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Man a Kill a Man for Nutin': Gang Transnationalism, Masculinities, and Violence in Belize City

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Abstract

Belize has one of the highest homicide rates in the world; however, the gangs at the heart of this violence have rarely been studied. Using a masculinities lens and original empirical data, this article explores how Blood and Crip "gang transnationalism" from the United States of America flourished in Belize City. Gang transnationalism is understood as a "transnational masculinity" that makes cultural connections between local settings of urban exclusion. On one hand, social terrains in Belize City generated masculine vulnerabilities to the foreign gang as an identity package with the power to reconfigure positions of subordination; on the other, the establishment of male gang practices with a distinct hegemonic shape, galvanized violence and a patriarchy of the streets in already marginalized communities. This article adds a new body of work on gangs in Belize, and gang transnationalism, whilst contributing to theoretical discussions around the global to local dynamics of hegemonic masculinities discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2018).

Keywords

masculinities, gangs, violence, Belize, Caribbean, Central America, maras, hegemonic masculinities, gang transnationalism

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Introduction

Belize is a small country of 350,000 people on the Caribbean Sea sharing borders with Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west. It is unique, being both Central American, a member of SICA, and Caribbean, a member of CARICOM.[1] Belize is also a fledgling nation, a former colony named British Honduras in 1878, which gained independence in 1981. Although popularized as a tourist destination, there is another side to the country. National murder rates reached 45 per 100,000 in 2017, making Belize one of the most violent countries in the world, comparable to its "noisy neighbors" in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Peirce 2017). Murders are driven by gang violence in the poor Southside area of Belize City located on the coast, which is so severe that one local school teacher lamented "young men round here have become an endangered species" (Greta, November 14, 2017). Despite copious amounts of scholarship on gangs in neighboring countries, besides the research presented here, Gayle, Hampton, and Mortis (2016) are the only other international scholars to publish on violence in Belize that draws from original data with gang members.

This article explores how Blood and Crip "gang transnationalism" emanating from the United States of America (US) became established and then flourished on Southside, and why high levels of violence persist today. Whilst this is a rare empirical contribution about gangs in Belize, masculinities are front and center of the analysis, which is built inductively from the street (see Methodology further). The impacts of exclusion are gendered and, on Southside, created a palpable masculine vulnerability amongst youths to transnational Blood and Crip culture as an aspirational site of identity formation. In this way, the social terrain was rendered receptive to the establishment of gangs, which is significant for contexts of urban exclusion beyond Belize.

Whilst this provides a narrative frame for the rapid embedding of gangs, this article adds to theoretical discussions around the global, regional, and local dynamics of hegemonic masculinities. For the first time, gang transnationalism is conceived as a form of "transnational masculinity" after Connell and Messerschmidt, who have discussed the potential for localized models of hegemonic masculinity (2005, 2018).

This article is mindful not reduce gangs to a rigid hegemonic identity, recognizing that individual and collective practices are multifaceted and complex, and that masculinities are indeed multiple. It draws upon sociological interpretations of gangs to argue that the "gang displays" and performances—that is, the gang "persona" and "gangsta culture"—established by the Bloods and Crips in Belize, have a concerted "hegemonic shape" that has galvanized violence and a patriarchy of the streets. Despite the rapid Creolization (also *kriolization*, see Hall 2015), and fragmentation of street gangs on Southside in recent years, the hegemonic shape of certain gang behaviors persists. This article aims to provide a rigorous empirical and conceptual exploration of gang practices as a form of localized hegemonic

masculinity. Given that the overwhelming majority of gang interventions are masculinities blind, understanding gang activities as a form of localized hegemonic practice is presented as a way to rethink and reinvigorate the approach to gang interventions to reduce the harm done to marginalized urban communities.

The article is structured as follows: "Literature and Contribution" reviews the relevant literature subdivided into "gang transnationalism" and "gangs and masculinities"; "Methodology" outlines the methodology used, which draws upon the authors unique experience of designing the only masculinities focused gang prevention program on Southside; whilst "Gang Violence in Belize" provides a contextual background to gang violence in Belize City. These are followed by substantive analytical sections "Gang Transnationalism as Transnational Masculinity" and "The Hegemonic Shape of Gang Practices" and the continuity of violence.

Literature and Contribution

Gang Transnationalism

Gang transnationalism is a subsection of the broader academic literature on gangs dominated by the US deportation experiences of the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio/Calle 18* gangs, often collectively termed *maras*. Up to 50,000 individuals were sent back to their emigre countries El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in Central America during the 1990s, although *maras* did not emerge significantly in the latter (Cruz 2014; Zilberg 2011). Most research on gang transnationalism concludes that they are social forms of street-level youth gangs with no clear federal or transnational criminal structure, and are migratory sociocultural phenomenon as opposed to the expansion of an international criminal network (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers 2009; Roks and Densley 2019). *Maras* first developed in Northern Triangle countries as a localized cultural capital populated by disenfranchised male youths. Evidence of gang transnationalism as a cultural or subcultural phenomenon is corroborated through studies of the Latin Kings and Queens who migrated from the US to Ecuador, and later Europe (Brotherton 2007; Cerbino and Barrios 2008; Quierolo Palmas 2009). As Rodgers and Baird (2015) have argued, the literature indicates that transnational gangs are a globalized sociocultural and political youth phenomena that tend to arise as a diaspora in the country of return in contexts of persistent exclusion, either organized in situ by migrant gang members or by disaffected youths that aspire to gang membership.

