

# "Marobot neMawaya" – Traffic Lights and Wire: Crafting Zimbabwean Migrant Masculinities in Cape Town

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## Introduction

Since 2000, Zimbabwe's multiplex challenges linked to interlocking political and macro-economic dynamics have generated economic hardship, perpetual uncertainty and vulnerability. Amongst other things, these conditions have produced a new wave of emigration from Zimbabwe, particularly to neighbouring countries such as South Africa. In the post-Apartheid context, migrants have met restrictive immigration regulations and those from other African countries experienced social hostility towards them<sup>2</sup>. Although Zimbabweans from all levels of society have joined the post-2000 wave of migration and face widely varying experiences, for many, the often marginalising context of migration has been aggravated in South Africa by limited access to socio-economic opportunities, curtailed further by struggles for legal recognition in South Africa<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, like other African migrants in South Africa, many Zimbabweans seek alternative livelihood avenues to adjust to the new and changing circumstances of their lives.

In this paper, I focus on young Zimbabwean men relocating to 'working class' townships on the Cape Flats<sup>4</sup> in Cape Town and who make a living from street trade and craft, predominantly the making and selling of wire and bead art at traffic lights in the affluent suburbs of Cape Town. Drawing from narratives derived from qualitative research, I discuss the ways in which the current wave of young Zimbabwean traders imagine and negotiate their gendered identities in this new space. I examine how the young men juggle the complex gendered and gendering experience of migration and relocation, and the centrality of the making and trading of wire and bead craft in shaping how they position themselves within prevalent discourses, through which they make sense of themselves in this marginalising context.

To consider the changing identities of migrant men who are part of the post-2000 migration wave from Zimbabwe to South Africa, I contextualise this research in the literature on gendered identities and migration. After a brief methodological discussion, I examine work as a marker of manhood and how the alternative livelihood option of craftsmanship is constructed within this context. I then discuss the competing and shifting versions of masculine ideals that these young men juggle with. In the final section, I argue that the migration experiences of these young men present them with the opportunity to recreate and construct ideals of masculinity that eventually allow them to cope with the marginalising and often hostile context. At the same time, I demonstrate that reconstructed masculinities allow them to meet other markers of adult manhood which play a key role in shaping their migration experience.

### **The gendered experience of migration**

Literature on social identity suggests that identities are flexible and malleable, arguing that the multiple aspects of 'cultural' and self-identity are fluid and shaped by lived experiences (Ghaul, 1994 – cited in Mtebule, 2001). Feminist theorists of identity have also demonstrated how notions of gendered identity are negotiated and performed differently across historical and spatial contexts, intersecting with other axes of social difference such as age, ethnicity and citizenship status. In parallel, a growing body of 'critical men's' studies has shown that like femininities, masculinities are diverse and dynamic, and should not be considered as belonging in one fixed way to one group of men (Mtebule, 2001; Morrell, 2001). Robert Connell's 1987 and 1995 work for instance, has been seminal in authoritatively developing an approach that understands masculinities as personal and social constructs (Morrell, 2001; Reid and Walker, 2005). His work pointed to the multiplicity and variation of masculinities, the ways in which they encompass issues of race, class, sexuality, and geographic location, among other social aspects (Mtebule, 2001).

In recognition that the process of social identity construction is context-dependent and situation-specific, there has been increasing cognisance within scholarly work that the experience of moving from one geographical context to another is central to identity construction (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994; Adibi, 2003), an observation critical for migration studies. Migrants find themselves renegotiating and at times, reinventing identities and meaning in their lives as they respond to the culture and conceptions of the dominant

society where they have resettled (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994: VIII). Central within these transitional processes of forming, retaining, negotiating and regenerating identity (Adibi, 2003), are changes to gendered scripts of performance and relationships. The experience of migration brings about opportunities, and sometimes drives change as migrants negotiate different conceptions of masculinity, femininity and appropriate gender roles across spatial contexts (Krulfeld, 1994: 72). Also useful in understanding these young Zimbabwean men's experiences is work on the ways in which gender identities are 'performed' in everyday life. Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) work points to the performativity rather than the fixity of identity (Nash, 2000). Her theory of performativity stresses practices which enact identities that are set apart by gender, class, sex and 'race'.

