

## **“GEVAARLIKE<sup>1</sup> TRANSITIONS”: NEGOTIATING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND RITES OF PASSAGE AMONGST COLOURED<sup>2</sup> BOYS AWAITING TRIAL ON THE CAPE FLATS.**

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### **Abstract.**

*This study looks at the way 25 coloured, Afrikaans speaking boys, awaiting trial for various crimes, position themselves in relation to forms of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to popular ideologies of ideal and actual characteristics of what it means to be a “real man”. These ideologies are located in public spaces and institutions, such as the media, corporate world, military and government. Specifically, the paper explores how forms of hegemonic masculinity influence the boys in this study’s rite of passage into manhood, which is observed in their stories of initiation into gangsterism. Through these tales the boys construct their masculinities in the form of both dominant, global understandings of what it means to be the “real man” and local language and descriptions of practices and rituals. They therefore create hybridised gendered identities, from their particular contexts. Whilst the boys endorse forms of hegemonic masculinity, such as a “Tupac Shakir outlaw” masculinity and a corporate executive masculinity, slivers of ambivalence appear in their discourse. This is due to the fact that these hegemonic masculinities are either largely unattainable or they temporarily empower the boys, but also leave them as children awaiting trial alone.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Afrikaans term *gevaarlik* is used on the Cape Flats and literally means “dangerous” but is slang for “awesome” or “potent”.

<sup>2</sup> The term “coloured” was an artificial apartheid racial classification category. The boys in this study all come from poor areas on the Cape Flats which were restricted to “coloured” people under the Group Areas Act, which separated groups by law. As a consequence of this law, many people classified as “coloured” were forcibly removed from areas like District Six, Mowbray and Harfield Village and were dumped in areas on the Cape Flats. Although the term “coloured” is a socially constructed category, it has had social, economic and political effects that continue into present day South Africa.

“Crime too has a history and a future, a canon of myths and legends by which its practitioners understand what happened in the past and decide how to act in the present. As such, they (prison gangs) get too close to the bone. They show us why generations of young black men lived violent lives under apartheid, and why generations more will live violently under democracy.”

Johnny Steinberg (2004) **The number**

## **INTRODUCTION.**

In this paper I will explore how 25 coloured, Afrikaans speaking boys from the Cape Flats, who were awaiting trial, describe a common rite of passage into manhood in these areas. This rite of passage is depicted as a structured and meaningful, albeit criminal, ritual that involves initiation into a gang. Following initiation, this form of gangster masculinity needs to be maintained through activities like shooting guns and performing other acts of bravery.

Through their scripts and tales of this ritual, the boys in this study construct gendered identities in relation to both local and global understandings of what it means to be “a real man”. I suggest that in these tales of becoming gang members, the boys somewhat ambivalently engage with local and global notions of hegemonic masculinity, a concept elaborated upon shortly. These boys do not have opportunities to construct their masculinities in a stable, middle-class context and therefore attempt to produce their own rituals, language and symbols for becoming “real men”. Yet there is a great deal of tension, as they also want to be respectable, educated human beings and their situation does not easily provide the material means for this.

To elaborate, the research involved 25 interviews with 16 and 17 year old coloured boys awaiting trial for various crimes, at a “place of safety” near Cape Town, where I was granted permission to conduct research. According to the boys, five were being tried for murder (including three boys being tried for two counts), one for attempted murder, three for rape, one for assault, three for armed robbery, seven for housebreaking or car theft, two for petty theft, one for possession of a gun, one for throwing stones on a neighbour’s roof and one made no mention of what he was being tried for.

The boys all came from poor townships on the Cape Flats, areas where gangsterism, drugs and guns are widespread and real opportunities are sparse. Most of these areas were constructed under apartheid. In 1948 Cape Town was one of the least segregated cities in sub-Saharan Africa. Western (1996) states that in 1936, 37% of the city’s residential areas were mixed. The Group Areas Act changed all this, separating groups by race, with Cape Town becoming a quintessential apartheid city, easily segregated by the natural dividers, such as the mountain and sea, aided by the major highways and railway lines (Western, 1996). Following the new legislation, many coloured people were dumped on the dusty Cape Flats, producing massive social dislocation. Some of the “coloured” areas that were constructed during that period, such as Manenberg and Hanover Park, are, currently, a few of the most crime and gang ridden suburbs in contemporary Cape Town (Salo, 2004). Pinnock (1984) posits that gangs on the Cape Flats are the result of groups of young men attempting to recreate social networks or “brotherhoods”, after the Group Areas Act tore communities apart.