Northern Triangle countries were contending with legacies of post-war violence, undergoing transitions to democracy from dictatorship, military oppression, and civil conflict, which shaped the societies that gangs inserted themselves into (Levenson-Estrada 2013; Savenije and van der Borgh 2015). A range of factors are attributed to the rise of *maras* including exclusion, connectedness to organized crime

and drug trafficking, and the role of politics (Berg and Carranza 2018), including counter-productive *mano dura* crackdowns (e.g., Gutierrez Rivera, Strønen, and Ystanes 2018; Wolf 2017).

The literature on Blood and Crip transnationalism is sparse. Exceptions in the Americas include Flores (2009), Gemert (2001), Hagedorn (2008), and Johns (2014), and Roks (2017) and Roks and Densley (2019) in Europe. In the Belizean case, only Miller Matthei and Smith (1998) have focused on transnatnioalism, although this research took place before the dramatic rise in gang violence in the country. In stark contrast to *maras*, research on gangs in Belize is scarce. Although this is not a comparative article, key similarities and divergences between the *maras* and the Bloods and Crips will be referred to in the section "Gang Violence in Belize" to contextualize the Belizean gang experience within the Central American region. Finally, amongst the gang transnationalism literature, this is the first masculinities reading of the phenomenon.

Gangs and Masculinities

Historically, scholars have written about the polymorphous threats of marginality that render disenfranchised young men susceptible to the lure of gang life. The notion of "protest" masculinity is not a new one (Adler 1928) and early studies in the US referred to gangs as a male backlash against socioeconomic exclusion where working class young men were blocked from achieving conventional male goals (e.g., Bloch and Niederhoffer 1958; Cloward and Ohlin 1966). These ideas permeated later studies where the gang has been consistently seen as an opportunity structure for "capital acquisition" or "masculine capital" that generates status, esteem, and respect for men in subordinated contexts (Baird 2012a; Mullins 2006; Mullins and Lee 2019). The literature has tended to present gangs as a homo-social enactment, display, or performance, based on variants of the "code of the street" (notable examples include: Anderson 2000; Bourgois 1995, 2001; Brotherton 2007; Venkatesh 2008). Bourgois's framing of young men "in search of respect" has gained significant traction amongst those seeking to explain the masculine dynamics of contemporary urban violence (e.g., Zubillaga 2009). The "ganging process" (Baird 2018a) has been conceptualized as a form of gendered socialization that insulates boys and young men from the threat of emasculation in the urban margins, reflected in findings across the globe (e.g. Barker 2005; Buller 2015; Heinonen 2011; Jensen 2008). Most notably in sociology and anthropology, gangs have been considered socially generated epiphenomena of structural violence, and this frames the protest, resistant, rebellious, and compensatory reactions by young men to societal expectations to achieve predominantly traditional, normative, and "hegemonic" forms of masculinity.

Critically, feminist scholarship (e.g., Cobbina, Like-Haislip, and Miller 2010; Maher 1997; Miller 2001) has warned against masculinist criminological assumptions that essentialize gang members to their aberrant or violent traits, and fail to

recognize multiple masculinities, glossing over the textures of gender relations in gang settings (these debates are well covered by Fraser 2017; Panfil and Peterson 2015; and Peterson 2018); how violence affects women (Saunders-Hastings 2018; Zulver 2016); and the strategies women use to negotiate violent ganglands (Baird 2015; Cobbina et al. 2010).

The richness of recent ethnographic literature shows that the pursuit of masculinity amidst exclusion provides an important, although partial, insight into the subjectivities that lead some into gang violence (Levenson-Estrada 2013; Mullins and Cardwell-Mullins 2006). Notably, labelling gang members' masculinities as "hyper" or "exaggerated" has limited explanatory power when presented as a monotone identity. Furthermore, de la Tierra (2016) roundly criticizes the recent work of Contreras (2012), Goffman (2014), and Rios (2011) as one-dimensional presentations of "perilous masculinity" that obscure the potential range of situationally enacted, relationally constructed, and hierarchical masculinities expounded by Connell and Messerschmidt's rethinking of hegemonic masculinities in 2005. However, scholarship in Latin America has taken noteworthy strides in teasing out the meanings of masculinity, particularly how these relate to violence (such as Gutmann and Viveros Vigoya 2005; Theidon 2007).

