just a 'bunch of men' whiling away time as they 'bird watched', to quote Khulu. This was a place where job opportunities were shared, money exchanged and advice given, always over a plate of shared food, either *kwasa kwasa* (spicy rice) or pap<sup>15</sup> and *mabhonzo* (bones).

The place was situated on the corner of Mzilikazi and Mandela streets in a predominantly black neighbourhood near the centre of Johannesburg. The neighbourhood had for some time been routinely referred to by mainstream media and scholars as an epicentre of violence and hotspot of crime (Landau 2015). Police patrols and camera surveillance were a constant presence (see also Vigneswaran 2013). In addition to conducting random searches for drugs and firearms, some police officers considered it part of their job to extort money from migrants without papers. Many NGOs were working in the area with the aim of eradicating violence, crime and other social vices.

Migrants congregated in the inner city, avoiding the townships located on the outskirts of Johannesburg where they feared meeting violence at the hands of the South African nationals living there. While townships like Soweto and Alexandra are relatively less expensive, and for this reason might appeal to migrants, they are perceived to be unsafe, especially following spikes in xenophobic violence, such as those recorded in 2008 and 2015. The most recent attacks happened in September 2019, while I was writing this thesis.

Migrants in inner-city Johannesburg have organised their living arrangements and neighbourhoods following national and ethnic networks, forming pockets of affective connections with their compatriots. For example, some of my participants referred to the inner-city neighbourhood of Yeoville as 'Kinshasa' (the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC) because of the many migrants from the DRC who were living there. Similarly, Berea, which borders Yeoville, was known as 'Chitungwiza extension' (after a city in Zimbabwe) because of its many Zimbabwean residents.

---

<sup>15</sup> Pap is a soft porridge made out of corn flour which is staple food in Southern Africa

## Using Uncle Kofi's Corner to conceptualise cornered masculinities

Because Uncle Kofi's Corner attracted mostly migrants and a few South Africans, and far more men than women, I came to think of it as an exclusive social space for men. It is a space born out of migrants' fear of being deported for lack of papers or being attacked for being migrants. Limited in mobility in both physical and economic terms, men found themselves spending time at Uncle Kofi's Corner. There was usually a group of five to ten men hanging around Uncle Kofi. It was a refuge. In the process of hiding out, they also produced a distinct social space of interaction that had localised codes and scripts of behaviour. Uncle Kofi's Corner provided a platform where conventional ideas about masculinity were tested, contested and reconfigured to meet the lived experiences of the men (and women) who hung out there, resulting in an enclaved space for masculinities characterised by creativity, multiplicities and becomings (Mangezvo 2015). Through their economic manoeuvring, they constructed a form of entrepreneurial street masculinity (Matshaka 2009), while also making a concerted effort to distinguish themselves from men whose street masculinities embraced violence or sexual immorality (Musariri and Moyer).

In his analysis of transnational masculinities in Stellenbosch and Cape Town, South Africa, Mangezvo (2015) defines 'enclaved masculinity' as a form of compensatory masculinity that emerges from migrant men's efforts to navigate space, place and exclusion. The result is that men occupy enclaved spaces as part of an effort to regulate their movements; they avoid specific spaces thought of as belonging to the locals while they work to establish a foothold in the city. Mangezvo (2015, 145) draws on Landau and Freemantle's concept of 'tactical cosmopolitanism' to illustrate how men tactically plan their use of public space with the explicit aim of avoiding areas of potential conflict. While the space Mangezvo describes started off as an opportunity for Zimbabwean families to congregate, he notes that over the years it became nearly exclusive to men, though from diverse migrant backgrounds. Through shared language and practices, they also unintentionally constructed the space to be near exclusive to migrant men. In this study I expand on Mangezvo's conceptualisation of enclaved masculinity, combining his observations with the idea of being 'cornered', as articulated by the men I researched. From their perspective, being cornered was the common denominator that brought together all the men who shared their stories with me. Uncle Kofi's Corner had presented some of them with opportunities to deal with or manoeuvre through their cornered positions. However, the corner also provided them with (limited) opportunities to participate in the broader social and economic spaces of Johannesburg. In short, it served as a site of becoming.

## The corner as a site of becoming

In their edited volume, *Unfinished*, which offers a framework for applying Deleuze and Guattari's idea of becoming to anthropological research, Biehl and Locke (2017) emphasise the importance of thinking of life in terms of both limits and crossroads. Through my research I came to understand the corner as limiting and symptomatic of structural violence, as well as a place where men bonded. I agree with Biehl and Locke's (2017, 46) assessment that 'symptoms are at times a necessary condition or resource for the afflicted to articulate a new relationship to the world and to others'.

Many study participants who had fled their countries for one reason or another found themselves in South Africa, where they tried to carve out new pathways. It can be argued that the crises that induced them to flee their countries also served as springboards for imagining better futures elsewhere, Johannesburg in this case. In many cases the very survival skills they had learned during crises in their home countries proved invaluable for their continued survival in Johannesburg. Uncle Kofi's Corner, though born of shared and systematic marginalisation, became a space where new relationships were forged, economic ventures pursued and identities redefined.

Likening structural violence to the process of cornering, below, I examine the various factors that can put men in a corner where they have limited options. I further examine how the corner impacts differently positioned men and men's various reactions to such spaces. I am interested in how migrants appropriate the inner city to become a safe place away from South Africans. In what follows, I draw on three extended cases studies. I examine how Fatso made use of someone else's papers to run a business, how Kundai struggled to find his way in the city and marry, and how Kimo ended up being part of a drug-trafficking syndicate.

These cases allow me to further theorise the relationships among migrant masculinities, cornering and possible lines of flight. Arguing for a less totalising theory, I interpret the efforts and manoeuvring of Uncle Kofi and Fatso as incomplete or unfinished moments on the way to becoming (Nyamnjoh 2015; Biehl and Locke 2017). These examples of becoming emerged when the desires of these men collided with seemingly powerful structures and found escape through 'lines of flight' (Biehl and Locke 2017, 54). By highlighting these lines of flight, I seek to show how the men in this study were always striving to move forward with their lives, despite social and legal forces that sought to suppress their momentum and to corner them.