As further background information on the areas the boys come from, based on 2001 census data for the Cape Flats, 40-60% of the housing in this area consists of informal dwellings or shacks and 35% of the households have no access to piped water. Less than a quarter of the adult population has completed grade 12. Approximately 39% of the children in these areas grow up without fathers. Most of the households on the Cape Flats have a total income of less than R1600 a month. Of those that do have work on the Cape Flats, 40% are employed in unskilled positions, such as domestic workers or labourers, 15% are sales people and 13% are craft trade workers (De Lannoy, 2007). Focusing more specifically on the youth in these areas, 61% of young people on the Cape Flats under 30 are unemployed; there are approximately 80 to 100 thousand gangsters and 130 gangs which contribute to 40% of the murders, 42% of the robberies and 70% of the crime generally in the Western Cape (Kinnes, 2000; Standing, 2004; Kagee & Frank, 2005; Samara, 2005).

It is within this chaotic, difficult context that many of these boys describe their transition into manhood through the ritual of initiation into gangsterism. Of the 22 Cape Town boys (three boys came from rural parts of the Western Cape), fourteen were “official” gangsters in the sense that they had tattoos and told stories of performing initiation tasks. A further five said that they “walked” with gangsters, meaning their involvement was dubious and largely “unofficial”. These individuals certainly spent a lot of time with gangs and were linked to criminal activity in this manner. Nineteen of the twenty-two Cape Town boys were therefore involved with gangs and all of these nineteen boys described how it was essential to perform public tasks of risk and bravery in order to (partially) achieve this form of gangster masculinity. Linked to this gang lifestyle, 17 out of the 22 Cape Town boys also described shooting a gun. Although this number may be incorrect, it indicates that even if they have not fired a gun, the desire to do so certainly exists.

In this paper I will focus on how the boys’ depictions of this process of becoming a gang member are influenced by local and global manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity may be thought of as, “a range of popular ideologies of what constitutes ideal or actual characteristics of “being a man” (Collier, 1998:21). The concept of hegemony is borrowed from a Marxist paradigm and the class analysis of Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony implies a dominant power (or “class” in Gramsci’s terms) within a set of competing powers; social ascendancy is achieved in a play of social forces. Hegemony is not totally based on brute force; it is maintained ideologically by the influential ideas of those who govern. Hegemonic masculinity therefore functions such that certain forms of being a man appear “natural”, “ordinary”, “normal” and are portrayed as more manly than others (Donaldson, 1993; Connell, 1995).

This is partly achieved through dominant societal institutions, such as the mass media, military and corporate worlds’ messages displayed in prominent public spaces (Connell, 1987, 1995; Jefferson, 1996). These models of masculinity do not necessarily depict the lives of actual men, yet they are fantasies, ideals and desires which influence men’s everyday lives (Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005). It is important to note that this concept should not be seen as a trans-historical set of traits that define a certain form of masculinity. It refers to a dynamic social process whereby specific ideals and fantasies affect the way real men and boys are influenced in terms of what is

considered to be a desirable gendered identity (Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005). I am therefore examining how local and global representations of “real men” influence and interact with a group of young men’s transition into manhood, on the Cape Flats.

These depictions of celebrated masculinities are played out in local, material conditions. Although the new South African state is characterized by a progressive approach to gender, high poverty rates, rising expectations and the emergence of a commodity culture, underlined by globalization, has led to widespread criminal violence and masculinities which are destructive (Morrell, 2001). Many marginalized people (especially men), obtained positive identities through joining the struggle as comrades and violence was legitimated, in this context, by its aims of liberation (Marks, 2001; Simpson, 2001). Specific forms of “struggle” masculinities were celebrated by marginalised men. With the end of apartheid, these youth have become depoliticized and disempowered from decision-making structures and express feelings that they have not reaped the benefits of democracy. This has led to an increase in gangsterism and many young men turning to criminal violence (Campbell, 1992; Simpson, 2001; Steinberg, 2001).

Crime and violence may therefore be ways in which some young men *do gender* (Butler, 1993). Gender is not a preformed entity but is often accomplished in the mundane actions of social life; it is realised in interpersonal transactions and practices. For groups of men marginalised by race and class, unable to “do” gender through formal employment, breaking the law may form a central part of their gendered identities. In some circumstances gender may therefore be thought of as a resource that is used to “empower” individuals under certain social constraints (Messerschmidt, 1993, 1997). The types of actions, language and practices displayed by the boys in the current study demonstrate how they “do gender” in their transition into manhood.

The focus of this paper is therefore to analyze how some boys on the Cape Flats describe their entry into gangsterism and a few of the central activities that form part of this gang lifestyle. Stories of these (predominantly violent) acts illustrate the way in which these boys influence and are influenced by certain form of hegemonic masculinity, in their difficult local context. By understanding what these boys hope to achieve through depictions of these rituals and rites of passage, we may be able to explore ways of keeping the benefits of these activities, but eradicate the violence which they entail.

