

## *I Show Her My Feelings: Young Black Men and the Doing of Love in a South African Township*

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### ABSTRACT

Love in the lives of young black men in South Africa has received particularly limited attention in literature. Although there has been a steady increase in love scholarship in Africa, these studies have mostly focused on the love experiences of young women. In that context, studies on love often focus on the disproportionate vulnerabilities experienced by young women, such as intimate partner violence. However, this characterisation of love in South African literature has, perhaps inadvertently, promoted a narrow understanding of young black men as being violent and emotionally inept. The article moves beyond these limited conceptualisations of young black men and explores love as a productive force in their lives. Drawing on empirical findings generated from interviews with 34 young men between the ages of 16 and 21, the article shows how love and the young men's emerging masculinities were experienced as mutually constitutive. Their negotiations of love were experienced as opportunities to resist normative masculinities, demonstrated through *ukushela* and emotional reflexivity. These young black men's investment in their relationships suggests the progressive possibilities of love in their lives.

**Keywords:** love, young men, black masculinities, masculinities, South Africa

### INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, there is growing consensus among researchers about the significance of love in the lives of young people (Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Bhana, 2018; Willan *et al.*, 2019). Yet, much of this research has almost exclusively conceptualised love against the backdrop of gendered and endemic epidemics: HIV, poverty, and gender-based violence (Mgwaba and Maharaj, 2018; Manyapelo *et al.*, 2019). This has served to identify love primarily as a site of vulnerability, especially for young women. The love experiences of young people (Bhana, 2015, 2017) outside of the violence and continued marginalisation suffered by young women (Wood and Jewkes, 1997; Ngabaza *et al.*, 2013; Zembe *et al.*, 2015), have received limited attention. Although focusing on the vulnerabilities of young women is a result of the difficulties and silences that surround female sexuality in the South African context (Shefer and Foster, 2001), an adverse effect of this is that the subjective realities and possible vulnerabilities experienced by young men in relation to love have not been sufficiently explored (Shefer *et al.*, 2015). Research has made a case for the ways in which young women negotiate and resist men's power in heterosexual love relationships (Bhana, 2008; Bhana and Anderson, 2013; Firmin, 2013; Willan *et al.*, 2019), yet instances in which young black men resist hegemonic love practices in their relationships remain relatively muted. The consequence of this is that mainly pathologised masculinities are documented and emphasised in research. Even though scholars have demonstrated how contemporary love relationships reveal the complex processes that shape the love experiences of young people (Hunter, 2007, 2015), there remains a paucity of literature that explores the generative and transformational possibilities of love in the lives of young people. This limitation is even more pronounced in relation to young black men in South Africa (Malinga and Ratele, 2012, 2016).

In that vein, Malinga and Ratele (2012, 2016, 2018) have called for a more considered focus on young black men's experiences of love and happiness, namely, how these are implicated in their daily, lived experiences. They further demonstrated that young black men not only value love, but their experiences of love also often prompt profound personal shifts (Malinga and Ratele, 2016). Despite this, there remains a relative silence on the other-than-violent experiences and expressions of love in the lives of young black men in South Africa. Writing on happiness, Malinga and Ratele (2018) highlighted the urgent need for holistic conceptualisations that acknowledge

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young black men's capacities for love, care, and nurturing. Similar calls have been made in scholarship on care by young fathers in South Africa, which challenges negative characterisations of young men as detached and absent from their children's lives (Morrell *et al.*, 2016; Mvune and Bhana, 2022). The significance and productive potential of love in the lives of young black people in South Africa has been routinely diminished as a concern secondary to more pressing public health matters. In this article I argue that young black men<sup>1</sup> are more than deployments of force, violence, and coercion; they too, have capacity for love and progressive enactments of love. Thus, there is an urgent need for studies that focus on the positive possibilities of love in relation to black masculinities.

