# Pilgrims of Belonging: Family, Gang, and Religious Script(ure)s to Live By

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*Abstract*

Understanding gang culture through a conceptual lens that views (ex-)gang members as "pilgrims," invites us into a world where men are invested in a continuous quest for sanctified sources of belongingness. We witness men undertaking lone journeys between institutions of family, gangs, and religion in search of this need, relying on hallowed rituals, scripts, and symbolic structures to find and salvage this meaningfulness. This explorative study attempts to unpack the meanings of 'coloured' masculine identity by focusing on the intersections of gender, race, place, and religion in the process of "becoming" and "being" a man during and after incarceration. The research question asks, what meaning(s) do 'coloured' men derive from their belonging to street and prison gangs? Furthermore, how does gang and prison culture as sites of belonging influence the process of identity formation? This in-depth qualitative study explores the life history narratives of six 'coloured' men from the Cape Flats, who are between the ages of 21 and 35 years. It employs feminist theoretical frameworks broadly modelled on the theory of Intersectionality, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Critical Men's Studies. The narrative analysis revealed that family was a central theme in the life histories of the men. Family bonds were constructed around moments of contradiction, crisis, and trauma in the gang space, which ultimately transformed into an epiphany of religious conversion. Instrumental in this process of meaning-making was that the brotherhood that gangs provided replaced family units in times when families of origin were in states of precarity. The aim of this study is to refute dominant, negative representations of 'coloured' masculinity as only absent, aggressive, criminal, and/or violent. An investigation of 'coloured' masculinity is compounded by the multiple and problematic ways that 'colouredness' is perceived as synonymous with gangsterism and thus critical to understanding the gendered and racialised experiences of incarceration and reintegration, particularly in the South African context.

**Keywords**: gangs; prison; conversion; masculinity; coloured identity

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## Introduction

The role of religion is an important site of inquiry for better understanding both gang involvement and desistence. Indeed, criminal justice systems are inherently informed and mediated by societies' religious beliefs,[3] as evidenced by correlations between, on the one hand, fundamentalism and correctional punitiveness and, on the other hand, Judeo-Christian values of personal transformation and correctional rehabilitation.[4] Ritual behaviour – a central characteristic of religious life – helps construct the moral coordinate points delineating "right" and "wrong," engendering society's ethical standards.[5] Maruna argues that while public spectacles of punishment (e.g. the drama of courtrooms, elaborated de-individualizing imprisonment processes, etc.) are highly ritualised; however, reintegration processes are rendered private matters.[6] In contrast to this lack of general public concern for ritualising the reintegration experience, a growing body of literature is exploring how and why former gang members are increasingly (and successfully) using religious conversion as a pathway to exiting gang life.[7]

'coloured'[8] communities are rife with both gangsterism and highly disproportionate incarceration rates.[9] Several historical experiences

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[3] Kelly Gillespie. "Moralizing Security: 'Corrections' and the Post-Apartheid Prison." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2:1 (2008), 69-87.

[4] Brandon K. Applegate, Francis T. Cullen, Bonnie S. Fisher, and Thomas vander Ven. "Forgiveness and Fundamentalism: Reconsidering the Relationship Between Correctional Attitudes and Religion." *Criminology* 38, no. 3 (2010), 719-51.

[5] Maruna, Shadd. "Reentry as a rite of passage." *Punishment and Society* (2010), 1-26.

[6] Maruna, "Reentry as a rite of passage."

[7] Jon Wolseth. "Safety and Sanctuary: Pentecostalism and Youth Gang Violence in Honduras." *Latin American Perspectives* 35: 4 (2008), 96-111; Bronwynne Anderson. "I'm not so into gangs anymore. I've started going to church now:" Coloured boys resisting gangster masculinity." *Agenda* 23:80 (2009), 55-67; Robert Brenneman. *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012); Robert Brenneman. "Wrestling the Devil: Conversion and Exit from Central American Gangs." *Latin American Research Review* 49 (2014), 112-28; Edward Orozco Flores. *God's Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery.* New York: New York University Press (2014); Edward Orozco Flores. "Grow Your Hair Out:" Chicano Gang Masculinity and Embodiment in Recovery." *Social Problems* 63 (2016), 590-604.

[8] The term 'coloured' is generally understood as South Africans of "mixed race" descent. For a full definition of the 'coloured' racial classification, see Erasmus, Z. *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (2001) and Adhikari, M. *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in southern Africa* (2009). We use 'coloured' here in lowercase and with apostrophes to highlight the authors' dissention of this term and furthermore to contextualise and problematise it as bound in sociohistorical, political and defamatory practice.

[9] Don Pinnock. *The Brotherhoods: Streets Gangs and State Control in Cape Town.* Cape Town: David Philip Publisher (1984); Ted Leggett. "Still Marginal: Crime in the coloured community." *South African Crime Quarterly* 7 (2004), 21-6; Andre Standing. *Organised*

helped to create a context from which gangs flourished by providing young people with alternative support systems and sources of belonging, namely: apartheid-era forced removals;[10] mass urban migration by the rural labouring class;[11] discursive "processes of disposability;"[12] and the state's white paternalistic use of social workers and draconian reformatories to "save" the youth from "broken families."[13] The production of the Cape Flats rearranged "right" and "wrong" in a way that further constructed 'coloured' stereotypes along discourses of moral shortcomings; here, gangs provide a certain stability and security undelivered by the state.[14]

Adhikari explains that the complications of race drive 'coloured' men to create a hybridised masculinity, which is informed by their racial ambiguity.[15] This ambiguity has largely been informed historically by South African society's failure to recognise and understand the complex position 'coloured' men find themselves in. Trotter, writing on race in District Six, postulates that a subculture in the form of gangs were created where 'coloured' men were able to resist societal impositions and inferiorities placed on them – a worthlessness on the basis of their racial classification.[16] Furthermore, this subculture became the norm, the place of belonging and security. It becomes the identity to which 'coloured' men can ascribe to, that is uniquely theirs.[17] It is the new and reconstructed "hegemonic masculinity" that has been created by 'coloured' men, for

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*Crime: A Study from the Cape Flats*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies (2006); Steffen Jensen. *Gangs, Politics & Dignitiy in Cape Town.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press (2008).

