



# Fragile Masculinities: The Loss of Young Men and the Pervasive Models of Masculinity in The Bahamas that Encourage them to Fail

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## **Abstract**

Even in predominantly black countries, young, black working-class males are seen as criminals. They are taught that they are violent and have few possibilities in life. The system is created to frustrate and retard their development. At the same time, they are fed a diet of images from popular culture that show black masculinity as bling-focused and violent, as well as cash-rich. They see that males are defined through women, sex, wealth and toughness but not through education, knowledge and good behaviour. The Caribbean, and particularly The Bahamas, has become a site where young, black males are socially excluded and so begin to react against this. Social exclusion is also based on their ethnicity. The system tells young men that they must behave a certain way and have the money to do so, but it also bars them from access to that space and the money to be able to enter that space legally. Meanwhile, a great many of the male role models they see around them perform the same kind of masculinity they are told is not for them because they are not of that social group. Politicians and rich tycoons behave badly in public and boast about beating women. What other examples do these young men see?

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**Key Words:** Masculinity, youth, violence, neocolonialism, social exclusion, poverty, bling, structural violence.



## Biography

Ian Bethell Bennett is Dean of Liberal and Fine Arts at the College of The Bahamas. His research interests include gender in development and migration. His recent publications focus on unequal development in the Caribbean particularly in The Bahamas and Puerto Rico where tourist resorts take over land and so disenfranchise locals. He works around Haitian and Cuban migration to and through The Bahamas and is currently working on a project on Statelessness in The Bahamas. He writes in the daily newspapers on gender and development.

In reading Junot Diaz's most recent collection, *This is How You Lose Her*, I was reminded of the fragility of masculinity in the region. Working-class non-white masculinity has come under attack from many directions of late. It is defined by violence, lack of performance, underachievement, drug dealing, underemployment, multiple families, with high levels of fatherlessness. I was also troubled recently by what seems to be the proliferation of images of young black male prosperity through illicit means.

Diaz's work was troubling because it seemingly reinforced all those old stereotypes that Latinos and blacks, and especially writers from both groups who move to the metropolitan centres, write against. We see the counter-argument in works by writers such as Patricia Powell, Dion Brand, Thomas Glave, and others. The currency of the images depicted in literature then becomes another issue. Diaz's male characters re-inscribe the image of the Latino as a lover, a womanizer, a loafer and layabout, and he makes his men sleep with as many women as possible. The violence depicted is not only external to the characters but also internal. Violence is self-inflicted as well as externalized. Is it that the mother who is overly violent towards young boys creates such damaged characters? Or is it because the mother is seen to be too submissive to male privilege and abuse from her husband that her sons are encouraged to replicate the same behaviour they saw from their father. Further, there seems to be lack of empathy or respect for self or others in the lives of Diaz's characters. These thoughts made me relate this text to a troubling reality that seems far too prevalent in the Caribbean/Latin American region and, particularly, in the tiny Bahamian archipelago where the murder rate currently exceeds that of Jamaica.

Young men are captivated by the image of themselves as being sexually aggressive and are eager to show their prowess, which serves well the national imaginary. The images created through Diaz's novel find resonance in the history of the plantation colony, as well as the images of paradise. His male characters are *hombres, mujeriegos*, who are misogynists and bad fathers. They do not speak back to history, but rather speak to history in its rendering of them as the status quo. Such images of Latino and black masculinities are widespread and have a particular saliency in the market economy (Watson and Shaw 2011). Today, young men in the Caribbean struggle with a masculine identity that is tenuous and fragile (Kimmel 2008). It is fragile because it is always based on something external to them. They are unable to create any real agency in their lives because they are often rendered silent by the discourse of late capitalist consumption and the market economy which has done a great deal to reverse many of the gains made during the early days of postcolonialism. bell hooks provides a phrase that I think captures this reality exceptionally well. She refers to it as "*imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*". "This phrase is useful precisely because it does not prioritize one system over another but rather offers us a way to think about the interlocking systems that work together to uphold and maintain cultures of domination," she said (hooks 2013, 4). Theoretically speaking, The Bahamas' system of rigid class segregation and white domination ended only in the 1960s, which suggests that the system could be more closely related to the US system than that in other Caribbean countries. What is interesting, though, is the resurgence of a local white elite, a resolidification of the distance and divide between them and the black working and middle class, and the entrenchment of a black elite, who, since the independence movement's success, has sought only to empower itself. So, notwithstanding that the country is majority black and blacks hold political power, the white elite hold economic power while transnational corporations usurp more of the country's earnings and land. Meanwhile, young black males are still treated as a dangerous minority (Bethel Bennett 2010). "In other words, a sense of shared identity is no longer a platform that can draw folks together in meaningful solidarity" (hooks 2013, 2). It would seem, therefore,

that the sense of a shared future and identity that drove the independence movement has been replaced by factions that can no longer work together towards a common goal. The authorities see it as incumbent on them to criminalise black males, and the power structure frustrates those males' efforts at escaping the structure and stricture of poverty and failure.

This system has translated into frustration for many working- and even middle-class youths, especially males. Young people, in general, feel unhappy with where they are and feel that they have few options to change their situation. They have invested a great deal of currency in popular music and popular culture as well as in the local manifestations of these. This means that a great deal of energy is consumed in trying to participate in the latest fads and trends. They feel that this is their way of asserting an identity. The lifestyle of a drug dealer also holds an allure because of the street credit or "respect" he earns. His largeness of personality, clothing and bling, as well as his ability to spend seemingly without limit, win him great admiration.

In focus group discussions in The Bahamas over the last three years, a great deal of information was gathered about the ways young people perceive the violence in their society. They feel far more concerned about the violence than they do about the political economic crisis. This fact leads them to focus on surviving and acting out their anger and frustration by negative means. The Bahamas has a serious problem with violence, both gender-based and male on male—which is often not seen as being connected to gender—as well as with sexual violence. In all the aforementioned areas of violence The Bahamas has ranked among the top ten countries if not the top five in the region, according to the World Bank Report (2011). The Bahamas, a country that relies heavily on tourism for its livelihood, has witnessed increasing numbers of attacks on tourists, from the rape of a teenage girl during the summer of 2013 to the murder of a tourist male in the late spring to early summer of the same year. All of this has led the United States to put out a travel advisory against the country. Further, cruise

companies have begun to warn tourists about having or wearing anything of value in Nassau.