To address the relative silence on young black men's love experiences in South Africa (Langa, 2010; Malinga and Ratele, 2012), this article explores their negotiations of love in an urban township context. It focuses on their embodied practices or enactments of love in the context of heterosexual relationships and considers the ways that love could produce progressive moments or practices for young men (de Boise, 2018). Importantly, it acknowledges that young black masculinities are not a monolith and that they do not enjoy equal power status in South Africa, noting that proximity to this power is determined by age, class, race and sexuality, among other factors (Morrell, 2001; Ratele, 2013). This is particularly important if we are to reverse damaging stereotypes and explore black masculinities beyond the 'crisis' discourse (Dube, 2016; Ammann and Staudacher, 2021). In response to escalating calls for progressive conceptualisations of emotions in young black men's lives (Malinga and Ratele, 2016, 2018), this article explores young black men's negotiations of love in their daily lives. Beyond the pathologising public health concerns, there is need for research that meaningfully explores the kinds of romantic partners young black men are, what they value, and what they feel within their love relationships (Korobov and Thorne, 2006). A recent study based in KwaZulu-Natal, by Manyapelo and colleagues (2019), demonstrated that love had a central role in the lives of young black men and that it profoundly impacted their gender performances, namely, how they negotiated intimate and sexual connections. Focusing on the love experiences and enactments of young black men living in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, this study adds to a growing body of work that explores the productive possibilities of love.

## **LOCATING LOVE AND YOUNG BLACK MEN**

Globally, there is a small but burgeoning body of work that has begun to provide insights into how love intermingles with young masculinities (Redman, 2001; Allen, 2003, 2007; Korobov and Thorne, 2009; Forrest, 2010). These studies demonstrate the significance of love in the lives of their respective participants. They also demonstrate that love shapes how young men navigate their entry into adulthood and becomes a resource through which they adjust to new social worlds (Redman, 2001). Although it may, in some instances, embolden hegemonic masculinities and facilitate young men's complicity, love can disrupt these masculinities and enable young men to reflexively rethink their subjectivities (Korobov and Thorne, 2006; Allen, 2007; Korobov, 2009). Similarly, Forrest (2010: 216) advocates for a more nuanced understanding of young men's love experiences through explorations that unpick the 'nexus of "big" cultural ideas about gender, emotions, and relationships and the specifics' of their social worlds. It is also significant that in some of these studies, young men describe their relationships in terms that indicate 'seriousness' about their partners, which further denotes their emotional investment and affective experiences (Korobov and Thorne, 2006, 2007, 2009; Forrest, 2010). Research on youth (hetero)sexualities demonstrates that young men's investment in their relationships can increase their capacity to resist enacting hegemonic masculinities (Allen, 2003, 2007). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that young men place increasing value on love and relationships, especially as they come of age and experience a number of individual and social shifts. However, these studies are generally located in the Global North and explore the lives of white, middle-class young men whose subjectivities present realities far removed from a South African township. In addition to revealing the limitations of South African studies, they further demonstrate the potential value of engaging with South African young men's experiences of love.

Lorentzen (2007) critiqued the limited research on love and (hetero)masculinities, and argued that exploring love might reveal its significance beyond the performance of heterosexual masculinities. For Lorentzen (2007), love is a transformative force and the emergent capacities should be explored (see also Holmes, 2015). He noted aspects of men's love experiences and capacities that remain underexplored in research on men and masculinities, namely, brotherly love, fatherly love and transgressive love. Lorentzen further contended that, for men, love means transgressing the social and material boundaries that frame masculinities and 'creating new forms of masculinities' (2007: 197). When approached from this perspective, we may come to see the ways in which young black men challenge heteronormative stereotypes, and the progressive possibilities that doing love presents for them.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study I focus on cisgender heterosexual young men; however, I acknowledge that within the township context, and among black men, masculinities are diverse (see Msibi, 2013; Ngidi *et al.*, 2021).