[10] Pinnock, "*The Brotherhoods.*"

[11] Jensen, "*Gangs, Politics & Dignity.*"

[12] Gabeba Baderoon. "Surplus, excess, dirt: slavery and the production of disposability in South Africa." *Social Dynamics* (2018), 1-16.

[13] Standing, "*Organised Crime,*" 9.

[14] Jensen, "*Gangs, Politics & Dignity.*"

[15] Mohamed Adhikari. *Burdened by Race: Coloured identities in southern Africa.* Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press (2009).

[16] Henry Trotter. "Trauma and memory: the impact of apartheid-era forced removals on coloured identity in Cape Town." In *Burdened by Race: Coloured identities in southern Africa*, edited by M. Adhikari, 49-78. Cape Town: UCT Press (2009).

[17] As a cautionary note, we problematise the stereotypical view that 'colouredness' is synonymous with gangsterism (Jensen, "*Gangs, Politics & Dignity.*"). In order to acknowledge the heterogeneity of 'coloured' identity, this paper attempts to build off the work of key theorists on 'coloured' identity (see Erasmus, "Coloured by history;" Salo, "Negotiating gender and personhood;" Adhikari, "*Burdened by Race*"), whilst also acknowledging the lived reality of gang culture. As this study, furthermore, is based on the qualitative methodology using a small sample, it is not reflective of the general population. Generalisability to 'colouredness' in South Africa is not the objective of this study; rather, we aim to shed insight into an experience that resonates within wide sectors of the 'coloured' community.

'coloured' men.[18] Gang culture holds high currency in terms of symbolic and structural value, as the benefits of belonging cater to both material and social needs.[19] In some working-class communities on the Cape Flats, entering gangs is practically inevitable for many young men.[20] Exiting is less likely. Yet, as this paper will argue, one practical avenue to leaving gang life in the Cape Flats is through the church.

Religious conversions have played a unique role within the cultural and historical experiences of the 'coloured' community and traditions of survival. In the Cape Colony, where constructions of selfhood were explicitly framed by Christian notions of family rights, one form of slave resistance was Islamic conversion, used as a "freedom index" to reinforce alternative affirmations of their humanity.[21] Another example occurs during the post-emancipation years, when mission stations attracted newly freed men by providing them with small plots of land if they met missionaries' standards of Christian life.[22] In her study of the Kat River Settlement, Scully reveals that an underlying function of the mission was facilitating a new bodily discipline of masculinity among the emancipated: the mission "conceptualized being a *fully free person as opposed to a slave* in the language of selfhood and citizenship…[here, the freedmen] resorted to a Christian discourse of 'manhood'…[as] active masculine citizenship" through fatherhood.[23] This is insightful as we explore the ways in which 'coloured' ex-gangsters invoke Christian embodiment and respectability to distinguish themselves from their previous lives as gangsters.

The following section will first review literature on the mythic, symbolic, and ritual nature of gangs, as a way of understanding the relationship and overlaps they share with religion. Following, we will outline the existing research on faith-based gang disengagement that has grown in recent years. The next section will elaborate on the feminist methodology undertaken in this study. We then finish with a discussion of the findings.

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[18] Adhikari, "Sons of Ham;" Trotter, "Trauma and Memory."

[19] Elaine Salo. "Negotiating gender and personhood in the new South Africa: Adolescent women and gangsters in Manenberg township on the Cape Flats." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2015), 345-65.

[20] Jensen, "*Gangs, Politics & Dignity*."

[21] Pumla Gqola. *What is slavery to me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press (2010), 152-6.

[22] Pamela Scully. *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853.* Cape Town: David Philip Publishers (1997).

[23] Pamela Scully. "Masculinity, Citizenship, and the Production of Knowledge in the Postemancipation Cape Colony, 1834-1844." In *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, by Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, 37-55. Durham: Duke University Press (2005), 38-39 (emphasis added).

## Literature Review

According to Chidester, anything can undergo processes of "sacralization" through rituals and interpretive labour that invest sacred meaning(s) onto them.[24] Such is the case with street gangs that have been imbued with a sense of sacredness within the working-class 'coloured' communities. Citing the Manenberg-based Americans gang and their use of ceremonial practices constructed through allusion to the titular superpower, Chidester highlights how the gang appropriated and reinterpreted global symbols to generate "distinctive myths and rituals that invested [their respective] urban space with religious significance" and, in effect, "operate[s] like [a] religious organization."[25] Perhaps no street gang comes close to the definitive sanctity that is claimed by prison gangs, which are even more saturated in these processes of sacralisation.[26] In his ethnographic study of an ex-Numbers gang member, Steinberg details how the gangs' lore offered an empowering language, a "grand narrative" of South Africa that placed marginalised men at its centre, highlighting how "[p]rison Generals walked out of jail [into the communities as] *demigods*."[27]

The Number gangs are deeply fuelled by mythic narrative, animated by ritualised initiations and practices, cloaked in imagined ceremonial regalia, and structured by symbolic regiments and routines. As a result, the members of these gangs, insofar as they are able to recite the Numbers' folklore in the holy language of "sabela,"[28] become consecrated: as embodiments of the stories, "they emerge from their tales *transmogrified*, *haloed* by the magic dust" of the mythology.[29] These sacralised elements of the gangs have also become a central plank in the gendered experiences of young 'coloured' men. Initiation rituals, in particular, coincide with their coming of age, a liminal phase wherein initiation serves as a rite of passage into manhood.[30] In his study of the rites of passage that 'coloured' boys undergo while awaiting trial, Cooper finds that constructing a positive gang masculine identity hinged on performing public displays of fearlessness, bravery, honour and, most importantly,

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[24] David Chidester. *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa.* Berkeley: University of California Press (2012), 43.

