**Faith, Space and Selfhood in East London ‘Youth Gang’ Culture**

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**Abstract**

Be it the stake in conformity religious observance usually brings to an individual or concomitant fear of the wrath of God, ‘religion’ has been held to keep believers on the societal straight and narrow. In recent decades approaches to combating deviance originating in the US and Latin America have aimed at “setting gang members free” via the scriptures and practices of Pentecostalism. With its focus on the experiential dimension of faith, especially around worship, Pentecostalism has offered a path to redemption to various ‘gang associates’ punctuated by expressive, energetic and interactive church services. A number of schemes inspired by this denomination of Protestantism also utilise ‘reintegrative shaming’, a strategy characterised by the forging of bonds between ‘recovering’ gang members and a sympathetic church congregation. At a deeper level such interventions work on the subjectivity of young people – both gang members and prospective gang members – and re-inscribe the boundaries of public and private, and sacred and profane. The attempts at refashioning a young person’s sense of selfhood – also assisted by the sanctuary provided by certain spaces (both real and imagined) – underline the ‘salvific’ power of Pentecostalism. In what follows analysis focuses on the work of Pentecostal Christian charity, Teaching Against Gangs (TAG). The authors use the findings of ethnographic fieldwork to examine how TAG’s founder, Sheldon Thomas (ST), seeks to combat Serious Youth Violence (SYV). More specifically, we document ST’s efforts to connect with young people involved in SYV/gangs by challenging their understandings of selfhood and appealing to notions of space and divisions between spheres. The paper begins by briefly surveying the extant literature on religion and gang-related crime,[[1]](#footnote-1) before considering the methods employed in the research and the settings in which TAG interventions were staged. The strategies and realities of the interventions themselves are then detailed. A consideration of the utility of religious values and rituals in the work of TAG and its attempts to prevent SYV/gang violence follows.

Key words: Gangs, Intervention, Pentecostalism, Serious Youth Violence, Space

**From Shaming to Salvation: Religion, Rehabilitation and Gang Membership**

Programmes in the United States and Latin America rooted in various branches of Protestantism exist to address a clutch of ‘gang-related’ issues including drug- and alcohol-addiction (Brennerman 2011; Leon 1998; Sanchez-Walsh 2003; Wolseth 2010). These programmes aim to address criminal behaviours through a combination of religious practice, prescribed patterns of scripture-inspired interaction and techniques of self-monitoring. The 12-step model of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) – beginning with the admission of addiction and culminating with the assistance of fellow group members – directly informs the work of organisations such as *Criminal and Gang Members Anonymous*.[[2]](#footnote-2) The model is premised on the drawing out of latent religiosity in offenders as well as explicit negotiations of (hyper)masculinity (Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013: 4).[[3]](#footnote-3) According to their proponents, programmes incorporating the 12-steps have enjoyed considerable success (Toft 2000). However, such interventions have also been subject to criticism. Some have claimed that the model reinforces neoliberal policies at state and federal level (which champion ‘entrepreneurial values’ and ‘individual responsibility’) by forcing subjects to accept fault and accountability (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Others have argued that such methods disempower adherents by forcing them to follow a linear narrative of recovery from a regrettable past, to existential crisis, to clean future (Carr 2010; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013), thereby extending and reinforcing state power.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such interventions, however well-intentioned, raise many issues.

Aside from pointing to the basic contradiction between its rhetoric of “freedom” and its ascetic codes (O’Neill 2011; Pine 2008), commentators have noted Pentecostalism’s perpetuation of patriarchal ideals. In the majority of Pentecostal churches in the United States, leadership positions are reserved for men. One might therefore argue that the church’s appeals to recovering gang members are predicated on trading one male code of honour for another (Leon 1998; Sanchez-Walsh 2003). These young men, in the space of liminality, may be encouraged to forgo extreme acts of *machismo* (such as street violence and domestic abuse), but do so in exchange for the less exaggerated masculine dominance of the household – or, in other words, the privileges of so-called “soft patriarchy” (Wilcox 2004). Interestingly, some researchers have praised this adaptation of masculinity because of its facilitation of upward social mobility through the deflection of resources from the street to the domestic family unit (Brusco 1995). In the respective markets of masculine credibility there is thus space for various forms of mobility and collateral.

**The Sacred and the Profane**

Space and place, so integral to debates around gang (and wider youth) culture (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2012; Goldson 2011), are also entailed in practices of salvation. As detailed above, young people in Central America confessing to gang-related misdeeds through instances of “reintegrative shaming” are encouraged by pastors to weep in the presence of church attendees (Braithwaite 1989). The objective is to undermine the hypermasculine status of reluctant gang members through displays of vulnerability. The hoped for confession is meant to cultivate a new sense of trust among fellow believers who seek to replace the congregations of the gang setting (Brennerman 2011). The use of an alternative strategy, labelled “disintegrative shaming”, in mainstream institutions such as schools and prisons has, however, been criticised (Rios 2011). For some, this method apportions blame to the deviant individual, as opposed to stigmatizing his or her behaviour, and is therefore inimical to rituals of reacceptance and reintegration. As a result of these shortcomings, critics argue, deviant behaviour is likely to continue (Braithwaite 1989; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Hagan and McCarthy 1997).

Salvation via subjectivity is promoted elsewhere. For young people in La Paloma, Guatemala, imperilled by gang violence, a faith-based child sponsorship programme has as its aim the ‘subject of prevention: the individual imagined and acted upon by the imperative to prevent’ (O’Neill 2013: 205). The programme attempts to instil a set of values associated with Protestant self-mastery – neatness, order, reliability, gratitude and delayed gratification – to (ideally) produce ‘a subject through a series of confessional images and imperatives’ (ibid: 218). Self-cultivation wasn’t a one-way street, however. Helping sponsored children to escape poverty, drugs, abuse and gangs, donors based in North Carolina (who sponsor ‘at-risk’ Guatemalan young people to the tune of $35 a month) hoped that – with God’s help – they might be spared the meaningless materialism and consumerism which they believed characterise much of life in post-industrial America (ibid: 205).