## Case Studies

### ***Case 1: 'This is what our government has reduced us to'***

In February 2018, towards the end of my fieldwork, I arrived at the corner around 2 in the afternoon. I had not been there for a week so I was surprised to see Fatso, who was supposed to be at work, sitting with Khulu and Kundai. Also present was Nomthi, a South African woman in her early 30s, who was hanging out because the friend with whom she stayed had forgotten to leave the keys when she left for work. Later, she told me that she felt safe sitting at Kofi's while she waited to get back into her house. As I drew closer, Uncle Kofi pointed to the chair next to him, shouting out: 'Your chair is already set here in the shade, Linda. Sit here next to Nomthi because no woman gets scorched in the sun at my shop. 'Especially a Dutch woman', Khulu added, while motioning for me to sit down, making me laugh while feeling welcome. I was not sure if he was being sarcastic or if he was just trying to make a point about my connection with the University of Amsterdam, but I found it hilarious all the same. Many times, he would throw in a phrase in Afrikaans, and I would always remind him that I understood neither Afrikaans nor Dutch. However, I would always commend him for being multilingual.

As I greeted everybody, I grabbed the chair next to Nomthi and quickly joined in their conversation on Fatso's job predicament. More than a month earlier he had excitedly shared with me that he had scored a 'piece job' with a construction company. A piece job is a short-term contract, usually involving jobs such as cleaning, carpentry, painting and the like. It could be a one-day job or, if one is lucky, it might last a few weeks. Most men who came to Kofi's relied on these kinds of jobs, but at times they might go for a full month without getting a piece job. For a few months' prior to landing this one, Fatso had been struggling to pay his rent. To get the job, he had to mobilise a few men who would work together as a team and present himself as the head of a small-scale company. He later told me that he was using the company of his friend since he did not have papers. Without legal papers, it is difficult to get a job, unless it is within the informal sector or work in small shops where workers are paid without tax; such salaries are minimal, or 'peanuts' in the words of my participants. Fatso was so excited to get this piece job that he had invited me to take a video of him and his men at work, to help 'tell his story in Europe'. Now Fatso was explaining that he had only worked for three days before the work had been put on hold to await the purchase of more raw materials. More than a month had passed, without the employer calling them back to work. Khulu teased him that he just

needed to accept that the work was over and move on, because there was nowhere he could report this to without implicating himself.

Fatso had always been the optimistic one, the most enthusiastic of the group. On the first day I interviewed him, he said, 'I know many people come here to look for jobs but I have a different outlook on life. I am here to create employment, I am here to make it happen'. His remark was met by others, who were listening in, with eye rolling and an unvoiced attitude that he was daydreaming. Having seen his endeavours at making a living thwarted, I found myself seconding these other men. Fatso must surely be dreaming, I concluded, but he remained adamant that he was going to get his 'breakthrough' despite the challenges. 'You see, 2008, when things were the toughest in Zimbabwe? My pillow was a bag of money.... I was swimming in cash, do you hear me? When everyone else was complaining, things were moving for me,' he told me as he reminisced about his good life. On another occasion, he bid us farewell as he went to eat breakfast. I told him that he might not see me on his return since I was planning on going home early, and he said to me: 'I will be back soon, there is nothing special about this breakfast, just bread and tea.... Gone are the days when I used to eat bacon and eggs for breakfast in Zimbabwe'. Fatso always compared his life back in Zimbabwe to the current situation, bemoaning bygone days. 'This is what our government has reduced us to', he lamented, echoing the views of many other Zimbabweans.

When I asked him how he made his money in Zimbabwe, he said, '*kukiya kiya*'. As a Zimbabwean, I quickly discerned that he meant hustling, so I asked him what exactly. He explained that he had worked at a service station where he sold fuel and he was also involved in an illegal cigarette syndicate, exporting Zimbabwean cigarettes to Botswana and South Africa. 'God gave me brains as a man, to use them. I am just waiting for this construction business to materialise. You know I do not have experience in construction, but the team I put together can deliver', he added. What struck me though, was how he had associated his 'illegal' business with his faith in God, in a way that seemed contradictory.

A few months into my fieldwork, Fatso told me that his wife and two children had come from Zimbabwe to join him. I was surprised because I knew that he had been struggling to pay rent. Despite him not having a job, his wife had insisted on coming. Although he admitted that their presence meant more pressure, he still preferred having them around, saying: 'A man's death is marked with intestines coming out', a Shona proverb that implies that a man may have to die for the sake of his family. Fatso's story of his family joining him reminded me of my own story when

I left Zimbabwe. I joined my husband who had just finished his master's degree. Although he had not yet found a job, my family discussed the issue and decided that I should join him. Though I had wanted to stay a little bit longer in Zimbabwe, it was evident that when and how I migrated was not my choice alone. From my own experiences I could understand when Fatso and other participants told me how complicated their migratory journeys were. My cousin had also warned me that my husband might be tempted by other women, saying, 'Sister, there are Xhosa women that side. They are yellow bones and have hips' (light-skinned and curvaceous), repeating a common stereotype held by many Zimbabweans about South African women. With this story in mind, I had asked Fatso if his wife had been bothered by their separation. He laughed: 'The key to a prosperous marriage is trust and good communication. There are certain things she knows I cannot do to her, the same way I trust she cannot do other things. I married my best friend. As a family, it is always good to stay together'.

I had followed Fatso since his early days in South Africa; he had only been in the country for a few months when I first met him. Over a short period of time, I observed an ambitious 40-year-old full of dreams being pushed into a 'corner' of life. His continued presence at Uncle Kofi's Corner was evidence of this. He was supposed to be at work but because his 'boss' had not called him back, he was hanging out, waiting, at Uncle Kofi's Corner. Since he did not have papers, it was hard for him to find legal or official help. However, Fatso invoked masculine ideals to bolster himself and to keep moving forward. As he said, a man dies trying. Despite financial pressures, he still expected and was expected by his wife and extended family to fulfill the provider role. Drawing on past experiences of employing his ingenuity, he was optimistic that he could also make it in South Africa. He believed that, unlike contemporary Zimbabwe, South Africa would provide him with the opportunity to meet his masculine duties as a provider, even though the opportunities appeared hard to reach owing to his legal status. However, when I returned to South Africa in May 2019, I heard that Fatso had returned to Zimbabwe.

