



Black Masculinities on Trial in Absentia: The Case of Oscar Pistorius in South Africa

Men and Masculinities

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Abstract

This article explores the social representation of black masculinities as violent in the globally publicized case of the murder by Oscar Pistorius of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. This murder and the subsequent media interest it generated highlighted the manner in which fear of crime in South Africa, particularly amongst certain sectors of the population such as white, male gun owners and gun lobbyists, (including Pistorius and his family members) contributed to assertions about their right to own guns to defend their families and possessions against this perceived threat. Such claims were made despite statistical evidence showing that black South Africans are more likely to be victims of violent crime than white South Africans. Drawing upon media coverage of the trial, this article critically discusses the intersection between masculinity and racial identity with a particular focus on gun ownership as a symbol of hegemonic white manhood, and the parallel construction of black masculinities as violent and dangerous. The Oscar Pistorius trial offers rich material for this analysis: his entire defence was based on the view that the intruder he feared was almost certainly a black man who, as a legitimate target for the use of lethal force in self-defence, deserved to die from the four bullets fired through a closed door. It is argued that in his absence, the black man was ever-present at the

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Oscar Pistorius trial as a threatening figure whose calling into being was revealing of how black masculinities continue to be represented, relayed and received in particular ways in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords

hegemonic masculinity, identity, law enforcement, patriarchy, violence

This article aims to illustrate how particular representations or forms of masculinity were (re)produced through public involvement with the Oscar Pistorius trial, which engaged both South African and international audiences in intense and complex ways. While the case evoked public and academic analyses on a range of topics, including gender-based violence, disability, and interpretations of law, we seek to elaborate how material related to the trial is illustrative of particular racialized constructions of South African masculinity. The Oscar Pistorius case provides powerful evidence of the unremitting stereotypical constructions of black and white masculine identities through inferences relating to power and oppression and perpetration and victimization. Emblematic in media commentaries on the trial was the figure of “the darkie [*sic*] behind the door” (Orford 2014, p. 9)—the imagined intruder into the home of Oscar Pistorius, both hypothetical attacker and hypothetical victim, whose haunting presence raised many questions about the recalcitrantly racialized nature of class and gender relations in contemporary South Africa.

To give some background to the arguments laid out here, a brief synopsis of some of the main features of the Oscar Pistorius case and trial is presented. On February 14, 2013, in the early hours of the morning, Oscar Pistorius, an internationally renowned Paralympic athlete, shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, in his home. Pistorius admitted to firing the shots that killed her but claimed that he had mistakenly believed that the person behind the toilet door, through which he fired four shots at close range, was an intruder. This was his key defense in his trial for the murder of Steenkamp. In September 2014, Pistorius was convicted of culpable homicide as well as an additional charge of reckless endangerment related to accidentally discharging a firearm in a restaurant (*The State v. Oscar Pistorius*),¹ but he was found not guilty of murder. He received a maximum five-year sentence from the judge. During a later appeal in December 2015,² Pistorius was found guilty of murder by the Supreme Court of Appeal on the basis of *dolus eventualis*, indicative of the fact that the judges believed that, based on his actions at the time, he should have foreseen the likelihood of killing someone, irrespective of the identity of the person behind the door. He was sentenced to six years in prison for murder. Much of the initial trial was broadcast live and attracted global attention from a wide range of commentators.