#### **SOME NOTES ON METHOD.**

The study was restricted to coloured, Afrikaans speaking boys because of the gang dynamics in the areas that most of these boys come from and because the interviewer could speak Afrikaans, albeit as a second language speaker (the researcher’s mother-tongue is English). In the morning, a social worker would select five boys. When questioned he admitted that these boys were probably more literate than the average boy at this institution and that he selected them because he felt they could give “insight”. The sample is therefore skewed in this way.

After one unsuccessful English interview, interviews were conducted exclusively in Afrikaans and the boys predominantly used Kombuistaal or informal Afrikaans spoken by coloured people on the Cape Flats. This worked well, as the boys were empowered and encouraged to explain, slowly, elements of their lives, giving examples to the

second language interviewer. 25 individual interviews took place. The sessions were then transcribed and translated. English words used in the interviews are in bold in the sections of transcript below and some slang terms have been left in their original form, with translations in brackets. Names of boys have been changed, but gang names remain in the original as the names themselves form part of these boys' meaningful discourse.

The individual interviews were semi-structured, with interview flexibility promoting the exploration of "gaps, contradictions and difficulties" perceived by the participants (Burman, 1994:51). Life-history type of questioning was used, starting with questions on family and communities, then addressing early school experiences, gang involvement, crime, girlfriends, interests and whatever else they wanted to talk about. I used Hollway & Jefferson's (2000) biographical-interpretative method in the interviews. This method tries to use many open-ended questions, in order to get the subjective meanings of the interviewees. The interview was designed to produce stories that contain personal significance and encourage "whatever comes to mind" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

The study therefore contains elements of interpretative and critical paradigms. Interpretative approaches do not try to measure something, but rather attempt to understand the negotiated meanings of actors' social worlds (Halfpenny, 1987). The semi-structured interviews facilitated a context where participants were able to describe what is important to them, in the worlds in which they live. However, the analysis also has a "critical edge", looking at the tensions, repetitions and the types of language the boys use. In particular, analysing words the boys employ, like "*sterkbene*" (literally "strong bones") and "*gevaarlik*" (dangerous/ awesome), gives more depth to an understanding of the way these boys negotiate their worlds. At times the analysis, therefore, moves from an interpretative paradigm, entering into a critical paradigm and the realm of discourse analysis.

### **ANALYSIS: INITIATION INTO GANGSTERISM.**

Two competing forms of hegemonic masculinity came through strongly in the boys' stories of initiation into a gang. The first is epitomised by Tupac Shakir. Tupac was an American rapper who preached the culture of "thug's life", with the associated glory of being criminal, rebellious and oppressed. There was a painting of Tupac in one of the social worker's offices at the institution where the research took place and the Americans gang has commissioned a two-storey mural of this figure in Manenberg. Whilst these boys made almost no reference to the history of Apartheid in 25 interviews, the history of Tupac made many appearances:

**Roger:** *"He made history ... ja the songs that he sings ... killing people ... armed robberies ... he wasn't scared for the jail. (he could) Get anything ... maybe a lot of girlfriends ..."*

And:

**Dewald:** *"In his songs he just talks the truth, how his life was. He says, I don't know if it's true, he was born in jail ... he says that in one song...**His mother was pregnant in prison ... and he came out in jail.** That's why he says the jail is his house."*

Tupac was therefore one mythical figure of American origin, but with local prominence, on which the boys modelled their masculinities.

At the same time, when shown pictures of different men, the boys readily pointed to pictures of businessmen in suits and ties, as types of men they would want to be. They therefore also aspired to the power and wealth associated with an educated, middle-class man, somewhat akin to the trans-national business executives that have been pinpointed by Connell (1995) as one global form of hegemonic masculinity. These two competing forms of hegemonic masculinities, the “outlaw and the executive”, create a tension in the boys’ narratives.

The influence of the “outlaw” could be observed in the stories of high-risk tasks that needed to be accomplished during initiation. In order to be initiated into a gang, become a man and gain the gang tattoo or *chappie*, the boys said that an individual usually has to shoot at a rival gangster or sometimes you could steal a large sum of money (approximately R2000). Once this is successfully completed the gang member needs to continually re-prove himself through acts of bravery.

These initiation tasks therefore involved demonstrating the ability to be both fearless and often violent, as this form of manhood was symbolically attained through performing dangerous acts. Shooting a rival gang member, a common initiation task, therefore comprises “symbolic violence”, as opposed to direct aggression (for example retaliating to provocation) (Marsh, Rosser & Harré, 1978). Symbolic violence largely functions in relation to others and is not simply a direct outburst of anger. It is an intersubjective process. Whilst aggression may be influenced by biology, it always manifests itself in a cultural or historical context and has different meanings. Gang initiation is therefore based on the performance of symbolic violence in order to gain the respect of relevant others:

**Galen:** *“So they saw I’m really like they say *sterkbene* (strong bones), you see *meneer* (mister), with the *ouense* (guys), righto they gave me a gun, you see *meneer* (mister).”*

