Faith, Space and Selfhood in East London 'Youth Gang' Culture[1]

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This article focuses on the role of religion in Serious Youth Violence (SYV)/gang interventions in contemporary Newham, East London. We examine the work of a Pentecostal Christian charity, Teaching Against Gangs (TAG), and the ways in which its founder, Sheldon Thomas, crafts the subjectivities of his young charges (primarily young men aged between 13 and 25) by appealing to notions of space and separate spheres. Rather than relying on a radical break between sacred and profane, Thomas' strategies, we argue, set up an opposition between the 'community' and 'The Road'. He posits salvation as something to be realised in the here and now, via legal income streams. Relatedly, the young people he reaches out to — his 'subjects of intervention' — are cast as naïve and deluded, with societal structures and racial politics ranged against them. As former gang members, agents of intervention (like Thomas) chart their own ongoing path to redemption, their selfhood forged in relation to those they seek to rehabilitate.
Key words: Gangs, Intervention, Pentecostalism, Serious Youth Violence, Space

Introduction

Be it the stake in conformity or 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 the 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 use 're-integrative 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. Our analysis focuses on the work of Pentecostal Christian charity, Teaching Against Gangs (henceforth, TAG). We draw on the findings of ethnographic fieldwork to examine how TAG's founder, Sheldon Thomas (henceforth, ST), seeks to combat Serious Youth Violence (henceforth, 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. We briefly survey the extant literature on religion and gang-related crime, before considering the methods employed in the research and the settings in which TAG interventions were staged. Then, we examine in detail the strategies

and realities of the interventions themselves. A reflection on the utility of religious values and rituals in the work of TAG and its attempts to prevent SYV/gang violence follows.

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 2008). 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] 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] 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] Such interventions, however well intentioned, raise many issues.

Apart from pointing to the basic contradiction between Pentecostalism's rhetoric of 'freedom' and its ascetic codes (O'Neill 2011, Pine 2008), commentators have noted its 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). Young men in the space of liminality may be encouraged

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[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.

[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.

[4] These criticisms draw on wider debates about structure and agency and whether the former — patterned and/or institutionalised arrangements and assemblages which delimit human action — or the latter — the ability of individuals to act independently — has primacy in shaping human behaviour (Giddens 1976).

to forgo extreme acts of *machismo* (such as street violence and domestic abuse), but do so in exchange for the less exaggerated masculine dominance in the household — or, in other words, the privileges of so-called 'soft patriarchy' (Wilcox 2007). Interestingly, some researchers have praised this adaptation of masculinity because it facilitates 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 hyper-masculine 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). However, the use of an alternative strategy — labelled 'disintegrative shaming' — in mainstream institutions such as schools and prisons has 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. A faith-based child sponsorship programme for young people imperilled by gang violence in La Paloma, Guatemala, 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 — in order (ideally) to produce 'a subject through a series of confessional images and imperatives' (O'Neill 2013: 218). Self-cultivation was not 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 (O'Neill 2013: 205).

The separation of public and private spheres is an important criterion in a number of interventions. Wolseth (2008: 96) notes how in Honduras 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 their enduring engagement with the local Pentecostal community. 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, and so on), that such individuals risk becoming the target of gang violence (O'Neill 2013). Interestingly, this amounts to converts not only policing themselves but effectively being policed by gang members. Such a curious dynamic relies on a kind of vicarious religiosity on the part of gang members; in order for them to recognise departures from religious codes, these codes have 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 becoming unsafe and levels of civic participation (particularly among young people) dropping 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 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, the exploited and the oppressed — these might be migrants, manual labourers and low-level merchants — because of the compensation it offered 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's 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 the wider society encourages this way of thinking. If this was in any way radical it was also quintessentially personal.[5]

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[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).