Fatso's case shows the paradoxical implications of Johannesburg as a land of opportunities and simultaneously a place where dreams are broken, as exemplified by his statement 'what we have been reduced to'. This story helps us to see the fluidity of Uncle Kofi's Corner and Johannesburg as a whole as places where men are cornered and where new possibilities are imagined. The very masculine ideas that put Fatso in a corner, pressuring him to provide for his family in a tough economy, simultaneously strengthened him not to give up hope. This was evident

in his efforts to use another person's papers in order to gain access to the formal market where 'paperless' individuals like himself were systematically excluded. Fatso's case illustrates what happens when normative ideas of becoming a man are subjected to corner spaces with limited options. Fatso tried to wiggle through the system by using someone else's papers. When his efforts failed, he opted to go back home. Returning home was seen as an act of respectable masculinity, despite being viewed as an act of failure in some cases by the same men. I will explore this further in the discussion section.

## **Case 2: The corner becoming home**

Kundai, in his early 30s, was also from Zimbabwe and a frequent visitor at Uncle Kofi's Corner. I had wondered why he was always around. I later learned from Khulu that Kundai was staying in the broken-down white *kombi* van stationed by the corner of the fence wall of the church. 'He uses that broken van as his home. . . . He sleeps there and uses the church's kitchen and public toilets to bathe', Khulu told me. It was so disheartening to hear this about Kundai, someone I saw as a young professional. From the two interviews I conducted with him, I learnt that he had a diploma in marketing. Five years earlier, as a fresh graduate, and like many Zimbabweans, he had made his way to South Africa. It was not an easy decision to make, but neither was it an option to stay in economically crippled Zimbabwe, then under the leadership of Robert Mugabe. After making the decision to undertake the precarious journey, he crossed the crocodile-infested Limpopo River that divides South Africa and Zimbabwe. On the other side, Kundai faced corrupt police officers who let him proceed for a fee of R250 (about 15 euros at the time), which was all he had to kickstart his new life. Kundai then found himself living on this corner doing menial jobs here and there.

A man like Kundai, who lived by the church and did not have steady work, was seen as a total loser by some of the other study participants. He was able bodied and should not have been, they would say, 'lazing around'. I had thought the same before getting to know him better. He volunteered at the church as a security guard and sometimes cleaned the church. He usually spent his mornings out looking for piece work or at the soccer bet, engaging in a form of gambling. One day he offered to clean my car and did a splendid job, and I learnt that car washing was the piece work he had been picking up. Suddenly it made sense to me why I always saw him leaving the church premises carrying a black bucket and a towel over his shoulders. I could not help but imagine how it would feel for someone with a diploma in marketing to be homeless and working as

a car washer. Closely looking at Kundai and the other men at the corner, I began to understand why, when I asked them about gender-based violence, they talked about feeling undermined by chronic unemployment. They emphasised how they had been dehumanised by extreme poverty and humiliated by the violence that they faced from other men, women and the police.

But Kundai's challenges were not only economic, as I initially thought. A religious man, Kundai told me how being Christian had helped him to cope. 'I know my breakthrough is on the way', he told me likening himself to the Biblical character, Abraham, who patiently waited for the manifestation of God's promise. He always praised his church and often challenged me, saying, 'Don't let *zvemabook* [books] take you away from God'. It was only towards the end of my fieldwork that I heard him complaining about his church, during one of our many informal group discussions. There were more men present than usual that day, with the majority belonging to Family Christian Church. They had come for a men's fellowship meeting, and after this, they joined our discussion. Two of the men were elders from the church who had befriended me. The discussion began with Uncle Kofi insisting that I eat ice cream so that I would gain more weight, and the advice: 'When you go back to Netherlands, you need to have another baby'. I pointed out that, out of the group assembled, I had had the most babies: he had one, and many of the men present had none.

Kundai was one of the young men who did not have a baby. He commented that his chance of getting married to someone he 'really loved' had been blown by the elders of the church. He pointed at one of the elders, who started arguing with him: 'I gave you a chance with the girl and you were busy talking about weather instead of going straight to the point and profess[ing] your undying love. . . . Someone beat you to it' (laughing). This exchange led to a heated debate, as many of the people present condemned the tradition of courtship practiced within the Family Christian Church. Known as *masofa*<sup>16</sup> (loosely translated as 'sofas'), the tradition entails elders of the church facilitating courtships between young couples to ensure that they avoid premarital sex.

Kundai defended himself, blaming the elders for going behind his back and discouraging the girl from marrying a 'poor' man. According to him, the elders had encouraged the girl to choose another man who was financially stable. Some of the people participating in the discussion

---

<sup>16</sup> This entails a young man approaching a church elder to say that he had seen a girl from church in whom he was interested. The elder would approach the girl on behalf of the man. If she agreed, an appointment would be arranged for the two to meet under the observation of the elder. If the meeting went well, they would begin the process of courtship under the same surveillance until they got married. The church would organise the wedding and pay for most of the costs.

pointed out that this system was incapacitating when elders had to do the 'wooing job' for another man. 'A man should hunt his own meat', one man said, implying that Kundai should have approached the woman himself. I followed up by asking Kundai if he had ever approached any girl outside of church, and he said that, after that incident, his confidence was destroyed. However, he also said that he was now looking outside of church because he had concluded that the church system was corrupt: 'Of course, at its inception the system was not bad in preserving good morals, but now it is corrupted'.

This story shows how, in addition to political and economic factors, religious factors can also disrupt masculinity practices. While Kundai's church gave him accommodation on the corner, it also put him in the corner where he could not fulfil some of his manly expectations such as getting married and having babies. While he might be considered an example of failed masculinity, as he did not have a wife, child(ren) or a job, as might be expected at his age, he found solace in his religion. The *masofa* tradition of having church elders influence and monitor the courtship of two individuals can support Mfecane's (2019) argument of 'communitarian personhood' among Xhosa men. Mfecane explains that an individual is conferred adulthood status by the group, after having met standards set by the collective group. If we are to go by Kundai's claim that the church elders discouraged the woman he loved from dating him, it becomes evident that the church too has defined the type of man who deserves marriage: someone who is financially stable and independent. Religious doctrines and institutions therefore can enact cornering when they dictate how men should or should not behave, or define how men might acquire a certain status.