Scholarship on love in Africa suggests that the experiences and expressions of love vary according to the intersecting conditions of gender, sexuality, class, politics, race, culture and geospatial location (Cole and Thomas, 2009). Similarly, South African scholarship on love has demonstrated how love is entangled in the overlapping legacies of colonialism and apartheid, which continue to mark the social and material conditions of daily life (Ngabaza *et al.*, 2013; Willan *et al.*, 2019). These conditions not only produce particular configurations of love, they also produce the subjectivities that experience and express these configurations. The concepts of ‘provider love’ and ‘provider masculinities’ (Hunter, 2010) demonstrate how love, in response to colonial conditions in South Africa, relationally produced subjectivities that emphasised a man’s material capacity to provide. Similarly, Swartz and Bhana (2009) found that young men enacted new forms of care and intimacy as they negotiated their emergent roles as fathers. Although fatherhood and care are not direct explorations of love (Ferguson and Toyé, 2017), lessons can be gleaned from this body of work about the role of emotion in young black men’s lives.

In South Africa, young black men are simultaneously dominant and marginalised, and such ambivalences necessitate explorations of their experiences that meaningfully engage the emotional and embodied performances of young black masculinities (Ratele, 2013, 2016). Yet, much of the research outside of Queer Studies continues to suggest that young black men are universally compliant with dominant masculinities – with minimal focus on instances where young men resist dominant behaviours. Thus, I heed Motimele’s (2021: 61) call for ‘new modes of reading black male vulnerability that can hold a number of ambivalences.’ In this vein, love enables us to apprehend the ambivalences of being young black men who live and love in the township: of being violent yet vulnerable, of being complicit yet oppressed, of being antisocial yet intimate and of being ‘young men’ – no longer boys, but not yet men. Furthermore, a focus on love avoids an overly deterministic reading of young black men as dangerous, without denying the violences that young black men do either experience or enact upon others (Motimele, 2021).

## ON YOUNG MEN DOING LOVE, AND THEIR LOVE DOINGS

Critical scholars have demonstrated convincingly that love is not a universal and naturally occurring feeling or emotion (Jackson, 1993; Morrison *et al.*, 2012; Ferguson and Jónasdóttir, 2014; Lanas and Zembylas, 2015). Furthermore, these scholars have demonstrated that it is not a unitary, transhistorical phenomenon untouched by social, cultural, spatial, and temporal shifts (Illouz, 1997, 2012). Rather, love is embedded in the ‘historically situated words, cultural practices, and material conditions that constitute certain kinds of subjects and enable particular kinds of relationships’ (Cole and Thomas, 2009: 3). We can therefore think of love as relational and rendered materially, discursively, politically and spatially – which then determines who feels it, how, when, where, for whom and to what end (Berlant, 1998; Ahmed, 2004; Morrison *et al.*, 2012). Love shapes, and is relationally shaped, by the lived experiences of those who enter into relationships.

Although critical masculinities studies have explored men’s emotions, their focus has mainly been on the extremes: of men as either emotionally inept, or their embodied expressions of rage and anger (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018). These extremes are far from universal, and relations between masculinities and emotions are ambivalent and complex and require that we further account for situated and embodied experiences of other subjectivities (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018; de Boise and Hearn, 2017). Importantly, young South African black men are living (and loving) in social worlds that are removed from the cultures of the Global North, which is overrepresented in current studies on masculinities, emotions and love. Seidler (2007) argues that explorations of young men’s emotional lives should give due consideration to the diverse discursive and material fields that comprise subjectivities in order to critically account for lived experiences. And, relatedly, de Boise and Hearn (2017) contend that understanding men’s emotional lives is central to challenging and transforming gender inequalities. As de Boise and Hearn (2017: 791) further suggest, in exploring men’s emotional lives, we have to ‘evaluate the ends to which emotions are put, what they are directed toward, how intensely and how these circulate between bodies and sustain as well as challenge men’s privileges’ (2017: 791).

Therefore, exploring young black men’s negotiations of love requires that critical attention be paid to their discursive positionings and embodied practices. I thus approach love as an embodied practice that is relationally situated, and not only experienced as a feeling, but as a doing too.