The separation of public and private spheres is an important criterion in a number of interventions. In Honduras, Wolseth (2008: 96) notes how Pentecostalism’s ‘doctrine of separation from community life’ allows young *cristianos* to‘exclude themselves from violent retribution by appealing to their rights to the sanctuary of the church.’ The church ‘saves’ young people not only by taking them out of a life of everyday violence, but by providing them with a set of spatial metaphors which can be invoked in navigating their dangerous neighbourhoods. These metaphors are organised around concepts such as the social and the spiritual, safety and danger, and allow *cristianos* to uphold their religious convictions at a ‘respectful distance’ from gang-related activity. Their devotion can be signalled by their orderly (as opposed to subcultural) dress, their ability to recite scripture, and an enduring engagement with the local Pentecostal community. Indeed, it is only when the mask appears to slip, when a *cristiano* is suspected of behaving in ways inconsistent with scripture (consuming drugs or alcohol, dancing in public places, etc.) that such individuals risk becoming the target of gang violence (ibid.). Interestingly, this amounted to converts not only policing themselves but effectively being policed by gang members. Such a curious dynamic relied on a kind of vicarious religiosity on the part of gang members; in order for them to recognise departures from religious codes, these codes had to be understood (if only in a demotic sense).

Pentecostalism’s persistent focus on the individual has understandably led to claims that it chimes with, and possibly even vindicates, the neoliberal paradigms of governance and security which so many have blamed for widening inequality and deepening injustice. Whereas security regimes in neoliberal cities tend to promote qualities such as ‘choice’, ‘character’ and ‘self-discipline’ (O’Neill and Thomas 2011), their Pentecostal counterparts, as noted above, seek to convert individuals rather than tackle wider societal ills (Lancaster 1988). This is ironic given the reality that neoliberal policies – including the curtailment or elimination of social services, suppression of wages, and funding cuts in areas such as state education and health care – result not just in the suffering of individuals but in the atrophying of the ‘social body’ (O’Neill 2008). Structural conditions most notably evident in economic policies can see public spaces become unsafe and levels of civic participation (particularly among young people) drop accordingly. In fact, it is this retreat from public space which has arguably strengthened the appeal of ‘privatised’ Pentecostal fraternities as well as the ‘private’ street gangs that cause such consternation (Montenegro 2001; O’Neill 2011).

All of the interventions described above share an ontological dispensation which Weber (1993 [1920]) famously called ‘salvific’. So-called ‘salvific religions’ respond to the existence of evil by positing a future in which the saved will live amid utopian conditions. This outlook, Weber argued, was attractive to the poor, exploited and oppressed – more concretely these might be migrants, manual labourers and low-level merchants – because of the compensation such belief offers for the ills experienced by marginalised groups in the here and now. The spread of this religious ideology would, its proponents argue, see society transformed through the conversion of individuals rather than these people challenging existing structures of oppression and inequality (Wolseth 2008). Crucially, as O’Neill (2013: 210) puts it, one would witness ‘the reformation of subjectivity over the restoration of society’. Viewing the Pentecostal way of life as removed from wider society encourages this way of thinking. If this was in any way radical it was also quintessentially personal.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Settings and Method**

The research described in what follows took place between 2011 and 2013 in the east London Borough of Newham (LBN). In the contemporary Newham setting, SYV/gangs is one of the main concerns of those tasked with policing, community-relations and all manner of related public-spirited interventions (see Armstrong et al. 2016). Situated north of the River Thames, around five miles from the City of London, Newham is one of the poorest boroughs in the UK (ONS 2011). It is also the second most diverse in terms of the ethnicity of its residents. According to the results of 2011 Census, 29.0% of Newham’s estimated 307,000 population is White (16.7% White British, 0.7% White Irish, 0.2% Gypsy or Irish Traveller, 11.4% Other White), 4.6% of mixed race (1.3% White and Black Caribbean, 1.1% White and Black African, 0.9% White and Asian, 1.3% Other Mixed), 43.5% Asian (13.8% Indian, 12.21% Bangladeshi, 9.8% Pakistani, 1.3% Chinese, 6.5% Other Asian), 19.6% Black (12.3% African, 4.9% Caribbean, 2.4% Other Black), 1.1% Arab and 2.3% of other ethnic heritage. With the highest fertility rate in the country (LBN 2014), this incredibly diverse populace is set to grow rapidly in coming years. In terms of religion, the population of Newham is 40.0% Christian, 32.0% Muslim, 9.3% No religion, 8.8% Hindu, 2.1% Sikh, 0.8% Buddhist, 0.1% Jewish (ibid.), with the borough being home to some 35 mosques, 26 Anglican churches, 16 Baptist churches, 12 Catholic parishes and four synagogues. Within this incredibly diverse setting were an estimated 300 young men whose association and activities were of concern to police and the local authorities. Many of their behaviours were classed as ‘anti-social’; their most destructive behaviours had resulted in serious wounding and death (normally following knife attacks). Some had discharged guns in street disorder. These incidents occurred in other London boroughs and were identified by those in authority as Serious Youth Violence/Gang activity. This category of SYV/Gangs was synonymous with ‘black’ youth.

Many embroiled in SYV/gang activity arrived in London as child migrants. Years later they sought to ‘defend’ a neighbourhood they had no connection with beyond their lifespan. Violent encounters between the young men who populated the MPS database of SYV/gang ‘nominals’ had a rationale imputed to them by various outsiders. A glib argument proposed that these incidents were about ‘postcodes’ i.e. antagonism rooted in place of residence and convenient notions of boundary defence and transgression synonymous with the sorting codes of the Royal Mail. In truth, no one spoken with in the research could define where such boundaries began and ended. Instead causation has to be sought in variously: youthful neighbourhood associations, male peer group loyalties, familial networks, the defence of street-level drug markets, and the propensity of teenage boys to insult their equivalents in words and lyrics propagated by social media (see below). In seeking causation amid this tangle of variables, one size did not fit all and while ‘space’ was integral to many contestations it did not underpin them all. The parents of such protagonists did not attach the same significance to these places and deem them in need of ‘defence’ from outsiders. As a result, there was little argument for any sense of cultural or generational transmission through parents; the issue cried out for enquiry from the bottom up.