The situation has deteriorated dramatically since the Progressive Liberal Party took office, after a sizeable victory in the May 2012 general election in which they campaigned on a platform to get tough on crime. Within hours of their winning, the murders had recommenced in earnest. The commissioner of police responded to the upsurge with a statement that crime is down. It must be remembered that information is jealously guarded in The Bahamas, and so the commissioner must request permission from the Prime Minister before making statements on such matters. The Official Secrets Act mandates such deep silence. When I began to write this paper in August 2013 there had already been 80 murders for the year, and each weekend witnessed on average three or four more. A striking and alarming murder recently that was discussed in some detail in one focus group was that of a male playing dominoes in someone's backyard. He was recorded to have lived in the Kemp Road area, one of the more dangerous parts of New Providence, an island that is 21 miles long by seven miles wide and that is home to the majority of The Bahamas' over 360,000 inhabitants. Bahamians blame the crime and murder rate on the Haitians, the largest immigrant group living in the country. There are sizeable Haitian shanty towns as well as more permanent communities across the inhabited islands. The shanty towns are usually supplied with utilities, given their longstanding existence. Two examples of these are The Mud and the Pigeon Pea, in Marsh Harbour, Abaco; another one exists off Joe Farrington Road in the Eastern District of New Providence that was gutted by fire in the summer of 2013. As stated, most Bahamians have continually blamed the Haitians for the large-scale increase in violence. However, facts or statistics seem to indicate otherwise. A study on crime and the inmates of Her Majesty's Prison at Fox Hill, New Providence, conducted by a team of professors from the College of The Bahamas (COB), showed the presumption and ethnic bias to be unfounded. Their results indicate that most of the inmates interviewed were, in fact, Bahamian. They were overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly represented

the lower class of the country. These results will be examined more closely as this paper develops. The COB study will be discussed along with a documentary by Dr. Ian Strachan, *I's Man* (2013), and conversations with groups of youngsters from the COB. This paper will also draw tangentially on developments over the last few years in which men in positions of authority empower persons who have acted and acquired possessions illegally. It will also highlight two members of parliament who in their professional capacity have been abusive to women or boasted about having been so, further rein-scribing the notion that women should be treated violently and that men have the right to use violence.

The paper will argue that the fragility of manhood or masculinity is a national problem that is in part based on a lack of humanity and a desire for richness that transcends the legal structure as well as the individual's abilities. Black masculinity has been entombed in an apparent lack of potential for success, lack of humanity and dearth of mainstream, culturally valued experience. Young black males in The Bahamas, despite the country being majority black, are treated as if they are criminals. This is borne out by the numbers of young males incarcerated, and their high high-school dropout and low educational attainment rates. To put it in succinct terms, The Bahamas is experiencing high male failure. However, this statement is too much of a generalisation when all the information is considered. Young, working-class black males form the majority of the group that is failing. Yet, even the word failing is too much of a generalisation. One of the premises of this paper is that many of the young men from the working class are taught not to look far beyond their current positions, though their current positions are barely above object poverty. Yet, they are cash rich. They are also taught that what they see is what there is. However, in the tourist economy, there is always the possibility of gaining access to what the tourist is perceived to have.

Young Bahamians are encouraged to become servers in the tourist enclaves where they will be constantly confronted by what they do not have. At the same time, the construction of black masculinity must be substantiated by

being the ideal exotic black male for the white gaze. Again, this means that there is a lack of emotional and other kinds of investment in the youth in their homes and communities. Young men and women today are encouraged to pursue service jobs because they are the hot commodity. These are the jobs the government promotes for the working class. Young, working-class men, as has been revealed in class discussions, are esteemed by tourists, and the former see this as their ticket to riches. They do not aspire to much beyond participating in bling culture or being the next drug barren because they are not taught to do so, nor are they told that anything other than what they see is possible for them to aspire to. Their masculinity is bound up in their sexuality and is also limited by the same. While this paper does not per se explore the sex tourism aspect of the resort destination, as have other works by Emilio Pantojas and Kamela Kempadoo, for example, it does seek to underscore the significant role of tourism's power in creating men. Michael Kimmel has an interesting position that serves us well in this context. "Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile" (Kimmel 2008, 137).

Kimmel's quote is an excellent jumping-off point for the discussion on young Bahamian or Caribbean identity in the early twenty-first century. Not only does it show how contradictory or reactionary masculine gender identity is, but, if based on white masculinities, non-white masculinities may be considered that much more tenuous and fragile because they are always contestatory and determined by a power external to them. They are always defined by the white patriarchal power, as bell hooks maintains, and rarely, if ever, by the attempt to disentangle themselves from it. Often, when black man attempts to liberate himself from the prison of white patriarchal-determined masculinity, his efforts are thwarted by, as hooks states, his falling into the trap of rebelling against the system while having no clear image of how he wishes to define himself. Hooks' *Writing Beyond Race* is also instructive here, as it shows the problematics of racism when we say that we have moved beyond race. So, if black men are constantly defined by white patriarchy to fit into roles that have been



prescribed, how does racism cease to exist simply because a black male is president of the United States? Moreover, if non-white masculinity is hemmed in by desires such as jungle fever and fear of the other that pose a threat to one's civility, how does the poor, under-educated, black male cast off such a straitjacket?

In the neoliberal moment, masculinities are interestingly defined by Hollywood or media. Magazines show pictures of who men are or are meant to be—according to them, at least. TV shows capture images of men and project those into the imaginary and thus the psyche of the viewers. Hooks underscores this in her book *We Real Cool* (2003). I would argue further, especially given the consumerism of the neoliberal moment, as Naomi Klein establishes in *No Logo*, we are defined by the lifestyles we are sold. Marketing, therefore, no longer sells a product but rather an entire image and lifestyle that go along with that product. Tommy Hilfiger, for example, despite his apparent discriminatory comments about minorities in the USA using his clothes, had a particular currency in working-class and poorer communities. This was their sign of having arrived. Their Air Jordans, at the time were also a marker of success. It is significant then that poor, black and Latino youth are often consumed by consumption. They are also defined by that which they wear, and to wear designer clothing is to make a statement about one's ability and one's worth. This again underscores the fragility and tenuousness that Kimmel discusses. I would argue that this tenuousness and fragility is even more characteristic of youth who, even though brought up in predominantly black or Latino countries, consume an enormous amount of American Culture, so that *No Logo* and neoliberalism define them as much as they define young Americans.

