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Fighting to the last drop of our blood: Invocations of radical struggle masculinity among black student politicians in South Africa

Abstract

This article examines how gender, race and class intersect with discourses of the struggle against apartheid in one of South Africa’s former black universities situated in the country’s northernmost province of Limpopo. The article, an analysis of left wing student politics, shows that the male student politicians in Limpopo draw on struggle discourses of warfare and violence that become hegemonic in their own right, which calls for an intersectional reading of masculinities not only with race and class, but also with history and local context. The argument builds on insights gained in recent studies of masculinities in South Africa, whereConnell’s conceptual framework of hegemonic masculinity has been applied to the understanding of how powerful and dominant versions of masculinity subordi-nate less dominant masculinities as well as women. Simultaneously, the argument is inspired by nuanced criticisms of that very framework made in anthropology and psychology, where hegemonic masculinities are generally seen to be overly categorical, too sealed off from other social forces (or hegemonies) and not sufficiently grounded in a specific socio-cultural context.

Keywords

struggle masculinity, South Africa, student politics, race, hegemony, intersectionality
Fighting to the last drop of our blood: Invocations of radical struggle masculinity among black student politicians in South Africa

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Introduction

While it has become a truism for feminists and masculinity researchers to claim that in order to study gender we must go beyond gender (Connell 1995, 76), this is seldom practised. Usually the call is made for intersectional readings of gender with other social divisions such as class, race, education, age and disability (see Connell, Hearn and Kimmell 2005, 3–4, McCall 2005, 1772, Staunæs 2003, 101), but as Nash notes, there is often ‘a tremendous gap between the conceptions of intersectional methodology and practices of intersectional investigations’ (Nash 2008, 6). This article seeks to overcome this gap by firmly situating the analysis of male student politicians in their specific socio-cultural and historical context at the University of Limpopo, which played a pivotal role as a struggle site in the fight against apartheid. The article furthers the point that in order to understand the political (re-)radicalization of young South African men, intersectional readings must take more account of the local context and the discourses of struggle and liberation inherited from the fight against apartheid. The findings stem from the one-year ethnographic field study that I conducted at the Turfloop campus of the University of Limpopo in 2006 and 2007 for my PhD-thesis on masculinities, sexualities, and HIV and AIDS (Oxlund 2009). This article builds on two previously published articles (Oxlund 2008, Oxlund 2010a). It begins with an outline of the methodology of the study in the first paragraph and then moves on to provide an overview of South African masculinity studies. The third paragraph examines the importance that Turfloop campus took on as a struggle site in the 1970s and 1980s, while the fourth paragraph provides an analysis of the invocations of the struggle to be found in the student elections of October 2006. The radical and violent protests that erupted at Turfloop campus in 2007 are documented, before the conclusion seeks to tease out the implications of these insights for intersectional studies of violent masculinities in general.
Methodology

This article is based on almost one year of ethnographic fieldwork carried out over two periods in 2006 and 2007, where I lived at Turfloop campus in a university guest house located a few hundred metres from the main administrative building, the student centre and the central student residences. I was thus able to take part in all aspects of student social life, although it was something that I moved in and out of during the day, allowing me to strike a balance somewhere between full participation and distant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 104). Since most of the students were 18 to 23 years old, there was roughly ten years difference in age between them and me. Both in terms of age and the resources that I represented (I had a car and an office), to my closest interlocutors I estimate that I had a status similar to that of an older brother, someone who could be relied on for minor material support and a piece of advice from time to time. In terms of power relations there was thus no escaping the fact that, in the Limpopo context, I was a prototypical white/male/well-educated/affluent researcher as described by Macun and Posel (1998, 123). I therefore employed a number of strategies to counter this senior status and to fit in better with the age and social environment of the students. First, I played on a football team that we called the Turf Chiefs, which served as a casual space for me to do participant observation in an all-male sphere. Secondly, I paid particular interest to popular culture and the South African hip-hop and house music that the students listened to and the dances that went with the music, which led my closest interlocutors to consider me ‘an African at heart’ although I was generally referred to as ‘lekgowa’ (meaning white man or, when used in a derogatory manner, white thing). Finally, I also chose to frequent the offices of the different student organizations in the shared space called the Student Centre at the geographical heart of Turfloop campus and to participate in the numerous church activities organized by the many different Christian denominations active on campus.

