A Black Man is a Cornered Man

*Migration, precarity and masculinities in Johannesburg*

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A black man is a cornered man: migration, precarity and masculinities in Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

Facing an ever-changing political-economic landscape marked by inequality, joblessness, and xenophobia, migrants in inner city Johannesburg are pushed towards the economic margins, or the ‘corner’ of life. In this precarious place, structural and everyday violence shape the daily lives and practices of men from various parts of Africa. This article examines how such men work to live up to self and societal expectations of masculinities while attempting to adjust to the socio-economic realities they face. Departing from the crisis in masculinity narrative, we highlight the multiple, creative ways that men navigate precarity. Our arguments are based on an ethnographic study of masculinities and violence, conducted from June 2017 to February 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Drawing on the stories of two migrant men and more broadly from observations undertaken at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, a street corner hangout and our main ethnographic site, we show how participants mapped urban space to produce enclaved masculinities. In these enclaves, specific scripts on how to be a man were (re)constructed resulting in multiple and unstable masculinities in a perpetual state of becoming.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, scholars have used the ‘crisis of masculinity’ narrative to draw ‘attention to problems confronting men in the face of changing work and family structure’ in contemporary times worldwide (Dube 2016, 73). In an effort to make sense of problematic masculinities in Africa, studies have theorized that African men are suffering from a ‘crisis of masculinity’ resulting from combined economic decline and the feminisation of the workforce (Gibbs 2014; Dube 2016).
Consequently, it is argued that men feel disempowered and unable to live up to their own and society's expectations. Some men compensate for their perceived failures by violently lashing out – often against women, but also against other men, especially those imagined to be taking their jobs and/or women. While the crisis of masculinity narrative has its origins in the United States, in South Africa, the concept has been used for more than a decade to try to make sense of high levels of violence, linking South Africa’s staggering rape and murder statistics to the changing legal and political economic landscape of the post-apartheid era (Dube 2016; Hamber 2010).

Anchored by the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the crisis of masculinity narrative theorizes the masculine ideal as fixed and predetermined, despite caution from the concept’s founder that hegemonic masculinity should be understood as relational and contested (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Yet the majority of our study participants, who could be categorically identified as ‘in crisis’, owing to their multiple forms of marginalisation as migrant men in South Africa, did not support the idea that the failure to fulfil the norms of hegemonic masculinity could justify masculinist violence. Additionally, their lived experiences appeared to belie the unidimensionality of hegemonic masculinity as implied in the crisis of masculinity narrative.

In this article, we examine how African migrant men reconfigure masculinities in the shifting social and political economic landscape of inner city Johannesburg by foregrounding the role of space in shaping identity. We aim to illustrate that violence is not the only line of flight, or escape for men who find themselves in crisis. To the contrary, we highlight the multiple lines of flight utilized by men living in precarious contexts. We use the case of Uncle Kofi’s Corner to explore the lives of migrant men who found themselves pushed to the margins of the economy and society or the ‘corner of life’, as they called it. This cornered space was characterised by violence and precarity that undermined their roles and identities as men. However, they responded to such corners in multiple creative ways as they mapped urban spaces to locate and produce enclaved masculinities. In such enclaves, they could develop and try out scripts, both old and new, about how to be a man. These scripts were continually (re)constructed, resulting in understandings and practices of masculinity that were multiple and unstable, leading us to characterize masculinities as being in a state of becoming (Nilan 1995; Hall 1993).

In this article, we engage with Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology of change, or theory of becoming, to highlight the flexibility and plasticity of our study participants responses to the inhibiting effects of social, structural forces. Various scholars utilizing this theory have foregrounded the role of space and place in identity formation (Biehl and Locke 2017; Hillier and Abrahams 2013; Dovey 2009; Hall 1993). Focusing our research on particular spaces and observing the ways men made use of those spaces to tinker with their
gendered sense of self provided us with a lens into the ways that ideals and practices of masculinity were shaped by migration and spatialized marginality in urban contexts. Although, most interested in contributing to discussions around masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa, our arguments also contribute to the growing number of studies that highlight the variability of the migration experience among men and emphasise notions of masculinities that exceed violence and crisis. Our findings resonate with studies showing that migrant men adapt to new circumstances and negotiate new identities in post migration contexts (Montes 2013; Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009; Datta et al. 2009). Masculinities are challenged, reaffirmed and reconfigured by a post migration context in which public space is of critical importance (Pasura and Christou 2018; Fast and Moyer 2018).