While post-structural work on identity provides a dynamic and innovative set of debates in which to frame young Zimbabwean men's experiences in Cape Town, in the migration literature, the inclusion of women in the study of migration made evident the ways in which men's experiences and differences in masculinities historically had not been explained nor theorised in the context of migration (Morrell, 1998). Men's experiences of migration have generally been treated in essentialist terms and have often not been explored as gendered experiences. In the Southern African context, although work has been carried out on male gender identities in the historical contexts of internal and cross border labour migration<sup>5</sup>, there has been silence on the gendered nature of contemporary male migrant experiences in the region<sup>6</sup>. There is an extensive body of work on post-Apartheid migration to South Africa and literature that focuses on the experiences of informal women cross-border traders (Muzvidziwa, 2001). Little has however been done to investigate the particular ways in which migration is breaking down, recreating (Morrell, 2001) and articulating masculinities for this recent wave of mostly male African migrants<sup>7</sup>.

It is against this backdrop that I bring together theories of masculinities and gender identities with an existing body of literature on gender and migration to explore Zimbabwean migrant men's negotiation of identity in Cape Town. I analyse the relationship between the transitional experience of migration and socially-constructed and shifting identities of masculinity, and I argue that the migration experience surfaces shifts in existing conventional masculinities (Morrell, 1998). Exploring the particular conditions under which masculinities are formed in the context of migration highlights the gendered implications of

changing socio-economic climates brought about by population movements. Varying experiences and shifting gendered identities offer key insights into the everyday lived realities of migrant men, in which gendered scripts of performance are constructed and negotiated, offering through this analysis new ways of imagining masculinity (Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005). Through discussion of the experiences of this particular group of Zimbabwean men as migrants and traders, I explore in the following discussion how they performatively produce and reproduce gender in the context of their everyday crafting and trading of wire and bead art in Cape Town.

### **Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa: a changing history**

The long history of migration between Zimbabwe and South Africa dates back to pre-colonial times and reflects changes in the regional political economy. Sisulu *et al.* (2007: 554) posit that “the labour needs of the South African industry ensured that in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was virtually a rite of passage for young men in colonial Rhodesia to have a stint in South African mines”. This labour migration, mostly by men as contract mine workers and migrant workers on commercial farms, decreased after Zimbabwe became independent (Southern African Migration Project, Public Opinion Survey Project 1997 – cited in Dodson, 1998). In the post-Apartheid period however, female cross-border traders oscillating between the two countries constituted the largest number of migrants (Southern African Migration Project Public Opinion Survey Project, 1997<sup>8</sup> – cited in Dodson, 1998). In addition to this regular flow of cross-border traders, migration from post-independent Zimbabwe to South Africa has also been described in waves. The first wave consisted of white ‘Rhodesians’ who left the country after the first majority elections in 1980, followed by the wave of Ndebele immigrants who fled the massacres that took place in the south-western parts of Zimbabwe between 1983 and 1987 (Sisulu *et al.*, 2007: 554; Pigou, 2004). The multi-layered crisis in Zimbabwe in the last decade has changed the character of Zimbabwean migration to South Africa, with increasingly large influxes from the different spheres of Zimbabwean society

There are no reliable figures for the number of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa given the circulatory migration process, the high level of undocumented and ‘unauthorized’ cross-border entry, as well as the reliance on deportation figures. The media and advocacy groups estimate of three to five million people, as opposed to the approximately one million legal and

illegal migrants, suggested by the few scientific studies that have been carried out (Makina, 2007). Others estimate that three to four million Zimbabweans have left the country in the last decade for different destinations (Sisulu *et al.*, 2007). These wildly varying figures are accompanied by often sensationalist headlines such as “*Zimbabwe: Refugee Crisis as Citizens Rush to Leave Their Country*” (Nyathi, *The Nation*, 2007) and “*Zimbabwean Refugees pour into SA*” (Hawker *et al.*, *Cape Argus*, 2007).

Nonetheless, the increasing number of Zimbabweans migrants reflects the interlocking political and economic challenges facing the country, including a shrinking economy, hyperinflation, widespread shortages of goods as well as local and foreign currency. As a result, many Zimbabwean businesses have closed, leading to retrenchments and contributing to an increasing high level of unemployment<sup>9</sup>, and the increasing impoverishment of the Zimbabwean populace. The condition of the large proportion of structurally unemployed people, who are earning their living from insecure informal sector activities such as petty and currency trading, has been further compromised by continual government clampdowns<sup>10</sup> and harassment by state agents. It is in this context that migration to other countries through regular or irregular channels has become the most practical option for a significant proportion of Zimbabweans. The politicisation of the crisis makes it difficult to distinguish between economic and political motivations for migrating. Zimbabwean migrants to South Africa no longer fall under the rubric of itinerant traders, labour or professional migrants. They now include overlapping categories of those ‘seeking economic relief’, fleeing from a deteriorating social situation (which includes declining health, sanitation and other key services), and those fleeing politically motivated organised violence and torture in the post-2000 period<sup>11</sup> (Pigou, 2004).