Contemporary analyses gangland masculinities have advanced sociological ideas about violence as a situationally dependent phenomenon, where the ganging process promotes the "baddest" to leadership positions (Baird 2018a). As opposed to a reductive exercise that essentializes the gang experience, this applies a masculinities lens to explain violence as one component, albeit an important one, of a repertoire of potential behavior. In this vein, Levenson-Estrada refers to "the marero [who] has turned into a gendered killer/killed persona, a male warrior" (2013, 97). This allows for multiple masculinities that are both contextually and situationally dependent. In recent studies, gang members have been shown to be loving fathers, sons, or boyfriends in certain socialization spaces, whilst murderers or rapists in others, all of which can occur within the same community, on the same day (Baird 2018b; Fontes 2018). Fundamentally, the masculine "protest" of the gang may be an insurrection against structural constraint, but it rarely challenges local gender hierarchies that subjugate women and non-hegemonic masculinities. On balance, they are more likely to reinforce them.

Progress in the theorization of masculinities as configurations of practice allow for nuanced interpretations of gangs as a form of localism that can be applied to contexts in the Global South. Jewkes et al. (2015) have debated this at length, reflecting Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) efforts to rethink their concept of hegemonic masculinity, suggesting they can be analyzed as multiple collective hegemonic projects, at global, societal, and local levels. In 2018, Messerschmidt revisited these, arguing that at a regional level, hegemonic masculinities can provide cultural materials to be adopted or reworked, providing models of masculinity that are important in local gender dynamics, practices, and interactions (2018, 53). These

dynamics provide conceptual leverage for understanding gang transnationalism as a form of transnational masculinity established in the local.

This article argues that gang transnationalism is a migrant form of gendered localism that requires a receptive terrain to bed-in effectively. Most obviously, the race, class, and rebellious cultural dynamics of Blood and Crip gang identities appealed to poor young Creole Belizeans as a site of opportunity, elevated gender status, and aspirational manhood. The Bloods and Crips brought Messerschmidt's "model" of masculinity with them, which was adopted, then reworked and *kriolised* by vulnerable young men. Clearly, we should not reduce the gang experience to hegemonic masculinity alone; likewise, we cannot deny the distinct hegemonic shape of gang practices, including violence.

Methodology

Based on four research trips to Belize between 2011 and 2018,[2] the methodology was built cumulatively as an ethnographic revisit, by layering together short-term trips of three to four weeks. Whilst this is not an unusual approach to research, what gave the methodology sufficient rigor to peer beneath the surface was the author's experience of designing the Southside Youth Success Programme (SYSP) in 2011 (Baird 2011). This was the first masculinities-focused gang intervention project attempted in Belize, which ran in collaboration with UNDP and the Ministry of Youth Development, Social Transformation, and Poverty Alleviation, until 2014. This created a foundation of relationships with individuals across government, state, and civil society, which were key to making short-term research trips effective. For example, colleagues at SYSP facilitated numerous interviews with young men from Southside who had passed through the program. Being known as a foreigner who had worked on Southside was a crucial in gaining trust from respondents who otherwise may have been unwilling to speak candidly about sensitive issues. Belize City is a small town, and locals are understandably reluctant to talk about gangs, crime, and political corruption to outsiders.

Interviews were conducted with six active and six former gang members; eight male youth participants in two gang-intervention programs[3]; a local rapper and dancehall singer, both former gang members; the wife of a murdered gang leader; one individual from a drug trafficking family; six recorded interviews; and numerous informal conversations with inhabitants from Southside. This was supplemented by four focus groups on Southside, one with young men, one with young women, a mixed group, and one group of mothers. Fifty-six local experts were interviewed comprising of youth workers, teachers, NGO staff, academics, police officers, prison wardens, magistrates, civil servants, politicians, and UN and embassy staff.

The methodology included time spent on the streets with gangs, in youth detention centers, and in Belize Central Prison. However, interviewing gang members is clearly not without risk.[4] This was mitigated through the use of gatekeepers, including a local Iman to enter the prison, a well-liked youth worker who helped conduct

impromptu interviews on Southside, and a politician who arranged meetings with gang leaders at her office. The author's experience of gang research in the region also provided a foundation of "ethnographic safety," an intuitive understanding of the rules of the game around street violence (Baird 2018b), although risks cannot be assuaged completely. These experiences helped the collection of primary data with gang members, which is rare precisely because it is hard to obtain, although sometimes a little fortune is needed: the first leader of the Crips in Belize (Angel, further) who was long "retired," was a driver contracted regularly during the fieldwork, although it took several years of bonding before he finally revealed his former identity and agreed to be interviewed.

Gang Violence in Belize

Below the Haulover Creek that bisects Belize City and its 60,000 inhabitants, Southside is comprised of ramshackle neighborhoods, many built on unforgiving peri-urban marshlands. Southside and one notorious downtown street called Majestic Alley, has played host to gang violence since the 1980s. Belize is a country characterized by elitism and inequality, and residents south of the creek have long been at the bottom of the country's socioeconomic strata (UNICEF Belize 2011; Warnecke-Berger 2019, 197). The country has decidedly mixed heritage, with sizeable Mayan, Spanish, Mestizo, and Garifuna (afro-indigenous) populations. The Creole minority of African descent makes up 15% of the national population, but accounts for the majority of Southside's residents. It is therefore unsurprising, as Gayle et al. says, that the majority of gang members there are black and brown (2016, 192).