During the trial, the prosecution sought to prove that the shooting of Steenkamp was intentional, highlighting a past history of aggressive and reckless behavior (particularly with regard to firearms) and a tendency toward abusiveness in his relationships with women including Steenkamp. Despite their lack of success in convincing the judge of their case, this presentation of Pistorius was widely endorsed by the general public. Largely because of his celebrated status as a global icon, Pistorius enjoyed considerable idealization. In overcoming his disability, he came to epitomize much of what might be associated with a particular form of desired hegemonic masculinity: competing and succeeding in sporting activities, securing a modeling contract and endorsements from top sporting brands, driving a sports car, being partnered by beautiful women, and being accepted into a masculinized group of friends and associates including club “bouncers” (Connell 2005). He was also proficient in the use of firearms. Alongside this, Pistorius was also represented as loyal to family members and as a role model for other disabled athletes and young people. Consequently, his fall from grace was highly charged and hotly debated. Somewhat ironically, however, in many respects his defense required that he represents himself in counterhegemonic ways as a man who was frightened, physically inadequate, emotionally weakened, panicked, and victimized. As will be evident, the Oscar Pistorius case thus highlights two interesting inversions of constructions of masculinity. The first is the much feared hypothetical black perpetrator behind the door, who in this instance becomes the victim or target of an overzealous self-defense shooting; the other, a white perpetrator whose actions needed to be understood in the context of being a victim of his own diminished capabilities. In unpacking some of the background and associations to aspects of the Pistorius trial, we hope to reveal something of the perverse nature of stereotypic constructions of racialized masculinities.

The Climate of Crime and Violence in South Africa

Interpersonal violence is among the top ten leading causes of death in South Africa. It is the second leading cause of death for males in the country (Bradshaw et al. 2004; Pillay-van Wyk et al. 2016). Approximately half of the 52,493 injury-related deaths in 2009 resulted from violence. The 34 per 100,000 people murdered in 2015–2016 in South Africa represents a homicide rate five times the global average (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2014). During the early years of the political transition from apartheid to democracy, there was a dramatic surge in violent crime, with homicides peaking in 1995 at 67 per 100,000 (Seedat et al. 2009). Since 2000, there has been a steady drop in several violent crime categories, with murder showing the most significant decrease (Bradshaw et al. 2004; Louw 2006; South African Police Service [SAPS] 2011). However, over the past four years, there has been a steady increase in violent crime categories such as murder, armed robbery, and assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. For example, the murder rate increased from a low of 15,554 murders in 2011–2012 to 18,673 in 2015–2016,

an overall increase of 19.5 percent (SAPS 2015–2016). The number of aggravated robberies increased from 100,769 in 2011–2012 to 132,527 in 2015–2016 (an increase of 31.5 percent over this period, that is, eighty-eight more armed attacks every day). It is clear that crime in South Africa is a serious social problem and that levels of violent crime are of particular concern. The 2015–2016 Victims of Crime Survey reports that of all weapons used to commit crime and violence, South Africans fear guns the most. It also notes that South Africans are being robbed in their homes more than being killed or assaulted. Fear of being attacked extends beyond the home, with the survey noting a “noticeable decline” (Statistics South Africa 2017, 2) in people’s feelings of safety when walking alone around their areas of residence.

Firearms play a significant role in the perpetration of violence in South Africa. It is reported, for example, that criminals are increasingly more heavily armed when committing certain crimes, such as car and truck hijackings, and house and business robberies (Bruce 2014). Furthermore, young men (mainly young black men) are disproportionately engaged in violence, both as perpetrators and as victims, with the highest homicide rates found in men aged fifteen to twenty-nine years (184 per 100,000). Although gun deaths have halved since the introduction of the Firearms Control Act (FCA) in 2000, gun violence remains a significant threat, with sixteen to eighteen people shot and killed daily.

Within the context of this intersection between firearm use and South African masculinity, it is interesting to examine constructions of black and white masculinity with regard to the perpetration of violence, including understandings of the deployment of weaponry and guns in the perpetration of and protection against crime. The Oscar Pistorius case reveals, among other aspects, the intersection between race and the politics of gun ownership, serving to expose enduring associations between white and middle-class masculinity and certain kinds of entitlements in dealing with “the scourge” of violent crime, both explicitly and implicitly viewed as perpetrated ubiquitously by black men.