A significant fraction of this current wave of migrants to South Africa are young men who are moving to the South African context in larger numbers and for more prolonged periods than previously recorded in post-Zimbabwe’s independence (Makina, 2007). Studies carried out by the Affirmative Action Project at the University of Zimbabwe reported that young men at the University found “themselves increasingly marginalised in the economy and polity of Zimbabwe”, and that their alienation resulted from growing un- and under-employment which has led to their economic marginalisation (Gaidzanwa, 2001: 3). Masculinity “bears the marks and characteristics of the history which formed it”, and it is in this context of the economic decline

in Zimbabwe and negative attitudes towards African immigrants in South Africa<sup>12</sup> that the masculinities of young Zimbabwean migrant's masculinities are challenged (Ouzgone and Morrell, 2005). The remainder of the paper examines the nuances that shape the way that gendered identities and interactions are being played out for young Zimbabwean traders in Cape Town.

### **Researching gender identities and building “masculinity-narratives”**

Like many other Zimbabwean migrants, the men that took part in this research are in South Africa because of the political crisis and economic downturn in Zimbabwe. By describing themselves as ‘stationed’ in South Africa, these long-term migrants distinguish themselves from other Zimbabwean handicraft traders in South Africa who oscillate between both countries<sup>13</sup>. However they still conceive this to be a temporary migration situation, regularly referring to a future date when they will return home. They ranged in age from 19 to 30 years and had lived from six months to over five years, mainly in the working class townships located on the fringes of the Cape Town. Central to all was their identity as workers, particularly as street traders. Attaining this traditional marker of manhood of work has become possible in Cape Town through the crafting and sale of wire and bead art.

The primary field site for the research was a major intersection in a well-off suburb in Cape Town where many Zimbabwean traders sold goods, wire and bead art in particular. Field work comprised of participant observation which involved “hanging out” (Bhavnani, 1994) and casual conversations with the young men, sharing their work environment, as well as informal group discussions. In addition, individual interviews were carried out with identified key informants to discuss more fully personal histories of migration and experiences in Cape Town, their entry into and experiences of trade, their living space and household composition in Cape Town, their social lives and relationships, as well as future plans. This qualitative approach allowed me to engage with the fluid and transformative nature of the lived experiences and gendered identities of these migrant men. The research process allowed me to observe how the young men negotiated and articulated their gendered identities among peers as well as with other men and women (positioned differently in the South African context by class, ‘race’, nationality and geographical location). In addition, my own position as

a Shona-speaking young Zimbabwean, occupying a gendered body different from my informants<sup>14</sup>, proved to be an interesting site for data generation and co-creating knowledge with my informants. My gendered female body was often used as site for constructing and co-constructing masculinities, facilitating construction of “masculinity-narratives” and a relational analysis of gender and identity.

In the remainder of the paper I discuss the experiences of migration and relocation in Cape Town of these Zimbabwean migrant men. I consider some diverse versions of masculine ideals that emerged and how they used these to assert themselves while coping and countering negative stereotypes.

### **Workers and achievers: The ‘marobot’ [traffic light] street traders**

Robert Morrell (1998) has demonstrated how colonialism “created new and transformed existing masculinities” within the African context, as work in mines and in service jobs became an important marker of masculinity of the newly created African working class. Over time African urban life and black masculinity incorporated work as a central feature of its identity, constructing formal paid employment as an empowering ideal which is now an integral part of adult male experience, closely linked with the achievement of other valued forms of adult masculinity.

However, the centrality of salaried employment as a marker of adult masculinity in the region has been increasingly countered by limited opportunities for employment. Economic downturn in Zimbabwe, characterised by deindustrialisation and high unemployment, has meant that a significant number of young men have been left in a lurch. When describing their history, a number of the young men discussed how they were unemployed over extended periods due to limited opportunities for employment after completing high school. Those who had managed to secure employment in the formal labour market also pointed to the limitations of formal employment. These they discussed in relation to job insecurity due to increased downsizing and company closures, as well as meagre and declining salaries in a context of hyper inflation as one young man described during an interview:

“the money was insufficient considering that things are going up on a daily basis. But your salary does not increase, it is unwavering [...] but prices will be going up so your money decreases in value and you end up unable to buy anything” (K.C., 12 August 2007).