In spite of South Africa’s horrendous history of race relations, I found that it was indeed possible for me to establish good rapport with both male and female students and that many appreciated the scholarly attention of a white foreigner and invited me into their private sphere of life. Given that many black South Africans exempt white foreigners from their general suspicion of white South Africans, it was only during one or two events of political activism that I experienced that the colour of my skin came to be seen as problematic or became an impediment to the research endeavour (see Oxlund 2010b for an in-depth analysis of one of these events).

Whereas the project originally set out to study gender dynamics and sexual relationships in the context of the unfolding HIV/AIDS pandemic exclusively, the research was gradually extended from the sphere of intimate relations to include the public spheres of music and dancing, student politics and Zionist Christianity, because these emerged as significant arenas for the enactment of gendered identities during the fieldwork.
In terms of formalized methodologies, I conducted, recorded and transcribed 45 individual interviews (in English), of which 30 were with men and 15 were with women, as well as eight focus group discussions, of which three were conducted with men, three with women and two with mixed groups. It is of particular significance to this article that six of the male students that I knew best were active student politicians, whereas I only got to know one female student politician, of whom there were relatively few. At national level several of the student organizations have had female presidents over the past decade, but at Turfloop campus male and female students deemed this to be ‘impossible’ (see Oxlund 2008 for the analysis of a case of a female student of political science who did not feel ‘empowered’ to participate in student politics although she had the desire to do so). Furthermore, during my fieldwork at Turfloop the few female members elected for the Student Representative Council (SRC) were assigned to responsibilities that were considered to be suitable for women such as gender and disabled students, whereas the presidency and the post as Secretary of Finance were seen to fit naturally with male student politicians. Although I will claim that such tendencies tie in with particular traits of struggle masculinity exercised at Turfloop Campus, they do at the same time resonate with more general notions of struggle masculinity exercised in South African politics for decades, as I will show in the next section.

Masculinities in South African politics

With the onset of democracy in 1994, the new ANC-led government moved swiftly to ‘promote a vigorous gender campaign’ in order to reduce inequalities between men and women in South Africa (Morrell 2001, 3). At the same time, however, the post-1994 state has been caught up in the contradictions of its own violent past and the legacies of the apartheid state (Morrell 2001, 21). In notable ways the world famous account of the peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy has thus overshadowed the fact that the so-called Rainbow nation was born out of a necessity to avoid the large-scale political violence about to erupt in the early 1990s, when a peaceful transition was being negotiated. Arguably, the very real threat of revolutionary political violence at that time is not only crucial to an understanding of the late apartheid state, but also to the understanding of the new South Africa, since these violent sentiments and discourses continue to inform micro-politics at the local level. Analysing the realm of student politics, this article thus shows that male student politicians at the University of Limpopo still draw on masculine discourses of the violent struggle against apartheid. Whereas in contemporary masculinity research it has become popular to talk of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell 1995, 77), I will argue that violent discourses of the struggle have become hegemonic in student and youth politics in South Africa and that they intersect with discourses of masculinity to define the naturalized political actor as a rebellious male youth.
Over the last decade, considerable attention has been paid to the links between masculinity and sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa (i.e. Niehaus 2005, Posel 2005, Wood et al. 1998, Wood and Jewkes 2001), while masculine discourses at the political level have been analysed primarily as a phenomenon of the height of the apartheid crisis years (Ernanz 2003, Mager 1998, Suttner 2007, Xaba 2001, see also Unterhalter 2000 for a reading of the discourse of struggle masculinity as a continuous trend). Since the authors differ in perspective and approach, it is worthwhile to briefly introduce and discuss the ground that has already been covered.