The Reemergence of a *Swart Gevaar*³ Consciousness and Related Responses

It is important to reiterate that violent crime affects everyone in South Africa, irrespective of class, race, or gender, although some people are more vulnerable to it than others due to living and working in “at risk” areas (Bruce 2014; Silber and Geffen 2009). Crime statistics and crime victim surveys confirm that townships and informal settlements are characterized by high levels of violent crime, with aggravated street robberies being particularly common. A study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR, 2009) found that there was a strong link between aggravated street robberies and murder. The township of Nyanga in the Western Cape (home to predominantly black, working-class residents) was found to have one of the highest murder rates in the country (300 murders

in 2014–2015), with Inanda in KwaZulu-Natal (with a similar race and class composition) posting almost 180 murders in the same period (SAPS 2015–2016). Contrast this with the six murders reported for the same period at the Boschkop police station for the 2014–2015 period, the station at which Steenkamp's death was registered in February 2013. The figures show that black people in townships and informal settlements are more adversely affected by crime than their white counterparts in suburbs, despite the dominant public discourse that suggests that it is middle-class citizens who are most at risk of crime. Although there are reasonably equivalent rates of housebreaking and property crime in “white” and “black” suburbs—for example, 346 residential burglaries reported in Boschkop compared to 391 such burglaries in Alexandra township (both situated in Gauteng province)—contact crimes, such as robbery with aggravating circumstances and assault, are much higher in historically black townships: about 715 such robberies recorded in Alexandra in 2015–2016 as compared to 125 in Boschkop (SAPS 2015–2016). These kinds of patterns are not dissimilar to those observed in other parts of the world, where violent crime tends to affect working-class and inner-city communities far more than it does wealthier communities.

In South Africa, the wealthy can afford to pay for private security and deterrents such as alarms, closed-circuit television, and electric fencing. Bruce (2014) argues that policing resources and practices also tend to be better in middle-class suburbs than in townships and informal settlements. For example, Harare in Khayelitsha (a black township) has one police officer for just over 1,700 people (with 164 murders in 2013–2014 financial year) compared to Claremont (a wealthy white suburb in the same region), which has one police officer for every 281 people (with 0 murders recorded in that year; O'Regan and Pikoli 2014).

Despite this evidence, many white South Africans still “racialize” the problem of crime, arguing that whites are disproportionately the victims of violent crime at the hands of black perpetrators (Lemanski 2004; Silber and Geffen 2009). For example, Steve Hofmeyr, a well-known Afrikaans singer, was quoted in the media as alleging that “white people are being killed like flies in South Africa at the hands of black criminals” (Brodie 2013, p. 3). His main argument was that the African National Congress (ANC)-led government is failing to protect white South Africans against violent crime. In another example, Brandon Huntley, a white male, was in 2009 granted asylum in Canada based on the argument that white South Africans are disproportionately affected by crime in South Africa. He asserted in his asylum application that “the ANC government was failing to protect the white minority from criminal violence perpetrated by black South Africans” (Silber and Geffen 2009, 35). Some of these views featured in the Oscar Pistorius trial when his father, Henke Pistorius, was quoted in the media as allegedly saying that “crime speaks to the ANC government, look at white crime levels, why protection is so poor in this country. It is the lawlessness in this country that has forced my son to arm himself” (Adams 2013, p. 2). It is evident that links between race, perceived threat, the

deployment of weapons, and certain expressions of masculinity are established within these kinds of public assertions, often further linked to patriarchal tropes of the need for (white) men to protect (their) women and children against external violation.

Fear of crime is a major concern for many South Africans and translates into attitudinal and behavioral correlates such as restricted movement after dark (Bruce 2014). Fear of crime is one of the most commonly cited reasons given for gun ownership (Altbeker et al. 2000). Ostensibly, guns are bought for self-defense and to protect families. However, research in South Africa indicates that gun ownership does not guarantee safety and that guns are four times more likely to be stolen than to be used in effective self-defense (Altbeker et al. 2000). Furthermore, stolen firearms are often used in the commission of further crimes (Lamb 2008). These findings are in keeping with international literature that indicates that owning a gun is not a protective but rather a risk factor for suicide, accidental death, and murder (Duquet and Van Alstein 2015; Van Kesteren 2014). This confirms the recent work by Matzopoulos, Thompson, and Myers (2014) that lower rates of gun ownership lead to lower gun deaths including cases of women being killed with a firearm in domestic violence situations.