An ethnographic approach was adopted, with observation, participant observation and in-depth interviews used in combination (O’Reilly 2011; Venkatesh 2008). In the instances that follow avenues of access were secured through TAG. Integral to the access obtained by researchers was the figure of ST. Aged 50 at the time of the research, ST lived in the borough with his wife Michelle. Both of Caribbean parentage, they were not born and raised in Newham but had lived in the area for a decade and were well-known to many Newham residents. Accompanying TAG personnel provided the researchers with a passport to areas and encounters not easily accessible to the multiple agencies which set out to address the issue. As white males with a generation separating their ages, both authors, while relatively well-versed in inner-city London life as a result of part-time employment as youth workers and sports coaches, recognised their differences with those under study. By contrast, TAG’s workers were of either West African or Caribbean parentage, while the young people they reached out to were almost exclusively drawn from black minority ethnic backgrounds.

Methods and meanings were crucial in interpretation. While there are a number of definitions of ‘ethnography’, there is broad consensus that the method requires the researcher to understand and articulate the meanings through which social agents encounter the world (Atkinson *et* *al.* 2002). Ethnography is particularly relevant as a methodology to facilitate an understanding of marginalised communities (Kearns & Smith 1994). Others exploring the complex social issues associated with crime have recognised the method’s potential to give a voice to society’s most peripheral groups (Robinson 2002; Emirbayer & Williams 2005; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2007). The ethnographic method is thus both a process and a product (Milgate 2007). Making sense of that witnessed is thus not a simple task. In what follows the predominant voice is that of ST, who in 2012–13 was funded for one year by Newham Council to implement policies of ‘Intervention and Diversion’ (supplementing the Enforcement strategies of the Metropolitan Police Service’s Gangs and Firearms Unit) among active, suspected and potential SYV/gang ‘nominals’. These individuals were flagged up by Newham police on its SYV/gangs database which processed intelligence from Youth Offending Teams. The interventions and diversions designed by TAG had grown out of years of attempts to offer solace and advice to those embroiled in SYV/gang activity. The policies implemented were fluid, pragmatic and relied on a powerful narrative.

**Agency and Structure**

Beginning life in 2007, the ‘Gangsline’, a 24-hour helpline for youth ‘gang’ members or those fearful about the involvement of friends or family members in youth gang-related activity, metamorphosed two years later into Teaching Against Gangs (TAG). TAG sought to reach youths involved in a life of drugs, guns and knife crime through messages of hope derived from the Gospels and channelled through the messages of Pentecostal Christianity.[[6]](#footnote-6) This faith was most evident in ST’s phone and face-to-face conversations which were smattered with words such as ‘bred’ (short for brethren) and ‘bless’ (the sign-off: God bless). The organisation thus grew from an information/advice service – primarily a phone-line which also produced leaflets distributed in fast-food outlets and wherever its outreach workers could find groups of young people ‘hanging out’ – to an intervention-based organisation that was both reactive (with a specialist Outreach Response Team) and proactive in utilising its various expertise.

From its inception, TAG sought to address the root causes of SYV/gang membership, a task which ST believed required an understanding of psychosocial issues including family breakdown, anger problems, the consequences of rejection, emotional hurt, unresolved conflict, a (missing) sense of belonging, the dangers of the disillusioned and the despair of struggling parents. In founding Gangsline/TAG, ST was seeking to offer credible support through programmes and workshops that focused on developing the submerged and unrealised talents of young people. The interventions were structured according to curricula and programmes based in conflict resolution and counselling delivered over a 12-week period. All aimed to equip individuals with the necessary tools to bring about responses to variously: emotional, physical, financial and spiritual factors which – ideally – would allow an individual to break free from distorted thinking and destructive life-cycles.

The TAG mission was underpinned by a faith-based framework that focused on notions of personal responsibility, morality, humanity, positive thinking, cognitive behaviour and self-esteem. Its training programmes did not follow a set format and its curriculum was delivered in diverse settings to individuals or groups. Sessions were adapted in order to meet the needs of young men – and women – at times too frightened or lacking in confidence to leave their known and ‘safe’ environment. ST led the sessions and utilised his major strengths of articulacy and charisma. It was speeches delivered by ST at conferences addressing youth offending in the capital had seen him approached and contracted by both local government officials and Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) personnel over the years 2008–2011 to conduct various forms of interventionist work with young offenders. The organisation *was* essentially ST and his wife, Michelle. The other street-workers were hourly-paid staff. The personnel that at times accompanied ST or worked in pairs on designated home visits was drawn from various sources. Some had contacted TAG seeking employment. Some were former charges of TAG who, having changed their ways, wanted to help others. There was no ‘ideal type’ of TAG worker. Whatever defined a ‘gang’ in contemporary London, the reality of death and ‘gang-related’ activity was an issue that aroused concern at the highest level of both police and political governance. It was an issue that provoked some innovative thinking in police circles. Realising that this was a problem that required more than policing to address, some officers tasked with a SYV/gang remit were humble enough to seek outside assistance and information on a culture and phenomenon that many admitted to us they knew little about.