According to Buerkle (2011), we are defined by what we buy or by what the media tells us we are. The images of self inscribed on young, non-white males are those of the muscular young thug ready to fight; the successful hip hop artists surrounded by women and bling; the professional athlete surrounded by beautiful women, all of whom are inferior to him. Media determines how

those young men see themselves. This conflates with the local reality where many of the young men then act out these roles. They see themselves in these images and choose to become them. They find acceptance there. The focus group discussions mentioned earlier revealed these tendencies. Furthermore, women accept this image of men and reinforce the idea that men must be able "to pay to play" in local parlance. In other words, they must be able to provide hair, nails and phone card money, among other essentials. Thus, the young men become further entrapped in this materialistic neoliberal prison of consumer masculinity and they perform accordingly.

Men are told that they are to serve the women, and especially tourist women. Once again, their masculinity, as hooks observes, goes back to being defined by their sexual organ. The negotiations that take place are often constructed around or through uneven power relations. Workers are aware of their relative poverty when compared to the tourists' assumed, and often apparent, wealth. The Trevor Rhone play *Smile Orange* explores this well. Notwithstanding the time gap between the current day and Rhone's play, the power imbalance has not changed. What has been altered is the reliance on tourism, and the images that have been sold to the consumer are now far more pervasive. The former has become more widespread and almost complete, providing much of The Bahamas' GDP. The latter is now also more dangerous as it sells at home and abroad. The tourist ad lures the local as well as the tourist into a fantasy. However, the local is also encouraged to believe that this job can change his life. He has seen the images on TV as well as in movies and is convinced that this could be him. So the local youth is in many ways doubly caught because he is at once the subaltern being consumed and the one who consumes. Ultimately, as hooks and Buerkle maintain, he consumes the image that is packaged for him, oftentimes unmediated because of a lack of family or parental input, education and training that could provide a counterbalance to the allure and caché of the image of black, cool masculinity.

Further, the images around young men, notwithstanding the official discourse that boys need to succeed in school, demonstrate everything other than academic success. Meanwhile, locally, men are taught that education creates soft men or sissies. Young men are increasingly dissuaded from dreaming of academic or professional advancement because they understand that the cards are stacked against them. In an economy that has thrived on riches gained through illicit means, they see their only options as being drug dealing, human trafficking or smuggling and hustling.

Male students, particularly, have often commented on the mistake I made in choosing to become a teacher; they insist that when they leave, they will be drug dealers as they will make more money. Success is thereby equated with monetary wealth. Wealth, as they say, can be used to wield influence. This thinking speaks to an overblown focus on the importance of wealth as a marker of success. However, the images shown to them through local media of local politicians embracing relationships with wealthy landowners have further inscribed this thought. The YouTube video of a wealthy Canadian tycoon “taking back The Bahamas” speaks concretely to this. The Caribbean, in general, and The Bahamas, in particular, have fallen victim to US consumerism and late capitalist greed. The role models established by men, like Allen Stanford in Antigua, who use the Caribbean as their kingdoms, are being followed not only by the young males on the streets or from the ghettos, but by the middle class who are leading the country. The models established by Fifty Cent, Vybz Kartel, Chris Brown, Kanye West and P Diddy/Sean Coombs are what the young men long to follow. So, Jamaica’s Dudus Coke, the notorious and violent drug lord, is an example of the allure of the bad man in the community. He has currency. He has provided the community with tangible leadership that they feel they need. Coke provided support, financial consideration and mentorship, as well as fathered many children and acted as a father figure in communities that looked up to that kind of example. His support and assistance led to their protection and defence of him in violent clashes with Jamaica’s security forces in 2011. His counterpart in The Bahamas would be Ninety Knowles, whose

community came out to protest when the Bahamian government threatened to comply with a United States extradition order. Knowles, a well-known and celebrated drug baron, much like Coke, offered his community tangible wealth. He also fathered many children with girls in the community. Both these men kill and get others to kill for them. They are mean and tough and demand respect. They offer an interesting balance between fear and love that bring about devotion. The devotion, though, is often premised on a great deal of respect based on fear. Diana McCaulay illustrates this with tragic clarity in *Dog-Heart* (2010). Deborah Thomas explores these kinds of characters, their influence and impact on their communities in her work *Exceptional Violence* (2011). Sadly, very little work has been done on the topics in The Bahamas. Suffice it to say, though, this masculine role model sets the trend and tone for young men's masculinities within a certain socio-economic sector.

This kind of misguided Robin Hood figure, or as Kimmel might say, misframed man, has become common in the region. Knowing the large and imposing impression these figures create in their communities inhibits the police from taking action against them; the police are often members of the same communities and are equally enmeshed in their sphere of power and influence. However, during the Tivoli Gardens debacle that centred on Coke, many young men that were perceived as being at risk or who were known to be moving toward a gang lifestyle were eliminated. Allegedly, the security forces used the opportunity to house clean. While this is a flagrant misuse of state power against the people, it is an excellent example of asymmetric power relations that create the initial problems and drive their perpetuation and deepening. It is the fragility of such masculinity constructed in this culture or environment that this paper explores. The irony of the situation, or at least one of them, is that Coke remained well protected as there were many politicians in his debt. The discussion around the known dons and gunmen who are on the platforms with politicians, giving them support, is infamous. It is speculated that for this reason the Coke debacle became such a long, protracted mark on Jamaican history. First, because he allegedly funded so many politicians, they were unable to

accede to the US's request that he be extradited. Even when things got bad, Coke held too much power over and information on the government for them to accede to the US's demands and meet their legal obligations. This led to a massive illustration of masculine strength and ingenuity where, because of the fear and respect the community had for Coke, they willingly took on the police and the army. He had provided for them in far more tangible ways, as a patriarch should, than had the government. He had played the father of the community role model. His bravado was famed and his violence infamous. So, he had created respect through fear. In a typical patriarchy, men tend to establish control through fear and also through paternalism; both of these attributes Coke manifested. He influenced many young men and women to follow his lead and his influence was seen as the spark that could fuel another generation of problem youth. When the standoff between the police and Coke's supporters was in full swing, the police and army, it has been speculated, took great pains to ensure that as few witnesses as possible were left alive. What is also significant here is that most of those who died were men. It has also been speculated through many unconfirmed yet disturbing reports that the opportunity was taken to eradicate a number of young males they foresaw as being potential troublemakers. They represented another danger of succession planning, as gangs are well-organised and oiled machines for dispossessed and disgruntled youth that provide them with a voice and a system of protection, as well as an avenue for building fear and respect. It is through violence and criminality that many of these young men now gain more street credibility and the masculine card. Gangs have in many respects become the new family in an age where family is failing for numerous reasons. Further, a role model like Coke provides a male presence and male modelling that many young black males do not otherwise have access to.