## METHODOLOGY

Analysis for this study was grounded in a critical feminist approach, which rejects essentialist notions of gender, sexuality, emotions and embodiment (Holmes, 2015; Jackson, 2018). From this perspective, love cannot be conceptualised as a universal concept, and young black men cannot be approached as a homogenous group. This article approaches love as a creative and productive force, thus opening up different ways of exploring the

possibilities and capacities that emerge through it (Jónasdóttir, 2014). An important aspect of this approach lies in its emphasis on social justice and paying attention to conditions that produce or reproduce power inequalities in the context of love (hooks, 2000; Ferguson and Jónasdóttir, 2014; Ferguson and Toye, 2017). This also enabled me to give due consideration to the young men's love experiences and to avoid limiting discourses of danger and crisis. Moreover, this perspective problematises attempts to group gender, sexuality and love into static categories and, instead, foregrounds the fluid and contingent nature of subjectivities in line with social and material conditions in South Africa. The approach thus frames love as central in the lives of the young men in this study, with the aim of broadening our understanding of their lives as having capacity for positive experiences and expressions of love. An important aspect of this approach lies in highlighting the mutual entanglement of love and masculinities as fluid, relational and contingent on social phenomena.

Data for this research are drawn from a larger doctoral study that explored the lived experiences of young men and their love relationships in the INK (Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu) precinct of townships, located in the north of Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. Collectively, these fall under the eThekweni municipality, which is the country's second most populous municipality (Statistics South Africa, 2022). This study sought to understand how young men experienced love, and how they negotiated love in their daily lives as they navigated township landscapes. In understanding that the repertoire of masculinities in townships are not defined only by violence, the study sought to explore how love might challenge and complicate stereotypical readings of young men's lives. Thus, the study made use of in-depth individual interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD). Thirty-four young men, aged between 16 and 21 years, were purposively sampled from local youth clubs and youth networks in the area. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and written consent was obtained from the parents and guardians of participants for them to participate in the study. Further consent was secured from participants for the IDIs and FGDs to be recorded. Participation was voluntary and participants' anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. All participants and the researcher are first language isiZulu speakers, so all IDIs and FGDs were conducted in isiZulu and recordings transcribed and translated into English. Using qualitative data software (NVivo), the transcripts were coded and analysed, from which broad themes were generated in line with the research questions of the broader study.

## GROWING UP AND DOING LOVE (DIFFERENTLY)

The 34 participants frequently discussed love in the context of growing up and linked it to the factors that shaped their daily lives. For most of them, the discourses of love as an embodied practice emerged alongside those of enacting forms of masculinities; being in a love relationship meant embodying and enacting masculinity differently. As one participant said of love, 'love is a verb, a doing word, you see . . . it's hard to explain what it is.' Thus, the young men's experiences and expressions of love were conceptualised as relational and complex doings. In this study, the young men suggested that love is experienced as a force that produces new understandings of self and thus different doings of love (Jónasdóttir, 2014). Most of the participants reflexively linked the development of their love doings with their 'becoming men.' But, these young men were choosing to do love differently:

When you [are a boy], you take [love] as something to have fun with.... As you become a man, you think differently about love. (Thabang, 16 years, IDI)

Thabang linked love and the related doings of love to maturing and becoming a man. His response suggests that 'growing up' and shifting towards a more mature masculinity opens up new avenues for doing love; that the doing of love shifts him from 'having fun' to being 'better.' By linking the idea of having fun with love, he suggested that not all relationships are love relationships – some are about a doing that does not require emotional engagement as part of the doing. During the interview, an example of having fun was described as being *isoka*<sup>2</sup> and having multiple girlfriends (Hunter, 2004). He contrasted this with growing up and performing a different form of matured masculinity that was more invested in relationships, and in developing a connection with someone. The suggestion here is that as young men mature and become men, they also perceive and do love differently. However, love is not a simple experience for young men, as another participant suggested:

How do you show her you love her? (Researcher)

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<sup>2</sup> *Isoka* (singular) is an isiZulu term which typically describes a young man who has multiple girlfriends or multiple sexual partners.