**Interviewer:** *“Why do you think most of the boys get involved in gangs?”*

**Galen:** *You see *meneer* (mister), many of them went through hard lives you see *meneer*. Now they have all these experiences you see from a gang and all these things. Righto, now he decides ‘hey these people are taking me for a *gat* (arse), for all these things man, I’m then not being seen in this place’. Then you *soema koppel* (just join) with us. When you’re *lekker* (nice) small, first start to clean the yard. Righto we start to test you, righto maybe 10 pills ok make your own business, see how you can *smokkel* (smuggle). Here’s a *gunnetjie* (small gun) or two, you see *meneer*. We watch how you *smokkel* (smuggle). If those pills sell well that’s a quick way that you *smokkel* (smuggle). Now we give you a gun, now we want to see how you shoot people dead. And if you can’t shoot then we teach you. We *soema* (just) bring you three, four sick dogs. ...”*

**Interviewer:** *“Did you do that? And what happened that night?”*

**Galen:** *“They gave me a big gun *meneer*, it’s the first time that I see a gun like that in real life *meneer* ... I didn’t know what’s going on ... they gave me two *Uzi*’s you see *meneer*. I must run through that whole **turf**, so I did it *meneer*.”*

**Interviewer:** *Alone? How did you feel?”*

**Galen:** *“I felt *kwaai* (cool) *meneer*. You see *meneer*, it’s almost like the people see, man hey you ... you’re not a *bangetjie* you see *meneer* and they know if I, if you make*

*me cross ... never mind who or what ... you can ma be who's family, you can ma be the be the biggest drug lord's family, I shoot you dead. You can ma bring your people I'm not worried I'm not scared. And my belief is this meneer, that what you can do I can also do, I'm then also a human just like you are. You can also get hurt just like I get hurt. Now who are you to keep yourself like a wat wat (what what/important person)?"*

Initiation was frequently described as related to fearlessness and needing to prove oneself as *sterkbene* (strong bones/legs) and not be a *bangetjie*. The word *bene* means both "bones" and "legs", implicating a strong core and nature "down to the bone". *Sterkbene* is partly achieved in the initiation task, but is an ongoing process never completely fulfilled. It is re-enacted through activities like shooting guns. The opposite of *sterkbene* is the terrible insult, *bangetjie*, referring to smallness, weakness and fear. *Bangetjie* is literally the Afrikaans noun for fear in its diminutive form.

The story above illustrates Galen's wish to be respected and esteemed through excessive risk-taking and violence, being *sterkbene* and not a *bangetjie*. Other values associated with becoming a Firm Boy (his gang) include the ability to perform tasks of high-risk, business skills to aid his "Firm" and intelligence in terms of *smokkeling* drugs. There is also an inherent form of individualism, of being able to "stand alone". All of these are components of the kind of "Tupac", outlaw hegemonic masculinity, translated into the local context of a Cape Flats gang initiation task. Many of these boys come from very poor, unglamorous backgrounds which may well result in feelings of worthlessness and shame. Boys like Galen therefore use local rituals, institutions and masculinities, like the gang/gangster, to compensate for the disempowerment of their socio-historical context.

The boys therefore perform (Butler, 1993) local masculinities to deal with the fact that: "these people are taking me for a *gat* (arse), I'm then not being seen in this place". Respect and honour are often related to forms of masculinity, as many men feel the need to be respected by other men (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Being "seen" is essential to these gangsters, especially if it impresses others. Galen's description of gang initiation, how he became a Firm Boy, involves Uzis and crossing the battlefield. This is similar to certain forms of Hollywood style masculinity, where narratives of overcoming extreme odds encapsulate the attainment of masculinity, as others watch and admire the hero (Sparks, 1996).

These aspirations to be "seen" and not taken for a "gat" are structured by the historical legacy of apartheid and the way in which it has divided groups of people. This illustrates Salo's (2004) contention that initiation into gangsterism is both a rite of passage into manhood and "signifies these men's embodiment of the contradictory meanings of race, class and gender" (Salo, 2004:35). A complex, fluid and historically changing power dynamic is therefore inherent in becoming a gangster (Salo, 2004). A gangster may be esteemed and empowered in one context and a "non-person" or "skollie" (ruffian) in another situation. The values esteemed by the "gangster", values that are associated with a form of hegemonic masculinity, may not have the same meaning in conversation with a white, middle-class researcher, especially whilst incarcerated.

This is illustrated by the fact that although Galen contests anyone assuming superiority over him, he is continuously addressing the interviewer as *meneer* (mister). It seems

unlikely that he would have offered such formalities to a “non-white” or working class interviewer. When Galen states that he is equal to the “biggest drug lord”, he is implying that because of his status as a gangster, his masculinity is dominant in that context. However, in the interview context, violence and risk-taking assume a different meaning. A white, middle-class, educated interviewer is more similar to the business executives that Connell (2000) labels as a current transnational manifestation of hegemonic masculinity. While Galen clearly would not use this language, he is aware of this, consciously or unconsciously, and is therefore always struggling to level the playing fields, even with his heroic descriptions of “Uzis and battlefields” and threats of violence.