So, even while Coke was arguably a model of working-class masculinity, his fame transcended that position, and became a much more transgressive type of masculine power that was viewed as desirable. Coke held the reins to many politicians' careers through his monetary contributions to their campaigns

and their pockets. He, notwithstanding his size, was violent and unflinching, and held the supposed upper crust in subservience because of his money and callousness. This again underscores why so many young men see this way of life as being desirable. They desire that kind of influence. They want people to respect them. They ultimately see replicating such damaged role models as being their only chance at notoriety and success. It offers riches, bling and great influence. The other irony here is that Coke is a very small man, and even after the huge masculine bravado of his crime spree and his influence over Jamaican politics, he attempted to flee dressed as a woman. The irony was not lost on critics. This model of unforgiving, intransigent, tough masculinity stems from a violent history of slavery, colonialism and imperialism in the region that then extends to the postcolonial period where little changes, but rather the same tools are deployed to disempower and disenfranchise non-white youth. Similarly, this failed system perpetuates itself when men are not charged for rape or are released due to a mistrial after they have raped young women in their communities.

These failures send a disturbing message back to the community that rape is acceptable. It also arguably demonstrates that men are free to rape women as they wish. It does not challenge the social construct of gender, but reasserts it. Men are given male privilege that allows them to perform their masculinity as they wish. Their sexual prowess cannot be controlled and their violence is held to be natural (Kegan Gardiner 2000, 2004, 2004; Kimmel and Aronson 2000). This idea of masculinity is challenged in the following statement by Judith Kegan Gardiner:

[the] most important accomplishment of 20th-century feminist theory is the concept of gender as a social construction; that is, the idea that masculinity and femininity are loosely defined, historically variable, and interrelated social ascriptions to persons with certain kinds of bodies — not the natural, necessary, or ideal characteristics of people with similar genitals. This concept has altered long-standing assumptions about the inherent characteristics of men and

women and also about the very division of people into the categories of “men” and “women.” The traditional sexes are now seen as cultural groupings rather than as facts of nature based on a static division between two different kinds of people who have both opposing and complementary characteristics, desires, and interests. By seeking to understand the causes, means, and results of gendered inequality, feminist theories hope to develop effective ways to improve women’s conditions, sometimes by making women more similar to men as they are now, sometimes by making men more similar to women as they are now, sometimes by validating women’s traditional characteristics, sometimes by working toward the abolition or minimizing of the categories of gender altogether, but all simultaneously transforming ideologies and institutions, including the family, religion, corporations, and the state. (Kegan Gardiner 2000, 35)

This is a significant moment and represents a departure for Caribbean masculinity studies in particular as it articulates that there needs to be an interrogation of the ways in which culture determines the roles women and men are allowed to play in their countries. Men, as aptly laid out above, are given the role of aggressor and leader, a person who should be rich and respected and/or feared. So, the socially accepted performances of masculinity, as the book *Performing American Masculinities* (Watson and Shaw 2011) shows, are powerful dictates to continued gender inequalities. In the Caribbean, though, the performance of American masculinities as determined by popular culture is interestingly complicated and leads to serious social and cultural shifts. Linden Lewis argues that class must be added to the mix when we examine Caribbean masculinities because class is a determinant of access to power and so determines behaviour. I use this to underscore the fundamental import of class in understanding the performance of masculinities in The Bahamas. Young, black working-class males, notwithstanding the racial makeup of the country, are criminalized by the system. Many of the participants in the focus groups, especially the young, darker-skinned men, openly discussed their encounters



with the authorities where they would be stopped when driving, told to get out of the car and often roughed up, slapped, and sometimes taken into custody for no clear reason, only to be later released without being processed. Can one argue that this is in part an adaptation of American popular culture or simply another symptom of the postcolonial state where, Fanon establishes, the colonised has learned to hate himself and so the leaders, having internalised colonial hatred for blackness, work to marginalise their own? This is particularly pronounced with young Haitian-Bahamian youth. Class and ethnic discrimination against the Haitian population is overwhelming. The usual discourse of dangerous men applies here. Young men are perceived as being inherently dangerous and the cause of great social dis-ease. Yet, many of them, in seeking to rebel against the social exclusion they experience, play right into the socio-cultural norms hooks describes.

### **The Bahamas as a case study**

In 2011 there was a debate in The Bahamas about young black men being criminals. The language followed that of the same debate in Britain in the post-2011 riots in London: black youth are a problem. A similar thread was carried in a Town Hall Meeting on crime in late August of 2013 in Nassau. People were of the view that all young black males were criminals and needed to be policed, a perception that had a great deal to do with violence; in particular, youth violence.

Whereas The Bahamas has never been as famed for its violence or even its youth-based or gender-based violence as Jamaica has, the recent developments show a different trend emerging. Because such violence in The Bahamas is a relatively recent phenomenon, work on the topic has been extremely limited. Meanwhile, work on the same in Jamaica has been far more commonplace. Two very interesting books on Jamaica were produced: one examined the role of elections, while the other examined violence in the



country. Sieves and Thomas offer salient studies that go a long way in underscoring the theory and praxis of violence in Jamaica and their work should be extended to The Bahamas. Their work, I think, shows that racism is structural but also based on structural inequalities that have pervaded society and did not end with the close of the colonial period or the adventure into postcolonialism or neocolonialism.

What is ironic here is that the image of masculinity projected for all to see in the local context is that men can behave badly, in fact, are expected to behave badly. They can break the law and are above challenge. Yet, when young black men attempt to express themselves, they are quickly neutralised or frustrated by the authorities, as exemplified by the level of police brutality they are often subjected to. The focus group discussions and class exercise gave strong evidence of this well-known yet seldom discussed fact in the country. Young men are often picked up and detained for vagrancy (The Vagrancy Act 1939 still functions) and are beaten while in custody. The anger and frustration that this kind of marginalisation, exploitation and criminalisation causes runs deep. Once again, young men see this as yet another way that they are refused full citizenship in the country. They retaliate by acting out in the same ways that they are told not to do but have been shown are normal.