I show her my feelings.... The challenge is that there is a lot of things happening there. (Vusi, 18 years, IDI)

Vusi struggled to define love and, like many other participants, reverted to his lived experience of love. He and his girlfriend had been together since primary school and all through high school. He explained earlier in the interview that, 'she is the one person I have imagined myself with' – signalling a deep sense of attachment and commitment to his girlfriend. Vusi's experience reflected the notion of thinking and doing things differently over time, as described by Thabang. As a young man, being in a love relationship also meant imagining a future and showing his feelings. This suggested that his relationship was not only an individual and internal experience of emotions, but was also a set of varied embodied practices of love. However, as he further clarified, the context of doing love is complicated by the many 'things happening there,' suggesting that the experience of love is constantly being negotiated. As love came to matter differently for Vusi, it cultivated a deepening reflexivity making him more self-aware and reflective on his future with his girlfriend. Although young black men may come to value and embrace love, enacting or embracing these emerging masculinities can also be challenging to navigate personally and socially (Langa, 2020). This is evident in Wandile's reflection below:

Sometimes you approach someone only with the intention of *ukugqema* [just getting sex], then next thing *usugaxele* [you're entangled]... It goes both ways, it's a risk, if I can put it that way ... I love her now, standard. (Wandile, 19 years, FGD)

Wandile's reflection referred to his current girlfriend of eight months. His assertion supports the findings of studies that have articulated an ambivalence between sex and love for young men when it comes to their relationships (Bhana, 2017, 2018). This is also suggested by his use of the terms *ukugqema* and *ukugaxeka* that index local discourses about intimate relationships among young men. *Ukugqema* (literally: to hit) was described as a 'hit and run' among the young men, where there was little to no emotional attachment to the woman. The main aim of *ukugqema* is to have sex. On the other hand, *ukugaxeka* (becoming entangled) refers to how, while navigating *ukugqema*, a young man can develop feelings and become invested and attached to a particular young woman. Thus, *ukugaxeka* is described mainly in relation to *ukugqema* and describes a shifting subjectivity that further shifts the nature of the relationship from mainly sexual to a love relationship. In the context of *ukugaxeka*, the young men undertake a different doing that entails emotional attachment and the 'showing of feelings'. This is the risk that Wandile referred to. Using himself as an example, he described how his current relationship had become a love relationship, which prompted different love doings on his part. As he spoke, Banzi (16 years) interjected '*Udlisive!*' at which the other participants laughed. He was suggesting that Wandile had been given a love potion and was spellbound. The *ukugaxeka* discourse was often used by some young men to ridicule others who had seemingly become 'duped' by love. However, Wandile maintained:

Sometimes you have [compromise] in order for you to get what you want, right? So, in my case, there are things I am willing to sacrifice for her.

By describing himself as a young man who has succumbed to *ukugaxeka*, Wandile actively resisted the discourse of *ukugqema*, which emphasises emotional detachment and a (hetero)sexual prowess. Wandile demonstrates how love can prompt a shift in masculine performance, thus producing a different enactment of love that is invested in emotional connection beyond 'just sex.' He also provides insight into the reactions that young men have to navigate in the process of resisting dominant notions that are widely accepted by their peers. Banzi's response is a clear demonstration of how young men's gendered subjectivities come under scrutiny when they seem to diverge from the heteronormative gender script. Within the group encounter, Wandile's performance of a 'duped' masculinity was being challenged and a heteronormative masculinity, which accommodates *ukugqema*, was being reasserted. The discourses of *ukugqema* and *ukugaxeka* are indicative of the confused messaging that young men negotiate in their daily lives (Malinga and Ratele, 2016). On one hand, they are expected to demonstrate their masculinities through having girlfriends yet, on the other, they should not like them too much. The excerpts in this section suggest that for some of the participants in the study love is experienced as relational and as mutually constitutive with their masculine performances; thus, doing love differently also produced the capacity to do their masculinity differently. Their narratives point to how love is imbricated in the complexities of young men's growing up, and demonstrate how it also becomes an important consideration for young men; they not only do love as part of their performance, but they also want to be loved. The narratives the young men offer in this section paint a more complex picture of the ways they negotiate doing love in their respective lives.