In 1961, Hurricane Hattie laid waste to Belize City, creating a national emergency. The lack of housing in addition to already fragile livelihoods and severe unemployment prompted a significant exodus north, and by the turn of the millennium 30% of the entire population resided in the US (Vernon 2000). Migration to the US proved pivotal as the deportation of Blood and Crip, red and blue "colors," gang members back to Belize City was the spark for the country's gang culture.

Whilst Belize shares the Northern Triangle deportation model of gang transnationalism, it most noticeably diverges along the lines of ethnicity and language. The Creole, and to a lesser extent Garifuna migrants that joined gangs, understandably gravitated towards the English-speaking African-American Bloods and Crips, not the Latino, Spanish-speaking 18th Street and MS 13 *mara* gangs, thus defining the gang identities of future deportees. Those who joined the Bloods and Crips in the US were deported for the first time in the early 1980s. These were the pioneers of gang transnationalism in Belize, arguably pre-dating the emergence of the *maras* in Central America. There are no reliable figures for 1980s deportations, but across a decade, between 1992 and 2002, there were 1,122 deportees (Warnecke-Berger 2019).

The first wave of Bloods and Crips met a nascent democratic system with limited institutional capacity to enforce the Rule of Law. Angel, who was deported in 1981 for his part in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles, was due to serve the remainder of his sentence in Belize: "I was taken to di plane in da US, then [when I landed in Belize] *notin' happen*! [his emphasis] I jus' walk off di plane. I cum home to my aunty here in Belize City, in Majestic Alley" (May 20, 2016).[5] He went on to become the first leader of the Majestic Alley Crips in 1981. In contrast to post-conflict countries saturated with weapons in the Northern Triangle, Angel noted the absence of firearms upon arrival when the Blood and Crip street culture began:

> Firs', we were selling weed, crack-cocaine hadn't even touched Belize. I started sellin', hustlin', whateva, jus' to mek a buck. There weren't gangs den, jus' little hoodies, guys who hang out and try to hustle .... There weren't really any guns, we used to chase our enemies wid a stick and machete ... den we started ta walk round in blue rags, blue clothes, y'know.

Both Bolland (1997) and Shoman (2011) recorded the post-independence role of political clientelism in underpinning the emergence of the United Democratic Party (UDP) and the People's National Party (PNP). Whilst there is no specific literature referring to the role of political parties in gang development in Belize City, numerous interviewees, including gang leaders Angel, Shorty, and Vartas, referred to clientelist relationships that peaked in the run-up to elections, "People only vote for what they getting off the politicians" (Shorty, November 19, 2016). Locals stated that the 1990s *Generals* (leaders) of the George Street Bloods and Majestic Alley Crips were connected to political parties and ran a "tight operation" with structure and discipline that kept a lid on factional gang spats (Bill, November 15, 2017; Muhammad 2015, 71). One frustrated local politician even regretted the eventual loss of the *Generals* "Boys don't respect gang structure anymore, they just want a gun ... they steal, they lie, and are out of control" (Shirley, May 18, 2016), reflecting the way clientelist control of the streets has declined.

By the early 1990s, gangs were being taken seriously by authorities. In 1991, a Crimes Commission was set up to create legislation responding to growing public concern around the gang phenomenon. Responses included *mano dura* type crackdowns, representing clear dissonance with clientelist forms of gang engagement, and for the first time in the country's history, the Belizean Defence Force was deployed to the streets (Miller Matthei and Smith 1998), although present day responses are led by the specially created Gang Suppression Unit. As with the *maras*, these measures have proved to be counter-productive, driving the "overutilization" of juvenile incarceration where young men are regularly held for lengthy pre-trial periods on misdemeanor charges, as they say locally *"fi wan stick o weed"*, for one joint (Peirce 2017, p. 5; UNDP and Government of Belize 2013).

The crackdowns of the 1990s failed, giving way to party-led attempts at gang negotiations, but these proved unsustainable. Murder rates rose from 9 per 100,000

in 1995, to 17 in 2002, to 30 in 2006, and 45 in 2017 (Peirce 2017; UNODC 2018). By 2008, there were over 30 gangs in Belize City, with 500 youth members, and in 2015, gang membership had tripled to 1,500 as gang territories packed closer together (Haylock 2013, 46; Peirce 2017, 21). One 17-year-old gang member said that in the St Martins neighborhood alone, there were four gangs; Peace in the Village, Bacalan (Back-of-land) Crips, the Complex City Crips, and the Third World Bloods, estimating that half of all young males in the area were in gangs (Smalls, May 12, 2016). Instead of becoming more institutional, organized criminal enterprises like some cliques of *maras*, Southside gangs have splintered into ever-smaller groups, multiplying "beefs". As one civil servant put it, "It's interpersonal violence at a gang level" (November 9, 2017). Shorty moved to Los Angeles at six years of age, later joined the Bloods, and was deported back to Belize in 2011, becoming a local gang leader. When interviewed in Belize Central Prison he said:

> It about small beefs, [gang members] be like chil'ren. One beef started because someone step on someone else's shoe in a club, and now they can't even remember what the original beef was about . . . . Like a dog in a cage, then you put another one in, and it ok. Then you throw a piece of meat in and they gonna kill each other . . . . Man a kill a man for nutin', for no reason, it's fucked up

This fragmenting process meant that, counterintuitively, gang violence has risen, whilst gang institutionalization has gone backwards over the last two decades. Despite spanning some four decades, gangs in Belize are currently very much at the margins of organized crime and transnational drug trafficking networks. Although gangs sold crack-cocaine in the late l980s, Shorty said, nowadays cocaine only ended up on Southside when someone found a bale jettisoned by traffickers washed up at the beach. This was corroborated during an interview with a member of a significant drug trafficking family from the coast who said their clandestine networks deliberately avoided street gangs (interview, May 22, 2016).