[25] Chidester, "*Wild Religion*," 44-5.

[26] Jonny Steinberg. *The Number: One man's search for identity in the Cape underworld and prison gangs.* Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers (2005).

[27] Steinberg, "*The Number*," 283 (emphasis added).

[28] Heather Parker-Lewis. *God's Gangsters? The Number Gangs in South African Prisons.* Cape Town: Ihilihili Press (2006).

[29] Steinberg, "*The Number*," 70 (emphasis added).

[30] Don Pinnock. *Gangs, Rituals, and Rites of Passage.* Cape Town: African Sun Press (1997).

violence: i.e. proving their masculinity to be "*gevaarlik*" (dangerous).[31] For Rodgers, this kind of social practice by gang members has a "quasi-talismanic" quality, whereby those who died living dangerously were reverentially seen as sanctified sacrifices.[32] It is thus a combination of the gendered and sacralised meanings hallowed into the gangs through ritual, symbols, coded language, and mythic storytelling that imbue gang membership with a unique reverence, not unlike that observed in church membership.

Given their relation to sacred objects and narratives as noted above, and the resources they exclusively offer to their communities,[33] gangs seem to fulfill Chidester's definition of religion: "a category of human activity that comprises not only beliefs and practices, whether in relation to transcendent forces, sacred objects, or ultimate concerns, but also resources and strategies…within an urban political economy of the sacred."[34] As a (quasi-)religious entity, it follows that membership in a gang is naturally taken seriously; in some cases, as a matter of life and death. Prison gangs and churches have been known to "talk the same language" and use similar modes of rules, deference to leadership, and daily rituals – a similarity that facilitates mutual familiarity between gang and church to the benefit of converts whose "signals of disengagement" via the church are, consequently, "not only sent, but received" on terms the gang can comprehend.[35] Furthermore, in his study of ex-gangsters in Central America who left through Evangelical-Pentecostal conversions, Brenneman shows how the gangs respect religion and converts, but view the gang and church as "equally serious endeavours" that should never mix; doing so undermines the seriousness of both and is punishable by death.[36] Johnson and Densley also show how ex-gang members in Rio de Janeiro-based prisons must "demonstrate the sincerity of their disengagement" through "hard-to-fake sign[s] of commitment" that go

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[31] Adam Cooper. "Gevaarlike transitions: Negotiating hegemonic masculinity and rites of passage amongst coloured boys awaiting trial on the Cape Flats." *Psychology in Society* 37 (2009), 1-17.

[32] Dennis Rodgers. "The Moral Economy of Murder: Violence, Death, and Social Order in Nicaragua." In *Violence at the Urban Margins,* edited by Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 21-40. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015), 28.

[33] Jensen, "*Gangs, Politics & Dignity.*"

[34] Chidester, "*Wild Religion,*" 44.

[35] Andrew Johnson and James Densley. "Rio's New Social Order: How Religion Signals Disengagement from Prison Gangs." *Qualitative Sociology* 41 (2018): 243-62, 259.

[36] Brenneman, "*Homies and Hermanos,*" 156-9.

beyond the verbal "redemption scripts" toward perceptible external signals of actions.[37]

Conversion by ex-gangsters can be highly performative and embodied, but not exclusively in the instrumental sense of proving authenticity to their former gangs (although this concern for the external gaze is important and will be discussed below). In his ethnographic study of two Los Angeles-based ministry organisations – Homeboy Industries (Jesuit non-profit) and Victory Outreach (Evangelical-Pentecostal church) – Flores argues that faith-based masculine negotiations can reorient gang identities for ex-members from self-destructive masculinities to nurturing ones.[38] This resonates with Anderson's study on 'coloured' men's transitions out of gangs in Durban, where religious affiliation allowed the young men to construct alternative masculinities contingent on a religious framework that allowed for a sense of respectability and for negotiating alternate ways of exiting gangsterism.[39] Flores further shows how these ministries focus on bodily practices as a foundation to shifting moral characters in two ways: reshaping the "malleable facets of men's embodiment" (e.g. tattoo removals, dress code, etc.) and "redirecting [the] rigid facets of embodiment" (e.g. getting high on Jesus, being soldiers for Christ, etc.).[40] Flores demonstrates that the effectiveness of this approach, *vis-à-vis* successful gang exiting, lies within the emphasis on habitual, active embodied displays and practices, as opposed to "being passively legitimated as 'family men' or 'men of God.'"[41] However, it is worth underscoring some limitations to the model: they implicitly advocate for a "reformed" masculinity that is based on traditional hegemonic Eurocentric patriarchy (i.e. household breadwinner); the programmes shame and stigmatise "active gang embodiment,"[42] a practice which is itself integral to larger racialised policing;[43] and, lastly, the programmes' focus on the

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[37] Johnson and Densley, "Rio's New Social Order," 243-7.

[38] Flores, *God's Gangs*; Flores, "Grow Your Hair Out."

[39] Anderson, "I'm not so into gangs anymore."

[40] Flores, "Grow your hair out," 591. While these findings are noteworthy, due to the limited scope of this paper, the data and findings in this study were not able to yield answers on the specificities surrounding daily rituals, facets of embodiment, or the particularities regarding prison and/or public conversion. Rather, as we will note below, participants speak more generally of how their changes in conduct were surveilled by their ex-gangs and by the community. Future research will allow for a deeper exploration of these particularities.