Guns as a Symbol of Manhood for White (Afrikaner) Men

Between 1961 and 1993, military service was compulsory for all white men in South Africa. Conway (2012, 59) argues that serving in the military not only gave white men the opportunity to protect and defend apartheid (and to defend their wives and children against the *swart gevaar*) but also provided them with the opportunity to attain a “good sense of manhood.” Conscription was seen as a “manly rite of passage” (Conway 2012, 59). The relationship between compulsory military service and the social construction of a particular form of hegemonic masculinity has been well-documented in other South African studies (Cock 2001; Conway 2012). During this period, the Afrikaner male identity, which had been associated for decades with guns, power, and authority, became entrenched. The 1969 Arms and Ammunition Act, a typical piece of apartheid-era legislation, was geared toward enabling whites to legally acquire weapons. For example, there was no limit to the number of guns any individual could own, and legal gun ownership was allowed from the age of sixteen years. Black South Africans, however, were not allowed to own a licensed gun. Gun ownership was seen as very much part of Afrikaner culture and in many respects a familiarity with firearms became a symbol of what it meant to be an Afrikaner male (Cock 2001). Eugene Terre’Blanche, a revered political leader within the Afrikaner right wing, was quoted as saying “the boer and his gun are inseparable” (Cock 2001, 47). The implication in his statement was that any Afrikaner man who does not own or carry a gun is incomplete or unmanly. This sentiment was also strongly expressed by Constand Viljoen,⁴ leader of one of the opposition political parties, when the FCA was passed into law. He said, “An

Afrikaner's guns are second only to his wife." The status associated with gun ownership is not limited to white men, although it may be strongly associated with Afrikaner male identity in South Africa. Many young black men also associate guns with a sense of power (Cock 2001; Langa and Eagle 2008) and, in particular, imbue the AK-47 assault rifle and the armed wing of the ANC, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, with the distinction of having liberated South Africa from the oppressive apartheid regime. The meanings of gun ownership for both black men and white Afrikaner men are rooted within the history of South African society. However, it is apparent that the Oscar Pistorius trial surfaced the nexus between masculinity, race, and gun ownership in significant ways.

Between Pistorius, his father, two of his uncles, and his grandfather (all of white Afrikaner descent), it is alleged that the family owned fifty-five guns (Laing 2013). It was reported during his trial that Oscar Pistorius had ambitions to purchase more than eight guns, and he was described as someone who enjoyed going to the shooting range for target practice. During his trial, he admitted to having fired a weapon through the roof of his car while driving and of passing a loaded weapon to a friend in a restaurant, when the gun discharged. His preoccupation with firearm ownership and use need to be understood against the backdrop of waning white privilege in South Africa. Swart (2001) puts this aptly:

For decades, being white male meant being kept from poverty, with jobs in the traditional Afrikaner preserves like the mines, railways, the police, and the civil service being handed down from father to son. Now fathers are retrenched and the sons face competition from blacks in the workplace. (p. 78)

The dominant feeling among some white South Africans is that the political and legislative changes that have taken place since 1994, especially evident in policies related to affirmative action, black economic empowerment and employment regulation, amount to "reverse" racism. This has created considerable personal and social anxiety due to the perceived loss of accustomed privileges and power. However, in reality, it is not true that white people are losing their privileges or their jobs. Employment statistics as elaborated in the recent Commission for Employment Equity's 2016–2017 report shows that many workplaces are not yet transformed in terms of meeting employment equity requirements (Department of Labour 2016–2017). The unemployment rate still remains high among black people and many continue to live in abject poverty (Statistics South Africa 2015). While the argument that white South Africans are losing their privilege and have become increasingly disadvantaged is largely baseless, the racialized discourses commonly in circulation about the place and future of white men in South Africa tend to disguise continued relations of dominance and oppression along conventional lines in relation to race.