Young men experience a disjuncture between the dominant patriarchal discourses which construct men as bread winners with access to a steady income and their lived experience. Like other young men on the African continent, they identify and utilise alternative forms of livelihood mainly in the informal sector to access opportunities to earn an income and to secure financially and socially adult manhood (Turner, 1999). Besides involvement in street commerce and crafts, the young men also explored various art forms, such as music as well sports, through which they pursued their passions and attempted to make a living. Before migrating to Cape Town, two of my informants described how they had explored the option of playing soccer at professional club level. When they did not yield the expected results and due to family pressure to find more 'lucrative' and 'secure' livelihood options, these options had been abandoned for migration.

In Africa as elsewhere, men have historically gone "to great lengths to meet the cultural expectation of work" and in parts of Southern Africa, migration for work in mines, farms or 'professional' occupations has been commonplace (Barker and Ricardo, 2005). Prior to migration to Cape Town, many young men's histories included migration to other countries within the region for short-term informal trade (in goods ranging from tobacco, alcoholic beverages, to second-hand cell phones). This alternative livelihood practice has increased among Zimbabweans since the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1990s (Muzvidziwa, 2001). With worsening economic conditions in Zimbabwe in the last years, long-term migration for employment in the formal labour market or involvement in the South Africa urban informal sector, has become increasingly popular. A number of the young men involved in this study indicated that they migrated with the specific intention of joining the informal sector based on information received from kin and non-kin networks. A trader explained:

"the person I had been communicating with while I was still in Zimbabwe had been telling me that selling stuff is better. So I already had plans to come and trade. I never had any thoughts of working or anything like that." (D.M., 27 August, 2007).

Through crafting and selling wire and bead craft, and trade in other wares, this group of Zimbabwean migrants enter the informal sector as a way to cope with economic marginalisation in both their home and host countries (Barker and Ricardo, 2005; Lekogo, 2006).



## Craftsmanship and street trading: emerging masculinities?

Lekogo (2006) suggests that due to migrant networks, people from the same country usually follow the same trades. Similarly through established networks, the young men explained how on arrival in Cape Town they were introduced, advised and guided into informal street trade by both non-kin and kin support networks. The informal street trade activities involve the buying and selling of goods from Chinese shops which include car cell phone chargers, toys, rugby jerseys, and other sports paraphernalia that are currently 'hot' on the market; what they refer to as the "latest 'disc'". Informants also explained that during the initial period, many of the newcomers also learnt the craft of wire and bead art from seasoned craftsmen. Entry into wire-craft trade among this group of young men is a more esteemed trade, a more masculine domain<sup>15</sup>, through which they are able to demonstrate artistic skills and produce uniquely distinguished crafts.

In explaining their craft the young men present wire art as distinguished, more valuable and sustainable than other street trade, such as the periodic selling of fruit or fresh flowers engaged in by some local women. Selling fresh flowers is seen as a female domain and is often disparaged by comments such as "these people are making money off nothing, selling flowers they have just picked illegally" (these seasonal blooms are picked along river banks and some reserved parks). The few men, who at times partook in the non-masculine arena of fresh flower sales were often subject to ridicule and described as "lazy men" looking to make a "quick buck" for alcohol or a "fix". The attainment of masculine ideals often requires the denigration of what are perceived to be feminine qualities, which in this case is defined as selling wares that do not involve any effort or demonstrable skill (Silberschmidt, 2005). In this case, the distinguishing of wire-bead crafts as innovative, artistic, durable and therefore valuable is demonstrated through the marketing of the crafts to customers as "everlasting" and "unique". Even the trade in wares from Chinese shops, which the young men engage in intermittently or concurrently, is not regarded with the same esteem, and is often derided as petty and not worthwhile because it does not involve the same intricate effort as crafting wire art.

The skill and effort involved in the crafting of wire art was often emphasised in descriptions of the long nights they spent producing them, and through comments on each other's crafts. The crafting involves different stages: constructing a wire frame, and 'plastering' this frame with tiny beads. This particular group of traders in the Southern suburbs of Cape Town have

distinguished themselves through the craft of different indigenous South African Cape Fynbos flowers, of which they have developed an intimate knowledge through familiarity with their official names and their local symbolic significance. These flowers are not a common feature of wire and bead trade in other parts of South Africa, which is dominated by the craft of animals and other figures. One informant explained that: “other people will be selling worthless things [...] but the South African flowers we are making, these are things you can market at any place” (K.C., 12 August 2007). He adds that, “wire art is unique. You can’t go into Spar [supermarket] and get it”.