In 2017 Belize City's murder rate reached 99 per 100,000, placing it amongst the top 10 most violence cities in the world, with an estimated rate on Southside at 128 per 100,000 (Arciaga Young 2019; Peirce 2017). Violence and trauma amongst boys in the city is now estimated to be higher than anywhere else in Caribbean (Gayle et al. 2016). Belize reflects the male demographic of gang violence regionally, where the vast majority of victims and perpetrators of murders are poor young men, or as Muhammad said in prosaic terms, Belizean gangs are "a black thing, a youth thing, an urban thing, a poor thing, an unskilled, undereducated and unemployed thing" (2015, 69).

Gang Transnationalism as Transnational Masculinity

The modern identity of Belize has been molded by colonialism and migration. One local academic lamented, "Colonial history means we have been taught to embrace

and value the foreign more than our own history. Everything that is great is fucking foreign, even Jesus is foreign" (Raul, November 15, /2017), and another that "there is an inherent sense of shame about Belizean culture and history" (Nia, November 15, 2017). A confluence of historic, cultural, and socioeconomic circumstances on Southside contributed to a propensity amongst a number of youths to "embrace that [US] ghetto culture . . . because Creole culture is not held sacred, young gang members have no recollection of history" (Raul, November 15, 2017). Evoking Espange's notion of "cultural transfer" (1999), US gangs represented a rebellious black youth identity that transposed fluidly into Belize City's urban margins as gangs "discursively appeared" (Warnecke-Berger, 2017, 256) in blue and red:

> Media images of the gangster in the 1980s and 1990s were the black youth of Los Angeles, New York . . . his gait, his stance, his mannerism and language formed a prototype that was made a global iconic figure . . . whilst these images were foreign in style, there were socio-economic and historical conditions for our own crop of gang activity . . . in Belize today we see more than the imitation of a foreign culture, we see the creations of [gang members] with their own set of values and definitions of what society is about and what means they will use to survive in a social environment they view as increasingly hostile and unfair . . . they lost hope and as a result became rebellious to the status quo. (Muhammad, 2015, 16–17)

"His gait, his stance, his mannerism" noted by Muhammad underscore the gender dynamics of this cultural transfer; hence, gang transnationalism can be understood as a "transnational masculinity" that makes cultural connections between local settings of urban exclusion—that is from South Central Los Angeles to Southside Belize City. On Southside, multiple and historic marginality generated masculine vulnerabilities to the foreign gang as an identity package with the apparent power to radically reconfigure positions of subordination. From this perspective, gang transnationalism is a migrant form of gendered localism that requires a receptive destination terrain that reflects (at least some of) the intersections of race, class, and subordination found in the originating locale.

Blood and Crip culture spread in a fertile environment. The aforementioned "global iconic figure" of the disenfranchised young black man striking back at structural violence was a compelling symbol in a post-colonial Belize disposed to revere the foreign. Early Bloods and Crips quickly gained influence over young men and boys pledging allegiance to them, as Carlos an eclectic former gang member, then prison officer, and current youth worker explained:

> Carlos: So [in the 1980s] Belizeans now have these American [Bloods and Crips] guys here who are deported, saying this is how we have to dress . . . they would bring back a couple of barrels of clothes, and den share dat wid de guys.
>
> Author: So, they were building like a cultural identity?

Carlos: Exactly! Y'understand. Den when clothing come in, it would be basically for dat specific gang . . . . At da time you wud wear di khaki pants and da white t-shit, wid your red rag, den you wud be a Blood . . . . Or red pants, red shirt, red bandana. And di Crip wud have di blue rag . . . dis ting was comin' from America, y'undersand? Because we did not have da finance to purchase them. So, di gang leader would distribute [clothes] and he would be seen as good, 'Hey! He's looking out for us!' So that is his defence now, he is giving them money, clothes, he protects them, he gives them weapons as a form of defence. So, people [young men] start to pledge allegiance to these guys. (May 11, 2016)

Two principle factions developed: the George Street Bloods and the Majestic Alley Crips. Angel, the first leader of the Crips, recalled how earnest beginnings scaled-up into lethal violence:

> My friend he started acting real gangster da way America does it, you know. He's da one dat decide dat Majestic Alley wud be blue, and anyting over swing-bridge [George Street], dat's red.
>
> Yeah, in '87, '88, we use to go fight at a local disco. If you from over di bridge, we pick a fight wid'you, wid knife an' machete. Dey were serious fights, but not really wid guns.
>
> First, we were selling weed, crack cocaine hadn't even touched Belize [in the early 1980s]. Da cocaine came in lik di '85. I started hustlin', whateva, jus' to make a buck. There weren't gangs den, jus' little hoodies, there weren't really guns. I tink I was about 17 maybe, I hold ma firs' gun, an' da first man dat talk big, I shoot in his chest.
>
> I buy my firs' [gun] from a farmer. Den we go an' kidnap di watchman, an' took his 16 [gauge shotgun] an' cut di barrel shaaf [shaft]. We call it *saadaaff* [sawn-off], you could stick it in your side, you run up into your enemy and you jus' bus-it [fire it] and run aff (Angel, May 20, 2016).

