

# ***Youth, place and theories of belonging (ISBN: 9781138559622)***

## **Chapter 8**

### **Belonging without believing? Making space for marginal masculinities at the Young Men's Christian Association in the UK and The Gambia**

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#### **Abstract**

As the largest youth faith-based organisation (FBO) in the world, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) offers a unique way to understand how transnational organisations are shaping local masculinities through complex forms of belonging and belief. Based on 18 months of ethnographic research conducted in the UK and The Gambia, I explore the interconnected geographies of space, place and attachment in the lives of the young men I worked with. As I show through ethnographic vignettes and interviews with young men, their sense of belonging is often dictated by their own sense of attachment to places and spaces beyond the YMCA, creating feelings of ambivalence, and in some cases increasing their sense of alienation and marginality.

#### **Introduction**

This ethnographic research explores the interconnected geographies of space, place and attachment in the lives of the young men I worked with at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the UK and The Gambia. An ecumenical, youth-oriented faith-based organisation (FBO) operating in 128 countries, the YMCA claims to be the largest and oldest youth organisation in the world (YMCA 2018) and plays a vital role in the circulation of ideas

about and definitions of youth<sup>1</sup> in the global sphere. However, each YMCA centre stands alone, operating autonomously in each different context and working trans-locally through informal, bilateral partnerships which draw on established development networks whilst bypassing the unwieldy global mechanism of transnational North–South development.

In this chapter, I analyse these informal connections through the sense of belonging fostered at YMCA centres which is embedded in local contexts, but also connected into global moral economies centred on youth transformation (Spurr, 2014). Characterising their work as ‘belonging without believing’,<sup>2</sup> I suggest that YMCA spaces instil forms of institutional masculinity which allow their centres to retain a homogenous character in quite different local environments. By tracing this sense of belonging through two connected local centres, in this chapter I show how the YMCA invokes its transformative power in different contexts and, in doing so, simultaneously makes space for and re-inscribes the moral-spatial coordinates of marginal youth identities. In the next section, I discuss the role the YMCA plays in circulating different forms of youth identity before situating my study in the research contexts of the UK and The Gambia.

### **‘Christian DNA’: a brief history of the YMCA**

From its inception in 1844, belief and belonging have been vital components of the YMCA’s model of engagement. Founded by a group of tradesmen’s apprentices in London, the movement was designed to tame the moral impropriety of young men entering the rapidly expanding city, turning them into ‘spiritual entrepreneurs’ equally adept at demonstrating Christian values as commercial ones (Muukkonen, 2002, p. 104). Male-to-male relations were central to the success of this model, as were spaces where intimate discussions, prayer and

worship could take place (Gustav-Wrathall, 1998). As the organisation expanded, this ‘associational’ model became enshrined in its core tenet of developing ‘whole men’ who were transformed in ‘mind, body and spirit’ and able to spread the now secular message of the organisation (Spurr 2014). Today, the YMCA embeds these values more implicitly in its programs, becoming implicitly non-gendered and blended with a range of organisational and societal goals to transform the lives of young people, creating what we might call a ‘whole person’ (YMCA 2018).

To understand the contemporary YMCA this chapter focuses on a specific program (Sports Leadership) for young people out of school in the UK and out of employment in The Gambia, West Africa. Located on the south coast of the United Kingdom, the city of Brighton and Hove (pop. circa 300,000) is known for its tourist attractions and nightlife, and boasts a vibrant local economy. Founded in 1919, Sussex Central YMCA struggled through much of the twentieth century as a local community centre before developing in the last twenty years to become a leading organisation in homelessness and youth development.

In comparison, The Gambia is currently undergoing a period of change and revolution, with a new government replacing the anti-western autocrat Yahya Jammeh, and a renewed feeling of hope and optimism. A small country of 1.4 million people, The Gambia is a poor country with pockets of wealth generated by a vibrant tourist industry. Fieldwork was conducted at the Greater Banjul headquarters of the Gambia YMCA situated in the commercial district of Kanifing, located between religious buildings, Gambia University, various local and international NGOs and the huge US Embassy, but also very close to the affluent tourist areas on the Atlantic Coast. Founded in 1979 as a vocational training institute, The Gambia YMCA developed with assistance from English missionaries and YMCA connections, growing with

the Gambian economy to today play a leading role in the regional NGO landscape, and working closely with the Gambian government on youth issues. In a strange quirk of fate, the YMCA in The Gambia was founded by a Muslim, who witnessed the YMCA's work in Senegal and decided to start his own centre before a group of local Christians and missionaries ousted him, citing his nepotistic practices as just cause.<sup>3</sup> This incident alone illustrates how vital it is to understand the links between FBO spaces and their impact on emergent youth identity.