**Context of the study**

Our arguments draw on research conducted at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, our main ethnographic site. Uncle Kofi’s Corner, was located in a downtown neighbourhood routinely referred to as an epicentre of violence and crime by mainstream media and academic studies (Landau and Freemantle 2010). The situation is exacerbated by high unemployment and poverty rates. According to Statistics South Africa, as of 2018, a quarter of South Africans lived in extreme poverty and almost a third (28%) of the employable population was unemployed. Both unemployment and poverty are amplified in migrant populations, increasing their precarity. The inner city provides an interesting case study for practices of masculinities because of its historical and contemporary paradoxical position as ‘a kind of sanctuary’ for the marginalized, such as migrants, while also being a place of poverty, violence, crime, corruption, infectious disease and other social ills (Stadler and Dugmore 2017).

As a port-of-entry for both internal and international migrants, the inner city is simultaneously a place of hope and a place where hope is crushed due to the social, political and economic inequalities which emanate from the colonial and apartheid eras. Since the colonial period, neighbourhoods like Hillbrow have been known as home to migrant communities, inhabited initially by European migrants who came during the boom years of mining in the Witwatersrand (Crush, Williams, and Peberdy 2005; Stadler and Dugmore 2017). As early as the late 1800s, inner city life had and was shaped practices of masculinity and practices of masculinity shaped inner city life. Because it was mostly unmarried men who came to Johannesburg to work in the mines, the scarcity of women saw men engaging in activities such as commercial sex work and excessive drinking which still characterize these neighbourhoods to this day (Stadler and Dugmore 2017). This context is the backdrop against which our study participants constructed themselves
either as better than or distancing themselves from masculinities and narratives usually associated with such contexts.

Uncle Kofi’s Corner, situated within a Christian church premises at the corner of Mzilikazi and Mandela streets in a predominantly black neighbourhood, provided a space and time for enclaved masculinities to emerge and converge. We term this form of spatialised masculinity ‘cornered’ to acknowledge the commonality of being cornered that these men shared. We refer to the otherwise nameless corner as we do to recognize the centrality of Kofi, a Ghanaian shoemaker, who stationed his informal business at the gate of the church. In addition to the shoemaker’s stand and running a small convenience (spaza) shop selling various small items, Kofi also sold ice cream, famous among the school children who flocked to his place every day after school while chanting ‘Uncle Kofi, Uncle Kofi’. The location was also popular among migrant as well as South African men and women who stopped by to chat as they ate ice cream or shared a plate or two of street food.

At Uncle Kofi’s Corner, migrant men and a few women from different parts of Africa gathered together, cushioning one another from the daily blows they experienced as they attempted to make their way through the conditions of precarity and systematic marginalization that characterized their lives in Johannesburg. In this article, we argue that Uncle Kofi’s Corner (and similar places found throughout the inner city) serves as a site where conventional ideas about masculinity are tested, contested and reconfigured to meet the lived realities experiences of the men and women who hung out there, resulting in enclaved masculinities. As stated by one participant, ‘You create your own reality and not let other people detect for you’. Uncle Kofi’s Corner is one such ‘reality’, created by men who might be considered as failures in some contexts as a site where they could work on their gendered selves and assert themselves as respectable men.