In a historical analysis of youth organizations during the years 1945 to 1960, Mager has drawn attention to the ‘increasing centrality of violence in the construction of some forms of masculine identities’ (Mager 1998, 654). Bereft of wage-earning opportunities in an apartheid society (and economy) where black men were generally designated as boys vis-à-vis white men, many young black men resorted to membership of youth organizations that subscribed to discourses of warfare and violence, which served to perpetuate notions of a warrior-like masculinity (Mager 1998, 658, see also Suttner 2007, 195). In an analysis of black masculinities in the 1980s and 1990s, Xaba has developed a dichotomy between what he terms struggle masculinity and post-struggle masculinity, where the former is seen as something possessed or exercised by ‘the foot soldiers of the revolution’ and the latter is a child of the new South Africa with its emphasis on human rights and gender equality (Xaba 2001, 107). Similarly, Seekings has shown how youths who were celebrated for the role that they played in the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, came to be dreaded as an obstacle to the process of democratization in the 1990s (Seekings 2001, 103). According to Xaba, traits of struggle masculinity have become very visible in post-apartheid South Africa, because ‘exiles’ and ‘comrades’, who did not succeed in securing themselves an official position in the new South Africa, have become rather marginalized and left with the option of taking up crime to secure their position and material welfare (Xaba 2001, 103). Xaba stresses that struggle masculinity was tainted by negative attitudes and behaviours towards women, because it existed side by side with street masculinity or the gangster identity known as ‘tsotsi’. These masculinities are seen as the opposite of what Xaba dubs post-struggle masculinity, which is understood to be founded on respect for law and order, the restoration of public order, and respect for state institutions like the police. Xaba points to ANC leaders as bearers of post-struggle masculinity, because they have used their government power to further a human rights inspired policy framework with a clear emphasis on gender equality and women’s rights (Xaba 2001, 112). While Xaba is right in underscoring the recent historic developments in South Africa, his rigid juxtaposing of struggle masculinities and post-struggle masculinities is a neat example of how Connell’s analytical framework is sometimes used to reduce complex realities to fixed masculinities that are either good (resistant) or bad (hegemonic), and where in-
TERNAL contradictions, historical complexities and processes of translation from discourse to practice are insufficiently explored.

With regard to ANC leaders, Xaba thus differs from Unterhalter, who has identified traits of struggle masculinity (which in her account becomes ‘heroic masculinity’) in the writings of current ANC government ministers (Unterhalter 2000, 174). Based on a literary study of the autobiographical accounts of anti-apartheid struggle heroes, she has shown how the struggle for freedom and the project of nation-building have been cast as the right and duty of men alone, and how heroic masculinity entailed giving oneself to the struggle, thereby finding a place in history (Unterhalter 2000, 157–158, 165–166). The question that arises with regard to the current events analysed here is: how do these discourses of struggle masculinity relate to 18–25-year-old male university students, who were around 4–12 years old when apartheid came to an end in 1994? Alexander has noted that: ‘…there is a noticeable distinction between those old enough to have had direct experience of ‘the struggle’, and possibly had their education interrupted as a consequence, and those who are younger’ (Alexander 2006, 26). Although few or no students of today have had their education interrupted because of apartheid, many of them have suffered apartheid-related losses like the death of a parent or a sibling. In spite of their young age many students are thus victims of apartheid in a very direct sense, whereas the apartheid infrastructure has a more indirect influence on their lives given that the socio-spatial layout of South African society has only seen limited change since the onset of democracy. Thus, many of the socio-economic conditions that inspired the struggle may not have changed that much since 1994. The following quotes from Xaba about 1980s’ township youth apply equally well to the present-day Sovenga township that surrounds Turfloop campus:

Numerous factors conspired to produce ‘struggle masculinity’. The upbringing of youth in poor households of impoverished and poorly serviced townships, coupled with the relations they had with state institutions, engendered opposition to the state. (Xaba 2001, 110)

During those days, being a ‘comrade’ endowed a young man with social respect and status within his community. Being referred to as a ‘young lion’ and a ‘liberator’ was an intoxicating and psychologically satiating accolade. (Xaba 2001, 110)

In spite of these similarities, there are, of course, obvious differences to be noted between marginalized former liberation soldiers and contemporary youths situated in a university environment. While it is difficult to pinpoint what kind of students are more likely to take part in student activism in terms of class position and family background, many of the leading student politicians at Turfloop, who are almost exclusive male, came across as
‘the students from lower-middle and working class backgrounds’ (Lipset quoted in Dawson 2006, 281); the ones ‘who tend to bear the brunt of existing inequities, the ones with the most to gain from social and political reforms and the individuals most likely to be caught up in the competition for status’ (Lipset quoted in Dawson 2006, 281). Furthermore, the legacy of the struggle is not only about the fight against the apartheid system and Bantu Education specifically; it is also a narrative that inspires anti-authority activities of youths in general (Morrell 2007, 76). The striking part is that male student leaders at Turfloop today find it so easy to identify with heroes who gave their lives in the struggle against racial oppression, which has everything to do with the received version of history communicated to students through the history of Turfloop as an important struggle site (see van Kessel 2000, 94, Unterhalter 2000, 166).