[41] Flores, "Grow your hair out," 590.

[42] Flores, "Grow your hair out," 597-8.

[43] Victor Rios. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys.* New York: New York University Press (2011).

body involves disciplinary technologies akin to the white paternalism characteristic of modernism.

O'Neill problematises Pentecostal conversion as conforming to the neoliberal framework of an individual agency that can transcend oppressive forces purely through "confessional logic" and "technologies of self-governance."[44] He further warns against this "spatialization of security" that locates security "uniquely privately" within an "ever-insecure…*inner* world of self," disconcerned with the macrosocial structures of violence.[45] Brenneman argues contrastingly that the belief that Evangelism reinforces neoliberal structures underestimates its "offering [of] embodied, emotion-laden practices…allowing for the social repair of communities torn apart by violence."[46] Perhaps Brenneman's is a limited understanding of the relationship between community healing and social justice, while perhaps O'Neill does underestimate the lived experience of safety from real violence that is, as Wolseth puts it, provided by the dual sanctuaries of the physical "House of God" and the metaphorical "Path of God."[47] Surely, "the [church's] discourse of self-transformation, emotional rituals useful for reforming the gang disposition, and social networks" can help individuals stay safe and secure legal employment.[48] Nevertheless, even these benefits are contingent on several factors outside the scope of the church which, if absent, is likely to result in failed conversions, including strong family ties, post-exit sources of validation, assumed adult responsibilities, and (to some extent) job security.[49]

Conversion involves a "process of acquiring a specific religious language" located within an "inner speech" through the following phases: first, alienation from the previous voices; then, a liminal state of confusion and speechlessness; and, lastly, beginning to hear a new voice.[50] This process is likely premised by anger and/or disillusionment when a gang identity

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[44] Kevin Lewis O'Neill. "The Reckless Will: Prison Chaplaincy and the Problem of Mara Salvatrucha." *Public Culture* 22: 1 (2010), 67-88, 70.

[45] O'Neill, "The Reckless Will," 82.

[46] Brenneman, "Wrestling the Devil," 126.

[47] Wolseth, "Safety and Sanctuary," 108.

[48] Brenneman, "Wrestling the Devil," 126.

[49] Scott H. Decker, David C. Pyrooz, and Richard K. Moule Jr. "Disengagement from Gangs as Role Transitions." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2013), 1-16; "Success" rates aside, the question of whether we can reconcile the benefits experienced by individual converts with the broader need for systemic change to alleviate historic injustices is outside the scope of this paper.

[50] Susan F. Harding. "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The rhetoric of fundamental baptist conversion." *American Ethnologist* (1987) 167-81, 169-70.

fails to fulfil more inflated identity standards, particularly surrounding safety, family, and economic prosperity.[51] This anger is seldom apparent because conversion tends to be narrated by the convert through a specific "redemption script:" (1) establish an inherent goodness of the "inner self;" (2) construct a narrative wherein this inner self was "ensnared" in an external cycle of deviance; and (3) an outside force helps to "empower" the individual to "make good."[52] This points back to O'Neill's argument that the conversion paradigm seems to rely on a never-ending quest inward, for an apparently inner realm that harbours an essentialist "normalcy."[53]

Luckily, Meiners and Sanabria provide an illuminating study. Highly intentional in their objectives of teaching critical thinking with a group of formerly incarcerated women and men, Meiners and Sanabria notably go against general trends of writing and other intervention programmes that centre the confessional and redemptive.[54] Nevertheless, they found participants sticking to a "redemption genre" (e.g. "*I was born, committed evil, served time, saw the errors of my ways (found God), and I am now on the true path*").[55] Their interpretation is, however, insightful: building on Doris Sommer's readings of writers of colour, they argue that the participants' seemingly "redemptive" style perhaps uses more intricate narrative strategies "to destabilize the interpretive process, to leave the desired audience less sure about their ability to know, to empathize, to understand this Other," whereby the writers are negotiating with the Western ways of knowing which readers are bound to rely on, such as "empathy, universalizing experiences, [and] apolitical readings."[56] Thus, while the particular personal narratives and thought processes that are conducive within Christian conversion spaces and processes undoubtedly reflect the conceit of neoliberal philosophy, a close analysis with ex-gang converts' narratives nevertheless offers deep insight into the meanings that men attach to gangs.

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[51] Bryan F. Bubolz and Pete Simi. "Disillusionment and Change: A Cognitive-Emotional Theory of Gang Exit." *Deviant Behavior* 36 (2015), 330-45.

[52] Shadd Maruna. *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives.* Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association (2001), 147-68.

[53] O'Neill, "The Reckless Will."

[54] Erica Meiners and Roberto Sanabria. 2004. "On Lies, Secrets, and Other Resistant Autobiographic Practices: Writing Trauma out of the Prison Industrial Complex." *JAC* 24:3, Special Issue, Part 2: Trauma and Rhetoric (2004), 635-52.

[55] Meiners and Sanabria, "On Lies, Secrets and Other Resistant Autobiographic Practices," 635.

[56] Meiners and Sanabria, "On Lies, Secrets and Other Resistant Autobiographic Practices," 645.

## Research Design and Methods

The qualitative design of this study centred on grounded theory, where the emphasis was on the interpretive, bottom-up approach.[57] This method seeks to explore experiences, ideas, thoughts, and emotions.[58] In this research design, data collection and data analysis were interconnected and operated in a dialectical process ensuring that research questions were open to constant (re)interpretation and reframing throughout the research process. This design was achieved by means of semi-structured interviewing in the form of individual, one-on-one interviews. Questions were not rigidly structured and thus ensured a measure of flexibility in the interview process. The life-story narrative method allowed participants to take ownership of the interview space. As this research study was based on the qualitative method and consisted of a small sample population, the concern was more with individual personal narratives and is not reflective of the general population.