The perpetuation of white male dominance, against the backdrop of what many perceive to be inadequate shifts in race and class relations in South Africa, relies in

significant respects on foregrounding the place of white and middle-class men in manning the barricades against pervasive crime, coupled with persistent representations of black (and impoverished) men as the rapacious perpetrators thereof. The depiction of white South Africans as the primary victims of violent crime at the hands of black criminals seems to draw heavily on the notion of *swart gevaar* (translated as black threat or danger)—a trope that gained considerable purchase during apartheid and that entailed depicting black people as dangerous and violent threats to the white population (Jürgens and Gnad 2002). In the white imagination, it was the duty of white men to guard against this omnipresent possibility. The threat was viewed as both internal to the country, in the form of popular insurgency, and external, in the sense of coming from other parts of Africa and the world beyond South Africa's borders. Young white men conscripted into the military and police services under apartheid were told that their fight was aimed at protecting the country against "black activists who wanted to overthrow the government" (Conway 2012, 17). The *swart gevaar* discourse was also deployed and promoted during the apartheid era to justify state-sponsored violence against the majority of black people and was often coupled with the notion of *rooi gevaar* (red danger)—the fear of communist imperialism.

The post-1994 era presented a major challenge for many white people, leading to what Cock (2001) calls "transitional anxiety," represented in feelings of uncertainty, loss, displacement, and disorientation. Much of this anxiety has focused around fear of crime. For example, one of the main reasons cited for emigration in the post-transition period was the perception of the increased risk of becoming a victim of crime in the new South Africa (Marchetti-Mercer 2012). The *swaart gevaar* has reappeared in a new guise—that of the black home invader intent on robbery, rape, and murder. Max du Preez, a political journalist and author, was quoted at the time of the Pistorius trial as saying that white citizens' fear of crime "is tied in with the deep seated, subconscious feelings that we are the haves and the former oppressors . . . and you expect the people who have been oppressed to come back for us" (in Serino 2014, 1). He also observes that this anxiety is associated with the right to counter-aggression: "If I don't have the right to defend in my own home then what the hell is my freedom about, sort of thing" (Serino 2014, 1). As argued previously, these kinds of attitudes and discursive constructions foreground particular raced representations of masculinity in the personhood of both hypothetical attacker and hypothetical defender.

These kinds of discursive constructions were very much in evidence and reinstated during the Oscar Pistorius trial, which is in part why the case drew so much critical commentary (Serino 2014). Since Pistorius' key defense was that his shooting was justified in response to an imagined intruder, it is important to analyze this figure that featured so strongly in the trial—so foregrounded as a presence, yet also absent. Although the gender or race of the hypothetical intruder behind the toilet door was never explicitly discussed or raised during the trial, it is apparent that particular kinds of linguistic and spatial markers evoked associations that directed

the “audience” to the case to particular kinds of conclusions. For example, Pistorius made reference to the fact that there had been “workmen” (manual laborers) in his residential complex soon before the incident and that a “ladder” had been placed against one of the houses. Manual labor is conventionally performed by black men in South Africa such that these inferences were strongly suggestive of the form of the black male intruder/s in the public imagination. The kinds of constructions of the feared intruder who so powerfully elevated Pistorius’ sense of threat rely heavily on the racist stereotypes of what it means to be a young black male in South Africa (and elsewhere in the world) and are in large measure reinforced by crime statistics (despite the fact that, as noted previously, young black men are as likely to be victims as perpetrators).