The craftsmanship involved in the production of wire and bead art is also a key site for masculine pride for these young men where they compete to demonstrate their artistic skills and through which they demonstrate innovation, a conventional masculine ideal (Silberschmidt, 2005). Day-to-day banter often includes comments about each other’s crafts: direct disparages or self-praise. Occasional skirmishes emerged over claims to the ownership of innovative designs, with comments passed such as “you traffic light people, all you are good at is copying”.

Through distinguishing their wire and bead crafts, the young men not only construct themselves as innovative economic agents, but also claim this form of street trade as an innovation unique to their ethnic and national group. A trader explains:

“most of the people who sell by the traffic lights are Zimbabweans. [...] If you get to a traffic light [...] there will be ten Zimbabweans and only one South African.” (D.M., 27 August, 2007).

Another trader adds:

“All the people who sell this end [the suburbs] are Zimbabweans. It’s us and the Coloureds. The Xhosas don’t come this side. [...] They are afraid to come [this end], unlike us Zimbabweans who go everywhere.” (J, 8 August, 2007).

The young men identify self-employment as more attractive than paid work in the formal sector, the common traditional marker of masculinity for working class men. Common rhetoric I encountered during the informal group discussions and the individual interviews valued “working for yourself”, “at your own pace” and “not being exploited”. As one young man observed: “I don’t think I will ever work for anyone else [...] I am used to doing my own things” (T.M., 17 August, 2007).

Despite the instability of informal trade – characterised by seasonal low

sales, occasional raids and confiscation of wares by law enforcement agents – street trade was preferred to formal work. This preference was often linked to the absence of relationships of exploitation, in the form of poor remuneration and working conditions, which are deemed to be present in the formal sector construction, service and private security jobs that are open to the young men and their contemporaries (Sisulu *et al.*, 2007; Makina, 2007). Traders also made reference to a company in Cape Town which was employing Zimbabwean men to produce wire and bead crafts for the European market, described as a site of exploitation “for those who are desperate”, as the pay was described as pittance. Craft and street trade presents these men with a platform not only to construct themselves as entrepreneurial but to also be autonomous agents.

For this group of young men, self-employment and informal trade is not just a stopgap while they look for wage employment, but an innovative stepping stone which they use to accumulate capital for what they describe as better or “bigger” things. Through street trade, many men hope to establish business ventures (formal or informal) such as setting up a shop to sell wire crafts, other enterprises like a landscaping company, or entering the parallel market of foreign currency trade in Zimbabwe. Street trade also provides an avenue to ownership of fixed assets and property, such as a house in Zimbabwe.

The alternative livelihood option of wire and bead craft is central to these young migrant men’s masculinity. Beyond an income, the young men construct a positive self-image and attainable and ‘successful’<sup>16</sup> masculine ideals. Central to these ideals is demonstrable earning power, closely linked to financial autonomy and the possibility to successfully provide. Intertwined in work and everyday social life, other diverse and at times competing versions of masculinity are built around craft and trade.

## **Individuality versus collectiveness: competing versions of masculinities**

In addition to the marker of socially accepted manhood of ‘work’, constructed around craft and trade, other versions of masculine performance found salience among this group of young men. In this section, I highlight the competing masculine ideals of individualism and collectivism, examining the ways in which young men negotiate and shift between these notions of masculinity.

A recurring theme in the discourse of the young men was the emphasis on autonomy linked to the masculine value of individuality. This ideal resonates with broader conventional or 'traditional' masculinities in a global, urban context, which stress autonomy and consumerism (Yoddumnern-Attig, 1992 – cited in Curran and Saguy, 2001). However, the rhetoric of self-reliance and autonomy exemplified by such statements as "I didn't come to Cape Town to make friends" or "friends are not good, they distract from what you came to do", contrasts with the collectiveness, dependence, cohesiveness and guidance which sustained traders' craft and lives in practice.

Young men are initiated by more experienced friends or relatives into the street trade, as well as the training to make wire and bead crafts. One trader recalls:

"We were told that they sold stuff and we also started to sell stuff from Chinese shops [...] we got a little money from that friend who was already here. He gave us some basic guidelines to help us start out."  
(D.M., 27 August, 2007).