The study was conducted in collaboration with NICRO and a Non-Governmental Organisation based in the Cape Town metropole (undisclosed for reasons of anonymity), as part of a post-release reintegration programme. Sampling was drawn from this group as a convenience sample population. Participants were all 'coloured' men between the ages of 21 and 35 years. Participants must have resided on the Cape Flats at some stage in their life, have belonged to gangs and have been previously incarcerated. NICRO is a well-established non-profit organization founded in 1910. They run a number of prison-based programmes with offenders, and aftercare diversion, non-custodial and reintegration programmes with previous offenders.

## Research Questions

The research questions in this study derived from the need to understand the personal and lived experiences of 'coloured' men. As such, the central research question and subsequent specific research questions focused on addressing the racialised and gendered experiences of day-to-day life in the specific context of the Cape Flats. Questions relating to issues of identity politics, politics of respectability, codes of honour, the meaning of family, and community were posed to participants. The importance of asking these questions derives from the need to understand the lived

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[57] Keith Punch. *Introduction to social research: quantitative and qualitative approaches. 2nd ed.* London: Sage Publications (2005); Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber. *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications (2007); David Silverman. *Doing Qualitative Research.* Fourth ed. London: SAGE Publications (2013).

[58] Silverman, "*Doing Qualitative Research.*"

realities of these men, and more importantly from their own perspectives. By gaining an understanding of childhood experiences all the way through to experiences of "becoming" and "being" men in spaces such as gangs and in prison – this is referred to as the life history narrative approach – questions were mere tools used to uncover significant and meaningful patterns in the life narrative.[59] Speaking to men about their experiences and the meanings they attach to their masculine identity is critical in understanding the issues they deal with on a daily basis, particularly the experiences of men who occupy marginal positions within a racialised gendered hierarchical system.

## Feminist Methodological Framework

The aim of this study is to engage with masculinity in the here and now, on the ground, and at a grassroots level. To study masculinity as a feminist researcher adds a dimension of complexity. From the onset this is a study about power relations, as its primary analysis; studying the relationships between men, as a secondary analysis; exchanges between the feminist researcher and the male participants. Presser argues that the inclusion and writing of the feminist researcher into the text is what critical feminist research and feminist theorising entails.[60] Merriam argues that feminist research draws heavily from critical theory, where critical qualitative analysis is not only applied to the individual(s) being studied but in doing so, addresses structural effects of politics and social relations that shape daily lived realities.[61] Through the telling of their stories in their way and in their voice, is an attempt to explore how so-called "problem identities," specifically criminalised, gendered, and racialised identities exist on the margins of academia and society. The politicised issues such as race, class, geographic location, and socioeconomic status that this study undertook to investigate were encapsulated on the basis of lived experiences and personal reflections, all of which evoke memories that are highly personalised, emotive, and sensitive. Added to this is the gendered power dynamics between researcher and participants, where a female researcher working with (criminalised) men can present a number of potential challenges relating to race, class, and social status in the research relationship.[62] However uncomfortable these exchanges may

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[59] Heather Fraser. "Doing narrative research: analysing personal stories line by line." *Qualitative Social Work* 3:2 (2004), 179-201.

[60] Lois Presser. "Negotiating power and narrative in research: implications for feminist methodology." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30:4 (2005), 2067-90.

[61] Sharan B. Merriam. *Qualitative research in practice: examples for discussion and analysis.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2002).

[62] Presser, "Negotiating power and narrative in research."

have been initially, having recognised and negotiated the power dynamics within the research context added to an understanding of the complexities of investigating masculinities within a feminist theoretical framework. It has the potential to advance feminist epistemology and the production of knowledge from an "outsider" (female) perspective.[63]

This research study makes use of two feminist theoretical paradigms. The first is critical men's studies (CMS), building on the work of Raewyn Connell.[64] This work pays close attention to the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," which is a way of theorising gendered relations of power among men.[65] The second theoretical framework draws on Patricia Hill Collins' work on standpoint theory, specifically that of intersectionality theory.[66] Standpoint epistemology involves the viewpoint of the individual being studied by looking at their location within a geographic, social context.[67] Furthermore, it is useful from a feminist perspective as it challenges the feminist researcher to "engage with institutions of hegemonic masculinity."[68] In effect, standpoint theory is the study of power relations operating within institutions and structures of power.[69] Using standpoint theory alongside intersectionality theory, which recognizes the multifaceted identities of an individual such as their race, class, gender, and geographic location, these two theories are able to uncover the individual and social forces that shape and inform the masculinities under investigation.

## Data Analysis

This study makes use of the narrative analysis approach, which focuses on the conceptual form that the life story takes. The purpose of the life history narrative approach is to make sense of how men contextualise

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[63] Merriam, *Qualitative Research in* Practice; Presser, "Negotiating power and narrative in research." Collins (2009) argues that a researcher is "connected knower" (277-83) – epistemology is built on personal experience of both participant's and researcher's personal experiences.

[64] Raewyn W. Connell. *Masculinities.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press (1995).

[65] Connell, *Masculinities*; Tony Coles. "Negotiating the field of masculinity: the production and reproduction of multiple dominant masculinities." *Men and Masculinities* 12:1 (2009), 30-44.

[66] Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* 2nd ed. New York: Routledge (2009).

[67] Collins, "*Black Feminist Thought*."

[68] Annica Kronsell. "Gendered practices in institutions of hegemonic masculinity." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7:2 (2005), 280-98, 281.