In articulating their multiple marginalized positions, our participants often referred to themselves as ‘being cornered’. For example, in response to a question about why there was so much violence in Johannesburg, one study participant, Khulu, said: ‘A black man is a cornered man, he is put in place which is hard to maneuver, and he cannot do anything. He retaliates like a wounded animal’. His response suggests that men, particularly black men, respond aggressively, ‘like a wounded animal’, when they are left with no other option. Importantly, such cornering occurs as a consequence of limited possibilities for maneuvering or of escaping confining economic and legal circumstances. Violence becomes justified through a lens of masculinity as men assert themselves. Although not explicitly contained in the above statement, our observations and discussions with men at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, make clear that it is because men are expected (and expect themselves) to provide for their loved ones that they are affected in specific ways by economic and legal precarity (Hunter 2010).
Following Khulu’s statement, we conceptualize our participants as being/becoming cornered. We understand cornering in a geographical sense, i.e. the street corner as a marginal albeit reclaimed space within the city that has been staked out to serve as an enclaved site of masculinity. Such corners provide spaces where both journeys and inter-subjectivities intersect (Anderson 2003). We also understand cornering in a metaphorical sense, i.e. the corner resulting from migrants’ exclusion from the mainstream economy that men feel they are backed into when social and personal expectations of masculinity are confounded by limited possibility of economic success. As participants pointed out, although economic circumstances in inner city Johannesburg were tough all around, as migrants they felt themselves additionally marginalized. The richness of the cornering metaphor exceeds economic constraint and can also 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, but also the crisis of masculinity narrative.

In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of our theoretical considerations paying attention to the role of space in shaping masculinities as we foreground our main argument. This is followed by methodology, a presentation of key findings and a concluding discussion.

Situating cornered men within the field of masculinities

Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualize space as an emergent process that is always evolving in non-linear, creative ways. This conceptualization can be applied to masculinity and gender more broadly, which we understand as being similarly emergent. Our research demonstrates that rather than being set of fixed and pre-given ideas or practices, masculinity is produced in relation to the ongoing contingencies constituent of an unstable dynamic world. Drawing on this proposition some feminist geographers have emphasised the spatial embeddedness of masculinity practices in specific spaces, arguing that ‘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’ (Hopkins and Noble 2009, 814; Christou 2016; May 2015).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) seminal work on desire and power further 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. The concept of becoming counters the understanding of people as ‘stable or fixed unidirectionally determined by history, power and language, culture’ (Biehl and Locke 2017, 42) as insinuated in the crisis of (violent) masculinity narrative. Such insinuations rely on a simplistic reading of Connell’s (1995) seminal
conceptualisation of masculinities. Connell and subsequent scholars argue that masculinities should be understood as simultaneously multiple and hierarchical, with dominant and conventional forms of masculinities referred to as hegemonic, and other forms of masculinity being understood as subordinate, complicit or marginalized (Matshaka 2009; Morrell 1998; Ratele 2016). In keeping with Connell’s intended formulations, current social theory holds that gender is socially constructed and that what it means ‘to be a man’ changes across space and time (Matshaka 2009; Ituluua-Abumere 2013). Trying to get at the importance of time and space for shaping gender, some recent theorizations of masculinities – often grounded in empirical research conducted in South Africa – have called for a situated contextualization of the concept of masculinities (Ratele 2016; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012). Our research underlines the importance of these assertions, prompting us to examine the ways that masculinities are shaped by the specific temporal and spatial contexts of contemporary inner city Johannesburg. Recognizing masculinities as flexible and as being continually worked on, we observed how places like Uncle Kofi’s corner could provide space for the emergence of particular enclaved masculinities.

Central to theorizations of enclaved masculinities is the (re)ordering and reconstituting of space in specific ways through processes of place making and belonging that are particularly important in post-migration contexts (Gutman 1997). Mangezvo (2015) illustrates this point in his research in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The men he studied have formed enclaved social spaces exclusive to Zimbabwean men to distance themselves from anti-migrant South African nationals. By engaging in activities such as football and social get togethers where they play Zimbabwean money games, they assert and distinguish themselves as Zimbabweans, ‘different’ from South African men. He identifies this enclave as compensatory masculinity, emerging from migrant men’s efforts to navigate space, place and exclusion (Mangezvo 2015, 15). We similarly see Uncle Kofi’s Corner as a site of enclaved masculinities where migrants who have been excluded from mainstream society find a place where they can assert themselves and foster a sense of belonging in Johannesburg. However, we term this particular formulation of enclaved masculinity as ‘cornered’ to highlight state efforts to regulate and exclude a certain group of people.