## UKUSHELA: PLAYING WITH WORDS AND SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

*Ukushela* was a constant feature of the interactions I had with the young men throughout the fieldwork. It is a gendered and culturally laden process through which young men propose and initiate a love relationship; a young woman's acceptance of this proposal is termed *ukuqoma* (Hunter, 2004, 2010; Zibane, 2021). Despite researchers noting that the translation of the term *ukushela* denotes a burning for one's love or to burn with desire, little research has explored how young men navigate the intensities that are part of the experience of *ukushela*. In this section, I explore the ways in which the young men's doings of love were negotiated in and through the practice of *ukushela*. The participants' experiences reveal that this practice – which is also implicated in relations of power and gender – produces particular love doings. The narratives of the young men in the study suggest that they often drew on a repertoire of love doings through *ukushela*, depending on the intended nature of the relationship or the intensity of the love:

[It's] how you present yourself to a girl, your words, how you speak [to her], the way you are and your actions add to that. It's how you play with your words. (Lubabalo, 17 years, FGD)

The above quote is Lubabalo's interjection during a group discussion as the young men debated how a young man could go about charming a young woman in the process of proposing love. *Ukushela* for young men takes place in different contexts, especially in the township. He suggested that the way a young man might go about presenting himself when charming a young woman is in itself a complex interplay of the bodies, words, talk, tone, and actions. Although studies have mainly highlighted enactments of *ukushela* as constraining young women's agency and even coercive (Hampshire *et al.*, 2011; Ngidi, 2022), the enactment that Lubabalo referred to resists this and presents an alternative love doing that is invested in passion and persuasion (Mvune *et al.*, 2019). This resonates with the notion of *ukudlala ngenkotha* (literally: to play with tongue), which is a form of sweet-talking undertaken by young men as part of *ukushela* (Zibane, 2021). From this perspective, Lubabalo suggested that, among young men, one possible capacity is a particular kind of love doing that 'plays with words.' The play with words is an embodied doing that ultimately informs 'how you present yourself to a girl.' Thus, the negotiation of *ukushela* for Lubabalo involves the complex arrangement of bodies, words, talk, tone and actions that produce his form of love doing. Other young men also offered more insight into the complexities of *ukushela*:

There is an isiZulu proverb that goes 'Induku enhle igawulwa ezizwen' – that is what I was taught. I was told that if I want a girlfriend, I must go out [of our community]. (Simba, 18 years, IDI)

The proverb Simba refers to can be translated as 'a beautiful stick is cut from country afar' (Mabaso and Liebhamer, 1998: 32). His reference to this proverb demonstrates his attempt to contextualise his own doing of *ukushela*. He elaborated that, during his childhood, his older brothers and uncles had always referenced the proverb and, as he came of age, it came to inform his own negotiation of love. Importantly, the proverb reinforces particular gender and cultural scripts that necessitate particular performances from young men. In addition to being the active proposer of love (Hunter, 2010), a young man also has to, discursively and materially, cultivate love (Mvune *et al.*, 2019; Zibane, 2021). Through the proverb, *ukushela* as the doing of love is thus further coded as an active (re)negotiation of a cultural and gendered terrain, which produces a young woman's favourable response (*ukuqoma*), thus becoming a girlfriend. For Simba, this required going to a different section of the township to ensure that he and his girlfriend were from different areas. Having described himself as quiet and introverted, he explained his experience thus:

I am the kind of person who writes poems, I shela [show my love] with poems.... It must be something that comes from the heart.... When the girl is in front of you, you will not be scared to tell her what is in your heart. (Simba, 18 years, IDI)

Here, Simba presents a different doing of love – one that renegotiates the notion of *ukudlala ngenkotha* as described above. As an introvert, Simba found an alternative avenue through which he approached *ukushela*; his version of 'playing with words' and showing his passion leveraged his talent for poetry. However, in contrast to Lubabalo and other young men whose 'presentation to a girl' emphasised outward, embodied practices, through poetry, Simba emphasised speaking 'from the heart.' Once again, this adds another dimension to existing literature, which largely focuses on outward manifestations of love doings. Thus, it becomes evident how love produces different capacities, and expands the practice of *ukushela* in new ways for a young man. The notion of speaking from the heart takes on deeper significance from the way that his poetic creativity enabled him to pull together his words, actions, and feelings to enact masculinity in a particular way that he knew to be novel. Simba's narrative goes beyond limited framings of young black men as dominant, unfeeling, and violent. Another young man, Dingani, articulated his experience of doing love:

I believe that love is something you can't control. Love is a feeling that comes at any time and [it's] something that you can't prevent from coming to you when it comes...it's a feeling which comes from the heart for another person or someone that you love. (Dingani, 18 years, IDI)

South African literature on youth sexualities has consistently highlighted the ways that love functions as a site through which young men exercise control over young women (Wood *et al.*, 2007, 2008). Wood and Jewkes (1997, 1998) have noted how young men unilaterally determine the terms and conditions of the love relationship, and foreground sex as part of the arrangement. Other studies, however, have provided more nuance and complexity to these findings and have demonstrated that, although young men may perform these versions of masculinities, they also value deep emotional connection (Allen, 2003; Bhana and Pattman, 2011). Dingani exposed the strong force of love in his life, how he experienced it as an uncontrollable and intangible force, yet one with very tangible effects in his life and on his performance of masculinity. The characterisation of love as a force that is beyond individual control was common among participants. Interestingly, this challenges the notion of self-control and emotional infallibility that is associated with normative masculinities (Connell, 2005; Seidler, 2007). And this experience of love disrupts notions about masculinity, particularly among young black men. Departing from the narrative of control and dominance, Dingani was admittedly not in control of his feelings in ways that facilitate gender inequitable atmospheres within his relationship. His approach and the process of *ukushela* that he undertook are not necessarily buttressed by notions of violence and control. Rather, he suggested that he is guided by the intense feelings from the heart that drew him to his girlfriend. Overall, the narratives in this section suggest a connection between feelings of love and other-than-violent doings of love. For most of the young men, love enabled them to rework or expand the practice of *ukushela* in progressive ways.

## A CLEANER MASCULINITY?

For many of the young men in this study, love was central to the shaping of their subjectivities and increasingly became a part of reimagining new masculinities. When participants described the impact of love in their lives, they suggested that love had changed their lives in profound ways (Malinga and Ratele, 2016). Importantly, while these personal shifts were reflected in their embodied love doings, the participants often suggested a deeper affective significance. As one participant explained:

Yesterday I was a young boy who got dirty, walking around with torn pants, playing soccer ...when I started getting a girlfriend and tried speaking to her I didn't want her to see me looking dirty and then I started looking after myself...she basically made me aware of myself.... It was something that made me have a different perspective and change the way I view things and do things. (Anathi, 19 years, IDI)

In the above excerpt, Anathi described the first time he felt intense feelings, which he later understood to be romantic love. These intense feelings changed how he moved around in his community, how he hung out with his friends, and even determined if or when he would play a game of soccer on the street. In describing the process that led to him declaring his love (*ukushela*), he noted how his feelings led to a change in his actions and perspective. These new feelings and emotions demonstrate a shift from the 'young boy who got dirty' to a young man who 'started looking after' himself and also became 'aware of' himself. Because of this, he began to perform a cleaner, less playful masculinity, one that he felt was required if he were to become a boyfriend. On the surface, it may seem that Anathi's new aversion to being dirty simply indicated a developmental understanding of going through adolescence. However, I argue that his contextualisation of actions in relation to his feelings and his girlfriend signalled a shifting emotional reflexivity in line with the shifting relations (Holmes, 2015). It is this emotional reflexivity that resulted in him having 'a different perspective' and changing the way he did things. Love is not just a concept for Anathi, it is a force that actively produced a different perspective and different actions in his life. This emotional reflexivity was also evident in other participants' narratives:

Love is also something that is very important because it inspires you and it can also change you. [It can] make you a better person...and become a clean person even in your mind. You think positively and also be gentle with people. (Menzi, 18 years, IDI)