**‘The Road’ to Nowhere**

The admission from police and indeed politicians that such an issue required specialist intervention received an added impetus following rioting across the country in the summer of 2011.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to the Mayor of London,[[8]](#footnote-8) 250 youth gangs – together comprising 4,800 individuals – were active in the capital in 2012.[[9]](#footnote-9) The behaviours and tactics used by those perpetrating such violence in ‘gang’ collectives and the personnel tasked with preventing their offending behaviours differed from borough to borough.[[10]](#footnote-10) The governance of ‘gang’ crime was thus crucial but one deserving of far greater analysis than is possible here (for an extended analysis see Hobbs [1997], Hallsworth and Brotherton [2011] and Armstrong et al. [2016]). For now, suffice it to say that according to MPS intelligence in 2010 the London Borough of Newham contained a dozen known ‘youth gangs’, five of which were ‘violently active’. According to the same source, in 2011 Newham was home to three individual ‘gang nominals’ – those suspected by police of gang involvement – who were among the top ten in London in terms of violent potential. In 2012 the same source identified one of the borough’s gangs as among the most notorious in the whole of the capital. For Newham MPS, the policing objective for the year 2012–13 was to target such groups that gathered within its boundaries using the triology of Enforcement, Diversion and Intervention.

The target demographic of both the MPS and TAG was the young men who, in the colloquial sense, were ‘On the Road’ (i.e. involved in both the entrepreneurial activities of gang life and the concomitant violence such enterprises demanded). Such collectives operated within an underground male-dominated and drug-related economy pervaded by notions of ‘respect’, ‘trespass’ and ‘business’ enforceable by both threatened and actual violence (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). The ‘Road Man’ varied in age from mid-teens to mid-20s. Those categorised by both gangs and police as the Road Man ‘Elders’ were generally at the upper end of the age spectrum and were assumed to be involved in more consequential and lucrative criminal enterprises than the ‘Youngers’. The former were also presumed capable of more grievous forms of violence. Jail time and the propensity to inflict serious wounding on perceived enemies typify life On the Road. The consequences of this behaviour to both perpetrators and victims had seen people like ST make it their life’s work to offer an alternative way of living.

**Spheres of Influence: Space and Rehabilitation in TAG**

TAG’s approach to prevention and rehabilitation did not posit any radical break between Pentecostal Christianity and wider community life. Though ST often staged his discussions and workshops in a hired room sited in a Methodist church complex in Newham, this was more a matter of convenience (and price) than religiosity. On other occasions he would deliver impromptu sessions in the homes of existing or potential gang members. His proselytising was likewise free of any sharp distinction between sacred and profane. If anything he charted an intermediate course between these spheres, knowing that identification with one or the other was less important than whether a young person decided to live within or beyond the bounds of legality. This strategy did, however, hinge on one of Pentecostalism’s central selling-points: the integration of ‘fragments of believers’ racial, gender, and class identities into a coherent alternative ethics’ (Wolseth 2008: 100). Perhaps the best way to explain this is through the presentation of ethnographic observations.

At the Methodist church at 4.30pm on a wet Thursday afternoon in February 2012, six young black men sit around a table in the meeting room of the church complex with ST. They hail from three different areas of the borough and represent three named ‘gangs’; they have all participated in the selling of drugs on the street and in altercations with one another’s peer groups wherein weapons were used. Two have stabbed rivals; two have suffered stab wounds in similar circumstances. The meeting place carries no territorial threat or controversy. To help matters ST meets all concerned on streets in the vicinity and walks with them to the venue. Once in the room they are soon at ease with ST who has spoken with them personally over the previous six months during street-based ‘outreach’ work which sees him drive around various neighbourhoods and alight to talk with groups of teenage boys and young adult men stationed on street corners. Obtaining the mobile phone numbers of various key players he was able in the weeks ahead to get those now gathered to attend the meeting at the appointed time and place. Now they have arrived, ST begins by asking all present for a basic level of respect, which requires them to turn their mobile phones to silent and avoid answering any calls for the duration of the meeting. Then, thanking them for attending, ST launches into a narrative as to his ‘*ting*’ (purpose).

The young men, listening to the narrative of ST, quickly get a sense of what is and isn’t authentic:

In the last three years there’s been 40 youth murders in London with one common characteristic: the victims and perpetrators are all black, all of an age range of 15 to 20. You gotta ask: why is that? And who killed them? You might know the answer – some of youse have been close to death. The victims are the same profile as the perpetrators … You lot can’t even blame racists for the violence on youse and the deaths. Those of us on the streets in the 70’s, we had to put up with racism from white police and NF (National Front)[[11]](#footnote-11) gangs – it wasn’t black-on-black then. Mine was a time with proper gangsters – you’re not. [This assertion elicits a nervous chuckle from the five]. Let’s have the bare truth: None of you are big time gangsters out there … Why? Gangsters don’t make YouTube videos.[[12]](#footnote-12) YouTube videos are for black kids. Now that’s real talk for you isn’t it? (All five nod and stifle smirks). Let me tell you this: in my day there was no guns, no 16-year-old had a gun. You were too irresponsible to angle one – you still are. If there was a gun, it was an M16. My ‘land’ (territory) was Peckham and Brixton (South London).

Of the eight now in the room (two had arrived late) only two had a job providing regular and decent income. The rest were scraping an income through the street-level selling of drugs – small weights of marijuana and ‘wraps’ of crack cocaine. One moment of humour was provided when ST asked all present whether they were ‘On the Road’. One latecomer to the gathering, not fully understanding the thrust of the question, explained by way of response that he was actually ‘On the Rail’; he worked full-time for a rail transport franchise! He combined the 35-hour per week position with a leisure-time associated with the Beckton Boys.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Keen to impress upon them the futility of their activity, ST explains what he sees as their existence, which is essentially disorganised ‘organised’ violence relating to a variety of slights (real or perceived) enacted without any established or accepted hierarchies or codes of behaviour. Furthermore, he explains that he is aware of recent intra-Newham youth gang enmities exacerbated by the production of short (five-minute) rap videos posted on the website, YouTube, in which members of rival gangs were mocked, derided and threatened. In the ethos of ‘respect’ that they shared, such insults had to be acted upon. Those considered both perpetrators and indeed silent sympathisers (by virtue of their being part of the video) had been attacked and in some instances wounded by stabbing. The business model these young men pursued, the monies earned from Road Life, and the messages sent and violence occasioned by these various activities did not impress the speaker, who added:

You’re involved in random shooting and stabbing, and that’s not ‘gangster’. You’ve got no-one to answer to and you’re just looking to go to jail. You’ve got no order or structure, you do what you want to do. Things were different when I was 14 – I was approached by the (names a South London Crime syndicate). Among other things, they did diamonds. They said I could work for them and – hear me out – they said to me, “you bring ‘heat’ (i.e. trouble with other gangs and/or police attention), we will kill you.” … The big white gangs and big men like (names a big white player in drugs distribution in the borough). The Feds (police) can’t touch him so they go after you lot. His income is worth more than all of us in this room put together. If he wanted to he could ‘drop’ £100k to a police friend, some of them are on £35k so his money is good for them. He’s virtually untouchable – and you can’t match him. You’ve got to understand this: real gangsters don’t feud over a £5 debt, and they don’t live in Newham. What you’re doing is feeding The Man (those in authority intent on keeping others in a subordinate position) by carrying little bags (metaphorical and actual in the case of cannabis and crack cocaine, and then you make YouTube chat and think you’re ‘all that’ (hard and affluent).

The room falls silent. What the young men hear is the truth and comes from a man who is physically a match for any of them. Lightening the mood somewhat, ST then asks: “So; can we come together?” The immediate response is from Asa, a member of the ‘Beckton Boys’, and consists of two short statements which explain the dilemma that prompted today’s meeting. “Too stubborn. Too much pride.” Everybody present, by way of a wry smile, seems to know what such words mean. Breaking the next silence, ST outlines some new horizons. Aware of Asa’s skills in penning lyrics for YouTube rapping clips, ST outlines a business model whereby Asa’s undoubted ability as a ‘lyricist’ could be promoted by those in rival areas of the borough who had other skills and the collective product transported by those from yet another area – in a sense, a four-way business model where everybody involved wins i.e. makes money from the enterprise.

Following this creative interlude, ST launched into a discussion of income and the potential for custodial sentences. Going round the table ST asks everyone present if they are currently making money. They all laugh at the question: they know they are not and only two admit to making a few hundred pounds over the last few months through drug dealing, which elicits from ST the comment – “if they could see you, the white man would just be saying ‘Jiggaboos...cheap change. They’re (black youths) making no money and meanwhile shooting each other, and I’m sat on my seven-million-pound boat.’” The hour’s workload for such income was then discussed. The street corner drug market required some 12 hours on duty which entailed making oneself available until the early hours. The business also called for constant vigilance; rival dealers would ‘rob’ their adversaries of drug monies at knife- or gunpoint well aware that no complaint to police would ensue. The ideal response to such an affront was violence, but not all possessed the resources, capability or desire needed for summary retribution. The young men were thus told by ST that they were all working for maybe half the national minimum wage and suffered taxation rates on their income through drug sales – at times – as high of 100 %. If this was a business model, it had no future.

While on the topic of income, ST asks all rhetorically: “How will you make money in the future? Do you fancy being broke at 23? There’s so much ‘beef’ (i.e. potentially violent hostility) around here you can’t even earn legally. To go four miles (from Beckton) to Stratford (the transport and commercial hub of Newham borough) you have to take a (mini) cab there and a cab back (as opposed to public transport) ‘cos you can’t take the tube” (an admission that entering areas ‘belonging’ to enemies necessitated cab rides rather than journeys by public transport at a tenth of the price). All recognise this dilemma and laugh at the ludicrousness of the situation which is neatly summarised by ST: “You’re stopping the flow of money and you can’t even move in your own neighbourhood.” At this point Danny, who had recently completed a three-year custodial sentence for discharging a shotgun in the direction of a drug-market rival, interjects, explaining: “This is so real … I recently promoted a ‘rave’ in Stratford and I lost money. Why? Because the club security wanted extra men as they’d heard some of the others (youngsters from areas ‘other’ than Stratford) were going to turn up and fight which means many people, fearing the beef, didn’t turn up. If there’d been no beef I would have made money and I would have invested in other areas. All could have eaten nice (made some income).”

If the devil makes work for idle hands then God-inspired employment might offer an antidote to such a path. Informing those sat around him of the futility of their ways is one thing, but ST has to offer an alternative existence which for all bar one around the table requires gainful employment. He thus informs them of a business model which requires three things of them: a commitment to accept week-by-week help; that they join the TAG programme, and that they ‘work with what you’ve got’. The latter requires those in school to study, those out of school to consider business opportunities and from all regardless of their age and status: “to put the community above self, get out of the ghetto mentality, forget the *bling* (jewellery and expensive branded accoutrements), and stay out of the game”.

A wider context is provided by ST: “This may sound superficial, but in truth why I’m here is as much about stopping innocent people getting killed as about youse.” This leads to him probing what they consider to be future ambitions. The issue of respect was raised with a new dimension offered. ST explained: “What you call ‘respect’ is actually not about fighting … the respect a man gets in life … is based in how you can help people. You’ve got to put down noise (fracas between members of rival groups) and guns and get off the road. In a few years you’ll be lucky to have wives and kids (one individual in the room has a child – he is aged 17). Who’s gonna’ pay for your kids food and school? Are you going to settle down with a girl with that life? Are you gonna’ be 29-years-old sticking up people (robbing people at knife- or gunpoint), thinking you’re bad? (All nod approvingly.) And that’s why I’m here; squashing the beef” (reducing the sources of conflict). The enormity of the task was brought home as Asa explains that the problem is their Woodgrange equivalents.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to Asa, who was a victim of a recent beating at the hands of youths from the Woodgrange district, they must strike up the first apology to end matters: “They rushed (collectively attacked) me first – they have to say sorry.” The ensuing silence is again broken by ST, who asks, looking around the room: “How do we stop all this?” One youth ventures the following argument, stating: “If we (Beckton) come off, the rest have to do the same. Trust is needed. We need to know we’re all on the same thing”. Another youth, hitherto silent, chips in: “There’s six groups (named ‘gang’ entities) on Newham – so which crew do we start with? I agree, I don’t want my kids going down this road, and I don’t want my daughter taking a bullet from a stray shot.”