Kundai's story also allows us to explore the idea of becoming. His understanding of his position as transitory – a training ground – shows his hope for a future of becoming someone else. This point can be emphasised in his self-comparison to the Biblical character Abraham and Kundai's claim that he strives towards achieving that level of faith. He acknowledged that this process of emulation was not easy and was a lifelong endeavour. This example illustrates how men who find themselves in corner spaces respond by accepting their situation and finding ways to get comfortable. I read his conversion of the old broken-down van into a home as his effort to get comfortable in a tough situation. Similarly, his interpretation of his predicament of being unemployed and unable to marry through the lens of Biblical characters can be read as another effort to comfort himself.

### **Case 3: You are just thrown, you have to swim'**

During my first days at Uncle Kofi's corner, I met Kimo, a Congolese man in his early 30s. He worked for a security company, patrolling the streets of Johannesburg. When he learnt about my research, he was keen to help me, professing that he encountered domestic violence cases on a daily basis. His job was to resolve such conflicts. During my fieldwork, he sent me videos and photographs of people caught on camera robbing and attacking people as well as messages of reported cases of sexual abuse. Twice he took me on a tour of one of the neighbourhoods that he patrolled. On our first trip, he took me to two buildings for which his company provided security. These two buildings, he said, were 'the headquarters of gender-based violence in this neighbourhood'. He said that not a day would pass without him having to respond to violence at one or the other of the two houses. When we came to the first house the gate was tightly shut and there was a security guard inside who peeked out before opening the gate for us. Kimo explained:

This is an exclusive place. You could not enter here on your own, though many of the girls here are your sisters [Zimbabweans]. It's really sad: some of these girls actually stay here [pointing at some buildings looking like hostels] and these white men just come to have sex with them....The place belongs to some German guy.

Passing through what seemed like a bar where two men and three women were sitting, we walked up to the balcony, sat at one of the tables and continued chatting over a can of Coca-Cola. He told me that some of the women were victims of sex trafficking while others were just there to make money.

He changed the topic and began talking about another enterprise taking place in the next building, in full view from the balcony. With the gate wide open I could see cars driving and people walking in and out the premises. We observed the place for more than two hours and there were always cars queuing along the sidewalk, their drivers waiting for other cars to come out. At the reception was a long queue of men and women with some people standing outside by the veranda. Others waited in their cars and would only get out when their partner came from the reception with a set of keys in their hands. Together they would head towards the back of the building where there were several rooms. Kimo told me that this was a 'cheaters' club' where people came to have 'extra-

marital affairs or just to have sex'. He explained: 'This is where bosses come to sleep with their employees over lunch, where the pastor sleeps with his church members, and *kombi* drivers sleep with their passengers'. He implied that, like the sexual relationships that occurred at the house where we were sitting, some of the liaisons were for material benefits, others for pleasure. According to him, the Irish and German men who owned this place were making money from the hourly room rates charged to clients. I was intrigued by the way he always told me who the owners of the enterprises were, highlighting how the cash flows spanned the global scale. In conversations we had with other men at Uncle Kofi's Corner, Kimo would always point out how the civil war in the DRC was sponsored by a few European countries who benefited economically from the war. He was one of a number of study participants who attempted to link the things they witnessed or experienced to global processes and connections.

On our second trip, on a different day, Kimo showed me the drug dealing trail of which he was part, telling me the story of how he found himself in this dangerous web. It began, he said, when he was asked by his boss to collect money from the street boys. He was not sure what the money was for. Upon discovering that the money was his boss's profit of the drug business, he was dismayed:

As a Christian, I did not know what to do, I approached one of my other bosses, who was a bit free [approachable]. He told me that there was nothing I could do to stop this well-established business. He said I had no option other than to join. 'When you came to South Africa, you found us in business and you will leave us still in business. Either join or leave'. I just had to pray to God to help me, and decided to do my job and not poke my nose in people's business. When they send me to collect their monies, I just go quietly. I need to feed my family.

Kimo went on to describe how some high-profile politicians and business people were also involved in this business. 'You saw those druggies on *nyaope* [narcotic drug] who were selling drugs on the street, those ones are used as a front. That's why police don't even waste their time with those ones. Today they are arrested; tomorrow they are released'. The point he was trying to make to me was not to focus on the outcomes while leaving out the deeper, underlying issues. To him violence against women was just one outcome emanating from larger structural inequalities. He emphasised that Johannesburg had a

tendency of bringing out the worst in people. 'Here is like a jungle: you are just thrown and you have to swim or else you sink,' he said, speaking of being caught up with drug dealing. However, because he went with the flow, he still had a job and could afford to send money to his family back in the DRC and to look after his child and wife in South Africa. When I asked him if he would go back to the DRC, he swore that he would never go back. Even if he were deported from South Africa, he would find another African country to go to. He also spoke of moving to the United States in the near future.

Kimo's actions, particularly his choice to 'go with the flow', show that sometimes men did whatever worked in the moment in order to survive. Although he said that participating in the drug trade was against his beliefs, he still continued to do so in order to fulfill his obligations as a provider. By pointing out that politicians and other police officials were also involved, he presented himself and the other street men whom he identified as '*nyaope* boys' as victims of the system. His identification with victimhood perhaps also echoed in his assertions that the civil war in the DRC was sponsored by European countries. Such statements could be read as him trying to evade responsibility or justifying his actions, especially in the phrase 'you are just thrown in'.

## Discussion

Drawing on the stories presented above, I will now discuss how men subscribed to tropes of masculinities. Then I look at the structural factors that place them in corners where they fail to live up to predefined societal and self-expectations as men. Lastly, I focus on how men respond to becoming cornered.