The Black Man Is Always a Suspect

In the words of Biko (1978),

the black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure, and accepts what he regards as the inevitable position. Deep inside him, his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he averts it in the wrong direction – on his fellow black man in the township, on the property of black people . . . All in all, the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated and drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. (pp. 130–31)

Biko was commenting at a time of marked oppression under apartheid, when black people as a social group were positioned as inferior to whites. Perhaps more significantly, black men were positioned as “boys” and black masculinity as inferior to white masculinity. Since then, the black man has been the subject of much speculation, commentary, and debate, perhaps more so now given the context of concerted efforts to address gender-based violence, women empowerment, and gender equality in contemporary South Africa.

In popular discourse, the black man is often constructed as the perpetrator of violence and thus a figure to be feared. Jensen (2008) and Barker (2005) found that, relying on stereotypes of race and class, people tend to associate young black South African men with gangs, crime, and violence. In his ethnographic study, Barker asked young black men in Brazil about their experiences of race and racism. One spoke about how he is always seen as a potential criminal:

Like sometimes when I’m walking in the white neighborhood, some whites will like walk away from you when they come in my direction. Some will walk around a different way to avoid me. I will say: Don’t worry I’m not a thief. But they walk by looking at me like all strange. (p. 30)

The police also rely on these kinds of racist stereotypes in the policing of young black men who they consider to be potential criminals who may assault, steal, or rob in homes and on the streets. A station commander in Cape Town was quoted in Jensen's (2008) study as saying: "Your average law-abiding citizen lives in specific middle-class areas, whereas the problematic groups live in the townships; you can say most people in the townships are gangsters" (p. 128). Some members of the police use these racialized stereotypes to justify their use of excessive force and violence against young black men.

Although black men are depicted as pervasively violent and aggressive, this conception was challenged and rejected in a Gauteng study conducted with a group of young black men in Alexandra, a historically black township situated adjacent to Sandton, one of the richest suburbs in South Africa (Langa 2010). In the extracts that follow, young black men refute and subvert the automatic associations between black masculinity and violent crime, particularly as this stereotype pertains to young black men living in predominantly black townships.

You know people always think boys in Alex are violent or steal. Not all of us steal or are involved in crime.

It is stupid to think that being violent or being a criminal made one a "real" township boy in Alex.

Not everyone is a criminal here [Alexandra]. Crime does not pay. Crime does not have guarantees. So there are many problems when it comes to crime. In crime, you can be a wanted. There is this thing that you cannot escape the long arm of the law. Even after ten years if you are a criminal; you got this via crime, I do not care how long it takes, but then as you also know; you live by the gun, you die by the gun . . . So with education you know that I didn't take someone's life to get this car. (Langa 2010, 9–12)

As the quotes illustrate, not all young black men embrace masculine voices that are violent and aggressive. Instead, some embrace voices that are peaceful, school-oriented, and non-risk-taking. However, these peaceful, nonviolent voices are not popular in the public discourse of how people tend to speak about young black men.

The Killing of Reeva Steenkamp: Outside the Norm of Violence

Gender-based violence is a major social and health problem in South Africa, with women at risk of being assaulted and even killed by their partners. Studies show that there is a strong link between the availability of guns and intimate partner violence and femicide (Abrahams et al. 2012). For example, in 1999, 34 percent of women murdered by their intimate partners were killed by a gun. In 2009, a drop to 17 percent was evident, attributed to the enactment of the FCA (Matzopoulos,

Thompson, and Myers 2014). Matzopoulos and colleagues argue that stricter gun control laws may help to further reduce cases of femicide.

Ironically, many men justify buying guns (as Oscar did) in the interests of protecting themselves and their loved ones but more often than not these guns are used in domestic or personal disputes. South African research shows that legal gun ownership significantly increases the risk of intimate femicide–suicide (the murder of a female by her intimate partner followed by the suicide of the perpetrator within a week of the homicide), with two-thirds (66 percent) of intimate femicide–suicide perpetrators in 1999 owning a legal gun (Mathews et al. 2008).