The history of Turfloop as a struggle site

Turfloop campus is located near the foothills of the Volksberg range, halfway between the provincial capital of Polokwane and the spectacular mountains of Magoebaskloof. A so-called Historically Disadvantaged Institution, the university embodies a number of crucial paradoxes pertaining to post-apartheid society in terms of the lofty promises made about institutional change following the onset of democracy and the disappointments subsequently experienced by the almost exclusively black African population groups served by the institution. In his book on the Turfloop experience, Chris White wrote:

The idea underlying the creation of University of the North was to greatly impact on the learning and teaching process from its inception to the present day. The University was established as a separate ethnic university in the service of the apartheid policy. (White 1997, 73)

Hence, the Minister of Bantu Education at the time, Verwoerd, stressed that it was exactly because the apartheid government did not want white students to study side by side with black students – and let them ‘feel that there is no difference between them and the natives’ – that separate universities were established (White 1997, 73). The ideology of separation was also a determining factor in locating the institution in a rural township 30 kilometres east of the urban metropolis of Polokwane (formerly known as Pietersburg). The name of the township itself was drawn from the three main ethnic groups of the area (Sotho, Venda and Tsonga, abbreviated to Sovenga) so as to underscore the ethnic basis of the University College (White 1997, 75). Eventually, in 1959, the University College of the North was established under the trusteeship of the University of South Africa with the specific aim of serving the black population only (Maja et al. 2005, 24; Mzamane et
al. 2004, 99). From 1970 onwards it started operating independently as the University of the North, which remained its name until it was merged with the Medical University of South Africa in 2005 to become the University of Limpopo. As the second largest black university (second only to Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape, where Nelson Mandela was educated), the then University of the North had a proud history of student activism. It was here at the Turfloop campus that in 1969 the legendary black consciousness leader Steve Biko, among others, launched the South African Student Organization (SASO) with the aim of promoting a strong sense of identity amongst black students (Dawson 2006, 278). In many ways this student activism can be seen as a response to the ambivalent feelings harboured by students in a situation where they had to enrol in an institution designed as part of a system to oppress them. Given these facts and the sentiments they inspired, it is not surprising that Turfloop came to have a history of tension, riots, demonstrations and unrest and that it thus features prominently in a ‘Barometer of student struggles’ developed by a journal for activists (Khanya 2004, 49–57). Ironically, however, the inception of the Bantu education system eventually came to have a liberating effect on South Africa (Teffo 2008, 76), since Turfloop and other educational institutions emerged as important sites of anti-apartheid struggle. An article called ‘Turfloop tension’, published by the Sunday Express on 20 October 1974, summed up how Turfloop was viewed by the white minority rulers at that time:

Turfloop has been the scene of Black student militancy almost since the day it opened in 1960. It has been the stronghold of SASO, the Black students’ movement and has provided it with three presidents. Strife reached a peak two years ago when a student leader, Abram Tiro, was summarily expelled for criticising the Bantu Education system in a speech at a graduation ceremony. This sparked off Black and White student demonstrations – and a corresponding police crackdown – around the country. Now the militancy at Turfloop has been given a fresh spurt by the triumph of the Frelimo terrorist movement in Mozambique. (Quoted in White 1997, 109)

As the second-largest black university in South Africa, the University of the North therefore had a proud history of student activism, which is how it has continued to present itself to the world. (FitzGerald 2006, 110)

Today the Turfloop campus is a celebration of local, national and international struggle heroes, as evidenced by the fact that student residences, buildings, lecture halls and theatres are all named after the most prominent leaders in South Africa and beyond. Although the famous leaders range from Nelson Mandela to Kwame Nkrumah, the most celebrated name in the history of struggle at the University of Limpopo is definitely that
of local hero Abraham Ongkopotse Tiro, whose life story was constantly reiterated in conversations with students and members of academic staff. Tiro was the president of the Student Representative Council at the University of the North in the early 1970s. At a graduation ceremony held in April 1972, he described the paradoxical nature of Bantu Education through a devastating critique of the fact that the family members of black graduates were not allowed to attend the ceremony, while the families of white academic staff were present in large numbers. The University administration was humiliated by the speech and decided to expel Tiro, who refused to make an official apology (Mawasha 2006, 72–73, White 1997, 104–107). On campus Tiro’s expulsion was followed by mass protests as an expression of black solidarity (Mzamane et al. 2004, 143). So heated were the fights that police arrived on campus and the entire student body was expelled, while SASO activities were suspended. Beyond Turfloop, SASO organized sympathy protests at all the black universities, which led to its leaders being periodically banned across the country (Mzamane et al. 2004, 143). But Tiro’s speech not only led to his expulsion from the University, it also set the path for his continued activities in the struggle, which saw him murdered by a letter bomb in Botswana in 1974.