### ***Defining a man***

A thread that ran through the stories shared with me by research participants and reflected in the cases presented above was the fact that men felt pressured to behave in a 'manly' fashion. When I asked them what they meant by this, the majority highlighted the provider role, in statements such as this: 'A man is supposed to look after his kids and wife'. Fatso's case illustrates this norm, as well as the challenges it presents. Despite his financial vulnerability, he agreed to allow his family join him, fully accepting he would be responsible for housing, feeding and protecting them. In Zimbabwe, as the economy began to crumble, he had tried *kukiya kiya*, engaging in multiple business ventures. He had hoped to do the same in South Africa. The importance of men meeting responsibilities related to

providing was reiterated by nearly all the men in this study, echoing research done on this topic elsewhere (Wyrod 2016; Dworkin et al. 2012; Hunter 2010; Morrell and Jewkes 2011; De Villiers Graaff 2017).

Provider-oriented masculinities emphasise respect and control. If a man can provide for his family, then he is in control and deserves respect. What then happens if a man fails to provide? 'I expect to do those things [looking after the family], even though things are hard. I still need to make a plan; otherwise I am a boy', Kundai once said. Calling into question manhood by suggesting that a person is a 'boy' has long been documented in South Africa, with clear resonances with the colonial and apartheid eras. In *Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies*, Morrell (1998, 15) explores the politics of using the term 'boy' in colonial times, arguing that it became synonymous with oppressed black masculinity, as it 'captured a condescension, a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of growth and the achievement of manhood amongst African men'. A man commands respect, whereas a boy does not.

As 'boys', black men were subordinated and denied respect by colonial settlers. In their qualitative study among participants of the One Man Can<sup>17</sup> intervention in South Africa, Dworkin and colleagues (2012) demonstrate the centrality of respect in defining masculinity in the lives of their participants. Despite their participants' involvement with the gender-equality intervention, they upheld the belief that if one considers himself a man, he needs to prove it by providing for his family. Some have argued that failing to meet this all-important aspect of masculinity, and the fear or experience of not being respected, may lead some men to overcompensate and embrace practices of masculinity such as physical violence (de Villiers Graaf 2017; Ratele 2013).

Earning an income is key in facilitating a man's fulfilment of his role as a provider and decision maker. Having an income or money also plays a big role in acquiring not only a woman but also respect from peers and from other women. For example, Kundai lacked money and was rejected not only by the woman to whom he had proposed but also the church elders who treated him with contempt because they assumed he would not be able to provide for her. Money was central in shaping the intimate relationships of men and women in this study.

As Khulu remarked: 'Today marriage is a business transaction.... If you see a man and a woman holding hands, know money has brought them together. When he gets fired or something happens, things change and it turns out the vows were all lies'. Khulu's statement makes it clear that where there is no money, a relationship is unlikely. This issue is extensively explored in *Love in the time of AIDS* (2010), in which Hunter (2010) draws on his ethnographic research in KwaZulu Natal to give a detailed account on the material aspects of love,

---

<sup>17</sup> The One Man Can Campaign is an intervention implemented by Sonke Gender Justice network, targeting men with the aim of promoting gender equitable behaviour.

transactional relationships and the payment of bride price.

The men who participated in my study subscribed to normative ideas of masculinities linked to patriarchy and religion, for example, being a provider and making decisions in the house. However, because they found themselves in cornered positions resulting from structural violence, it was not always possible to live up to societal and self-expectations.

### ***Becoming cornered: exploring structural violence among migrant men***

Although I have used the term 'structural violence' to explain the challenges that my study participants faced, participants never understood them as such. Rather they used other idioms to express their struggles, such as 'being cornered' or 'going through a trial' or 'being tested', emphasising the temporality of their situations. A major challenge that most participants faced was the lack of legal documentation to stay and work in South Africa. This made it difficult for them to find jobs and forced them to take low-paying jobs for which they were overqualified, as well as making it difficult for them to demand fair treatment from employers who might refuse to pay them or who might report them to the authorities to avoid doing so. Kundai was a graduate of marketing and became a security guard. Some men took Fatso's route, using someone else's documents, or became an informal trader, like Uncle Kofi. All these forms of work were both irregular and insecure. The uncertainty of employment and income, intensified by not having legal documentation, was the greatest factor shaping men's sense of being cornered. Regardless of how hard they hustled, the threat of losing their source of income meant they could always find themselves back on the corner (and in a corner), seeking another line of flight. It is because the corner was ultimately inescapable for most men that I insist on likening it to structural violence.

Scholarship on structural violence attempts to understand the relationship between the violence experienced at an individual level and the way life is organised through social structures (Farmer 2004; Anderson 2015). Lee (2016) argues that structural violence tends to be hidden or invisible because it is rooted in social structures; it is usually overlooked in the name of being 'natural' or an unfortunate life circumstance (Lee 2016; Farmer 2004; Rylko-Bauer and Farmer 2016). The difficulty most people have in drawing a connection between social structure and violence is precisely what makes it so powerful, because 'death, injury, subjugation, stigmatization and trauma resulting from it may be assigned to other causes' (Lee 2016, 2; see also Farmer 2004). During fieldwork, I regularly heard men lamenting the economy and their limited employment opportunities. But the way they discussed it suggested that they saw this state as natural, as a

consequence of the times and equally shared by all, summed up in the statement: 'These days jobs are hard to come by'. For many men, that was where their reflection on job scarcity would end, with few bothering to question who or what might be behind the scarcity. Kundai and many Zimbabweans, in contrast, blamed the Zimbabwean government for their predicament.

In the few instances where study participants attempted to find a cause, they would blame South African nationals, in the same way that South African nationals would blame the migrants. While South Africans blamed the migrants for taking their jobs, the latter blamed the former for not giving them jobs even though they were 'better qualified' and 'more hardworking' than the South Africans. For example, although Kundai had expressed gratitude to his former boss, he said that his boss would not give him a job in marketing for fear that Kundai would outperform South Africans and create 'unnecessary tension'. Because he wanted money, he settled for a job as a security guard. Even working as a security guard, he claimed he was more hardworking than his South African counterparts, to the point that his boss favoured him.

While it is common rhetoric among migrants to label South Africans as lazy or unemployable (Matshaka 2009; Mangezvo 2017), the reason why they are supposedly unemployable was rarely explored. One South African study participant illustrated this point well when he told me: 'You see these foreigners? They are used to work[ing] proper jobs in their countries and most of them are educated, and when they come here they can even make a business out of this rubble [pointing to a dumpsite full of rubbish]. Unlike me, you see, I am not educated'. Zondo was in his mid-50s and originated from KwaZulu Natal. He saw migrants from other African countries as having an advantage over South Africans, owing to the repressive laws of apartheid. Commenting on structural violence in post-apartheid South Africa, Hamber (1998, 12) posits that 'structurally marginalised groups run the risk of being re-victimised because of their sustained social standing post-apartheid'.