Settings and Method

The research described in what follows took place between 2011 and 2013 in the east London Borough of Newham (henceforth 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 (Office of National Statistics 2011). It is also the second most diverse in terms of the ethnicity of its residents. According to the 2011 Census, 29 per cent of Newham's estimated 307,000 population is White (16.7 per cent White British, 0.7 per cent White Irish, 0.2 per cent Gypsy or Irish Traveller and 11.4 per cent Other White), 4.6 per cent is of mixed race (1.3 per cent White and Black Caribbean, 1.1 per cent White and Black African, 0.9 per cent White and Asian and 1.3 per cent Other Mixed), 43.5 per cent is Asian (13.8 per cent Indian, 12.21 per cent Bangladeshi, 9.8 per cent Pakistani, 1.3 per cent Chinese and 6.5 per cent Other Asian), 19.6 per cent is Black (12.3 per cent African, 4.9 per cent Caribbean and 2.4 per cent Other Black), 1.1 per cent is Arab and 2.3 per cent is of other ethnic heritage. With the highest fertility rate in the country (LBN 2014), this incredibly diverse population is set to grow rapidly in coming years. In terms of religion, the population of Newham is 40.0 per cent Christian, 32 per cent Muslim, 9.3 per cent No religion, 8.8 per cent Hindu, 2.1 per cent Sikh, 0.8 per cent Buddhist and 0.1 per cent Jewish, with the borough being home to some 35 mosques, 26 Anglican churches, 16 Baptist churches, 12 Catholic parishes and four synagogues. In this setting there were an estimated 300 young men whose association and activities were of concern to police and the local authorities. Many of their behaviours were classified as 'anti-social'; their most destructive behaviours had resulted in serious wounding and death (normally, following knife attacks). Some had discharged guns in street disorders. 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 youth involved in SYV/gang activity arrived in London as child migrants. Years later they sought to 'defend' a neighbourhood with which they had no connection beyond their lifespan. Violent encounters between the young men who populated the Metropolitan Police Service's database of SYV/gang 'nominals' had a rationale imputed to them by various outsiders. A glib argument proposed that these incidents were about 'postcodes'; that is, antagonism rooted in the place of residence and in convenient notions of boundary defence and transgression synonymous with the sorting codes of the Royal Mail. In truth, no one spoken with in our 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 these youth did not attach the same significance to these places and did not 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.

We adopted an ethnographic approach combining observation, participant observation and in-depth interviews (Prato and Pardo 2013, O'Reilly 2011, Venkatesh 2008). In the instances that follow, we secured access through TAG. ST played a key role in this. 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 us with a passport to areas and encounters not easily accessible to the multiple agencies which set out to address the issue. We are white males with a generation separating our ages. While relatively well-versed in inner-city London life as a result of part-time employment as youth workers and sports coaches, we recognised our 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, Prato and Pardo 2013). Ethnography is particularly relevant as a methodology to facilitate an understanding of marginalised communities (Kearns and 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 and Williams 2005, Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009). 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 and pragmatic, and relied on a powerful narrative.

Agency and Structure
Beginning life in 2007, the 'Gangsline', a 24 hour helpline for youth 'gang' members and people worried about the involvement of friends or family members in youth gang-related activity, metamorphosed two years later into TAG. TAG sought to reach youths involved in a life of drugs, guns and knife crime with messages of hope derived from the Gospels and channelled through the messages of Pentecostal Christianity.[6] This faith was most evident in ST's phone and face-to-face conversations which were smattered with words such as 'bred'

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[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.

(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. They 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. The training programmes did not follow a set format and its curriculum was delivered in diverse settings to individuals or groups. Sessions were adapted 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 using his major strengths of articulacy and charisma. Because of speeches he delivered at conferences addressing youth offending in the capital, he was approached and contracted by both local government officials and Metropolitan Police Service (henceforth, 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 who at times accompanied ST or worked in pairs on designated home visits were 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' TAG worker. Whatever defined a 'gang' in contemporary London, the reality of death and 'gang-related' activity 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 addressing this problem required more than policing, some officers tasked with a SYV/gang remit were humble enough to seek outside assistance and information on a culture and phenomenon about which, many admitted to us, they knew little.

'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] According to the Mayor of London,[8] 250 youth gangs — together comprising 4,800 individuals — were active in the capital in 2012.[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] The governance of 'gang' crime was thus crucial, and deserves far greater analysis than is possible here.[11] 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 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' (that is, involved in both the entrepreneurial activities of gang life and the concomitant violence such enterprises demanded). These collectives operated in 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-twenties. Those categorised by both gangs and police as 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'. They were also presumed capable of more grievous forms of

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[7] These '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. Having started 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).

[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 the 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).

[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*.

[10] These personnel also face fundamental issues relating to the definition of gangs and consequently gang membership and gang crime (Esbenson et al. 2001).

[11] For an extended analysis see Hobbs (1997), Hallsworth and Brotherton (2011), and Armstrong et al. (2016).

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. Although ST often staged his discussions and workshops in a hired room located 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 also 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 4.30pm on a wet Thursday afternoon in February 2012, six young black men sit with ST around a table in the meeting room of the Methodist church complex. 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 where 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 nearby streets 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 his street-based 'outreach' work, which sees him drive around various neighbourhoods and talk with groups of teenage boys and young adult men stationed on street corners. Having obtained the mobile phone numbers of various key players, he was able to get those now gathered to attend the meeting at the appointed time and place. 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 is not 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)[12] 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. 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 arrived late), only two have a job providing regular and decent income. The rest are scraping an income through the street-level selling of drugs — small weights of marijuana and 'wraps' of crack cocaine. One moment of humour is provided when ST asks all present whether they are 'On the Road'. One latecomer to the gathering, not fully understanding the thrust of the question, explains by way of response that he is actually 'On the Rail'; he works full-time for a rail transport franchise! He combines the 35-hour per week position with a leisure-time associated with the Beckton Boys. [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 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 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 the violence occasioned by these activities did not impress the speaker, who adds:

'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

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[12] 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.