Smoking in Belize City predates transnational gangs, and relatively benign "Base Boys" who sold marijuana on the streets were swiftly subsumed by the new gang identities and began selling small amounts of crack cocaine. Successful gang leaders achieved notoriety, and by the 1990s, *Generals* George "Junie Balls" McKenzie a Crip form Majestic Alley, and later "Shiney" from George Street Bloods (Muhammad, 2015, 169), had become iconic figures amongst the local population and pivots for political party clientelism. It is telling that within a generation, the Bloods and Crips emerged as a standout model for young male Creole success across Southside. Those with the capacity for violence such as Generals and gunmen were admired, even reified, by younger generations as "big men":

> Yah. More money, more bigger you get. Den man com' to trade gun for crack, gun for weed. So, I sell weed, but if I have no army, man [rival gang member] com an' tek it away. I use' to pack a 9 mm and a 357 . . . dat a barrel gun, it sound lik a bomb exploded, so everybody respec' you. Dat a Big Man gun you know (Angel, May 20, 2016).

Being red or blue had become aspirational and ontologically salient amongst local meanings of masculinity, mirroring gang research in Colombia and Guatemala (Baird, 2018a; Saunders-Hastings, 2018). Whilst this analysis chimes with previous interpretations of gangland masculinities as a protest against structural constraint, we should be wary of presenting gang members straightforwardly as disenfranchised rebels. In the Belizean case, the assertion of transnational gang identities in the local simultaneously established the gang as a hegemonic masculine project with negative outcomes for host communities. Whilst gangs are in part a male reaction to deprivation, many of their activities reassert hegemonic practices that reinforce a patriarchy of the streets. The gang persona becomes a vessel that vulnerable young men fill with their gendered ambitions and fantasies of manhood built around their "soldier heroes" (after Dawson, 1994).

Complex histories of poverty on Southside generated a deeply gendered vulnerability to gang transnationalism, which arrived as an aspirational and accessible form of masculinity at a time when a young nation was finding its feet. The following section considers how the "hegemonic shape" of gang practices, particularly violence, have remained consistent across generations of gang members, even when gang structures themselves have changed rapidly.

The Hegemonic Shape of Gang Practices

As Southside gangs began to splinter at the turn of the millennium, micro-level "beefs" proliferated. Gangs are now broadly acknowledged to be disorganized with fast-flowing ephemeral membership, a far cry from the early days of the *Generals*. As Shorty said "Gangs here are childish, they don't know what they're doing.... Everyone spend their money and be broke the next day" (November 19, 2016). The Blood and Crip identities that had previously been adopted wholesale passed through a culturally syncretic process, blending with Belizean identities. Whilst present day gangs still bear remnants of US gangsta culture, seen in the ongoing use of red or blue "rags" and imported Dickies trousers, the influence of the Bloods and Crips as an organizational structure has been eroded over the last two decades. Local politician Shirley surmised, "Boys are confused about what they are fighting about, they don't know what wearing red or blue means" (May 18, 2016). Gang leader Vartas added, "Now it's 'an enemy of my enemy is my friend', Bloods and Crips don' matter no more" (May 19, 2016).

This section draws upon Messerschmidt's (2018, 53) proposal that regional-level hegemonic masculinities can provide cultural materials to be adopted or reworked, providing models of masculinity that are important in local gender dynamics. The arrival of the Bloods and Crips reconfigured street patterns of masculinity establishing a gangsta culture with discernible hegemonic practices. Jewkes et al. (2015) suggested that multiple hegemonic projects can be observed in the local, which supports the possibility of gang transnationalism being established as a model of localized hegemonic masculinity. A key finding from Belize is that these local

models or projects of masculinity are not static templates, but culturally and intergenerationally adaptable, which is why the term "hegemonic shape" is used.

The original Blood and Crip structures in Belize City established a lasting set of social practices perceivable in contemporary gangs: the aesthetics of language, the pose, the cars, or gold chains, and the symbolic *shotta* notoriety and fear, sexual access to women, street parties, drinking, and drug-taking. This can be understood as significant "capital," flaunted to an audience in the ghetto to acquire meaning (Baird, 2012a; 2012b; 2015; Fraser, 2013; Sandberg, 2008). These displays are a version of hegemonic masculine localism, a set of socially and culturally adaptable and relational notions, practices, and displays, performed under specific social and economic conditions.