Another case of re-victimisation can be observed in Fatso's case, when his boss failed to pay him for the work he had done because he knew that, as a migrant without papers, Fatso could not access legal help. Similarly, Kundai's lost chance to marry the woman he loved, because of his inability to provide for her, is another case of structural violence where the root cause was hardly explored by some of my participants. Failure to capture structural violence in one's analysis is like failing to net a big fish because you are focusing on a small fish (Lee 2016). This point was made by Kimo when he was talking about the druglike Kimo and the 'nyaope boys', who were most visible on the streets, were the ones most likely to be apprehended, while the high-profile people behind the scenes were protected by the system and its structures. Ironically, these small fish were also most likely to become targets of various interventions seeking to transform them into better,

responsible men, placing the burden of changing masculinities on their shoulders while their more powerful big fish bosses continued unchecked (Dworkin et al. 2015).

The role of racial inequality as a form of structural violence cannot be over-emphasised in South Africa where income inequalities, residential segregation and (un)employment still reflect a racial skew that is a legacy of apartheid. This is why, when Khulu said to me, 'A black man is a cornered man', I initially did not think much of it, seeing that it was only black men and women who congregated at Uncle Kofi's Corner. However, in my quest to understand how race specifically impacted him as a migrant, I questioned him further. I eventually came to understand that his referencing 'black' was not merely in regard to skin colour, nor was he the only one who used the terms 'black man' and 'African man' interchangeably (Ratele 2017).

In *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe (2017, x) explores the historical processes that have shaped discourse relating to the terms 'Black' and 'Africa', philosophising that in contemporary times these 'words do not necessarily represent anything'. While I agree with Mbembe's assessment to the extent that these terms are unstable and can mean many different things to different people, my ethnographic research suggests that this polyvalence is precisely what gave these terms such power in practice. Certainly, these terms were imbued with different meanings at different times and in different spaces. However, in *most* cases they were used as a synonym for economic marginality. When Fatso expressed his idea of running his own company and becoming an employer, the other men jeered at him, saying, '*Hausi type yekuita murungu!*' (You are not the type to become a white person). In this taunt, 'white' is equated with being an employer and the impossibility of Fatso moving from worker to employer was understood as just as impossible as him changing his skin colour. Prior to conducting this research, I had thought of being black as a fixed identity (despite all the social theory I had read). It was only through observing the wielding of the terms 'black' and 'African' in everyday practice that I came to understand how blackness or whiteness could be about becoming. Although extremely difficult, one could 'become white', at least socially speaking, if one earned enough money and achieved sufficient status. However, racism in South Africa has been shown to cut across class boundaries (Nyamnjoh 2010).

As I came to better understand that Khulu's claim that a black man was a cornered man was about much more than race, I also began to see that the challenges my participants were facing had at least as much to do with economic position and migration status. The slippery matter of race was only one of the social structures contributing to the violence of their cornering. Much research has demonstrated that while structural violence disproportionately affects the black population in South Africa, this is even more the case among African

migrants who are systematically excluded from participation in the mainstream economy due to legal and societal factors (Human Sciences Research Council 2008). We can see this, for example, in the Black Economic Empowerment program, a policy, introduced by the South African government as an affirmative action programme, that aims to bring the historically disadvantaged 'black majority into the economic mainstream'. However, only black South Africans, Indians and Coloureds are included in the black category, not black migrants from other African countries.

In addition to limited access to resources, such as jobs, credit and insurance, migrant men in South Africa also have to deal with anti-migrant sentiment. The migrant men and women who congregated at Uncle Kofi's Corner did so partly because they were avoiding interacting with South Africans or police who might turn them over to immigration officials. Some scholars have suggested that the spectre of the *male* migrant exacerbates an already existing 'crisis of masculinity' among black South African men, who see African migrant men as coming to take both their jobs and their women (Matsinhe 2011; Maluleke 2015), leaving them feeling undermined. Marginalised migrants and marginalised South African nationals find themselves in the same boat, competing for the same resources within the informal labour market (Matsinhe 2011). Their shared experiences, which might unite them, instead push them apart, as evidenced by migrants preferring inner-city neighbourhoods far from the townships.

In this section, I argued that cornered men are not only victims of structural violence but also aspire to a better life (Liebow 1967). Indeed, the men I spoke with had frustrations and limitations that stemmed from various factors, including their places of origins and destination, as well as their collective history of colonialism and apartheid. However, we should understand these 'social aggregates not as givens that must be embraced or resisted, but as temporary collectives that – whether they evaporate or congeal into lasting forms of change – reveal transformative visions and potentials emerging from unexpected corners' (Biehl and Locke 2017, 11). These 'unexpected corners' spawn unpredictable responses by those who get cornered. In one of those responses, men redefined their identities as men in the face of structural violence. In the next section, I examine some of the responses that emerged from the corner spaces where I conducted research.

### ***Redefining masculinities using kukiya kiya***

I have established that the men at Kofi's corner subscribed to normative masculinities. However, given structural factors relating to their class, legal and migration status, there were times when they failed to live up to those expectations. How then did they respond to such limitations? While Khulu

claimed that men would 'retaliate like a wounded animal', that was often not the case. At times they played victim or went with the flow, as in Kimo's case: he joined the drug trafficking business because keeping his job as a security guard meant he had to get on board; if he refused, he would likely face violence from other traffickers. Other times, men altered the dominant scripts, redefining what it meant to be a man in specific contexts. As Fatso once said, 'You create your own reality and not let other people dictate for you'. Most often, rather than reacting violently or retaliating, men came up with hybridised definitions of masculinity that matched their lived experiences.