Recently, while I was driving in the vicinity of the local mall in Nassau, a police cruiser drew up beside three young men walking towards the mall. They were attired in the typical baggy clothes of their age with apparently “unkept” hair, yet they were clean, starched, and well-pressed. The police stopped, got out and started to frisk them. The only crime they had apparently committed was walking in a group while being black. These images are problematic as they simply re-inscribe the old paradigms of black youth as being dangerous; this is a paradigm that harks back to slavery and the colonial period. This is a particularly troublesome memory in The Bahamas where slavery has been greatly downplayed as being of a milder, gentler form. It is also significant because of tensions that developed among the white settlers who lived in constant fear of

an uprising in The Bahamas after the 1804 Haitian revolution and the exodus of Haitians from Haiti. Many of those who left tried to land in The Bahamas and were summarily sent on for fear they would contaminate the local blacks.

Again, these facts are well documented by Tinker, Sears and Bethell, among others. The first substantial study on Haitians in The Bahamas by Dawn Marshall underlined the discrimination against Haitians, but did not discuss the discrimination heaped on Haitian-Bahamians. This relationship has been troubled ever since the uprising began and has certainly been an ongoing part of Bahamian life. Haitians are argued to be a threat to civility and the Bahamian way of life. Ultimately, this has also created an underclass of young Haitian-Bahamians or BaHaitians that feel as if they are excluded socially, which they are. This social exclusion and the anger it fosters leads to enormous tensions and to the performance of more violence, especially in the form of gang violence. The Haitian/BaHaitian gang Zoe Pound has become infamous for its activity in the country, according to the Organization of American States' (OAS) report on gangs and 'the Inter-American cooperation on dealing with criminal gangs' (2010). The anger of these young males is usually exhibited in anti-social behaviour, which is where gang membership becomes significant. Like the example above of the young men near the mall who were stopped by the police, BaHaitian youth are often the targets of discrimination and poor treatment by the authorities as well as their peers. Over the years, gangs have grown significantly, yet the authorities claim that there has been no organised gang activity. Gang violence, as has been stated in studies on Jamaica, has grown and changed the face of violence in many countries. This is certainly so in The Bahamas. Unfortunately, finding information on this has been all but impossible. The only information available is in newspaper articles and first-hand anecdotes of school violence, not in authoritative studies. At the same time, much effort has been made to keep this violence out of the press and to downplay it.

To be sure, the images the youth receive through the media and the

social reality they face produce a confluence of influences that aggravate the gang-based violence in the country. This is particularly so in government schools where there are often gang-related attacks, beatings, stabbings, and shootings. Gang membership is often organised around communities, or areas, and also ethnicity, as indicated with the BaHaitians. These gangs come into contact with other gangs on school campuses, or at the gates, and violence erupts. The police are often intimately involved, given that they are now, once again, on school campuses. The PLP government has brought them back onto campuses, after a period of absence during the last administration (2007–2012). The policing of schools, though, only seems to exacerbate the performing of violent masculinity, and the number of fights, mostly unreported, has skyrocketed,

What is developing is a normalising of violence at all levels. Young men see themselves portrayed only as violent perpetrators of wrong and so internalise this and begin to act accordingly. They are also the target of police and social frustration. Society feels unsafe and it collectively sees young males as the troublemakers. It therefore pushes for more policing. This only increases the frustration and anger of the young men who are the target of this prejudice. Moreover, as the economy worsens crime increases which leads to further distrust. However, there are a number of factors that need unpacking in this section. The role media imaging plays in all of this, which is in its turn re-inscribed by the politicians. The behaviour becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the case of the young men accosted by the police, they were accosted because they were black but also because they were dressed as befitting of young hiphoppers — baggy trousers hanging around their bottoms, underwear showing, and big shirts — an image popularized by media and internalised and owned by youth internationally. As argued in *Performing Masculinities*, especially in the chapter “Masters of their Domain” (Buerkle 2011), this neoliberal image is all that is seen. It is popular and so must be emulated. This is buttressed by other images of masculinity that show young men that this is what they can be, and ultimately what they are.

Concretely, while Hollywood projects images of black males that resonate with these youth, society is telling them that they are outcasts and must fit into a particular model of masculinity. This model, coupled with the images made popular by videos of hip-hop artistes like Eminem, P. Diddy/Sean Coombs, Ludacris, R Kelly, among others, is what is available to them.

Ultimately, if we take a step back and examine the images portrayed through American popular culture of black masculinities, it becomes apparent that there are basically two choices open to young black males: They can be rappers/gangsters — tough men who wield power in their communities through violence and illicitly got means, much in the style of Coke. Or they can become an NBA star, for example, who controls through his strength and athleticism. Both of these men are desired. This interestingly holds true in an environment where black males are in apparent positions of power, as politicians, bank managers, and the like. Moreover, society's perception of many males in positions of relative power is that they are white or think of themselves as white. This again creates a demarcation between those who are darker and those who are lighter and excludes the former. I would argue that this is another indication of the general population's perception of their inability to access power and the success that being in those positions engenders. These observations have come from conversations in the focus groups and classrooms as stated above.

Of paramount importance to understanding the power dynamics in the Bahamian context is the need to comprehend that the white oligarchy that functioned pre-independence was never fully removed. They became the United Bahamian Party in the 1950s, after the establishment of the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), and governed until the win of the PLP, majority rule, in the 1965 general elections. However, despite many of the gains made by a black middle class and a small black elite during the 1970s and 1980s, the white minority, otherwise known as the Bay Street Boys, has maintained its monopoly of the local economy. This functions in many ways to create perceived obstacles

to advancement. Moreover, the control of the economy through Foreign Direct Investment also plays a part in discouraging young, black, working-class males from aspiring to mainstream leadership positions. The ambition of the 1950s' generation is considerably less in the children born in the 1990s and 2000s. Of course, as studies show, the images projected to black youth help determine the ways they see themselves. Their social context plays another part in this equation. And this is where two salient studies in Jamaica are informative. One examines the impact of crime in the community on children (Crawford-Brown 2010), and the other the impact of popular culture on youth (Forbes 2010). Working together, they reveal how the surroundings really do work to crush or encourage progress. Crawford-Brown basically states that community-based violence severely scars the children who are brought up therein. Arguably then, the trauma and violence internalised become co-contributors to the performing of masculinity as evidenced. This is complicated further by the prevailing air of privilege ascribed to rich men who behave in unacceptable ways.