This hegemonic shape runs through the history of street gangs in Belize. As the Bloods and Crips fragmented and the *Generals* died off, smaller factions were run by new generations of *Big Men*, *Boss Men, Shottas*, *Killer Men and Strike Men* who picked up the mantle as the new gangsta personas driving the localized hegemonic masculine ideal. Tiger, a young man on the fringes of gang life stated:

Tiger: Mi father was a member of a gang, but he ded. Mi brother a was a member of Bakatown gang, but Ghost Town [gang] end up kill him, like tree year ago.

Author: Why they kill him, what was the beef about?

Tiger: Mi brother was [laughs self-consciously], mi brother was their killer-man. He was the strike-man for Bakatown, and Ghost Town wanted revenge . . .

Author: Why do they fight?

Tiger: Dey fight for respec' an' ting. 'Coz mostly ting happen when dey got a party on. When all da gang members meet up, and ting just start to flick-up [flare-up]. Their beef done start simple. Simple ting cause beef down here. They teef [steal] a bike down dere, small tings! Den dey come up into bigger problems, y'know? (May 12, 2016)

The narratives of young gang members discussed identities consistently linked to domination and the rejection of non-hegemonic traits, where "Everybody wanna be a man, you da man if you kill somebody, if you don't do it, ya pussy" (Vartas, May 18, 2016). Haylock's research with male youth offenders corroborates this: "Everybody wants to be known as the 'big man' out on the streets. We want everyone to think we are 'bad' enough, being a 'killer, murderer, or a prisoner' is respected." (2013, 31). Messiah, a former gang member-turned rapper, connected violence to male status, "There's niggaz who have respect from the streets and niggaz know, 'don't fuck wid dat nigga 'coz he will shoot the fuck out of you'" (November 16, 2016). These identities set out a gendered framework for gang membership. Sufficient numbers of Southside boys learn these rites-of-passage to facilitate the fluid intergenerational handing-over of the baton, what Jabaar refers to below as a fast "transition":

> Like, right now the leader of George Street is a guy dey call 'Baby', because he's unknown, he's a young fellow, and he's more ruthless coz he knows what happened to his seniors [murdered gang leaders]. So, da killers are more ruthless now. Dey are new, dey are young, and da transition is faster. Some are 13 years old. I saw a young guy who I know is a shotta [gunman], and he is not more than 11 years old. So basically, what we have in Belize is child soldiering. (May 11, 2016)

A former manager of a gang prevention program referred to the vulnerability of the young boys she worked with on Southside who were almost all from struggling single mother households: "The only men that talk to these boys are gangs on the streets, who they look up to and idolise" (Sally, May 10, 2016).

> Boys think that being rude and acting like a gang member is how you get respect off someone. There is no longer manhood. We have overgrown adolescents, right? There's no male role model. Actually, the role model that most of our young males seem to be gravitating towards are gangsters. Back in the day, when you went to jail you got scorned. Now, you get stripes, street credibility. So, street credibility has taken over masculinity. (Jabaar, May 11, 2016)

The ganging process demands the practice and display of "baddness" that subordinates non-hegemonic masculine traits (Baird, 2018a). Gang performance asserts a patriarchy of the streets encompassing the treatment of women and sexual violence, demonstrated by Shorty's narrative:

> Besides my other whores, I had this beautiful woman [goes on to talk about teenage girlfriend. Shorty was thirty-three at the time]. The bitches who love gangstas only love the dude for the stuff he's doin' on the streets . . . they all want the same, they only like him because of his name, then they always fuck their best friends! Yeah, we *train* [gang rape] them. I've seen ten gangbangers do one woman [called "Pleasers"]. Some are forced, some wanna do it to show that they are down, it shows they love them . . . the dudes don't really hang out with the home girls, they hang out in their own groups, they are separated. Women don't hold guns . . . but I know one who killed two people, because I taught her how to be a real, real, real home girl (November 19, 2016).

This section has not set out to be an essentialist appraisal of poor young men; rather, it uses empiricism to demonstrate how gang culture plays a role in gendering identities of the street. Particularly the gang persona occupies significant ontological ground in terms of local meanings of masculinities because of its hegemonic power, displayed in the public practices and capital of gang members. Arguably then, hegemonic masculine practice as a form of localism is at the heart of gang continuity. A notable finding is that this hegemonic power is derived from multiple sources. This allows Southside gangs to have influence through a range of masculine capitals even if they may be financially poorer than more organized criminal gangs in other contexts. For example, despite this relative poverty, a recent report stated

that 73% of gang members interviewed still felt the gang brought them significant "respect" (Arciaga Young 2019, 86). As one government official said, "[G]angs might not be well resourced, but they are an important social organism in the human ecology of Southside. That's why people join gangs. It's like a factory" (Bob, November 21, 2017).

Finally, reflecting on Beske's work, who said that rising violence in rural Belize has come to redefine the cultural order itself (2016, 63), gang transnationalism has come to redefine the cultural order on the streets, whose hegemonic shape underpins the continuity of violence in the city to this day.