The youngsters around him are implored to divert their resources into family life. Their current endeavours, he explains, were destined to flounder or fail; legitimate revenue streams would be more lucrative. They already possessed the means to be successful. What was required was a reappraisal of methods and priorities. To ‘put the community above self’ was a not only virtuous commitment but held out the prospect of becoming someone in the wider community. Conscientiousness would secure such an elevated status and, consequently, material betterment. This was salvation in the here and now.

Before the group depart, ST exhorts them to come again, to bring their friends, but warns that if anyone in the interim ‘beefs’ (continues gang-based vendettas) they are not to come back. The words seem to register and the departing Asa states aloud: “I’m squashing the beef” (i.e. ending hostilities). A couple of others nod slowly in approval but say nothing. All present are asked to clasp their hands together in prayer and close their eyes while ST asks for God’s blessing on all in the room and all the things they hold sacred. His closing word of ‘Amen’ is repeated by all eight of his listeners. These young men then go their separate ways.

**Compelling Subjects: Selfhood and Rehabilitation in TAG**

In this section we seek to build a picture of TAG’s subject of intervention; that is, to paraphrase O’Neill (2013), the individual imagined and acted upon by the imperative to intervene. In his study of US-based programme aimed at preventing young people in La Paloma, Guatemala, from joining gangs, O’Neill found that the forging of selfhood was a two-way street: “This “subject of prevention” includes at-risk youths … but also (and increasingly so) evangelical Christians who self-consciously craft their subjectivities through their participation in gang prevention – as ministers, missionaries, and mentors” (2013: 205).

This alternative way of life was consonant with an alternative ethics. Unlike other Pentecostal-inspired interventions, a reformed life did not mean retreat into a ‘separate’ religious community. The meaning derived from involvement with Pentecostalism could be carried over into life amid the pre-existing wider community. This offered the prospect of comfort, safety and, potentially, affluence. Indeed, two of ST’s most compelling appeals centred on the possibility of making money through legal channels, and parlaying masculine capital amassed in gang life within the sphere of the wider community. In leaving behind the ‘ghetto mentality’, young men could transpose rather than relinquish certain strains of their masculinity.

In observing the work of TAG it became clear that here, too, the business of self-cultivation was reciprocal. ST’s speeches indicated that, for him, the work of intervention represented an ongoing process of redemption. Even though his days as an enforcer were behind him, ST’s overtures to young people relied heavily on his past exploits, many of which involved violence and intimidation. Indeed, the respect that these young people had for him was not solely bound up with his role as rehabilitator; it was contingent on his violent past – a potential which would never again be realised. Such a process required a biography and a confession. As ST explained to all present:

You mess up your life based on a lie. I and others in this room have come through the pain barrier. I’ve been ‘played’, and I reckon I’ve been a dickhead … My game was extortion. I had a big reputation and I was a Rasta (sporting dread-locked hair). I didn’t look normal and I could walk around alone in any borough South and East (London). I could and did pull up any man without a gun. Was I a good fighter? No, but if I got ‘marked-up’ (injured at the hands of a rival gang) cars would have ridden up and shot down the street. I took money (robbed with the threat of violence). I could approach a Bred’ (friend) and if he was rude, and I had to ask again, he got a gun put in his face. I got out because of a ‘West’ (West London versus South London) issue – Notting Hill and Shepherd’s Bush booked a rave on Brixton. This was rude, they didn’t ask our permission. Me and others were asked to ride up in a car. As we did, I got an unease. I said ‘Stop the car, something’s not right’. In the boot of the car were five guns. I ducked out. I never killed anybody. In those days, you didn’t kill your own: it wasn’t black-on-black. I got called everything (in patois he recites the insults he received from his associates). The next day I read about 20 people being shot that night in the venue.

Knowledge was crucial in acquiring respect from listeners. The stories of ST were salutary not only in underlining his masculine capital, but in positioning his young charges as subjects of intervention. Alongside this, changes in the complexion and dynamics of SYV in London were useful in fashioning subjectivities along the lines of ‘race’, competence, experience and masculinity. ST situated the plight of his audience in relation to the wider context of organised crime and his own experiences as a ‘serious’ gangster. This device was used to sketch the lineaments of both his own and his recruits’ sense of selfhood. For the latter, these concerned the somewhat hapless attempts to navigate the racial politics of organised crime. For the former, they retraced an ongoing road to redemption. The sermons of ST also touched upon a latent religiosity and the role of parenting.

**In the Name of the Father**

For many of those TAG reached out to, rehabilitation involved a return to, rather than discovery of, the religious life. Most young men ST dealt with had attended church regularly as youngsters, so involving themselves in religious life represented a gathering up of slackened spiritual reins, as opposed to being something wholly new. Entering the Methodist Church’s function room, ST explained how many of the teenage boys TAG worked with in this area knew the location well: “They once came here as little kids on Sunday mornings, dragged by their Mums.” Their refusal to attend church as teenagers wasn’t prompted by another belief system but by the assertion that church attendance was for the conformists among their peers. Those who dressed smart on Sundays and sang in praise of the Lord in the company of parents – many of them fathers.

The notion of ‘manhood’ was integral to the work of TAG as it was to the ambitions of those it challenged. After the session (in conversation with the researcher) ST elaborated on the circumstances that created aspiring young gang members:

Forget the ‘Big Man’ gangster stuff around here, because once you have a gun, you are your own man and no one gives you orders. Guns come from all over down this end: Bosnians, Lithuanians, white criminal networks. Black guys don’t have structures like them. Neither do they have the markets for the straps (guns) so they have to buy second-hand. A 9mm cost £300, a Glock £450, a MAC 10 £800, an Eagle Eye £600. The ammo (ammunition) comes with the guns. The thing is, there’s no target practice or training ... that’s the reason why these black youths can’t really shoot straight; they buy a piece (gun), and use it the next day but can’t control it and that’s how innocents get killed or maimed. These black kids need telling they are not ‘gangsters’, because unlike their white counterparts, they don’t make money. White gangs don’t live with their Mums. White gangsters don’t live in blocks with piss-filled lifts and their children don’t go to no-hope comprehensive schools …

The causation for the situation so many young black men found themselves in was multifaceted. Having once lived the life and for years immersed in attempts to intervene and change mind-sets, ST was forthright in explaining what he saw as familial deficiencies which proved consequential.