For Menzi, love inspired change and, once again, the discourse of becoming clean is referenced in relation to love. He suggested that love is simultaneously a deeply personal and transformative project. Furthermore, it is significant that he suggested love makes one 'a clean person even in your mind.' Studies suggest a causal link between young men's experiences of trauma and their vulnerability to enacting violence and having multiple sexual partners (Gibbs *et al.*, 2019). However, as Menzi suggested, being in a relationship prompted a shift away from the possibilities of violence making him 'think positively and also be gentle with people.' He suggested that his love relationship

produced the capacity to resist enacting negative love doings and masculinities, in general. Throughout the fieldwork, many participants also described how spending time with their girlfriends allowed them some respite from homosocial spaces where violence, alcohol, and drugs were currency. Significantly, the becoming clean discourse provided a useful metaphor for these young men to position themselves in relation to the masculinities from which they sought respite. Another participant said:

There is someone I am in a relationship with.... It has shaped me in good ways. I often see the difference between me and other young men that I grew up with. (Tito, 21 years, IDI)

Tito suggested that being in a relationship had ‘shaped’ him in ways that made him different from ‘other young men.’ As a result of his love relationship, he performed a different masculinity to those of his peers and he credited the affectively engaging space that he and his girlfriend had created for this shift. It is particularly significant he saw it as responsible for a different trajectory.

As the young men established love relationships and became boyfriends, they negotiated new ways of doing love. However, as the narratives in this section suggest, these new ways could have broader implications for how the young men enact other masculinities. The suggestion is that love relationships produce cleaner masculinities, where love does not only prompt the doing of love differently, but further shapes how young men act in relation to normative masculinities. Love is experienced and understood as a disruptive affective experience that shifts their daily lives towards becoming boyfriends and enacting cleaner masculinities. However, it is important to note that these shifts do not suggest a complete transformation of masculinities. What these cleaner masculinities suggest is that love can produce progressive possibilities for young men to do love differently. In continuing with the analogy of becoming cleaner, these narratives further suggest that the shifting and transforming of masculinities is not a once-off process that takes young men from one extreme to another. Rather, it is an ongoing process of transforming and transgressing restrictive heteropatriarchal norms – which is not linear. Thus, when participants describe love as making them cleaner, they are also suggesting their daily enactments and experiences of love are iterative and incremental instances of making them cleaner. To do love is to incrementally undo harmful scripts.

## CONCLUSION

In *All About Love*, hooks (2000: 4) muses that the ‘word “love” is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb.’ For her, love has to be understood as more than an internal psychological state. Her thinking in this regard is instructive; love can only be understood as such when it is actioned or practised. Love is about doing. Thus, love is not only about naming feelings, but it is also about the related actions through which one does or enacts love. This article highlights the significance of exploring love in the lives of young men (Allen, 2007; Korobov, 2009; Forrest, 2010) and, specifically, of exploring love as a positive affect among young black men (Malinga and Ratele, 2012, 2016). Love offers young men the opportunity to reimagine their masculinities (particularly in relation to their girlfriends), which might be a useful avenue to further explore in the context of challenging intimate partner violence. Love seems to produce progressive moments that occur in the seemingly mundane moments of young men’s daily lives through prompting reflexive engagement with their own feelings and those of their girlfriends. The notion of love as a form of doing signals that love relationships are intimately tied to the ways young men understand and perform their masculinities. Although doing love does not necessarily mean a complete dismantling of hegemonic masculinities, these young men were able to resist in meaningful ways (Allen, 2007). The doings of love enabled further insight into to complexities of love in the ever-shifting terrains of being a young man in a township, which seemed to require different doings from these young men. Understood thus, we see that love was understood and experienced by the young men as producing the capacities to feel, to act and be in new and different ways than before. To explore love doings thus enables us to trace the other-than-violent possibilities and capacities among young men. Their reflections suggest that love was a central component of their transitions into adulthood; as they became boyfriends, so they also became men. Furthermore, through love they became clean and better young men – demonstrating the progressive possibilities of love.

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