During the height of apartheid’s crisis years in the 1980s, Turfloop continued to be a virtual battleground for clashes between students and the South African Defence Force or the police. According to Delius, this was also a time when student politics was starting to have a broader impact on the path of the struggle:

The Turfloop campus of the University of the North, in particular, started to provide organisational impetus throughout the region. In the 1970s, despite their relative proximity and role as the crucible of the Black Consciousness Movement, students at the university had rarely been politically active in their rural hinterland, although they did have some impact in the immediate environs of the campus and in nearby townships. In the 1980s, the main student grouping [...] shuffled off its Black Consciousness origins and adopted the principles of the ANC’s Freedom Charter. It also managed to gain control of the SRC at the University of the North and thus unlocked a treasure trove of organisational resources ranging from cash to cars. The campus soon became known as ‘Lusaka’ (after the headquarters of the ANC) in activist and police circles alike. (Delius 1996, 181)

Student activism is still the order of the day, partly explained by the fact that the post-apartheid tertiary sector has seen a difficult transition from the racially segregated system under the former regime to an open and free-market, competitive system since 1994. The new system brought with it new and less favourable funding regimes and increased competition over students (Nkomo and Swartz 2006, 2–3), and in this setup the former black universities have been particularly prone to funding shortages and decreasing levels of
students, since black students (and the best qualified black academics) have now been allowed entrance into the well-funded, former white institutions (see Oxlund 2010a). Whereas struggle leaders like Biko and Tiro were clearly fighting a different kind of battle, they remain the revered forefathers whose legacy the student politicians of today wish to honour by continuing the struggle. This is one of the reasons why male student politicians still claim that they ‘will fight to the last drop of our blood’ in trying to reduce photocopying fees. In pursuing this perspective a little further, the next paragraph takes a closer look at the numerous ways in which the imagery of struggle is re-enacted and made real during the competition for power at the SRC and the violent protests and angry demonstrations that regularly erupt on campus.

Invocations of the struggle in contemporary student politics

The SRC elections held in October 2006 abounded with invocations of the struggle against apartheid. ‘Our history is written in blood and no amount of lies can change that’ was thus the message pasted on the back of the T-shirts distributed among supporters of the Pan-Africanist Student Movement of Anzania (PASMA), the student wing of the Pan-African Congress (PAC). PASMA draws on the ideology inherited from the Black Consciousness Movement started by Steve Biko and promotes a racialized policy of Africanization. During the presentation of manifestos at the Tiro Hall at Turfloop, the PASMA presidential candidate, a young man of 20 years, claimed that ‘we are going to fight to the last drop of our blood to ensure that we achieve an increase in student subsidies’. Through this sustained emphasis on their willingness to ‘bleed’ for the students, PASMA leaders established a clear connection with the bloody struggle that their organization was part of in the past. But PASMA was not alone in making claims to struggle history during the course of the SRC elections at Turfloop campus in October 2006.

In a widely distributed poster, the South African Student Congress (SASCO) made reference to the 1976 uprising in which children of Soweto were marching and protesting against being taught in Afrikaans. The poster used as a background the world famous photograph of 13-year-old Hector Peterson, who had just been struck by a bullet to his head. In the photo he was being carried by his friend, while his sister was running alongside in her school uniform. Through its nation- and worldwide circulation the photo of the dying Hector Peterson came to symbolize the brutality of the apartheid regime and the discrimination of the Bantu Education system. Using the iconographic photo in conjunction with the messages: ‘Realize the 1976 dream’; and ‘Fight for quality student services’, SASCO could hardly have been more explicit in references to the struggle history of the organization. Despite the fact that SASCO is generally seen as the student wing of the ruling party ANC (Dawson 2006, 282), the situation at Turfloop in October 2006 was slightly confusing given that the ANC Youth League had suddenly entered the game of
student politics as an independent player. Nevertheless, the use of the photo claimed the struggle history to be that of ANC movement rather than that of the Pan Africanists. With hindsight it can be noted that the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) was acting in an overconfident manner when they entered Turfloop. Leaders of the league kept telling me and everybody else that they were sure of winning the elections, and that they did not even consider the possibility of losing. Through their political connections to the mother party they had access to resources in the forms of vehicles, T-shirts, money for pre-election parties and other social events. So confident were the leaders of eventual victory that they were already planning the celebration party by ordering food and DJs, when I conducted participant observation at one of their pre-election parties. Among the competing organizations, the ANCYL probably made the least reference to struggle history, although in their election leaflet bullet point no. 10 read: 'Vote ANCYL which was formed by comrade Nelson Mandela and later led by forever roaring young lion of the North comrade Peter Mokaba (The Youth League of the Ruling Party, the ANC)’. Perhaps this goes a long way towards explaining how the competing organizations, more notably PASMA, succeeded in framing the Youth League as ‘the ANC baby league’ in their written materials and public speeches. Through this nickname the Youth League was ridiculed as a bunch of immature children, who did not have any credibility in terms of holding student political office themselves. The jokes about the Youth League were emasculating in the sense that it was not just adulthood, but rather manhood, that it was seen to be lacking. In intricate ways the apartheid era theme of denied manhood noted by Suttner and Erlank (see above) thus made its way into the student elections at Turfloop in 2006. The ‘baby’ mark left the Youth League struggling to successfully display their self-image of the ‘young lions’ or ‘comrades’ of the North.