The public display of becoming a man through this rite of passage into gangsterism was often described as being performed in relation to one’s peers:

**Kenny:** *“Standard six I at least had a few good friends, friends that were with me at primary school, did drama with me, sang with me. But when I got to standard seven my whole **attitude** towards the school changed ...”*

**Interviewer:** *“Why do you think, if you think back now, did you decide to take the gun and go and shoot?”*

**Kenny:** *“For me it was just, I really liked girls. For me it was like the girls are going to like me so much more because I’m not a bangetjie. I can prove to them I can walk in the road with a gun. I am the man.”*

**Interviewer:** *“Can you tell me about that day?”*

**Kenny:** *“So they gave me a nine-mil star. So I took the gun and walked down the road. They showed me “Kenny you must shoot that one, you must go shoot at those people”, so I walked. I had to shoot at my cousin meneer, but he belonged to another gang. So I first told them that I don’t feel like doing it but I was still a bit scared so they told me again ‘then we must do something to you because we already gave you the thing [gun], you have it in your hand’. So I was scared, they were going to hurt me. So I took the gun and went to shoot. I ran, the gun fell. I had to turn around again, I picked it up. I hid it under my bed in my mother’s house.*

**Interviewer:** *And did they give you a chap (tattoo)?”*

**Kenny:** *“No I refused to take it.”*

**Interviewer:** *“Why?”*

**Kenny:** *“I don’t like things like that because my father always told me if you have a chap (tattoo) you won’t find work.”*

Kenny explains his entry into gangsterism as related to being popular and acceptable to girls; a public performance in order to be “seen” by relevant others. He informs the interviewer that where he comes from, adolescent masculinity cannot be accomplished through drama and singing, interests he had in primary school. Being *the man*, potent, respectable and attractive, involves holding a gun and not being scared. This change of values occurs during his move into high school, illustrating the rite of passage into a new phase of life. It also happened as he made new friends; in other words it happened in order to impress a new group of peers.

Kenny immediately names the kind of gun (nine-mil star) he had to use, showing that he knows a fair amount about firearms and that he possibly was less resistant to the process than he seems to indicate in the story above. The tale seems like one of being coerced and of personal regret, yet naming the kind of gun indicates that Kenny has

probably seen guns before and is able to distinguish between different models. It also suggests that he may have a certain amount of interest in guns and respect for individuals who use them.

Guns are a key feature to acting out hegemonic masculinity for many South African youth and are associated with fast cars, flashy clothes and glamorous lifestyles (Cock, 2001). Shooting guns is obviously a very dangerous physical act, but it is also a ritual which these boys use to display and perform aspects of their masculinities.

At the same time, Kenny's resistance to a tattoo indicates his ambivalence towards abandoning his former family through a visceral and permanent act of defiance. It also alludes to the shame associated with the gangster "skollie" he will become in the family context and in future employment endeavours. This is made even more difficult by being forced to shoot at his cousin, a horrific initiation task.

The status of the gangster is therefore ambiguous. Kenny wants respect and power as "the man", yet at the same time this reputation includes being seen as a "skollie", not worthy of employment and a disgrace to his family, in other contexts. He is remembering and telling the story whilst living in a centre for boys awaiting trial. The story is one of regret, as Kenny explains that he had good friends before things "went wrong." He adds that he was scared and dropped the gun. He therefore attempts to recreate the situation as a mistake and not as something of which he is proud. An analysis of the way the story is told demonstrates Kenny's intentions with this particular tale. He both asserts and resists his gang involvement in a way that is ambivalent. It can be understood through an analysis of the different forms of hegemonic masculinities which influence the boys in this study.

Initiation was often described as enmeshed with the desire to impress and assimilate with local role-models. Only three boys said that they knew who their fathers were and there was almost no mention of positive male role-models in their communities - people like priests, soccer coaches or teachers. This rite of passage was therefore often described as performed in relation to a local role-model or slightly older gangster:

**Quinton:** *"You do a lot of things, you smoke with them and everything, drink, party together. And these are boys they weren't like this, they come from big houses and their mothers and fathers are educated, but their mothers and fathers don't know what they're doing there."*

**Interviewer:** *"Tell me again how you got into the Americans?"*

**Quinton:** *"Fancy Boys. How did I get in there? Oh I was first here by a game shop. This one he's now he's now, he's now the one. So they came to me, I didn't know them and they said to me, no, it wasn't the first, they played games. There's a boy and he wasn't like that, he's got murders now, he wasn't like that. He was also a lekker (nice) cool guy, he was alright, lekkertjies (nice). We started school together. They stood in a circle in front of the game shop, he soema (just) plays kwaai numbers (cool songs) and so on, rolls joints in the car and so. From that day onwards, so I said to him 'look here I also want to be one of you guys, I also want to be a Fancy Boy'... They teach you the whole skrif (script) and so on."*

**Interviewer:** *"What's a skrif?"*

**Quinton:** “Almost like, they tell you ‘let us so and so and so. We go to that place and so, ok, there in prison’, or ‘life’s nice and it’s hard’, all that. The F has a meaning the A has a meaning, the N, the C, the Y, and the B, and the O and the Y.”