### ***Redefining 'respectability' and 'responsibility'***

As mentioned above, few men analysed their situation in terms of structural violence. As much as they acknowledged adverse situations, they insisted on their ability to make choices, for example, to stay in South Africa despite the hardships or to take the route of adopting socially acceptable behaviour. Choosing to stay in South Africa despite being unemployed was a marker of what some men called a 'tough' masculinity. For instance, although Fatso was financially unprepared when his family joined him, he did not see it as a burden but rather thought of himself as a 'responsible African man' who, despite the pressure, could still 'make a plan'. Fatso told me several times that if he was to fail to find a legitimate way of making money in South Africa, he would rather go back to Zimbabwe than involve himself in 'dodgy' activities of crime and violence. During follow-up research in May 2019, I heard that indeed Fatso had gone back to Zimbabwe, leaving his family under the care of the wife who had secured a job in South Africa and children behind. Although Uncle Kofi told me that Fatso could not keep up with the challenges he faced in Johannesburg, he was not critical of his decision. Some of the other men also told me they respected Fatso for opting to go back to Zimbabwe rather than getting involved in dodgy ways of making money, like some of his fellow migrants. To Fatso, *kukiya kiya* should not involve unscrupulous ways of making money, although he had told me that he had been involved in an illegal cigarette business in Zimbabwe.

Similarly, Uncle Kofi routinely celebrated that he avoided unscrupulous ways of making money, and took pride in pointing out that, even though he was a humble shoe maker, he was able to buy an ice cream machine worth R27,000 (1500 euro) and, more recently, a car worth even more. In many interactions, Uncle Kofi noted that his royal identity obliged him to be exemplary and to lead a noble life. He did not see himself as like the other men. In May 2019, on his 42nd birthday, someone asked him what his secret was, how he attracted many people. Referring to himself in the third person, like a true royal, he responded:

Uncle Kofi is not a normal person. I was born into a royal home as the last born to my father. I was born to lead people. Now, I ran away from my own throne<sup>18</sup> because of travel. I was disobedient. Now, Baba passed and I am sitting here fixing shoes and someone is on the throne. But they bore me a special [child] to lead people. So, people come close to me because they feel that they are at home. It's the royal blood that my father gave me.

Even though his father was long dead, Uncle Kofi felt obliged to do him proud by leading an exemplary life. As a prince he was 'different' and did not mind to be considered such. Furthermore, presenting himself in this way also gained him status as a 'good' man. Therefore, to maintain his positive reputation and remain being seen as an ideal man who provides for his family, he chose to stay away from criminal activities. Having to endure poverty, unemployment and the humiliation that comes with it, Uncle Kofi was viewed as a tough man fighting for survival.

### ***Constructing distinguished masculinities***

Participants in this study routinely distanced themselves from narratives and claims circulating in public discourse that depicted migrants as 'criminals' and South Africans as 'lazy and violent'. In highlighting their avoidance of crime and violence, men at Uncle Kofi's Corner presented themselves as different, particularly from South Africans, but also from other migrant men involved in such activities. Referring to such claims as often unfounded, they refused to endorse them. For example, several Zimbabwean men claimed that Zimbabweans were known to be peaceful people and they felt it was their responsibility to safeguard this reputation. The November 2017 peaceful coup d'état that saw the long-serving President Mugabe removed came to serve as proof of this claim for many men, despite the country ranking number 124 in the Global Peace Index.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps trying to uphold this image of Zimbabweans, several participants claimed that violence was not the answer where they come from, and that they would prefer to avoid violence.

This is not to suggest that Zimbabwean men were less violent than their migrant peers. During the September 2019 xenophobic violence that erupted in Johannesburg, Zimbabweans were among those foreigners who retaliated,

---

<sup>18</sup> Uncle Kofi's claim on the throne arise highly unlikely to be true, as heirship to the throne within the Ashanti tribe is matrilineal (verbal communication with Dr Kristine Krause, who has done extensive research in Ghana, October 2019). But this does not disprove his claim to have royal blood.

<sup>19</sup> Country Economy, Zimbabwe Global Peace index available at: <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/global-peace-index/zimbabwe>.

taking to the streets to protest and declaring war against South Africans. However, among the Zimbabwean men in this study, most made a point of rejecting violence and criminality as legitimate markers of masculinity. Mangezvo's (2015) study in Stellenbosch and Cape Town, and Matshaka's (2009) study among Zimbabwean street men recorded similar findings, whereby Zimbabwean men represented themselves as more peaceable, entrepreneurial and industrious than South African men. Like the Zimbabweans, two Malawians who frequented Uncle Kofi's also professed that they felt responsible for upholding a positive image of their country.

In fact, none of the migrant men I interviewed wanted to be mistaken for South Africans. The reason most often given for this was that they saw South African men as violent and they did not want to be seen as violent. As migrants from supposedly peaceful countries, such as Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique, they tried to maintain a public demeanour and avoid violence. For them, avoiding violence was not simply a matter of rhetoric. They knew the places where they were likely to encounter violence and did their best to avoid them, and they encouraged each other to do the same. Their professed preference for Uncle Kofi's Corner was linked to their desire to avoid violence and the men who spent time there actively policed each other to ensure no violent behaviour was exhibited there.

In a study among economically marginal street corner youth in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Moyer (2005) similarly found that young men fashioned themselves as peace-loving individuals inspired by Rastafari rhetoric. They mapped the city to demarcate safe, peaceful spaces from unsafe, violent ones. Through verbal and body language, as well as dress, they developed localised scripts to maintain peace in these spaces, keeping police at bay and protecting their informal, unlicensed businesses. Although at home in their native Tanzania, most of the men she studied were rural migrants and, like those I studied, most did not have the formal paperwork required to live and work in the city. Building on Moyer's analysis, I would argue that the men at Uncle Kofi's corner may also have had legal and material objectives in upholding the peace there. Some, like Uncle Kofi, made a living there; some, like Kundai, lived there; others used the corner to seek out work and job advice, or as a place to pass the time while waiting for their workday to begin. And, since few of the men at the corner had their paperwork in order, they were invested in staying under the radar of the police.

### ***Becoming morally respectable men***

Kundai, in addition to being Zimbabwean and upholding the view that he must be peaceful, also identified as a Christian. One day, when we were hanging out, he told me:

I know people laugh at me. To me, being born again has given me a new hope in life. Even when things are not going well, as a man of faith you know all this is temporary; if I stay faithful my breakthrough will surely come. Many people, because they do not have hope, they have ended up taking shortcuts that have led them to destruction.