[69] Kronsell, "Gendered practices in institutions of hegemonic masculinity." Ange-Marie Hancock. "When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition: examining intersectionality as a research paradigm." *Perspectives on Politics* 5:1 (2007) 63-79.

their lives and position themselves in relation to gender, race, and place within specific cultural and social institutions, such as the family, the community, gangs, and prison. The aim is to uncover meaningful patterns that exist within the narratives, whilst simultaneously considering and questioning the significance of the narration. Narratives are closely scrutinised to understand why the story is being narrated in a specific way and why it is meaningful to the storyteller by chronologically mapping the life stories into a coherent form. The individual life histories were subjected to the narrative analysis method and involved the use of two analytical conceptual structures: first, Polkinghorne's chronological organisation and second, Bruner's functional approach.[70] The chronological structure is a tool of analytical inquiry that allows the researcher to map significant life events in an order that has a clear beginning, middle, and end.[71] The functional approach focuses on the context in which the narrative occurs and the ways in which the narrator makes sense of his world.[72] Both conceptual structures emphasise the importance of "meaning-making" in the narrative of the participant where the central focus rests on analysing themes in the data, which happen to take the form of stories/narratives.[73] A narrative analysis focuses on interpretation and close examination of meanings attached to the stories being told and provides an analytical toolkit to help the researcher make sense of the data.[74]

## Findings

To arrange coherent stories, we started by coding the narratives into two broad narrative structures. The first code encompassed the entirety of the life story and is thus referred to as the life history narrative. The second code, the micro-narrative, was divided into two sub-sections: crisis narratives and conversion narratives. The crisis narratives were based on traumatic events prior to conversion. The conversion narratives focused on the religious conversion as men prepared for re-entry into their communities after incarceration.

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[70] Donald E. Polkinghorne. "Narrative and self-concept." *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 1:2-3 (1991), 135-53; Jerome Bruner. "The narrative construction of reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18:1 (1991), 1-21.

[71] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and self-concept."

[72] Bruner, "The narrative construction of reality."

[73] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and self-concept;" Bruner, "The narrative construction of reality;" Fraser, "Doing narrative research."

[74] Fraser, "Doing narrative research."

## Crisis Narratives

This discussion revolved around moments of crisis. These were significant life events related to gang and prison life: (1) the "trigger event" in the teenage years that marked the entry into the gangs; (2) the "trauma event" that marked the exit from the gangs. This narrative highlights the entry into gangs as a coming of age, a rite of passage, and a belonging to a brotherhood that caters to family connections during the process of "becoming a man." Here, gangs present a mystical world, one that simultaneously provides affirmation through the camaraderie of brotherhood, family, and unity that was missing in the family of origin.

> *Luke\*: For me being a gangster that really stood out for me…(J: And the relationships that you formed there?)…uhhh the brotherhood, the unity, they showing me that they there for me even though I know they making me too [closed/ blind to reality] you know…because it really it stood out for me. I often…I didn't got that…that love from my family, from my mother…she was always doing her own thing. She was on drugs and so on for a lot of years and so on. I had to always, when I was younger I had to go to my friends seeking for that brotherly love, seeking for a hug, seeking for that kind of stuff. I had to go through a lot. I saw a lot. I grew up with a lot of pain as well.*

> *Anthony\*: Yes because we were always together, me and the gang members, my friends. And uhm, when we were together it was like this is what I always wanted man. It was like we talked about stuff that brothers talk about, like if I need something I can ask them […] So I would say yes, the gang members fulfilled that space, that father figure or the brother figure, everything, they filled that space.*

Through increased gang involvement and acquiring elevated statuses, they gained a deeper insight, often marked by the metaphor of "seeing" or being blinded to the reality of the gang. This "seeing" coincided with the initial breakdown of the gang family bond. Becoming more embroiled in its activities initiated the crisis moment.

> *Eric\*: That time they say "you're a wise one." That's how they come, then they tell themselves but they don't tell you. Then they say, "I can't close [pull the wool over his eyes/deceive] this guy because he is a bit wise… his eyes are open, he knows what he knows."*

As the violent reality of gang culture slowly started to sink in, there was a critical traumatic moment that started the process of self-interrogation, often revolving around their abandonment by gang members before or during prison.

*Walter*\*: Yes, it is a family because uhmm how can I say… it is a family because they enjoy everything together (pause). Look if I can just be honest… If I can just elaborate a bit…if we look at the 26 gangs. Look in…in your house you have laws…there are laws placed in a home and your work, your chores that you must do. Now it's the same in the gangsterism **(J: Is this like street gangs?)** Street gangs and prison gangs. Look, prison gangs are more disciplined than the gangs outside. Look, outside gangs they just do as they want, but understand in the prison there is always orders there. They eat together, they always sit…they are always together understand? That is why I say it's like a family. It is how a family…that is how a family is, but that is not…that is after all closing [deceiving] stuff man. I could never see it, understand? They always said that…my friend always told me, "my brother we go…I will die for you," but if I fight with that one or they are chasing us then they aren't with me, understand? They are never there, if perhaps I get hurt as well, they are never there. If I go to prison they are never there for me.*

What makes this period more traumatic is their attempt to balance constant drug relapses during periods of rehabilitation. Consequently, the repeated backsliding was further exacerbated by other traumatic events in their lives: death of friends, alienation from family members, and being left destitute. Participants talk about being "down and out," with extreme drug addiction and being caught up in the gang or prison world. The decision to leave the gang slowly starts sinking in, and so a lot of the narrative is concerned with is decision-making and choices.