I would put family breakdown as a major cause. It’s not parenting *per se*, some of their homes are nice and some have a good family network, but it’s too female-centred for many of these boys. There’s a common denominator in many of these boys’ lives, and that is the absence of a father. A good father would make all the difference and go a long way to stopping all this. As it is, some of them are in their mid-teens and end arguments about their behaviour with their Mums by punching them … Some look to religion as well. Danny has recently come out of prison. He ‘got’ Islam when inside. But for many of them it’s a fashion because a true Muslim wouldn’t tattoo their bodies or fornicate or make rap music or provoke violence…

Taking account of the subjectivities evident at TAG, it is clear that the notions of selfhood constructed on behalf of rehabilitator and rehabilitated were done so in relation to one another. Teenagers involved in SYV were usually fatherless, deluded, naïve, inexperienced in so many ways, and struggled to reconnect with the faith they last encountered as children. Rather than challenge the societal structures which saw young black males born and raised in marginal areas of city, so often within female-headed households, TAG was abidingly Pentecostal in its attempts to rehabilitate young people through faith, one individual at a time. Overseeing their rehabilitation was ST, whose continuing path to redemption was contingent on saving these youngsters. Their fecklessness, haplessness and hopelessness shaped not just ST’s approach to rehabilitation but, one might argue, his own sense of self.

TAG’s championing of entrepreneurship is consistent with the teachings of Pentecostalism. The road to salvation is reminiscent of debates surrounding the Pentecostal movement. In relinquishing gang activity by religious conversion Pentecostalism offers young men the chance to trade the hypermasculinity SYV/gangs for the ‘soft patriarchy’ of heterosexual domesticity. This was soft patriarchy with hard edges, however. Indeed, sociologist of religion Bernice Martin contends that the movement encourages a radically individualised self-consciousness which acts as a fitting primer for the realities of neoliberal capitalism. For Pentecostalism, she argues, “business is the business of selfhood” (1998: 129).

**The Here and Now**

In drawing to a close we should connect the issues of space and subjectivity to the broader themes discussed earlier. The first of these relates to the kind of salvation held out by TAG and, more generally, the appeal of Pentecostalism. The *motif* of salvation was certainly evident in the work of TAG but tailored to local conditions and mind-sets. The imminent and the immediate reality took precedence over contemplation; as such ST used words rather than religious texts, realising that in interventions of this nature the quoting of psalms and parables was a waste of time. TAG meetings thus avoided engagement with religious scripture, even if young men admitted their past misdeeds through forms of quasi-religious confession. No mention was ever made of an afterlife.

Salvation therefore largely consisted of being saved by TAG from premature death as a result of SYV/gangs. However, within this closer time horizon, worldly redemption also promised material gain. A set of business opportunities could be pursued which were not only legal but broadly consistent with Pentecostal values. By making the most of the skills they possessed – some of which were currently being used to express and embroider gang rivalries – ST sought to harness elements of young people’s racial, gender, and class identities to a set of coherent, alternative ethical principles. As underlined throughout the paper, however, adhering to this ethic was a task for the individual. Rather than setting up redemption as an induction into the sacred from the realms of the profane, a pair of more worldly proxies had to be stressed. Swapping ‘The Road’ along with its dubious and elusive trappings for the ‘community’ promised not just a more meaningful but most likely a more lucrative existence.

In constantly stressing the racial politics of both organised crime and wider society, ST set up an opposition between structure and agency and vowed that redemption would come via the latter. Tapping into the vein of a shared history of oppression along racial lines, he emphasised the futility of seeking an income within criminal-entrepreneurial structures ultimately dominated by white gangsters. The ‘white man’ – characterised as ‘The Man’ – occupied a superior position within the hierarchies of both acquisitive enterprises and organised crime. The same man raked in the profits from both contexts while remaining aloof from observable day-to-day criminal activities. Furthermore, whereas he might curry favour with the police through bribery, some police would disproportionately target the ethnic-minority gangs operating at neighbourhood level.[[15]](#footnote-15) Those TAG sat and walked amongst were the low-hanging fruit that were picked for crime statistics. In terms of selfhood, whereas the ‘subject of intervention’ was naïve, immature and incompetent, the ‘subject of redemption’ was realistic, shrewd and committed to family and community. These newly-forged qualities would see him pursue legal, sustainable opportunities and cultivate deep and enduring relationships.

**Conclusion: A Place on Earth**

The efficacy of the work of TAG – and ultimately, the words of ST – was, like all interventions promoted in the criminal justice system, difficult to prove. Those funding TAG were forever seeking to quantify the organisation’s interventions. They wanted ‘results’, ideally manifested in a reduction in the number of SYV-related crimes recorded in the borough. This constituted value for money in a system that sought to quantify and monetize everything and was unable (or unwilling) to comprehend and indeed tolerate notions of spirituality and the slow progress that might typify personal redemption. The change that the police and politicians desired from these young men therefore also required alternatives to scripture for the recalcitrant; enforcement (i.e. the application of criminal charges in the pursuit of convictions and in many cases custodial sentences) was therefore another policing option. With the various structures of crime and security ranged against them, going legit and relinquishing the ‘ghetto mentality’ made business as well as spiritual sense. In this powerless position, the paradox was that retreating into a community of like-minded individuals represented the best way forward and, more concretely, the most likely prospect of material improvement.