Irrespective of whichever organization students belonged to, during the weeks of heavy campaigning they addressed each other almost solely in military jargon, using titles such as general, commander, colonel and lieutenant in the same way that Mager noted of youth organizations in the middle of the 20th century (Mager 1998, 659). Many even dressed up in camouflage clothing or wore T-shirts with Ché Guevara emblems or green army caps. In terms of language, many turned to the use of violent metaphors and allegories when speaking of wars, bombs, bullets, fights, revolutions, killings, and oppression and liberation, observed to be trademark words of aggressive masculinity (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 22). In an introduction to how the concept of class intersects with masculinity, Morgan made a number of very pertinent remarks about the symbolism of class struggle:

Representations of class struggle and class differences traditionally drew from masculine imagery. Although the rhetoric might refer to ‘working people’, the representations of the working class frequently included masculine symbols (such as the
hammer or clenched fists) and emphasized collective solidarity. At the very least, such representations of solidarity dissolved gender differences in a large class identity and frequently went further than this to convey collective, embodied masculinity. The language was the language of struggle, of class war and conflict. (Morgan 2005, 170)

The primary embodied ritual of class struggle is the raised fist of the mass meeting, which is used by all the student organizations at Turfloop in combination with the struggle shout ‘Amandla!’ Furthermore, three of the student organizations also have a clenched fist or a hammer as a part of their logo. Meanwhile, the very idea of working class symbolism in a university setting is in a way contradictory. The working class symbolism draws on a masculinity that is collective, physical, embodied and oppositional, while the very educational process that the individual male student is going through is most likely to make his performance of masculinity much more individualistic and relatively disembodied. Obviously, this could be said about left-wing-inspired student activism in any university campus across the globe; and the collective activism may be linked to what Lipset has called protest-proneness related to how students are treated by universities everywhere (Lipset quoted in Dawson 2006, 279). Similarly, Nkomo has pointed out that students are likely to protest when there is a radical discrepancy between the worldview of students and that of the political authorities (Nkomo quoted in Dawson 2006, 280). In the case of students at Turfloop one could also argue that the students are professionals in the making, although they have come from impoverished working-class backgrounds. Their immediate outlook is thus determined more by the social position that they came from than the one they are likely to take up in the future if they manage to leave the university as degree holders, Yet, this is not very likely considering that the university had a graduation rate of only 11% at undergraduate level and 8% at master’s level in 2004 (DoE 2005, 30).

Incidentally, the fact that student politics drew so heavily on discourses of the struggle against apartheid and the necessity of class struggle almost entirely marginalized the position of women in the struggle matrix. Male student politicians at Turfloop generally see themselves as being much more rational and in control of their emotions than their female counterparts. Among the Pedi, the ethnic group to whom the majority of students belong, fearlessness in men has always been a celebrated virtue as documented in the classical monograph written by Mönnig:

The Pedi have a well-known proverb in praise of men who control their emotions, saying: *Monna ke nku, o llela teng* – the man is like a sheep, he cries inside – which refers to the fact that sheep make no noise when slaughtered, for which they are
greatly admired and which makes them highly desired sacrificial animals. (Mönnig 1967, 14, original emphasis)

In the same vein informants kept telling me that ‘real men don’t cry’ and that it would be highly emasculating for them to be caught crying. When speaking of politics, male students often claim that women do not have the mental capacity to stay cool, remain objective and in essence make sound judgments. In an informal discussion with one of the male representatives of the student council I was told that ‘the girls are too emotional’ and that ‘they cry in the boardrooms’. Clearly, in this account of gender the faculty of reason was equated with being male. While male students thus tend to assume a strong connection between rationality and masculinity (very similar to the connection identified by Seidler [1987] in Western Europe since the Enlightenment), this did not prevent them from engaging in heated and highly embodied protests, when they themselves did not get their way in the boardrooms, as was the case in October 2007.