*Luke*\*: I lost a lot of friends as well. I mean friends that were a part of churches. I really think a lot about a other friend of mine. His name was Bobby\*. I always told him, "Bobby see here, if I see you with the boys, if I see you with my brothers I'm going to chase you away, I don't want to see you becoming a gangster." And just a week before he died I come out of the house and see this is Bobby standing here. Now there is a spot there by us, yes we put them there…"right you see for the cops you see for the enemies." And I see this is Bobby here. I tell myself huh uh this is not gonna work out for this guy, and I'm a kinda guy like this…the Lord he has given me a…how can I say…He has given me a gift…like I can see a vision, it's almost like I can see things happening or its gonna happen…now I mean really. I could have seen that guy is gonna die and so on, but I never knew it's gonna be so early. My heart really goes out for that guy you know, and just a week after that, they shot him dead.*

*Eric*\*: I came right already. And this thing of coming right is that you must always…I never knew…last year I was also with the Lord. I left prison converted, I was converted in prison. I was on trial, then I came out. And how the gangsters fall is because of a woman…not always but most of the time it is women and nice times […] That was the time I lost my*

*conversion so I jumped right back into the game. So I went to prison again on trial for about two months.*

## Conversion Narratives

Making the decision to leave the gang is difficult; however, exiting for religious reasons is often cited as the only legitimately recognised way to leave the gangs. The narrative is punctuated by anecdotes of "finding God," "through God's grace and mercy" or "being with Christ." This progression leads to the conversion narrative.

> *Walter\*: You're almost like…if we look at uhh Pinnochio was controlled with ropes. Now that's how it goes in gangsterism, you become controlled. They say and you must just do so. So it is in gangsterism. (J: Hmm so how does one break those ropes?). To change your life is to give your heart to the Lord. (J: is that the only way that would be accepted?). Yes, that is the only way they would accept, so that they can see. You must be able to show them, "I no longer want to be in that." But now…look if you are not going to leave that and you still live your life that you want to live…they have dirty thoughts then they'll shoot you dead or hurt your family, understand? (J: Why is that?). It is almost like a commitment…it's something that you commit to…for life. Look in the camp [slang for gang], there in the gang business in jail they say uhh, "we will cut and divide your strength in the whole camp if you no longer want to be like us…then we will fetch it with blood," which means you will die for it you understand? So you must make a change in your life to show them.*

> *Eric\*: Gangsters are like that…one thing about a gangster is even when you're talking to them, they must be able to see the thing as you're telling it to them. You must be able to paint a picture for them. So they want to see it. They will say to you, no your words are not evidence, but if they can see it…now how will they see if I'm converted if they don't see me with those people (J: okay). If they want to see…what do they want to see?*

A dominant feature in the conversion narrative is a ruminative outlook that is adopted. Discussions of positive self-image and self-worth are contingent on the legitimacy and respectability claimed through the church. In this sense the church and the conversion that comes with it offers salvation and prevents any possible retribution from the gangs.

> *Jack\*: So I handed myself over to the Lord and so I said…so I asked myself, "Am I now really converted?" But I asked myself, "do you know what you did?" […] He came and opened my eyes. He came and showed me the path […] because in Matthew 6 verse 22 it says, "the light of the body is your temple inside"…this is the temple of mine see? My light burnt all the while, but it is just the devil that took over man…he's a liar*

*in everything that he does. If he leaves you then he just leaves you with death.*

***Eric\*:*** *That's mostly how they [gang members] got me, when I came right. Then I will prove to them, no it's not like that because I know what they're capable of. I can be straightforward and say sometimes I am terrified because I know these are murderers. They can kill me and that time you're thinking, "I wasn't with the Lord the way I am with the Lord now." I now have a better understanding of God and stuff. Even now, even when I go to court they still give me looks and so, or they still say stuff, but I tell them straight, "I don't worry about what you're going to say." Because I proved to them many times that I am not with those people and not with these people. And I stand by my thing, they can say what they want to about me, they can't trick me and that anymore.*

In problematising the conversion narratives, we consider the added possibility of the conversion process as a point of "self-preservation." If religion is seen as the only way out of the gang, it may be a moralising way to preserve a sense of self or a way of protecting oneself from the wrath of the gangs. Coinciding with questions of "who am I now?" reinstatement of the family of origin becomes central again.

***Ben\*:*** *I am just thankful to the Lord that he restored me again, because everyone in my family forgave me.*

***Walter\*:*** *Look, sometimes they think you are just looking for an exit, understand? You probably just want to do things your own way, understand? I am not just saying it's the conversion that you have to do, but today's guys don't see it like that. They just see "ohhh you want to go. You are going that way now so you don't want to be with us…wait we must make a plan with you now because you know too much stuff that happens." Now if you're going to work with the community, now they are scared you are going to talk with the community about what happens there, understand? Now they will concoct a plan to hurt you.*

A discussion of the future comprised a minor part of our interaction during the interview period. Once again, the conversion was framed in dynamics of the family because there is no longer the family connection that the gangs previously catered to. The significance of what it means to be a "family man" is a huge concern and weighs heavily as this sits alongside the reintegration into the family and community, which was often seen as an extension of the family in the context of the Cape Flats.

***Walter\*:*** *They respect me…not because they see me come with this closing-off [deceiving/deceitful]. I'm not just there to get that out…to seek that gap. I show them that no I am that person that I present myself to be. I am, understand? Like even yesterday as well, I went to casual*

> *[work] and I met a friend who was with me in prison and he's like to me, "Hosh! My brother [slang, gangster greeting], what do you have to say?" I look at him (pause) and I say to him, "No, I no longer speak the language [prison language – sabela] man, I am converted," and in that same moment he asked my apologies and he respects me. That made me feel good again. I can walk with my head in the air. I don't have to look behind my back. I don't have to say to my little brother, "Hey walk with me, look with me and you just have to be my back," huh uh…I walk like a free man.*

The main finding is the recurring theme of family. Gangs, both in street and prison act as family units. They impart family values in a space where families of origin are or were in a state of precarity; thus, the meanings that the men make in shaping their identity are rooted in the family; whether it is the family they belonged to, that they have lost, that they have created or the ones they are trying to find. Interestingly, the connection that the initial feeling of displacement from the family of origin was the reason cited for entering the gang. Coming full circle, the alienation from the family of origin is also a reason for leaving the gang.