Again, in the Bahamian context, males in positions of power are often seen to be permitted to act as stated above. Two parliamentarians in the last year, 2013–2014, have exemplified this kind of patriarchal and misogynist privilege. In the first case, the member of Parliament made derogatory comments about one of his female colleagues as being an hysterical woman not comfortable (read not able to function) in a man's world. He was thus indicating that males control government and that women really have no place there. He then put his arm around her even after being warned to remove it. When she slapped him he claimed that she was crazy. All of this played out in the national media. The second example of such unacceptable, yet celebrated, behaviour was when a married member of Parliament boasted about beating his girlfriend, and that some women like to be beaten. He claimed he only left because he got tired of beating her. The others all laughed and the discussion was captured on TV. Nothing was said against the member until after the event. Despite the member's insisting that he was being truthful and serious, no action was taken (Aranha 2014). He later claimed that he was

joking and that he supported women and offered a thousand dollar donation to the Crisis Centre. His colleagues silently supported him (Missick 2014, Jones, 2014, Dames 2014, Virgil 2014). These two examples only serve to underscore the rampant re-inscribing of the image of black men being abusive, violent, womanising, irresponsible individuals that is consonant with images from popular culture. Tragically, these are the same politicians closely implicated in another national imbroglio while being entertained by a wealthy tycoon at his home, all of which was captured on YouTube.

The overriding stereotype of black masculinity in The Bahamas has become one of male privilege without responsibility. After the Youtube incident mentioned above went viral, the deputy leader of the opposition party requested the resignation of key members of Parliament due to their unacceptable behaviour at the house of the tycoon supporter, as seen in the video. The video on YouTube, titled Nygard Takes Back The Bahamas (2013), features ministers of government at a party that became infamous for its bad behaviour. Yet, the foreign tycoon has managed to acquire land for nothing, allegedly because of substantial political contributions. The debate has also played out in the local newspapers and in legal cases. Said individual has offered to create a new industry for stem-cell research in The Bahamas. Be that as it may, the ministers were caught in compromising behaviour with young women. Notwithstanding this public presentation of inappropriate behaviour, the ministers did not resign nor were they sanctioned. They stood as a beacon of acceptable and celebrated masculinity. Despite YouTube's impact and its publication of very dark details of grown men behaving badly, this culturally endorsed performance of masculinity where men allegedly have more than one woman, behave inappropriately, and use public office to empower questionable private citizens is celebrated. The younger generations have learned that they can emulate these role models without fear of being disciplined. At the same time, their behaviour is encouraged by many of the women in their lives. Meanwhile, theorists and critics argue that men are not moving quickly enough towards promoting gender equality. According to

Kegan,

Poststructuralist feminist and queer theories American feminist journalist Gloria Steinem (1992) announces that "women want a men's movement" if that means men will "become more nurturing toward children, more able to talk about emotions," and less violent and controlling (p. v). English psychologist Lynn Segal (1990) regrets the "slow motion" of men toward gender equality and muses that the literature of masculinity "uncannily mirrors" its feminist fore-bears: it "focuses upon men's own experiences, generates evidence of men's gender-specific suffering and has given birth to a new field of enquiry, 'Men's Studies'" (Kegan Gardiner 2004, 160).

The paradigm demonstrated in The Bahamas is troublesome as many of the young women in the focus groups who discussed female empowerment in their communities argued that men should dominate women. Their argument was partially biblical and partially financial. Some of them subscribed to the belief that once a man pays for a woman, she is his. This belief goes in tandem with the biblical interpretation that the man is the head of the woman and he must control her. Many of the students felt that men needed to be promiscuous as they could not control their urges and that they needed to behave violently as men are inherently violent, or more violent than women. Simultaneously, though, they complained about men not being socially or financially responsible. Many of the young women saw young men as being encouraged to be irresponsible and this was an attractive characteristic, until they wanted to settle down. They were also not sure what to make of the fact that young men did not see education as important. Yet, they also subscribed to the idea that education made young men soft, and many did not want "no sof' man." When discussing an essay, "The End of Men or the Rebirth of Class", many of the students in a class of twenty, of which three were males, were troubled that there were so few young men in college, but saw it as normal. This trend is not surprising when hooks underscores the problems with young male failure and the racist architecture of the state. She argues that the poor or working-class man

has been hurt—and sometimes hurts others—by being unable to live up to dominant definitions of masculinity

because he does not have the privilege or power society has taught him “real men” should possess. Alienated, frustrated, pissed off, he may attack, abuse, and oppress an individual woman or women, but he is not reaping positive benefits from his support and perpetuation of sexist ideology [and so is] not exercising privilege. (hooks 1984, 73)

hooks builds on this in her later work. In *We Real Cool*, though somewhat less theoretically rigorous than her earlier work, she explores the ways in which white patriarchal power and society forces black men to react in particular ways. One of these ways is through gang culture or gangsta identity. They are told or sold that the only possibility they have of fitting in is through street culture, being violent, being cash rich, possessing bling and often using women to afford this lifestyle or doing so through other illicit means such as drug dealing. They are not allowed to fit in in a white, patriarchal world, according to hooks, and so feel that their masculinity is threatened by their inability to possess wealth, which the dominant discourse of masculinity tells them they must have. Fielding further works on this as it relates to educational attainment and the problems created by a lack of educational success.

### **Education and its role in Masculinities development**

Perhaps one of the most revealing markers of youth trouble in The Bahamas is a World Bank 2010 report that underscores that education is the leading problem for industries that wish to do business in The Bahamas (Collie-Patterson 2008). Fielding, in his study on “Education: Attitudes and Achievement of Males and Females in The Bahamas”, highlights the World Bank study:

Between 1990 and 2010, although educational attainment



increased, the education gap between males' and females' educational attainment has increased with greater proportions among females than among males being educated beyond high school (Fielding 2013, 6)

Fielding underscores, however, that aspirations are different in school as well. "Throughout their time at school, males have lower aspirations than females towards academic attainment. The aspiration to attain academically decreases with the age of the student and is accompanied with disengagement of pupils and teachers" (Fielding 2013, 18). He focuses on the fact that

...there were different parent/guardian expectations of sons and daughters as to whether or not they wanted them to stay in education beyond high school. This disparity in expectations was observed from primary school... This divergence in expectation may be related to girls spending more time (9.5 hours per week) on school work at home than boys (6 hours) (Fielding 2013, 10).