Given these grim statistics, what was so unique about the case of Reeva Steenkamp? Why did this case attract so much media interest? Dominant discourses tend to associate gender-based violence with black women as victims and Reeva Steenkamp's case may have been construed as being out of the norm.

Reeva Steenkamp, as a victim of femicide and intimate partner violence, presents an interesting interrogation of dominant media and sociocultural representations of what scholars such as Kramer (2017) and Judge (2017) describe as victim worthiness. In their respective interrogations of gender-based violence, these scholars demonstrate dominant discursive constructs within the South African social imaginary that may well have applicability in other contexts. In her analysis of female perpetrators and male victims of sexual abuse, Kramer (2017) shows how notions of who is worthy of being considered and configured as a “victim” are imbued with social constructs and representations of gender that reinforce patriarchal notions of masculine dominance and feminine vulnerability. Similarly, Judge's (2017) analysis of social representations of corrective rape and homophobia in South Africa is imbued with contradictory and at times problematic meanings attached to violence and potential victims that emphasize ideologically loaded, intersecting positionalities. Both studies highlight that dominant discursive constructs and responses to violence are configured in relation to racialized constructs and racializing practices pertaining to “safety,” “vulnerability,” and “victim.” These constructs and representations in turn effectively function to normalize some bodies as “always vulnerable” to violence. In contrast, other bodies are viewed as being outside of this normalizing construct and only specific victims are therefore considered worthy of public outrage and response. We can read the media coverage of Reeva as victim within this dominant representational mode of meaning. Given the privileging of whiteness and its ideals in South Africa, it is unsurprising that femicide in white suburbs is considered exceptional and newsworthy. While South African studies on intimate partner violence have been conducted in black areas/townships, as violence against women is often seen as a “poor black problem” (Helman and Ratele 2016, 4), the latter stories of femicide remain invisible and unknown, while the story of Reeva Steenkamp dominated the media. It is also evident that as a white female victim, Steenkamp fitted the template of the worthy victim while the hypothetical black male target of the shooting could be construed as deserving

of the violence meted out against him. The Pistorius defense clearly played on these kinds of constructions of race and gender in relation to victimhood and aggression as warranted or unwarranted.

Black Masculinity in *Absentia* at the Oscar Pistorius' Trial

In his book *Chase Your Shadow: The Trials of Oscar Pistorius*, Carlin (2014) argues that if Oscar's story was true, "the faceless intruder of his imagination had to have had a black face, because the fact was that for white people crime mostly did have a black face" (p. 3). Orford (2014) takes this argument further in proposing that the "threatening body, nameless and faceless, of an armed and dangerous black intruder" was "nothing more than the reclaiming of the old white fear of *swaart gevaar*." To reiterate, as a result of this discourse, the black man is always considered a dangerous perpetrator of violence, allowing Oscar Pistorius to insist that he thought his life was in danger. As Orford (2014, p. 9) says, "whoever Pistorius thought was behind that door, firing at such close range meant that when he finished there would be a body on that bathroom floor."

Wright (2017) demonstrates the print media's complicity in how race and crime are intersected to form dominant social representations of violence in society. Her research shows that media reports and representations of violent crime tend to be sensationalized and to also include the race of the offender. This reporting of the offender's race is especially highlighted when the offender is not white and also dehumanizes "nonwhite" offenders. Conversely, Wright (2017) argues that crimes committed by white offenders are reported in ways that elicit sympathy. Isaacs (2016) argues that media reporting of intimate partner violence in a South African context demands more nuanced and less stereotypical reproductions of violence and positionalities, including attention to the intersectionalities of identity. In a *Time* piece titled "Oscar Pistorius and South Africa's Culture of Violence," Perry locates a reading of the Pistorius case against South Africa's sociohistorical backdrop of violence (in Bansel and Davies 2014). Bansel and Davies (2014, 42) argue that "in doing so he assembles an originary fear of, and need for protection against, the violent black male. The violent black intruder is reassembled and reconfigured in the context of the sociohistorical emergence into democracy. Every day (white) South Africans, constructed as outsiders against this monolithic backdrop, become reconstructed as helpless victims who are justified in taking the law into their own hands. This account and reading of the Pistorius case 'prefigures this intruder as black'."