> **Walter**\*: *Through the grace of the Lord for this five months I made that choice that I have a family, so I am going to make that choice, not to tell them. I want to surprise them that I can do something on my own you understand? And I said to my little brother…my little brother and I are very close. We did things together and I said to him, "Hey Jack\* I'm going man…to straighten my life" and he said to me, "[big] brother I am going with you to straighten my life as well"…and that's where we are now.*

## Discussion

### *Family Ties: Breakable Bonds of Belonging*

The narratives revealed that gang membership was valued as a place of family love and unity, particularly at vulnerable times when they needed the support of the family structure. Boys grow up in close proximity to one another and come to see older gang members as role models and this form of hegemonic masculinity as the norm. Alternate masculinities such as educated men, religious men, and working-class men are too few and marginal for this type of masculinity to be seen as respectable. We see the centrality of gender relations of brotherhood where the world of men is sacrosanct, secret, and worth protecting.

They speak of moments of clarity where the "true" meaning of family dawns, once a traumatic event takes place. Gangs are thus an intermediary zone where the meaning of family is explored and refined. Once this zone reaches an impasse, a realisation of family come to

fruition. Men work through their anxieties of the mother and father relationships in the gang in order to make sense of their place and belonging in the broader social world. Women play an insignificant role in the discourse directly related to the gang identity. Women are seen as additive in the gang world of men.

## Gangs and Religion as Codes of Honour and Authority

Gangs are where masculinities are made and, being a 'coloured' man from the Cape Flats, the meaning of race is closely tied to gender. The question of race was important because it set out to interrogate and problematise the general perception of the synonymy of gangsterism to 'colouredness.' The economic, emotional, physical, and social needs that belong to a gang caters to give credence and upholds it as fundamentally cultural. Viewing gangs as essentially cultural, it is understandable that men see it as worth defending. Gangs share much in common with religion, particularly the devotion to the prison Number doctrine and its strict religious-like fundamentalism. The scriptures and code of laws ("wette") are akin to the Ten Commandments and its rigid structure of power and authority. One is indoctrinated and initiated into a new way of life, much in the same way that one is baptised and taught biblical scripture. Religion and the conversion feed into this cycle. On the one hand, it is unfortunate that religious conversion is one of the few ways to legitimately leave the gang; on the other hand, at least, there is a "way out." Alternative masculine identity allows men to reimagine a 'coloured' masculinity free of the reductive criminalised trope, while forging of a new sense of self beyond the confines of gang culture (albeit within the confines of another).

## Communi(ties) as Protectors and Prosecutors

Looking at the beginning phase as the "pathways to crime" addresses young boys' limited choice to be anything other than a gangster. The peripheral communities on the Cape Flats characterise a double marginalisation. The men often speak about feelings of alienation and displacement, like they never truly belong, that they are social pariahs. Living as a 'coloured' man on the margins of the Cape Flats means survival, and there is very little time for introspection and to consciously contemplate the realities of gender and race when one embodies a marginalised reality. The gang embodies that survival, security, and a group cultural identity that acts as a buffer against a broader social hierarchy based on race. However, this survival strategy is also alternately supported by the religious conversion in the replacement and absence of gangs when men decide to leave. The support structures of the gang, religion, the family, and the community are relied upon structures of

support for these men located on the margins. Communities represent a binary, in so doing the bonds of community life are breakable, unstable and insecure.

## Recommendations for Further Research

While this study adds to the growing literature on faith-based gang exit, we wish to highlight a gap that remains unaddressed and worth serious investigation. Existing studies primarily explore Christian-based conversions. Absent, however, is the possible role of indigenous religious systems. Deloria has shown that an important distinction between Western religions and indigenous spiritualities is that the former emphasises notions of progress and linear chronological histories (i.e. Christian history "unfolds" with "a divine plan for humanity") while indigenous religions privilege the spatial (e.g. spiritual relations to land and sacred sites).[75] One is concerned with the philosophical problem of *time*, while the other with the philosophical problem of *space*.[76] This is not to say that any religion has more worth than another, nor to devalue Western religions. Rather, we point to Deloria's distinction as a possible point of departure for future researchers to inquire into the possible benefits and relevance of interventions based on non-Western indigenous knowledge systems and spiritualities.[77] Of course, this is no easy task, for indigenous spiritual systems are highly heterogenous, and many communities have been violently uprooted historically. It also is not meant to promote essentialist identity politics nor to deny the ways in which various aspects or elements of indigenous worldviews were survived within Western frames during processes of creolisation. The challenge here speaks to a gap among researchers and practitioners, a lack of work that centres non-Western religious interventions with ex-gang members.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was an exploration of the gendered experiences of 'coloured' men as they negotiate and construct their masculine identity in the high-risk, criminal, and violent context of the Cape Flats. This study aims at refuting dominant, negative and stereotypical representations of 'coloured' masculinity that has been written into academic and social discourse, whereas positive attributes of this masculinity has either been absent, ignored, or silenced in the literature. The objective therefore in

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[75] Vine Deloria. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion.* Golden, Colorado: Falcrum Publishing (2003), 68-9.

[76] Deloria, "*God is Red*," 61-2.

[77] Deloria, "*God is Red*."

collecting and analysing data was to ensure that it contributes to a greater body of knowledge on 'coloured' identity, experiences, and culture.

The value of this study is that it addresses a gap in the study of 'coloured' masculinity. The lack of sufficient empirical and theoretical research on 'coloured' masculinity and personal experiences of 'coloured' men in the South African context means a continued reliance on evidence and thinking developed in the North, far removed from the realities of South Africa. The relevance and value of the research study proposed here is that it would serve to identify the complexities and particularities of gendered, racialised, and criminalised masculinities in the context of high-risk communities where poverty and social supports are lacking.

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