Turfloop on fire

The University of Limpopo made it into the news for all the wrong reasons in late 2007. An article published in The Mail & Guardian in October 2007, entitled: ‘Institution of unsolvable problems’, stated that the University of Limpopo was ‘on the brink of collapse’. The actual occasion was the release of a report of an independent assessor submitted to the Minister of Education, which launched a damning critique of financial administration, human resource management, academic planning, governance and management at the university (Khoapa 2007). As the third investigative report of its kind into the university’s affairs in a period of eight years, the report reinforced public opinion in South Africa that the institution was crumbling beyond repair. Another article published in City Press on 14 October 2007 entitled: ‘University of Limpopo finances a shambles’ opened with a blunt observation: ‘The merged University of Limpopo is a mismanaged and maladministered financial time-bomb surviving on overdraft facilities’. Students and academics circulated photocopies of these news items, and while academics feared for their jobs, students became more and more infuriated. January 2007 had already seen a registration crisis, as students learned that tuition fees had increased by approximately 20% when they came back after Christmas to enroll for another term. In view of the provincial context of poverty, the increase in tuition fees posed a huge challenge for most students, and some had to stay at home during the first term on this account. For those who actually struggled and managed to meet the new fees, it seemed odd that the University was again close to bankruptcy. Given that the independent assessor’s report pointed out that both the top management team and the council lacked capacity and were deemed ‘considerably weak’, PASMA called for the entire council and executive manage-
ment to be expelled. Tensions thus kept brewing in the student community in October 2007, where rumours were now circulating that another rise in tuition fees was on its way. Furthermore, the PASMA and their alliance partner, the Student Christian Organization (SCO), claimed that the results of elections for the Student Representative Council in 2007 were rigged so as to bring to power the ANC Youth League, which was believed to be more supportive of the Vice-Chancellor. There was an angry atmosphere on campus, where revolutionary memos were circulated in the morning, with mass meetings being held at noon, and protest marches and ‘toyi-toyiing’ (which is an apartheid era protest style of dancing and chanting) starting in the afternoon. Management realized that riots were about to erupt and therefore brought the police on to campus, but that did not stop the turmoil. That month saw the most hectic student riots at Turfloop campus in recent times: cars and tyres were burned; stones were thrown through windows at the main library and the administration block; entrance buildings were set alight; and groups of students fought armed police officers by throwing stones. At one point a group of 300 mainly male students tried to force its way through to the main administrative building in order to ‘remove the Vice-Chancellor’, as they said, by physically chasing him out of his office. Several police vans had been called in advance and chains of police officers prevented the students from getting through to the entrance of the administration building. The students aimed not only to remove the Vice-Chancellor, but also to chase away the security guards employed by the private firm, Urban Security. At around 8 pm on 31 October 2007, I could see flashes of blue light from the overwhelming presence of the police who were pouring on to the campus in huge vehicles. It was the last night of my fieldwork at Turfloop, and I was taking a walk around campus to witness how groups of mainly male student protesters were touring all over the area throwing stones and using petrol and tyres to set Turfloop on fire. Whenever a police van arrived and armed police officers started chasing the students, they split into smaller groups and vanished into different student houses and residences. One of the main gates, which had been abandoned by Urban Security guards amidst threats to their own safety, was set on fire. When the fire brigade drove two vehicles towards the fire to try to control it, they were showered with stones and had to abandon their mission. Many student protesters had run into the central and partly-fenced female student residential area named after Abram Onkgopotse Tiro. Garbage containers were set on fire and students took refuge behind them and threw stones at the police officers, who were gradually moving closer and closer. The student residential area had now emerged as the central battleground, and the police began to fire rubber bullets. For safety reasons I decided to go back to my room at this point, and I have to rely on other sources to develop an idea of what transpired thereafter.

That night one female student was shot and ended up in the intensive care unit of the provincial hospital (Daily Sun, 13 November 2007; The Citizen, 2 November 2007). A further 204 students were arrested by the police, and damage to property amounted to
R600,000 (€53,000) (The Citizen, 8 November 2007). Student leaders used the media attention to highlight the fact that ‘millions of Rands are unaccounted for on this campus’ and urged the Minister of Education to intervene (The Citizen, 8 November 2007). The morning following the dramatic events, a communiqué was issued by the Vice-Chancellor to the university community noting the ‘disruptive and anarchical behavior of some students’ and explaining how the Executive Management had requested the assistance of the South African Police Services ‘in the interest of restoring and maintaining stability on campus’. The communiqué then listed 30 male student leaders that the University Management had suspended and expelled from the campus. It further advised the student community not to hide any of the listed male students in the residences and threatened that those contravening this instruction would also be ‘summarily expelled’.