Given these beliefs and assumptions that the black man is always a dangerous perpetrator of violence, Pistorius was able to insist that he thought his life was in danger. He went so far as to call a psychiatrist as an expert witness to testify on his behalf that his fear was particularly understandable as he suffered from generalized anxiety disorder. It was put to the court that his fear was in part derived from his disability, which was contrary to the way in which he spoke about his condition in

his book, *Blade Runner* (Pistorius 2012). There, he emphasized that as a child, he did not want to be seen as not good enough and wished to be treated in the same way as other children at school. He celebrated his tough masculinity by engaging in sporting activities such as rugby and competitive athletics. However, during the trial, his masculinity as an athletic person was put aside. He was depicted as vulnerable, powerless, and helpless. In commenting on a neighbor's testimony that she had heard the scream of a woman, Pistorius asserted that when he screams he sounds like a woman, so presenting his masculinity as fragile. He was also portrayed as a fearful person who slept with a gun under his bed, afraid of potential intruders.

Memela (2014) asks the significant question of whether it would have been an issue if Pistorius had in actual fact killed a black man who was in his home or if Pistorius himself had been a black man who had killed his girlfriend in the same manner. Would the trial have captured the imagination of the world and been televised worldwide? Would psychiatrists and psychologists have been called as expert witnesses to explain the social and psychological circumstances that may have contributed to a black man committing such a crime or would his crime have been seen as the norm? These are difficult questions to answer as they were not raised in court but they show that, *in absentia*, a black man was on trial as the possible intruder, one with the intent to cause harm and commit crime and therefore one more deserving of extreme violence than a young white woman.

Conclusion

It is evident that black masculinity is almost ubiquitously socially represented as violent and dangerous in South Africa and globally (Barker 2005; Jensen 2008). The case of Oscar Pistorius highlighted the significance of fear of crime among many South Africans and the association of this fear with (justifiable) antagonism toward young black men as potential intruders/perpetrators. Within the racialized history of South African masculinities, it is very evident that white masculinity occupied a hegemonic position, while black masculinity was subordinated (Morrell, Jekwes, and Lindegger 2012). However, these dynamics appear to have changed post-1994, with white men feeling a sense of loss due to their perceived political and economic marginalization, despite the fact that the majority of black citizens still live in poverty. Inequities in wealth and access to resources have been found to be one of the key drivers of violent crime in South Africa (CSV 2009). Tensions pertaining to race and gender identity play out with considerable affective weight with regard to criminal victimization and perpetration and such tensions reflect the reinscription of ideological positions associated with apartheid violence and repression. The case of Oscar Pistorius, and most particularly his defense, was very evidently constructed in relation to such racially inflected fault lines and is emblematic of enduring constructions of black and white masculinities. Not only did race and class play a role in the case being considered exceptional and newsworthy but ultimately, black masculinity became the hidden casualty of the trial and its coverage. In this

article, we have rendered this problematic representation of South African black masculinity as necessarily violent and dangerous less hidden and have highlighted some of the inversions and complexities of positioning that allow violent masculinities to be better understood in postapartheid South Africa.

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Notes

1. *S v Pistorius* (CC113/2013) (2014) ZAGPPHC 793 (September 12, 2014).
2. Director of Public Prosecutions, *Gauteng v Pistorius* (96/2015) (2015) ZASCA 204 (December 3, 2015).
3. Afrikaans for “black danger/threat.”
4. Constand Viljoen was a leader of the Freedom Front Plus at the time. During the apartheid era, he was the Minister of Defense.

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