Conclusions

By focusing on gangs in Belize, this article has framed gang transnationalism as a form of "transnational masculinity". Drawing on Connell and Messerschmidt(2005) and Messerschmidt's (2018) notions of localized hegemonic masculinity, models, or projects (the latter after Jewkes et al., 2015), empirical evidence has been put forward to argue that gang transnationalism has established localized hegemonic gang practices in Southside, most visibly in displays of violence and symbolic and material masculine capital, leading gangs to acquire and maintain prominence as aspirational sites of male identity formation, and leading to their self-perpetuation.

Much has been said about the social terrain into which gang transnationalism inserts itself. Clearly, historical exclusion on Belize City's Southside created vulnerabilities amongst the disenfranchised, poor, male, Creole population to the lure of transnational gang culture. It has been argued that gang transnationalism is a migrant form of gendered localism that requires a receptive terrain that reflects the intersections of race, class, and subordination found in the originating locale. The experience on Southside indicates that the transnational gangsta persona can become established rapidly—within a generation—in vulnerable terrains, precisely because it is a hegemonic masculine model that inflects the vulnerabilities of local men. This is a significant claim, but one that opens lines of enquiry for further, particularly comparative, research: Can other experiences of gang transnationalism be understood as a form of transnational masculinity?; Do destination terrains need to reflect the setting where gang transnationalism originates from? And would comparative analysis make it possible to predict where gang transnationalism may emerge in the future?

"Localizing" hegemonic masculinities is in itself a challenge. To what extent can men subordinated by race and class even represent a hegemonic ideal? In response, this article has attempted to tease out some nuances of gangland masculinities. Although gang members have not been cast as simple victims of "perilous masculinity" (after de la Tierra, 2016) it is vital to read the social terrain from which gangs emerge. Reading exclusion as gendered helps us understand how gang transnationalism embeds effectively. The vulnerability of local boys and young men was palpable during the fieldwork; for many, gang membership was a socially cohesive

sub-cultural guarantor of identity and dignity, a conduit for masculine power that offset the multiple subordinations wrought by legacies of exclusion. However, the image of the emasculated and imperiled Creole gang member striking back at the system as a form of protest, rebellious or compensatory masculinity, is only part of the picture. Whilst gang practices should be considered a subversive reaction to structural constraint, they rarely challenge the gender hierarchies of the street that subjugate women and non-hegemonic masculinities. In the Belizean case, the gangsta persona reinforced them, often with violence, reasserting the patriarchies of the street and multiplying the harm done to communities already structurally excluded.

We should be measured in our use of this analysis, however. Perceiving gang practices, displays, or performances as an expression of hegemonic masculinity may be an apposite way to unpack the violence often inherent to them, but it should not be used to essentialize the lives of individual gang members. Masculinities are multiple, relational, and setting-dependent; away from gang socialization spaces, these young men are likely to be loving sons, boyfriends, or fathers. In short, gang members are part victim, part perpetrator; both vulnerable men and violent hegemonic men.

If vulnerable young men respond to gangs, how can alternative masculinization opportunities be promoted in marginalized communities to prevent gang membership? These types of questions are rarely considered in gang-focused interventions, which are overwhelmingly masculinities-blind. Therefore, to conclude, it is worth reflecting upon the SYSP (UNDP and Government of Belize, 2013), a masculinities-focused pilot project designed by the author that targeted school drop-outs and other youths at high risk of joining gangs, such as those in conflict with the law. It was notable from interviews with the participants on this program that they valued the “men-talk” component as the only time they critically engaged with meanings of masculinity. Most came from fractured homes, and gang members were often their male role models on the streets. The mentoring delivered at a drop-in center on Southside encouraged them to find positive pathways to manhood and to reject the gang as a site of male success. This was further bolstered by weekly male “motivational speakers” who covered topics such as “Not choosing the path of a gangster”, “Losing a loved one as a result of gang rivalry,” “Sexual exploitation,” and “Changing the course of your life” (UNDP, 2014). The program evaluation showed that the masculinities focus was instrumental in reaching out to boys and young men who were tempted by the gang because it gave them tools to critically appraise the gang as a site of male success. During the project lifecycle from 2012 to 2014, 89 of the 106 participants ended up in work, a paid apprenticeship, or back into full-time education (SYSP Annual Report, 2014). A key lesson from this experience was that whilst masculinities matter, mentoring was only effective when twinned with tangible alternative pathways for youths back into education or gainful employment; in other words, visualized and viable alternative pathways to manhood prevented gang membership. The better we grasp the masculine dynamics of gang practices, the better positioned we will be as scholars and practitioners to reduce the harm done by gangs to already vulnerable communities, particularly homicidal

and sexual violences, and the pernicious impact of fear that lies just beneath the surface.

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3. Southside Youth Success Program; Belize National Youth Apprenticeship Program.
4. Ethical approval was secured from the Centre for Trust, Peace, and Social Relations at Coventry University.
5. Quotations from interviews have been written phonetically where the interviewees spoke with a pronounced Creole accent. These tended to be young people and gang members, whilst expert interviewees would typically "lighten their tongue" or "speak American" for the benefit of foreigners.

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