**Interviewer:** “What is the meaning?”

**Quinton:** “The first one, the F is **the fastest live the longest**, this one [A] is from the *Fancy Boys in America*. That’s almost like the British flag, they were at war. Then the N stands for **nice time** with your *tweedende broer* (second brother/gang brother). The C stands for **come what may come what will**. And the Y stands for **reason why** and then you go on to the B and the B stands for **I’m a boy but I can change like a bastard**. And the O stands for **overlook every wrong, overlook every wrong cause overlook that ... (for example) ... he piemped** (told on) you ok they will get him again. They *soema* (just) shoot him dead. Yes they shoot him dead, he can’t do that because that’s your brothers, its almost like he’s your blood brother, that’s the reason you’re a gangster ... I decided, they don’t tell you you must do it, they look if you’re *sterkbene* to go with them. If you’re strong in your heart.”

Gangsterism offers a life of drugs, parties, women, a sense of belonging and a set of shared codes and rituals. It was often described as triggered by the desire to attain the power of a slightly older figure, who “has a car, rolls joints and plays music”. Like Galen’s story of the “battlefield”, the act of parking one’s car outside the game shop, where the general Cape Flats youth are gathered for some video games, is described by Quinton as a very desirable public display of status. This esteemed local form of masculinity, like the Marlborough man or John Wayne in other contexts, appeals to these young men; their desire for this material and symbolic power is depicted as (almost) irresistible.

In examining the FANCY BOYS acronym that Quinton recites, the tapestry of gangster values and traits appear. Speed, survival, American materialism, camaraderie, accepting the harshness of life and the ability to instil fear, are exuded through these statements. The use of the term “wrong” also needs to be noted, as it indicates how prison “*sabella*” or prison gangs’ lingo has infiltrated street gangs in post-apartheid South Africa (Steinberg, 2004). This type of language directly inscribes a form of “tough man”, outlaw masculinity related to crime, wealth and spending time in prison. Becoming a gangster involves familiarizing oneself with a new *script* that contains elements of what I have called “Tupac” hegemonic masculinity.

Yet at the same time there is an air of ambivalence and dis-ease to Quinton’s description of these gangsters. He says that these boys come from “educated” families with big houses and they are “not really like that”. Quinton is alluding to the fact that people from learned families “should know better” and shouldn’t behave like “common thugs”. It is therefore apparent from this story and the tone in which it is told, that although this gangster masculinity may contain desirable elements, it also lacks the respect that is contained in a middle-class, educated family environment. He is implying that even the “worst” gangsters are not inherently evil, as they weren’t previously that way inclined and some may even come from respectable homes. This indicates that there is potential for even the “worst” gangsters to change, something that is desirable to a young boy awaiting trial.

In all three of the boys’ accounts above there is therefore a partial endorsement of a form of hegemonic masculinity based on breaking the law, risk-taking and violence,

which is achieved in the rite of passage into gangsterism. However, all three also seem ambivalent to the way this hegemonic masculinity manifests when translated into the local context. Galen is addressing the interviewer as “*meneer*” throughout, Kenny is scared he will not find employment or respect from his parents and Quinton has to reassure himself that gangsters are “not really like that”. Stories of this rite of passage into manhood, therefore simultaneously indicate that this form of gangster man is both idealised and glorified, but also partially undesirable or illegitimate, as it turns them into rough, unemployable, violent “*skollies*”, who are now awaiting trial.

I would like to use one more story to demonstrate how this kind of “outlaw” hegemonic masculinity imbibed by the gangster continues once the initiation process is finished. The boys described how you have to maintain your reputation, repeatedly, through acts that prove you are “*sterkbene*”. In much the same way as the boys used language like “*sterkbene*”, in order to depict the manliness needed to be initiated as a gangster, they also described the need to be “*gevaarlik*”, another common term. “*Gevaarlik*” literally means “dangerous”, but is slang for “awesome” or “very powerful” or “potent”. An understanding of this adjective illuminates how these boys associate power and respect with danger and violence. In the following extract Remo describes a time when he felt *gevaarlik*:

**Interviewer:** *“And were you already in a war, a gang war?”*

**Remo:** *“Yes, they kidnapped me already.”*

**Interviewer:** *“Who kidnapped you?”*

**Remo:** *“The Naughty Boys.”*

**Interviewer:** *“And what did they do to you.”*

**Remo:** *“My mom was my saviour there. One day so I was standing at the shop stoep but I didn’t have a gun. I had lots of pills on me, dagga and money of the camp. I see this golfie (Volkswagon car) come on but I didn’t know. They first drove past, the windows were tinted. A white golfie. So they came past again, loud music playing in the car. They all jump out, I didn’t know that these were Naughty Boys. So they came, they grabbed me and in the car and they drove off with me to their house ... They hit me with pik steele (pick axe), with sjambokke (whips) one had an Oukaapie (a kind of knife) to my throat, they want to slit my throat. Luckily the people at the shop saw and called the police and the police came there with my mother. That same night when I got to the hospital I ran away from the hospital and got a gun at the yard and went to go shoot on those people. I shot one dead.”*

**Interviewer:** *“Just one?”*

**Remo:** *“Yes I shot one of them dead. They were still drinking in their yard, he was standing with his back in a corner and peeing, when he turned around I shot him in his head two three shots.”*

**Interviewer:** *“How did you feel after that?”*

**Remo:** *“I felt nothing, I feel nothing for those people. Then I just went back to the camp and then they heard “there’s someone dead in the Naughty Boys camp”. So I came back and we had a party because I shot that man dead. Everyone is happy because we verdalla (beat) those people, everyone’s happy because we go on now.”*

**Interviewer:** *“And how did you feel?”*

**Remo:** *“I felt happy, I must just feel happy because I shot someone, I feel gevaarlik (dangerous). They all, they look up to me. They know I can stand for the camp. I can stand for the Bad Boys. But it also brought me nothing in the pocket. Today I’m sitting*

*here, they can't come and visit me, they can do nothing for me, they can bring me nothing."*

Risk-taking and being "dangerous" or "powerful" (*gevaarlik*) through revenge shooting helps Remo gain respect and feel valued. It creates a sense of acceptance from other gangsters. The phrase: *I can stand for the Bad Boys* indicates that shooting guns also acts as a conduit in helping Remo achieve an, albeit temporary, sense of belonging and contribution to a group. This involves putting your body on the line, being seen and risking oneself for the gang. Through standing for the Bad Boys Remo creates a sense of self-worth and an identity.

This is reinforced by the fact that Remo felt "*gevaarlik*" when he shot an opposition gangster. The way the boys use the term *gevaarlik* is similar to the way some African Americans use the term "bad" (like the gang name "Bad Boys" above). *Gevaarlik* or "bad" implies a danger that needs to be noted and respected. Through a high-risk experience, overcoming adversity and revenge shooting, Remo creates a uniquely *gevaarlik*, respected and feared reputation. His story has connotations of extreme risk, rebellion and "cool craziness".

In a different context, Collison (1996) described English street youth as striving for a reputation as "mad". In addition to acting in a manner perceived to be tough and demanding respect from others- attributes usually associated with male self-identity on the street- these youth attempted to: "'munch' the image and fill the 'no place' of structure and identity-to get a reputation as mad, through extreme forms of risk-taking" (Collison, 1996: 441). For the boys in the current study, risk taking and being *gevaarlik* was integral to the kind of men they aspired to become. Through the kinds of stories told above, the boys perform a kind of masculinity which incorporates elements of an esteemed, global "outlaw" hegemonic masculinity, translated into the local context.

However the story closes with Remo's realisation that this lifestyle and being *gevaarlik* have also led to him awaiting trial alone and without benefits. To many middle-class South Africans, he is "a little coloured criminal without morals or education". The form of masculinity the boys strive for may result in their becoming far from hegemonic, when translated into their poor material context and its consequences. Through their rituals and rites of passage these working-class "children of the new South African democracy" therefore find a means of temporarily empowering themselves. At the same time, some of the boys realise that this power is unsustainable and that they are perceived in a different light, in other contexts.

## **CONCLUSION.**

In unpacking the values and tensions contained in the stories the boys in this study tell, it appears as if they position themselves in contradictory ways in relation to forms of hegemonic masculinities. The boys do not simply mirror global forms of what it means to be a man. They translate and hybridise hegemonic masculinity in their local context and exert a degree of agency. These boys partially mould their own masculinities, from their position in the local/global nexus, creating unique identities through their rituals, symbols and language.

These boys utilise a combination of the global mass media world which idealises both a "thug's life masculinity" and overcoming extreme adversity, as well as the local

language, with its embedded concepts, such as *sterkbone* and *gevaarlik*, and local prison gang lingo or “sabella”, including terms like “wrong”. Simultaneously, the boys are aware of another kind of hegemonic masculinity, one which involves education and formal employment, somewhat akin to a modern business executive (Connell, 2000).