Because of his Christian subjectivity, Kundai refused to be moved or shaken by the pressures that life exerted on him. This can be seen as an expression of toughness although in an unconventional way. His decision to volunteer at the church can be read as a way to sublimate the social forces hindering his economic and upward mobility. Self-identity and the need to maintain that identity can play an important role in opposing the supposed hegemony of a violent manhood as men manoeuvre through structural obstacles. Krause (2018), in an article on political subjectivity and disability, shares similar findings, in writing about a disabled migrant woman who saw her condition as being called by God. Krause (2018, 294) argues that being born again is an 'unfinished project', in which a person can stay perpetually in the process of becoming, constantly renewing their relationship with God. The woman in Krause's study identified with Biblical characters in ways similar to Kundai identified with Abraham. He aspired to reach the level of faith and trust that Abraham had, so that he could get the economic breakthrough he needed. As he waited for this breakthrough, he engaged in petty gambling at the soccer bet, in which every man at Uncle Kofi's Corner was involved. This was despite their acknowledgment that it was a 'bad' thing, especially for women, because it was addictive and destructive. However, it was something men did in the 'meanwhile' as they waited for that breakthrough.

Apart from drawing on religion, it was common to hear men at Uncle Kofi's Corner distinguish themselves as more morally upright than those from higher social and economic classes. When Kundai shared his story of the woman who rejected him because he did not have money, other men at the corner comforted him, saying, 'Don't worry'. 'That's her loss'. 'She will probably come back to you'. In such scenarios, Uncle Kofi usually shared a similar story about himself as an encouragement. Yet he always managed to present himself as the victor in this story, ending with how, some time later, the same woman came back to him after she had experienced abuse at the hands of the man she had chosen. The man may have had money and the means to provide, but he lacked what Uncle Kofi said he had: 'a good heart'. This claim was confirmed by Nomthi when she said told me how her ex-husband used to be loving before his business was established. However, when he started making money, he also started having girlfriends and not spending time with her, 'throwing money' at Nomthi, she said, 'as a substitute for love'. When she shared this story she also expressed the

dilemma women like her faced when they seek a man who can offer 'true love' but who is also unable to provide for her financially. 'Love can't really put food on the table', Nomthi and I joked.

### ***Redefining conditions in intimate relationships***

At the corner, conversations sometimes turned to men who, due to widespread poverty and chronic unemployment, were going after women who had money or who could offer them a way to make money. It was said that men usually entered such relationships knowing that they did not have respect, since respect is presumed to be tied to money and control. Hence, they would trade their need for respect and to be in charge for love, companionship or security. In the context of such discussions, Khulu often insisted that I find him a Dutch woman who was willing to take him to Europe, saying he would do whatever she wanted. Several men would jokingly reprimand him, and he would respond: 'At least I am being honest, and it doesn't mean I won't love the woman, in fact I would love her more'. It was evident from these exchanges that men did not always turn to violence or go with the flow, as in the case of Kimo, but at times they defined their own realities, shaping localised codes of distinction as a critical aspect of the enclave masculinity of Uncle Kofi's Corner.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to answer the first question of my thesis: how do men who subscribe to normative ideas of masculinities respond when they find themselves cornered by economic and legal structures? Analysis of the experiences of my interlocutors was done against the backdrop of a rich body of literature, focusing on how shifts in political, economic and legal structures shape gender dynamics and more particularly violent masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa. This has been explained based on the assumption that men fail to manoeuvre through fixed hegemonic masculinity ideas. Another body of literature in South Africa suggests that some men have embraced these changes in positive ways, to the extent that they are championing gender-equitable masculinities (Dworkin et al. 2012). Through case studies presented in this chapter, I have shown that hegemonic masculinity ideas are not as fixed as implied by the term 'hegemony', but rather can be altered as men create their own realities. With the aim of showing some empathy to my interlocutors, I first looked at their experiences through the lens of structural violence. However, the concept of structural violence, like hegemony, tends to assume some fixedness; therefore, borrowing from my interlocutors, I adopted the phrase 'cornered men'. This was

particularly important because men found new meaning and redefined their identities as men based on the challenges they encountered and endured.

While the cornered men in this study found themselves in difficult situations in life, for various reasons beyond their control, they still found ways to make it through supposedly fixed structures in ways that belie the assumption of fixedness of hegemony. In detailing their efforts to (ku)kiya kiya, I have attempted to highlight the men's flexibility and plasticity, which enabled them to live through the inhibiting effects of social, structural forces (Biehl and Locke 2017). I find it useful to use the concept of cornering to zoom in on the intersectional factors that shape the identities and practices of my interlocutors in diverse unpredicted ways. From a corner place, possibilities are imagined and new trajectories forged.

While acknowledging the role of structural violence in the emergence of Uncle Kofi's Corner, I also presented it as a safe space where men from different parts of Africa gathered together, cushioning one another from the daily blows they experienced as they attempted to make their way under conditions of precarity and systematic marginalisation. It is also a place that attracts women like Nomthi and me, and young girls, because we perceived it as safe for women and girls. To Uncle Kofi, this corner presented him with an opportunity to run a business and integrate in society. To Fatso, it was a place where he could get ideas and encouragement not to give up, and, in remaining focused and tenacious, he was acting as a 'real' man should. To Kundai, this corner had become home: the white *kombi* was better than living on the streets. No one could harass him or no landlord could request rent from him. To him being cornered was a humbling training ground from God, preparing him for greater things when his breakthrough comes. To Khulu, Uncle Kofi's Corner was for 'bird watching', as he spends time with other men, who he says 'cannot be fully trusted, as people are one thing during the day and another in the night'. To Kimo, the corner was a place where he could unwind from the negativity he drew from 'the dark side of Johannesburg'. To me, it was a corner of opportunities where I could do research to advance my career. Corner spaces can serve multiple roles and provide multiple angles through which a person can view life in an open-ended way. Those who in a corner can be protected just as they can be constrained. Similarly, those on the outside corner can be exposed to risk while also having ample space and freedom to manoeuvre: this was the case at Tino's Corner Salon, as I show in the next chapter. As much as the corner is symbolic of structural factors affecting migrants, it is also a place of belonging, friendship and care.