Another trader explains what happened when he met a former school mate:

"He then told me that he was making wire crafts. [...] He said it's a good trade and it has good money [...] When he came here he didn't know how to do this wire craft, but one of the friends he was staying with was doing wire art [...] this friend is the one who started teaching him, and then he also taught me. So from then I can make [the crafts] and I can now teach others." (K.C., 12 August 2007).

Previous work on migration has emphasised the importance of both kin and non-kin networks, that in the early days offer needed assistance, such as helping one find a job (Curran and Sugay, 2001; Muzvidziwa, 2001; Lekogo, 2006). Similarly in this case, non-kin networks are important in the migration experiences of these young men. The nurturing and caring ethic that is occurring in practice among these young migrants is not limited to introduction into the trade but extends to day-to-day practical support such as helping find accommodation, as well as sharing meals. An informant describes his experience:

"All my friends are here, so I just came straight here and they helped me [...] while I sorted out things, considering that I had not started working [...] Those guys are the ones who found the place [for me to stay]." (T.M., 17 August, 2007).

### Another trader explains that:

"When you are coming from Zimbabwe we do not expect anything from you because you will not have any money, we know that. If we cook, you will eat and if you feel hungry and there is food, you will cook it without waiting for anyone to give you permission." (R.M., 20 September, 2007).

These networks continue as a platform for collectiveness, with a number of the young men sharing living spaces and other resources with non-kin members. Collectiveness in this migration context is drawn on as a means to support each other, and to maximise the accumulation of capital and fixed assets in what they consider a temporary migration situation. There is a disparity however, between these practices of collectiveness and supportiveness and how traders place importance on individuality and autonomy.

Popular discourse dismisses friendship as unimportant and potentially disruptive, as illustrated by the following statement made during an informal group discussion:

"your friend, even if you both have the same flower, if a customer comes and picks yours he will get angry [...] he will only lighten up when he also manages to sell his. [...] If you need friends it shows that you do not have self-esteem." (L, 14 September, 2007).

Light-hearted camaraderie seems like the acceptable surface ideal, evident in occasionally going out to places of leisure, a chance for young men to display autonomy and spending power by paying for entertainment or alcoholic beverages. Despite the central role of non-kin friendship networks, they are down-played because of the nurturing ideals and collectiveness they represent. The supportive role of non-kin networks accentuates an undesired position of dependence, thus contradicting the masculine ideal of independence. Kin networks are presented as more acceptable and described as more reliable because of the ties of obligation, but in practice these are less available in the Cape Town context. Close or key non-kin networks are then often re-appropriated as being like kin relationships, for instance, migrants described key support as "he is like my brother".

Though suppressed and denied, the nurturing or caring ethic among men collectively demonstrates the redefinition of masculine ideals and performance in the context of migration for these young men. The marginalising migration experience presents these young men with a situation that necessitates a move from individuality and autonomy to collective performances that help maximize opportunities and livelihoods in Cape Town.

## Asserting self: coping with and countering the negative

Thus far, I have focused on some of the ways in which these young men construct their sense of self and community in the migration context. These practices however take place in an often hostile and difficult host society. Zimbabweans like other African migrants are particularly alienated and stigmatised by media and public discourses which construct them negatively, labelling them as threats to South Africans seeking employment, and in which they are seen as poor, desperate, purveyors of disease, and as involved frequently in anti-social activities (MacDonald, 1999; Landau, 2006). Coping strategies that counter these negative stereotypes are thus critical and central to the ways in which migrant men negotiate, construct and assert their masculinity.

To counter negative stereotypes about themselves, traders in this group often 'other' locals by drawing on collective stereotypes about Capetonians and about township and city spaces. These stereotypes are gendered<sup>17</sup> and often tied to ethnicity as well as urban space, with Xhosa men and women living in the townships constructed as the 'other', unlike Xhosa or other black South Africans living in the central city or suburbs, whom they construct positively and identify with as progressive and educated. In the process, traders also construct and reinforce positive stereotypes about themselves.

Through their livelihood option of street trade in wire-bead crafts and other wares, the young men see themselves not only as innovative economic agents, but also as industrious and responsible: using their earnings to accumulate fixed assets, saving for future ventures, as well as sending remittances back home. Images of focused crafters and traders working hard to earn a living emerged in relation to rhetoric about time-wasting. Traders repeatedly emphasised: "we came here to make something of ourselves", a statement common among Zimbabwean migrants. When asked about leisure activities one informant said, "since I came to Cape Town I have never had time to rest [...] I spend my time indoors because of my work" (T.M., 17 August, 2007). In discussing relationships in this migration context he added that "because I am looking for money, I don't think it's okay for me to be going around looking for friends so we can spend the day fooling around".