The concept of hybridity emphasizes those spaces or performative identities that remake boundaries, the hybridised product being not one or the other but something else, something in-between (Bhabha, 1994). These Cape Flats youngsters therefore combine various masculinities in the interstices of the local/global nexus, creating unique identities in their own particular configurations. In theorising the “types of men” these marginalised “children of the new South African democracy” wish to become, and how they are influenced by forms of hegemonic masculinity, which has been my focus here, we need to look at the different contexts in which they are placed, as well as the shades of grey between them.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity may therefore negate the contextual nature of identities and the divisions inherent in individual subjectivities. It may be an overly rigid concept in terms of how it influences people in different geographical locations (for debate in this regard see for example Connell, 2002; Hall, 2002; Jefferson, 2002; Hearn, 2004). Furthermore, the South African situation is complicated by the thorny racial dynamics which are present, making it difficult to analyze hegemonic masculinity (Morrell, 2001).

Men and boys may strive for different ideals in different contexts and certain actions may have different meanings in different settings. Bill Gates may display many aspects of a form of hegemonic masculinity in the boardroom, but it would be a different story in the Bronx. I have described elsewhere how the boys from the Cape Flats that I worked with both portrayed themselves as macho gangsters, aspired to be respectable gentlemen, and also expressed emotion openly in certain realms, such as with mothers and girlfriends (Cooper & Foster, 2008).

However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity allows us to assess the influence of powerful institutions, such as the mass media, in which forms of being “the man” are inscribed. It is imperative to be able to make analyzes at a systemic, totalizing level, whilst also attending to the complex and divided specificities of individual behaviour. It must be accepted that there are culturally exalted, institutionally engrained - and very public forms of masculinity, in relation to which these boys position themselves and to which they aspire. “Tupac” type tales of risk and bravery may be perceived as directly linked to how these boys position themselves vis-a-vis universal forms of hegemonic masculinity.

Boys may therefore be influenced by, and influence, hegemonic masculinity in different ways. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful for understanding broad structures and institutions, which have a substantial impact on gender constructions, such as the media and corporate world and the types of men that these institutions champion (Connell, 1995). Investigating individual subjectivities, specific descriptions of local praxis and unique historical contexts, however, may enable a more complex picture to emerge. When these boys’ tales are translated into the local context and they use the resources available to them, they become both the most *gevaarlike* men in their communities and also children awaiting trial alone.

This ambivalence towards hegemonic masculinity has also been found elsewhere. For example Frosh et al (2002) found that boys in London schools needed to differentiate themselves from girls and denigrate homosexuality, yet, contradictorily, most described emotional closeness with mothers and a degree of conscientiousness with regards to schoolwork. Young boys are not all passively sucked into hegemonic forms of masculinity; they also actively negotiate contradictions associated with being young men. Many find the ideals associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity constraining in a variety of ways, in different contexts (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002).

As the first generation of children to grow up in a democratic South Africa, the manner in which the boys in this study display violent and somewhat confused expression of forms of hegemonic masculinity is substantially due to a lack of genuine social transformation, massive inequality and little redistribution of wealth. This has meant that legitimate spaces for respectability are limited for them. Many of these boys have therefore become part of an informal economy or “predatory capitalism” (Dixon, 2001) - a sector of the economy within which they may temporarily find power and wealth and, simultaneously, incorporate forms of hegemonic masculinity, with limited success. However, in the interstices of their stories of bravado the boys exhibit anxiety towards certain dangers associated with their precarious position.

What is the relevance of this kind of theorizing and how is it useful in dealing with the issue of young men and crime in contemporary South Africa? This paper is not endorsing criminality or slipping into a form of relativism which says that “boys are boys just in different ways”. The point is that these boys are not all simply pathological, crazy or inherently evil, even if their behaviour is sometimes abominable. They are using very public, global portrayals of what it means to be a man, in trying to construct esteemed reputations for themselves on the Cape Flats, during their rite of passage into manhood. This process is not fundamentally illogical and irrational. It involves forging a respectable sense of self through meaningful acts that communicate specific values, to others, with the resources they have available. We are judged by others and we attempt to influence those judgments (Emler & Reicher, 1995).

Through describing their transition into manhood, these boys try to establish and maintain an esteemed reputation. The real question is how can boys like this gain respect and a valued place in society, through other spaces and rituals, through legal, alternative pathways? Particular masculinities are attempted as collective solutions to specific cultural problems and contradictions (Pattman, Frosh & Phoenix, 1998). We need to find answers to both individual problems and the broader contexts in which they occur. Hopefully, we may now understand better the matter of factness of this earlier, chilling comment, as one of the boys has the last word: *“Now we give you a gun, now we want to see how you shoot people dead. And if you can’t shoot then we teach you.”*

### **Acknowledgements.**

This paper is based on research done in partial completion of an MA in psychological research, supervised by Professor Don Foster. The thesis was entitled: “Democracy’s children?: The constitution of masculine subjectivity of coloured adolescents awaiting trial in post-apartheid Cape Town”.

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