Fielding further discusses the disparity between household expenditure on males and females. He notes that

...males are less likely than females to see the importance of higher education as a pathway to getting a 'good' job; also they are less likely to see the relevance of their school work beyond school, and this lack of purpose increases between grades 8 and 11 (Fielding 2013, 19).

It may seem paradoxical to a patriarchal state,

[h]owever, it should be noted that households spend more on their daughters than sons, at all stages of education (Table 59). The increased expenditure on females than males is noted throughout the various levels of household expenditure...This parental choice reflects the expectation of parents noted by students earlier...and

shows that parental expectation is linked with parental commitment. (Fielding 2013, 40)

What is alarming and could perhaps bear out why there is a 2:17 ratio in favour of girls in many of the classes taught at the College of The Bahamas is what Fielding shows in his table 5.

**Table 5: Parents/guardians' expectations of their children to attend college.**

	Females	Males	Percentage	Number
My parents want me to attend college/ university (strongly agree) (Primary school children)	80.5%	75.7%	0.006	505
My parents want me to attend college/ university (strongly agree) (Secondary school children)	76.5%	66.8%	0.002	929

Original Source: Bahamas Ministry of Education, and The College of The Bahamas (2009). [Survey of schoolchildren in The Bahamas]. Unpublished raw data (Fielding p. 10)

If, by the time students are in school, they are already segregated by sex and their attitudes to education and gendered roles are already being formed by their parents, it should be no surprise that the cultural performance of masculinity or gendered roles, in particular, is so entrenched. Young men are taught from early that they should not aspire to an education. By high school, this idea is apparently well ingrained, as Fielding points out above. Again, not surprisingly, by the time they have arrived at college, there are far fewer boys than girls (Chipman-Johnson and Vanderpool, 2003; Coalition for Education Reform 2005). In many English classes, which are a general education

requirement, there will be an average of three men, at best, to seventeen women. These courses are not meant to be indicative of the entire system, but they do show that there are significantly reduced numbers of young men. So, in a third year writing course, there will be two males to seventeen females. When asked about this disparity, the boys say many of their peers feel that education is not important. They cannot hope to get jobs through education where they can earn good money. They see construction and other such areas as being better avenues to earning a good wage. This is, though, class-based and cannot stand for the entire population. The College, in general terms, will get fewer of the elite students, as they will be sent off to study abroad. It will get more of the middle to lower middle and lower class students who are less able to afford foreign university study or will try to do it later on after they have done the first year or two at home.

These discussions with students in class served to underscore the social pressure on young middle- and lower-class males to move away from education, which is perceived as a soft option. Education, it is culturally believed, makes men soft. They also discussed the need to support the family. This demand for financial support was a massive pressure on males, especially those from single-parent households. They were encouraged to leave school and seek lucrative employment that would allow their siblings to eat, as well as reduce the pressure on the one parent in the home. This parent is usually the mother. The other factor that seemed to overwhelmingly influence male behaviour and productivity in the country was gang involvement.

Gang involvement and activity, as indicated above, have grown exponentially over the last 20 years. Fielding shows what a significant player gang involvement is in youth development.

Currently a member of a gang in grade 7, 6.3% of boys and 1.2% of girls in Grade 9, 7.4% of boys and 6.5% of girls and in grade 11 10.6% of boys and 0.0% girls were said to have participated in gangs.

(Original Source: Ministry of Health, 2001; reproduced in Fielding p. 12)

Fielding goes on to discuss further what gang involvement says about the youth:

It should be noted that being a current member of a gang is associated with a range of antisocial behaviours and so may be an indicator of other behavioural issues, which may be linked to school attainment, Table 13. For example: the frequency with which children take weapons to school is related to their GPA, with those who never take weapons having the higher GPA (Fielding 2013).

**Table 13: Antisocial behaviours of males (in grades, 7, 9, 11)**

	Still a gang member	No longer/ never been a gang member
Have ever been disciplined in school	87.2%	64.7%
Damaged school property 3 or more times	40.0%	7.7%
Had a fight with weapons 3 or more times in the last year	41.2%	5.6%
In the past month, carried a weapon to school, most of the time	21.6%	1.1%
Carry a weapon at other times, almost all the time	29.7%	3.1%

Original Source: Bahamas Ministry of Education and The College of The Bahamas (2009). [Survey of Schoolchildren in The Bahamas]. Unpublished raw data. (Fielding p. 13)

“Males in grade 11 who were not current gang members were more likely to plan to go to college than those who were still gang members, Odds ratio, 3.6

(95% CI: 1.2-11.1)” (Fielding 2013, 13). Once again, coupling this with group discussions, it seems that young men feel great peer and socio-cultural pressure to conform to cultural norms (Blank 2005). What has shifted, for example, is the image of responsible, proud, black males in the society. While it is hard to know exactly how black males saw themselves in earlier generations, the level of male educational attainment and participation in the formal economy was higher in times past. Further, even though young men were seen as troublemakers, as Cleveland Eneas points out in his book *Bain Town* (1976, which was a “famed dangerous” suburb of Nassau in the 1930s and is now a notorious ghetto community, the Bain Town male would stick up for himself and was a proud person who would defend his rights. This is an interesting declaration in a colonial environment where police were brought in from other Caribbean territories to be a buffer zone between the local blacks and the whites and browns.

The idea that one can move up in society based on educational attainment that was so prominent among the leaders of the 1950s and 1960s has all but disappeared. (A discussion of that topic is beyond the scope of this work, however, but only serves to underscore the shift that has occurred among the majority of black males). What is also informative from the group discussions is the perception that construction work is better than professional work. Perhaps this is because one needs little skilled preparation for it and can make between three and five hundred dollars cash a week, an amount seen as considerable when one is eighteen or nineteen years old. Unless one prepares oneself beyond the basic level, the salary does not increase as professionals' remuneration could. Further, day labourers' lack of formal employment means that they are without benefits when they are ill. As these males age, their position becomes less tenable and more tenuous. They also become less able to make the same kind of living they once did. The scenario is complicated, but also leads to increased male frustration, disillusionment and disenfranchisement. This kind of scenario is discussed in great detail in June Carbone and Naomi Cahn's "The End of Men or the Rebirth of Class" (2013).