Despite Uncle Kofi’s Corner emerging in response to structural violence and systematic marginalization, masculinities arising from this place of ‘cornering’ are not predetermined, but better understood through a frame of unguaranteed contingencies. Following Deleuze, we argue that men are not so much subject to practices of power, as they are produced by desire. Conflict and conviviality co-exist at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, providing a space for ideas and practices related to masculinity to emerge and be altered. In this space, men consider, discuss and debate definitions and localized codes of
how to be a man in Johannesburg. Similarly, Fast and Moyer (2018) draw on Biehl and Locke (2017) anthropology of becoming, to illustrate the ways young men use urban space to navigate and negotiate precarious realities through establishing relations and imagining future possibilities elsewhere. Building on this theoretical trajectory and drawing on our research at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, we understand masculinities as a set of practices and ideas resulting from unstable subjectivities that are in the process of being and becoming (Fast and Moyer 2018; Hall 1993).

**Methodology**

Research for this article was conducted from June 2017 to February 2018 and in May 2019 in various neighbourhoods in Johannesburg. The first author collected data using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with men and women aged between seventeen to fifty plus years. While South Africans and women also visited Uncle Kofi’s, the core group followed in our study consisted of migrant men from Zimbabwe, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Guinea, Djibouti and other South African provinces, particularly KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo. Although, the study initially targeted men and women, the latter were underrepresented owing to their limited presence in street spaces. In total, the first author ended up talking to 33 men and 8 women who visited Uncle Kofi’s Corner for various reasons. The few women interviewed were included opportunistically, for example when they partook in activities happening at Uncle Kofi’s Corner. The majority of men interviewed were not employed or only marginally so, while a handful were involved in small scale entrepreneurial projects. Their marital statuses differed, though most were married. Several languages were spoken at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, with English being predominant. Others included Zulu, one of the official South African languages, as well as Shona and Ndebele, both spoken in Zimbabwe, from where most of the participants hailed, including the first author. As a migrant woman who has lived in Johannesburg, the first author found it relatively easy to access migrant populations, even as her class position made her an outsider to some extent. The second author did not collect data, but relied on her extensive ethnographic research on masculinities elsewhere in Africa to assist in study design, analysis, conceptual work and writing.

**Case studies**

To highlight the ways that systematic marginalisation pushed men in geographical, economic and social corners, we present two representative case studies that draw on the stories of two men who frequented Uncle Kofi’s Corner. These cases illustrate how, in the face of such constraints, men developed distinct scripts about how to be respectable in Johannesburg, as well
as the ways that the corner was utilized as a space of temporary and permanent relief for men. The central protagonists of these cases are representative of other study participants in terms of demographics and experience. In the discussion section we draw out these similarities.

**Case study 1: grappling with disappointment and unemployment**

In February 2018, Linda, the first author arrived at Uncle Kofi’s Corner on a Thursday afternoon towards the end of her planned fieldwork. Three men – Khulu from Malawi, and Kundai and Fatso from Zimbabwe – were seated next to Nomthi, a young South African woman who was waiting for her friend to return from work. All four were conversing with Uncle Kofi who was busy serving a customer who had come to buy airtime (mobile phone credit). While exchanging greetings, Linda grabbed a chair to sit next to Nomthi while joining in a conversation about Fatso’s job predicament. More than a month previously Fatso had excitedly talked about scoring a ‘piece job’ with a construction company. Prior to landing the job, Fatso had been struggling to pay his rent for months. To get the job, he had to mobilize a few men to work together as a team and then present himself as head of a ‘small scale company’. He later told us that he was using the company name of his friend since he did not have papers.