This description of contemporary events at Turfloop is thus remarkably similar to the historical reports of the dramatic events that took place on campus during the height of the apartheid crisis years. The toyi-toyiing and the violent protests described and analysed in this article must therefore be taken seriously as an embodied resistance against the structural inequalities that continue to mar post-apartheid South Africa. From a gender perspective it is noteworthy that the male student politicians are quick to engage with the legacy of the struggle against apartheid in promoting a radical attitude, which succeeds at the same time in furthering a notion of masculinity that pivots around the hegemony of the liberation hero seen exclusively as a male subject. This is so even though the ANC Women’s League, which was founded in 1943, boasts a proud struggle history that includes among other highlights the women’s strike in 1956. Women in the liberation movement, however, have continued to derive their status more from their roles relative to men as mothers, wives and sisters rather than as political actors in their own right (see Unterhalter 2000, 166–167). In the conclusion I wish to tease out the implications this might have for an understanding of masculine hegemonies in an environment marked by a recent liberation struggle.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to understand the ways in which student politicians ‘do gender’ (to paraphrase West and Zimmerman 1987) in the specific context of a former black university in the South African periphery. Such an approach subscribes to the idea that gendered differences and inequality ‘are constantly negotiated and recreated more or less in repeated interactions, but [that] no interaction is identical’ (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 44). The present analysis has paid attention to the ways in which gendered identities and discourses are entangled in struggle history and how this complex of meanings are used by male student politicians jockeying for power and position at the Student Representative Council. It also shows how this allows for the struggle against apartheid to be
re-enacted at Turfloop campus, a place and space that is in itself enmeshed in a total symbolism of the struggle against apartheid. So even though the students are now demonstrating against a black Vice-Chancellor and a black government in a politically reshaped society, they still resort to embodied forms of resistance and protest such as the toyi-toyiing and violent protests described above.

These findings speak to the nuanced criticisms of Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinities that stress the dangers of treating gendered identities in a categorical way that seals off gender from other social forces and pays only scant attention to the specific socio-cultural context (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, Wetherell and Edley 1999). Others have rightly pointed out that ‘as studies of men and masculinities continue to deconstruct the gendering of men and masculinities, other social divisions, such as age, class and disability, come more to the fore and are seen as more important’ (Connell et al. 2003, 3). In one way such an intersected reading of social divisions is validated by the empirical findings presented in this article, but in another way the ethnographic material points beyond the social divisions or categories traditionally found in the sociologist’s theoretical toolbox. If, as social scientists, we really want to grasp the complexities of lived lives, we need to take a closer look at the multiple and overlapping discourses that inform the practices of social actors. The existence of hegemonic discourses must be qualified and demonstrated through nitty-gritty descriptions of how meanings are invested and interpreted by acting social agents rather than taken for granted. If one follows Gramsci’s thinking (as does Connell), hegemonic ideologies preserve, legitimate and naturalize the interests of the powerful (Wetherell and Edley 1999, 536). But in view of the analysis presented above it would seem as if struggle discourse is where the real hegemony is located in the Limpopo context, since the masculine discourses are by and large subsumed under or entangled in struggle discourse. This understanding resonates with Hearn’s rethinking of the relationship between the concepts of masculinity and hegemony (Hearn 2004). In brief, Hearn suggests that the focus on hegemonic masculinity is too restricted and that its uses have been too narrow, because it centres on reified notions of masculinity rather than on men. Hearn therefore argues for the need ‘to look critically at the ordinary, taken-for-granted-accepted dominant constructions, powers and authorities of men’ in order to address the formation of a dominant category of men (Hearn 2004, 59). In the case of student politics at the University of Limpopo, the deconstruction of the taken-for-granted struggle discourse became more important than a focus on masculinity in and by itself. Returning to the calls made for intersectional readings of gender with other social divisions, it becomes apparent that other social forces or hegemonic discourses may not necessarily comply with the constructs or concepts of gender theory, but may instead have to be grasped through a situational analysis on the ground. By firmly situating the study of male actors in a socio-cultural context in a given time and place such as that of the Turfloop campus of the University of Limpopo it thus became possible
to identify the interplay between the hegemony of the struggle and the political aspirations of young men claiming to be ready to fight to the last drop of their blood.

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