[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.

other things, they did diamonds. They said I could work for them and — hear me out — they said to me, "you bring «heat» (that is, 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 could then be transported by those from yet another area — in a sense, a four-way business model where everybody involved wins; that is, makes money from the enterprise.

Following this creative interlude, ST launches into a discussion of income and the potential for custodial sentences. Going round the table he asks everyone present if they are currently making money. They all laugh at the question: 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 is then discussed. The street-corner drug market requires some 12 hours on duty which entails making oneself available until the early hours. The business also calls 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 is violence, but not all possess the resources, capability or desire needed for summary retribution. ST then tells them that they are working for maybe half the national minimum wage and suffer taxation rates on their income through drug sales — at times — as high of 100 per cent. If this is a business model, it has no future.

While on the topic of income, ST asks rhetorically, 'How will you make money in the future? Do you fancy being broke at 23? There's so much "beef" (that is, 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 tells them of a business model which requires three things of them: they have to commit to accept week-by-week help, join the TAG programme and 'work with what you've got'. The latter commitment requires those in school to study, those out of school to consider business opportunities and 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 is raised with a new dimension offered. ST explains: '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 is brought home as Asa explains that the problem is their Woodgrange equivalents.[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.'

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[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'. This 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.

The ensuing silence is again broken by ST, who looking around the room asks, '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.'

ST implores the youngsters to divert their resources into family life. Their current endeavours, he explains, are destined to flounder or fail. Legitimate revenue streams would be more lucrative. They already possess the means to be successful. What is required is a reappraisal of methods and priorities. To 'put the community above self' is a not only virtuous commitment but holds the prospect of acquiring status in the wider community. Conscientiousness would secure such an elevated status and, consequently, material betterment. This is salvation in the here and now.

Before the group depart, ST exhorts them to come again and 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 on all that they hold sacred. His closing word of 'Amen' is repeated by all eight, who 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 the 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 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 to the aforementioned meeting:

> '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.'

This knowledge was crucial in acquiring the listeners' respect. ST's stories 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 of his own experiences as a 'serious' gangster. This device was used to sketch the lines 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 marked an ongoing road to redemption. ST's sermons 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 with whom ST dealt 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 that many of the local teenage boys with whom TAG worked knew the location well as 'They once came here as little kids on Sunday mornings, dragged by their Mums.' Their refusal to attend church as teenagers was not prompted by an alternative belief system but by the view 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 as integral to the work of TAG as it was to the ambitions of those it challenged. In a conversation we had after the described session, 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 MAC10 £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 having for years engaged in attempts to change mind-sets, ST was forthright in explaining what he saw as familial deficiencies and their consequences:

'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…'

In attempting to refashion the subjectivities of the young men who listened to his talk, ST also reinforced his own identity as rehabilitator and rehabilitated. Teenagers involved in SYV were usually fatherless, deluded, naïve and in many ways inexperienced, and they struggled to reconnect with a faith they last encountered as children. Rather than challenging the societal structures which saw young black males born and raised in marginal areas of the city, often in 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 entrepreneurship is consistent with the teachings of Pentecostalism. The road to salvation is reminiscent of debates surrounding the Pentecostal movement. By encouraging relinquishing gang activity through religious conversion, Pentecostalism offers young men the chance to trade the hyper-masculinity SYV/gangs for the 'soft patriarchy' of heterosexual domesticity. This is 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 immediate reality took precedence over contemplation; ST used words rather than religious texts, realising that in interventions of this nature quoting psalms and parables was a waste of time. Thus, TAG meetings 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. Business opportunities could be pursued which were not only legal but broadly consistent with Pentecostal values. By making the most of their skills — 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 this article, 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.

Constantly stressing the racial politics of both organised crime and the 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 enterprise 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] 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 the latter pursue legal, sustainable opportunities and cultivate deep and enduring relationships.

Conclusion: A Place on Earth
The efficacy of the work of TAG — and ultimately, of ST's words — 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 wanted from these young men also required alternatives to scripture for the recalcitrant; enforcement (the application of criminal charges in the pursuit of convictions and in many cases custodial sentences) was therefore a 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 U.K. 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

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[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 from white preacher Charles Parnham the doctrine that glossolalia (or speaking in tongues) was evidence of a Christian being infused with the Holy Spirit. 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. Although 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.

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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