‘Papers’ was street lingo, used by migrants to mean valid a passport and visa, which allowed someone to either stay and/or work in South Africa legally. Without such papers, it is difficult to get jobs outside of the informal sector or small shops where they are paid off the books; such salaries are minimal, or ‘peanuts’ in the words of our participants. A piece job is a short-term contract, usually involving menial work such as cleaning, building or painting, lasting from one-day to a few weeks. Most men who frequented Kofi’s relied on these jobs, but a full month could go by with no work.

When he first got his piece job, Fatso was so excited that he had invited Linda to film him and his men to ‘tell his story in Europe’. On that day in February, however, Fatso was explaining that he had only worked for three days before the work was put on hold to await the purchasing of building 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, saying there was no-one to whom he could officially complain without implicating himself. Uncle Kofi and the rest of the people encouraged him to keep looking for more opportunities. ‘I like coming here because I get to share my challenges with others, its encouraging’, he told Linda on a different day.

Because Fatso had only been in the country for a few months when we first met him, we were able to observe how he was shaped by his experiences looking for work in the city as a migrant without papers. We observed this ambitious 40-year-old man who was full of dreams slowly being pushed into a ‘corner’ of life. His continued presence at Uncle Kofi’s Corner when he
was supposed to be at work demonstrated that the cornering of men like Fatso is as real as it is metaphorical. Waiting weeks on end for his ‘boss’ to call him back, he hung out at Uncle Kofi’s Corner. Without papers, he was without legal recourse. In such moments of frustration, Fatso would often invoke masculine ideals both to cope and as self-encouragement, commonly declaring: ‘A man dies trying’. Despite extremely limited work opportunities, he still expected to provide financially for his wife and children who had come to South Africa with him. Recalling how he had used his ingenuity to navigate Zimbabwe’s tough economy, he seemed optimistic about making it in South Africa. For him, however, ingenuity, which can sometimes be a euphemism for illegality, had its limits. He was clear that he would rather go back to Zimbabwe than engage in ‘dodgy’ activities and, in fact, he did eventually return home, leaving his wife and children in Johannesburg. His wife who had found a job took care of the family while he tried to resettle in Zimbabwe.

**Case study 2: when the corner becomes home**

Kundai, a frequenter of Uncle Kofi’s Corner, was a Zimbabwean man in his mid-thirties. When we met him, he was sleeping in a broken-down white kombi (mini bus) parked by the wall of the church, using the church’s kitchen to cook and public toilets to bathe. With a diploma in marketing, like many fresh graduates, he made his way to South Africa in 2012. Kundai said he did not take the decision to migrate lightly, but was compelled to consider it seriously given the state of the economically crippled Zimbabwean economy under Robert Mugabe’s presidency. His harrowing journey included crossing the crocodile-infested Limpopo River and paying off the corrupt police who let him proceed for a fee of R250 (EURO 15), all the money he had at the time. Penniless, Kundai found a place to stay on the church premises, doing menial jobs here and there, including washing peoples’ cars. Carrying a black bucket and with a towel over his shoulders, he often tracked back and forth to the church sourcing water to wash cars. He usually spent the mornings out looking for piece work or gambling at a soccer bet, hoping that one day he would find a job in marketing so that he could make use of his diploma.

In the eyes of some of our participants, particularly those met in places other than Uncle Kofi’s Corner, Kundai would be considered an example of failed man because he did not have a job, a wife or a child. For some, it would have been perfectly understandable if Kundai decided to engage in criminal activities. For example, another young Zimbabwean man stated, ‘We came here to make money, not to sunbathe… whatever one has to do, one must do. The family will starve to death back home’. By ‘whatever one has to do’, he was implying that migrant men might engage in criminal activities to make money to send to family. Of the few men we got to know who openly engaged in crime through our research elsewhere in the city, most
would scoff at men who took up piece work: ‘You mean I cross Limpopo to come and clean someone’s car? No!’.