Through this image of 'industrious entrepreneurs', which emphasises autonomy and the work ethic even in this informal context, these young men distinguish themselves from local Xhosa men living in the townships, whom they stereotype as 'lazy criminals'. In doing so they are feeding into

the public discourse and dominant narratives, which present the majority of South African young men in the townships as economic victims who embody hyper-masculinities of survival (Mtebule, 2001; Morrell, 2001). For instance, one informant made the following observation: “these Xhosa men I don’t know how they think because they don’t work [...] the ones in the location [township]. All they think of is robbing [people]” (G.M., 19 September, 2007).

By describing themselves as ‘hardworking’, these young men contrast themselves with dominant ‘street masculinity’ – represented by the ‘tsotsi’ [gangster] and ‘amagents’ masculine identities – which prevail in the Cape Town townships where they live, using this to counter negative stereotypes that migrant men are criminals or needy public wards (Landau, 2006). They also separate themselves from the violent and other illicit attributes of this street masculinity. As one young man explained: they occasionally are stopped by police for random searches for drugs and weapons, but, once the law enforcement agents realise that they are foreigners they ask for documentation and “let you go on your way”, because “they know you are not mixed up with drugs or violence” (D.M., 27 August, 2007).

In everyday contexts, young men negotiate prejudiced discrimination from ordinary citizens by constructing themselves as better financially positioned than local South Africans in the townships. Migrants interviewed repeatedly referred to how “foreigners make money”, compared to the local working class people living in the townships of Cape Town, whom they often described as “being dried out” financially. For example, one young trader in describing socialising explains:

“In the Smoke rooms [taverns], Zimbabweans are the ones who get V.I.P. treatment because they know they buy a lot. [...] Imagine a foreigner being given a seat on the sofas. They know the makwerekweres [the African foreigners] buy. Even in the bars in town it’s the Zimbabweans who will be buying [...] the Xhosas don’t have money.”

Images of ‘industrious entrepreneur’ work in tandem with some traders’ projection of themselves as financially ‘well-to-do free-spenders’. This image was often invoked during lull period conversation, as young men described their conquests pointing to their ability to provide materially for girl friends, demonstrate spending power by purchase of latest fashions or trendy gadgets (such as the latest cell phone), or buying alcohol for friends. Prioritising leisure and consumption activities in a foreign land may be understood as

another layer to masculinity used to counter the popular construct of African immigrants as poor and struggling to survive, particularly those involved in the informal sector (MacDonald, 1999; Peberdy, 2000). The insistent assertion of self-worth, professional and otherwise, through gendered notions of their own capacity as workers and providers illuminates the construction of non-violent heterosexual masculinities that are socially responsible in contrast to their view of masculinities in working class townships of Cape Town.

In most studies on migration to South Africa<sup>19</sup>, xenophobia and harassment are central challenges described by respondents. In this case, my informants did not name these but instead offered explanations such as ‘they assume we are Xhosas’ (in the case of random searches by police) or explanations which counter any practices of prejudiced discrimination through reinforcing positive stereotypes of themselves. These explanations are made in ways which position themselves as achievers of ‘successful’ masculinity. These practices were striking in men’s narration of their migrant and street trading experiences.

### **Concluding remarks**

Young Zimbabwean street traders conceive, negotiate, and create, their gendered identities, influenced by both the transitional migration context as well as by the macro and micro factors in the context from which they migrate. These young men have constructed the craftsmanship of wire and bead art as well as street trading by traffic lights as an innovative Zimbabwean domain. This domain becomes key to how they construct themselves in this context, presenting their manhood as innovative, creative and skilful, in a context of high local male unemployment.

Although on the surface, these young men present appear to draw from conventional and essentialised constructions of masculinity (built on notions of worker and provider), close analysis of this migration experience and practice shows how the ways that these notions of masculinity are constructed and performed, are reflective of the situated and specific experiences of being young migrant men. At the same time, despite their efforts to separate themselves from the local constructions of masculinities and relational femininities dominant in the townships they live, they remain linked to them. These local constructions, which they experience as marginalising, are the focal point from which they develop their own countering and often, oppositional masculine ideals.