As with all religious faiths, that sought and that lived were not always consistent. Indeed, here faith tended to be specified rather than actualised. One year after the aforementioned meeting Danny received a six-year jail sentence for sexual assault, possession of an offensive weapon and attempting to prevent the course of justice. Asa, however, left ‘The Road’ and obtained legitimate employment in a government-funded training programme. There remained much work to do in this milieu, as at the time of writing levels of serious youth violence in the UK were at their highest since the ‘riots’ of 2011 (Hamilton 2016). The protagonists of SYV/gangs were thereby spoken to in various tongues by parents, peers, police and the proselytisers of TAG. However, the gift of the discerning spirit was not always theirs; many needed a guiding light and in ST and TAG they found an inspiring and caring intermediary as well as someone they could admire and enjoy talking with. Ideally having listened and learned the young men would in true Pentecostal style be ‘running the aisles’ and no longer deluding themselves that they ran the streets of East London.

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1. The constant – and unresolved – issue in all such multi-agency approaches to the issue of SYV/gangs was agreeing on what constituted a ‘gang’. There were academic and police attempts at definition but none that were universally accepted nationally or specifically in the Newham context (see Hobbs 1997, Esbenson 2001 and Armstrong et al. 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Criminals & Gang Members Anonymous* was founded in 1997 by Richard Mejico, a one-time gang member and prisoner of Mule Creek prison in Ione, California. Sentenced to death for murder, while on death row Mejico was visited by a nun who gave him a copy of the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. In examining the book’s teachings he realised that many of these could be applied to criminal gangs. The organisation’s mission is to assist gang members in overcoming addiction to the criminal activities typically associated with gang life. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though largely considered to be couched in the terms of Protestant Christianity, the exact religious orientation of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) strategies seems to be context-dependent (Rudy and Greil 1989). In his study of young alcohol-dependent men in Mexico City, Brandes (2002) noted how the core values of Mexican Catholicism – guilt, confession and salvation – figured frequently in AA programmes’ narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These criticisms draw on wider debates about structure and agency and whether the former – patterned and/or institutionalised arrangements/assemblages which delimit human action – or the latter – the ability of individuals to act independently – has primacy in shaping human behaviour (Giddens 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indeed, a contrast can be drawn between the apolitical stance of this radical break and the perceived activism identified with Catholic liberation theology (and figures such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Oscar Romero) along with its political gloss on social injustice in settings such as the USA and Latin America (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995; Wolseth 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A similarly committed Christian, black British Michelle Thomas was integral to the TAG enterprise. Her tasks included speaking with female victims of SYV/gangs and contacting the mothers of the young men who constituted TAG’s client base. Michelle came from a highly respectable Christian family and had no claims to a previous criminal life. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The ‘riots’ took place between 6th and 11th August 2011 and were triggered by the death of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old black man shot dead by police in Tottenham, North London. Beginning in Tottenham, disorder spread to other parts of London and eventually to other town and cities (including Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham). These disturbances resulted in five deaths and property damage estimated to be in excess of £200 million. Though Prime Minister David Cameron blamed ‘gangs’ for orchestrating the disorder, his claims were subsequently challenged by the findings of a high-profile academic study (Lewis et al. 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Mayor of London during the period of research was the Conservative Party’s Boris Johnson. Together with the 25 elected members of the London Assembly, the Mayor was responsible for the strategic governance of the 32 boroughs that constitute Greater London. Under pressure to tackle ‘gang violence’ in aftermath of the 2011 ‘riots’, Johnson’s attempts to do so culminated in Operation Shield, a scheme modelled on policies pioneered in the USA and centring on community mobilisation and harsh punishments for recalcitrant gang members. The Operation ran aground in 2015 when it was rejected by local authorities in Lambeth and Haringey (two of the three councils tasked with trialling it) on the basis that it risked worsening police-community relations (Gayle 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In 2007 youth gangs became the focus of a Home Office specialist subgroup, the *Tackling Gangs Action Programme*, chaired by the Home Secretary and overseen by the *Task Force on Gangs and Guns*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These personnel also face fundamental issues relating to the definition of gangs and consequently gang membership and gang crime (Esbenson et al. 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Founded in 1967, the National Front (NF) is a far-right, ‘whites-only’ British political party which opposes non-white immigration and endorses a programme of repatriation. Its support reached a high point in the 1970s – it fielded 303 candidates at the 1979 general election (none were elected) – but since then its popularity has waned. In the 2010 general election the NF fielded just 17 candidates. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The young men known collectively in police circles as the Beckton Boys were – unsurprisingly – all drawn from the Beckton district of Newham. This neighbourhood collective had (somehow) been accorded the status of a ‘gang’. The leading lights in a recent tit-for-tat exchange of violence with counterparts from the Woodgrange district a few miles away shared an enthusiasm for football. The one detail that brought them together in common enterprise was attempting to win weekly football matches. Out of this endeavour they would be found sharing time and space together on the streets of their neighbourhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Taking their name from a district of Newham, in 2012 the 25 young men who gathered under the banner of ‘Woodgrange’ attained London-wide notoriety via a YouTube video titled ‘Who’s That Click’. The five-minute clip showed the gang rapping and subtly insulting neighbouring groups. The video attracted more than 250,000 views. It was eventually taken down from the website following an appeal to YouTube by Newham police in conjunction with Newham Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In some ways this interracial dynamic has parallels with the early twentieth-century beginnings of the Pentecostal movement. The man credited with organising the first institutionalised practice of Pentecostalism, William Seymour, the son of former slaves, learned the doctrine that glossolalia (or speaking in tongues) was evidence of a Christian being infused with the Holy Spirit from white preacher Charles Parnham. Seymour was given permission to listen to Parnham’s lectures, but only through an open door while sat in the corridor of a Bible School in Houston, Texas. Though Parnham was initially supportive of Seymour’s attempts to spread the word of Pentecostalism, as a sympathiser of the Ku Klux Klan he disapproved of the co-presence of whites and blacks at religious gatherings, and the two became dissociated, forming the (black) Church of God in Christ and the (white) Assemblies of God, respectively (Espinosa 2014). One might therefore identify a religious precedent for the racial division of labour in the drug-distribution market so lamented by Thomas. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)