While Kundai was aware of criminal possibilities, he resisted them. He found purpose in serving at the church and fulfilment in knowing that ‘he was not like other young men’ engaged in illicit dealings. He volunteered at the church as a security guard and at times he cleaned the church. As a religious man, Kundai believed being Christian helped him to cope with his stagnation in life. ‘With faith and patience, I know my breakthrough is on the way’, he said likening himself to Abraham in the bible.

Kundai’s story also shows how the church that he loved made it difficult for him to fulfill his desire to marry and enter manhood in the way he desired. One day a group of men belonging to Family Christian Church who were attending a men’s fellowship meeting at the church joined our discussion at Uncle Kofi’s Corner. Discussing relationships and families, the conversation turned to Kundai and the fact that he did not have a wife or children. Pointing at one of the elders from the church, Kundai commented that his chance of getting married to someone he ‘really loved’ had been ‘blown away’ by the elders. The elder responded: ‘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’, he added laughing.

This exchange led to a heated debate, as several people condemned the Family Christian Church’s courtship, which entailed church elders’ facilitation to ensure young couples avoided premarital sex. Kundai blamed the elders for going behind his back and discouraging the girl from marrying a ‘poor’ man, encouraging the girl to go for financially stable man. Some pointed out that this system was problematic because elders had to do the ‘wooing job’ for another man. ‘A man should hunt his own meat’, one man said, implying that Kundai must approach a woman himself. When asked if he had ever approached any girl outside of church, Kundai replied that his confidence was destroyed by the incident and that he was now looking outside of church because the church system was ‘corrupt’.

Kundai’s story complicates narratives that suggest that it is primarily the political economy that disrupts masculinity. As has been documented elsewhere in Africa, Kundai’s practices and ideas as a man were also shaped by his religion. However, while his church provided him with meagre accommodation at the corner, it also ‘put him in a corner’ where he could not fulfil his masculine ideal of getting married and having children.

**Discussion**

In responding to shifting political economic contexts in transnational spaces, cornered men like Fatso and Kundai engage and produce enclaved
masculinities. Spaces like Uncle Kofi’s Corner serve as sites for these enclaves, providing a place and time to (re)construct and alter conventional ideas of masculinity.

From the stories shared, we observe how the process of becoming cornered was gendered. Several men who frequented Uncle Kofi’s discovered a comparatively safe urban oasis when they first approached the church to seek shelter or accommodation. They came to the church because they had limited options; they were ‘cornered’. Upon arrival they found people in similar situations and began forming affective connections and coded distinctions. Although, there were women in similar situations, some who even shared the same physical space with men, they were limited in number and generally excluded from the men’s social space. The church, as a shelter for the homeless, was open to anyone, however, women were less likely to make use of the services, especially sleeping there, in part because they feared exposing themselves to assault on the streets by robbers, drunkards, drug addicts and/or women abusers. Also, when faced with homelessness or unemployment, one participant suggested that migrant women were more likely to return home. For men, return migration normally had negative implications for their masculinity, so they would rather ‘die trying’ on the streets than be thought of as ‘failed men’. The few women who did pass time at Uncle Kofi’s, including the first author, normally did so because they saw it as a safe space where they could wait for people or wait between appointments with less fear of being attacked in the city. Although men also risked being attacked, the pressures to provide and to not give up easily meant they had little choice but to hit the streets.

Widely denouncing violence, the men of Uncle Kofi’s both produced and were produced by the enclave of masculinity located there (Lefebvre 1991). Drawing on the Deleuzian line of thought regarding space and identity, we argue that this particular enclave of cornered masculinity arose from the desires of men to belong in the city and to assert themselves as men in spite of the limitations they faced. Our findings regarding the importance of space, particularly the street and street corners, for shaping masculine identity resonates with those of Fast and Moyer (2018) who demonstrated the ways young men in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, used the streets to conjure a sense of forward momentum to counter the precarity that characterized their everyday lives.