As single-parent homes proliferate and the one parent is overwhelmed by her responsibility to provide for everyone in a shrinking economy, there is less parental involvement due to more hours spent on the job. Young men then look for acceptance and identification in groups where they can find it. Further, as society increasingly paints a picture of young, working-class, black males as violent, unwanted and dangerous, they retreat further on to the margins of mainstream society. Gangs and other youth groups provide them with a place they feel welcome. These groups, as seen in numerous reports, give youth a feeling of family, acceptance and respect, which is usually unavailable to them at home. They seek this acceptance and sense of belonging to something that is bigger than just they themselves and so are easily brought into the fold. The fear and loathing of gangs is palpable in The Bahamas currently, as a report in the *Nassau Guardian* on 23 October substantiates.

The "War on the Streets" is evidence that "the chickens have come home to roost", according to reformed gang leader Carlos Reid, who said that the crime wave sweeping New Providence is partly due to gang activity. "I can say now that there are four major gangs that have turned into enterprises, . . . that would be One Order, M.A., Fire and Theft and Zoe Pound (Rolle 2013).

This is also borne out by international sources. The Bahamas government has been extremely slow to react to this violence. In fact, the authorities have chosen to argue that gangs do not pose a real threat in The Bahamas. Meanwhile, large numbers of socially frustrated and angry young men fight against each other in their neighbourhood, school, community, and work-based gangs. Carlos Reid and the above article go on to argue that the serious gangs sprang from youth gangs. The irony is, as Reid underscores, "In 1995, when we started our movement, ... not too many people took us seriously... Most of the major gangs are funded through the drug trade. They have moved from delinquent young people to people trying to make a buck" (Rolle 2013). Rolle also reports that "Last year May, two people were killed and six other [sic] injured as a result of a feud between rival gangs, which erupted in a shooting at

a local night club."

What becomes clear is that healthy masculinity is ultimately undermined by the social exclusion that so many youth experience and gangs offer them a way to feel more empowered, as does subscribing to rap culture and becoming a part of the bling generation. Many young men feel that their only way to succeed is to perform the same types of violence portrayed in films, videos and in the news. This is actually their attempt to claim fame. They are unable to access wealth through employment success, unless they work in the service industry, where many of them do work as jet ski operators, but continue to offer other services as well as a way to buttress their limited income. As seen in the section on education, according to Fielding, gang involvement was another sure sign that educational attainment was not valued. Gang members were far less likely to pursue an education. What should be studied is the link between this and social class. While the lower socio-economic group is influenced by the pull of popular culture, they are also being shown those men who are supposed to be role models acting in disregard of all rules of ethical public behaviour.

The tycoon's case further illustrates the complications between young, working-class men, the power structure that surrounds them, and hook's "*imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*" (hooks 2013, 4). Candia Dames states as follows:

The perceptions created by *Nygard Takes Back The Bahamas* video, his flamboyant frolicking with government ministers, and his hero's welcome in Grand Bahama... renewed debate on money in politics. The controversial video was one of several which made the rounds on social media last week. The video showed Nygard celebrating the Progressive Liberal Party's 2012 general election win while watching Prime Minister Perry Christie's victory rally address. Nygard proclaimed as he watched "Yes. We got our country back". Later in the eight-minute video, a group of new cabinet ministers is shown at Nygard's cay for a meeting with Nygard. Some of the

ministers involved have branded the visit as casual (Dames, 2013)

Dames' story is disturbing not only in its focus on what this tycoon has done, but also on what she does not underscore, or the undergirding problems and inequalities mentioned above. In the Dames' story one of the ministers claims, "Mr. Nygard is a Bahamian...He is a philanthropist and he has given more to this country than many other Bahamians including those who criticize him" (Dames 2013).

The tycoon himself claims that "I have been dedicated to this country more than any single person in the whole country. There's testimonial after testimonial". This does not bode well in such an environment. It underscores his arrogance, as well as the *"imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"*. It seems to render everyone else with less money less than full citizens. This once again re-inscribes the messages youth are faced with daily. Said tycoon can act in an illegal manner as Hartnel indicates in "Government Proposed 21-Year Lease Of Reclaimed Crown Land To Peter Nygard", and be empowered for it. He can illegally acquire land and then be rewarded for the same with the lease to that land (Dames 2013, Hartnell 2013, Virgil 2013). He can damage the natural environment, but not be sanctioned for it. The debate is long, but because of his wealth and political clout, he seems immune to prosecution or control. His brand of masculinity raises the question, why should the youth see themselves as being able to progress through legitimate means? He shows them that bad behaviour is rewarded.

Overall, the problems presented here underscore the need to reassess how young men see themselves. Their self-image is predicated on exposure to a limited set of values due in part to a break down in responsible male participants in their lives, damaged family relations, popular culture, political life and local models of male behaviour which only serve to reinforce those presented by the media in *Shotas*, for example. The sad reality is that young, working-class, black youth have very few options from which to choose and even fewer that they



see as being accessible to them. Given the low value placed on education for young men, they are disinclined to pursue an education. Social class impinges enormously on what images they see as accessible to them. Ironically, as Ian Strachan highlights in his *I's Man*, officialdom does nothing to improve the ways men see themselves. They are corrupt and ensure that corruption continues by the public nature of their misbehaviour as seen in "Nygard takes back The Bahamas". Taken in tandem, the messages from popular culture and lived experiences are overwhelmingly negative and only reinforce the fragility of black masculinities, especially among the working class. A work like *This is How You Lose Her* promotes a damaged concept of masculinity and works along with aspects of popular culture like rap music to increase youth exposure to misogyny much like the aspects bell hooks challenges and many leaders in the region seem to perform. Gender transformation is denied by popular culture, cultural understandings of masculinity and the behaviour of many powerful men working to simply re-inscribe the old stereotypes of acceptable male behaviour as patriarchal, misogynist and demeaning to women, and to men who are perceived as weaker, and produces more social exclusion of young, black working class males.

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