Although the traders are reluctant to acknowledge these practices publicly, there is also evidence of an emergence of unconventional constructions of masculinity that highlight the nurturing, caring, collective masculinities essential to these young men's livelihoods and lives in Cape Town. The shifting masculine ideals that these young men draw on demonstrate that the 'something' constituting male gender identity is not unitary or consistent. Rather what it takes to 'be a man' changes from one context to another and within contexts as well. Nuanced research that examines the constructions of masculinities by different groups of men in particular places and how these change in the context of contemporary migration is important for informing future 'careful' concerted efforts to bring about the positive constructions of masculinity and esteem they deserve.

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## Endnotes

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2. In South Africa, notions of class and the intersections with racial and migrant identities are complex, politically and culturally salient, with African foreign nationals particularly vilified as 'Makwerekwere' strangers, and working class

African migrants often the targets of xenophobic tendencies (Njomah 2007).

3. There is continuing debate on whether Zimbabwean migrants are economic immigrants, escaping poverty and destitution, rather than political refugees.
4. An extensive body of work documents the range of evolving masculinities within South African townships, e.g. the volumes by Morrell (2001) and Reid and Walker, (2005). The term Cape Flats is used to refer to the former dormitory suburbs of Cape Town, areas which Salo (2006) describes as the “black periphery” of the city.
5. Moodie and Ndatshé (1994), Elder (2003) – This work looked at changing notions of gender and sexuality in male migrant labour hostels and mine compounds.
6. The exception is recent work that reflects the direction of a broader body of men’s studies in the Global South, which focuses on migrant men’s sexuality and the implications for HIV transmission (see, for instance, Lurie *et al.*, 2003).
7. Although some of the work on post-apartheid and post-2000 waves of Zimbabwean migrants to South Africa present gender disaggregated data on patterns of migration and describe the different aspects of these migration experiences (the Southern African Migration Project series, the Human Rights Watch reports), with a few exceptions (for instance, Lefko Everett, 2007), there is a failure to discuss the implications of these gendered transition experiences.
8. The Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) Public Opinion Survey Project of 1997 showed Zimbabwe to have the lowest number of migrants to South Africa.
9. Although no official unemployment figures have been released since 2001, different quarters including the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, estimate unemployment to be over 80 per cent.
10. The most notable of these clampdowns was the urban ‘cleanup’ Operation Murambatsvina in 2005, aimed eradicating parallel market activities in the informal sector among other things (Tibajjuka, 2005).
11. Politically motivated violence heightened during pre- and post-election periods of 2002, 2005 and 2008. These periods have been associated with peak migration waves in media and other reports.
12. A number of studies and reports point to the growing xenophobia in South Africa (SAMP Series and agency reports produced by bodies such as Human Rights Watch and Refugees International). The increasing levels of intolerance of the presence of African foreigners in South Africa is evidenced by the May 2008 outbreaks of xenophobic violence across the country which left 162 dead and resulted in the displacement of an estimated 80,000 people.
13. There is history of Zimbabwe traders who travel in the region for limited periods buying and selling various curio/handicrafts. Examples of work that document the experiences of these cross-border traders are Peberdy (2000) and Muzvidziwa (2001).
14. Prior to conducting fieldwork I realised that my identity as a black Zimbabwean woman, positioned differently in terms of access to the South African political economy to the group I worked with, would be key to the research process and

outcome in relation to how I was perceived and therefore received. Initially I was concerned about how my gender would prevent the camaraderie that may have taken place with a male researcher, but during the research process I identified this as an important site to generate different forms of knowledge about masculinities from what has been produced by male researchers.

15. During the course of my research I only encountered two women who were involved in the sale (not the making) of the crafts through kin networks and when I helped with some of the craft activities such as helping to bead wire, I was often reminded to be careful of 'feminine' hands.
16. Woods and Jewkes (2001) put forward the notion of 'successful' masculinity which they describe as the prevailing masculinity as defined and admired by the dominant peer culture in a particular context (2001: 317).
17. Migrants' relationships with local and Zimbabwean women are important and complex. This paper does not focus explicitly on these relationships.
18. 'Tsotsi' identity, an oppositional street masculinity associated with Apartheid struggles is said to still be alive especially in black urban townships with the 'amagents' seen as the evolving version of this identity (Glaser, 1997 – cited in Xaba, 2001; Mtebule, 2001). This 'street' masculinity is usually associated with gang membership and violence.
19. For instance, the Southern African Migration Project.