**Becoming a man in the shifting economy**

Despite our open-ended theorizing of masculinity i.e. doing away with pre- given notions of what masculinity was, it was also clear that the men in our study felt pressured to behave in a manner that often coincided with hegemonic ideals of masculinity. When asked what they understood by manhood,
study participants responses were similar to those recorded elsewhere in Africa (Wyrod 2016; Hunter 2010; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012; De Villiers Graaff 2017). The importance of the man’s role as provider was reiterated by many. Several scholars have traced the emergence of the provider role to colonialism and the accompanying practices of church missions and extractive capitalism in Africa, which saw the enforcement of men’s wage labour in plantations, farms and mines (Pasura and Christou 2018; Mangezvo 2015; Hunter 2010). Among our study participants, a man who can provide for his family is presumed to deserve respect and with such respect he is able to control his family. As one man put it, ‘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’. Morrell (1998) explores the politics around the term boy among migrant men in colonial times. The term, which was synonymous with black masculinity more generally, ‘captured a condescension, a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of growth and the achievement of manhood amongst African men’ (Morrell 1998, 15). A man commands respect, whereas a boy does not. Hence as ‘boys’, black men were subordinated and denied respect. Having a source of income is key in facilitating man’s fulfilment of their role as a provider and a decision maker. It enables him to gain respect from peers and more importantly from women. Without the respect of women, he has little hope of marrying or fathering children, which are considered key to becoming a man. Drawing on an ethnographic study conducted in KwaZulu Natal, Hunter (2010) provides a detailed account on the entwinement of love, transactional relationships and paying lobola (bride price): Money is central to all. If one considers himself a man, he needs to prove it by providing for his family.

**Redefining respectability in masculinities: morality, endurance and entrepreneurship**

Some have argued that failure to meet one’s obligations as provider may lead to overcompensation through other markers of masculinity such as physical violence (De Villiers Graaff 2017; Ratele 2013). While we do not dispute such assertions, our findings resonate with recent research that attempts to counter the crisis in masculinity narrative of violence in South Africa. For example, Gibbs (2014), researching the precarious taxi industry of South Africa, deviates from the predominant narrative which portrays ‘failed men’ as ‘violent men’. While he acknowledges the turbulence and the general violence that characterized the taxi industry, he points out that kinship, prestige and respectability are critical in shaping migrant masculinities. As researchers, we are similarly interested in moving beyond understandings marginalized migrant men as failed and violent. Among men at Uncle Kofi’s
Corner, violence was largely rejected. The men there were motivated by the desire to be seen as respectable. Studies of violence and masculinities in (South) Africa often overlook men’s efforts to avoid violence and crime to be seen as respectable, suggesting that African men are limited in their imagination regarding ways to earn respect to either the ability to provide or the willingness to exert physical violence. This simplistic dichotomy was rarely endorsed by men at Uncle Kofi’s Corner.

Observing Kundai’s experiences, it is possible to see how migration is marked with shifting ideas of respectable masculinity based on context. The process of migration itself, particularly via the Limpopo river, was identified by some study participants as a marker of tough masculinity. The willingness to risk one’s life for the prospect of a possible income in South Africa was viewed as admirable. The journey was described as precarious and requiring bravery, a trait they associated with masculinity (despite the many women who also made the trip).

Finding himself homeless and domiciled at a church as an able-bodied graduate, Kundai could be considered to have failed as a man, comparable to the homeless street boys who had resorted to drug dealing nearby. However, he had distinguished himself from them and their criminalized street masculinity by intentionally finding shelter at a church and avoiding the path of crime that many migrants in his situation were enticed to follow. This earned him respect among his peers at Uncle Kofi’s Corner, who consistently urged him to hang on. Moving to and consequently attending church also came with a distinct script about how he should behave, for example following the church doctrines in his intimate relationships. Through religion he had also come to a place where he identified his situation not as a predicament but as a sign of responsible masculinity, one that is marked by endurance. To him the current conditions of unemployment and homelessness were transitional. Pasura and Christou (2018), researching masculinity among African men in the United Kingdom, demonstrate the many ways that men negotiate and perform respectable masculinities despite precarity. When men do experience a rupture of their masculine identity, for example when gender roles are over turned or undermined, they prefer to negotiate new modes of respectability rather than turning to violence. For example, some men ‘negotiated and embraced transformative masculinity ideas’ to maintain respectability, including turning to church for emotional support. Kundai and some other men at Uncle Kofi’s Corner seemed to have reached a place where they could accept their situations, largely because they were able to characterize themselves as being respectable, moral men.

Similar observations were made by Matshaka (2009) in her research on Zimbabwean migrant men who sell handicrafts at traffic lights in Cape Town, South Africa. They reconstructed their masculine ideals to fit their
everyday experiences of marginalization. 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 violence (Matshaka 2009, 79). In distancing themselves from violent and criminal modes of street masculinity, they simultaneously othered South African men as problematic and imagined themselves as ‘better’.

The men at Uncle Kofi’s Corner who participated in our study identified with both Kofi and Kundai’s stories. The eventual success of men like Uncle Kofi made Kundai even more determined that his story too, would have beautiful ending. Uncle Kofi’s Corner is a space where men encourage each other to endure. In similar spaces in Tanzania, young men congregated and involved in various activities to while away time as they went through seasons of stagnation. Yet, ‘despite their lack of success, they remained optimistic about their futures, and their day-to-day lives continued to be characterized by a sense of forward momentum’ (Fast and Moyer 2018, 15).

In the event that one failed to live through the challenges, men like Fatso opted to return home. He felt Zimbabwe would be relatively easier for him to employ his ingenuity as a man compared to South Africa. However, returning home with nothing exposed one to labels such as a ‘failed man’ (Mangezvo 2015). For example, in Fast and Moyer’s study, young men moved out of the big city following unending seasons of stagnation, in the hope of finding forward momentum somewhere else. Similarly, a few studies have documented how some African migrant men returned to their home countries with the hope restoring their respectability or dignity which they felt was being undermined in the social and political economy of the host country (Pasura and Christou 2018). Similarly, instead of reading Fatso’s return as a failure it can be seen as an effort to restore respectability.

We also view Uncle Kofi’s Corner, as a space where ideas of how to behave as a man were contested. The debate around having church elders facilitating courtship between couples, illustrate how men at Uncle Kofi’s Corner challenged religious practices and ideas that undermined their roles as men. Kundai’s statement relating to the now defunct system that used to work in the olden times can be read as the process of transformation as some traditions are dropped for new ones. This is contrary to the presentation of religion as fixed structure that cannot be changed.

Conclusion

We argue that the concept, becoming cornered, illustrates the constitutive role of space in (re)shaping ideas and practices of masculinity among
migrant men. Becoming cornered as a metaphor for spatialized marginalisation, identifies the role of structures in limiting options for men to maneuver. Simultaneously, corner spaces can be viewed as a place where roads intersect, where possibilities are imagined and new trajectories forged as men collectively work to establish lines of flight through exchanges of information, the offering of support, and shared condemnation of violent and criminal street masculinities. Fatso’s attempt and subsequent failure to enter the labour market using someone’s paper as well as his eventual return to Zimbabwe can be read as attempts to find lines of flight from such inhibiting structures. Similarly, Kundai’s stance of looking outside of church for a partner could also be viewed as another flight channel from the cornering courtship system propagated by the church that also accommodated and allowed him a platform to construct himself as respectable moral man, where others would have labeled him as failed. In both cases men found non-violent escapes to deal with their crises.

We conclude this article by acknowledging that economic, political and social marginalization as well cultural factors shape ideas and practices relating to masculinity in post-migrant contexts. We also emphasise, however, that men re-invent themselves in the face of everyday realities, crafting localised and spatialised scripts to live by. These altered and negotiated scripts, which were both speculative and on-going, leading us to see them as becoming even as they also served to promote a sense of being in control or respectable in the face of the ever changing political, economic and social landscapes they encountered.

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