## **Methods**

For the purposes of this study, I followed a series of Sports Leadership courses in each location, spending six months with the Sussex Central YMCA and twelve months with The Gambia YMCA between January 2011 and June 2012. The Sports Leadership course targets disengaged young people (aged 13–25) and involves four main foci, spread over 33 hours of teaching: planning and running a coaching session; health and fitness; communication; and leadership. These teaching points offer a fruitful basis for analysing how the YMCA combines embodied practice with a discourse of leadership and self-development. In each location I combined participant observation with a series of focus groups and interviews with young people, YMCA staff and in some cases family members.<sup>4</sup> As a practitioner worker, the research presented a series of ethical dilemmas over 'blurred boundaries' (Wolff, 2004, p. 202) which meant being open and transparent with my informants, creating a transparent dialogue of consent and mutual trust and working closely with key gatekeepers to continually reflect on any troubling issues that arose (see Wolff, 2004).

## **Marginal masculinities in the neoliberal landscape**

In both the UK and West Africa, palpable anxiety over the role of disruptive young men has placed increased focus on intervention programs targeted at engendering forms of desirable, acceptable (Ward 2015) and respectable masculinity (Batsleer 2014). In this climate, organisations such as the YMCA have grown in stature due to their focus on producing productive young men able to act as capable citizens and to enact positive, non-disruptive modes of masculinity (see Ward et al. 2017). Yet, whilst studies of masculinity which focus on white working-class boys have increasingly focused on how a sense of belonging is configured through space (Farrugia & Wood 2017), less is known about how ideas of space are reconfigured through non-institutional settings which combine their own organisational imperatives with government agendas, policies and objectives (see Robb et al. 2015; Roberts 2011). Even less is known about how these organisations operating in the transnational sphere promote forms of deracinated youthhood based around generic, neoliberal goals usually founded on narrowly defined economic parameters (see Wignall 2016).

Consequently, I argue that a contradiction exists at the heart of the YMCA's work between producing mainstream forms of masculinity and reproducing forms of prejudice against the very types of men they are designed to help. To explore these tensions, I analyse the YMCA's 'whole man' masculine model as a form of space-specific 'hegemonic' or dominant masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) determined by a precise masculine 'habitus' into which young men can be inducted (Bourdieu 2001). Described as 'the permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body' (Eriksen & Nielsen 2017, p. 130), habitus can play an important role in establishing forms of embodied behaviour linked to moral and social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1991). At the YMCA, young men are 'responsibilised' through a series of tests, challenges and obligations, with the ultimate prize being integration into the YMCA system. Sport is key in this context as a way of ritualising embodied behaviours and

integrating individuals both into wider corporate group structures and broader skeins of social meaning (Mellor & Shilling 2014; Bourdieu 1991).

An ethnographic approach centred on spatially embodied processes can reveal how young masculinities are fashioned by way of ‘power geometries’ in which ‘groups and individuals are placed in distinct and unequal relations’ (Massey 1996, p. 176, quoted in Farrugia & Wood 2017, p. 213). In the UK many of the YMCA’s clients are drawn from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds or communities where particular social issues (anti-social behaviour, truancy from school, violence, criminality) are painted as problematic, cast as part of a general social ‘backwardness’ that requires remedial action (see Ingram 2009; Ward 2015). For many working-class men, this has meant that, rather than ‘learning to serve’, they reject dominant notions of new masculinity and form their identities from the areas where they are comfortable, the ‘margins’ (McDowell 2000; Willis, 1977). However, recent scholarship has noted how young people also powerfully exert their sense of agency through space, challenging and subverting forms of dominant masculinity and developing different forms of agency which rely on complex assemblages of space, place and belonging (Ward et al., 2017).

Across West Africa, the pathologisation of young masculinities is exacerbated by the prescient fear of violence and instability and neo-colonial discourses of ‘idle’ young men (see Wignall 2016; cf. Honwana 2012). This leads to polarised narratives of youth and masculinity centred on either being productive economic actors or destructive political actors, with little room in between for ambiguity, nuance or lived realities (Wignall 2016). In the Gambian context, categories of manhood are dictated by The Gambia’s paradoxical recent history as a self-styled Islamic state and a hedonistic tourist destination (see Wignall 2017). In the midst of these intersecting global and local forces, young men experience exclusion and marginalisation

through both febrile and exclusive ethnics and governance structures and from the older generations who see youth as a threat (Janson, 2013). Coupled with the difficulties of finding a sustainable livelihood due to the unbalanced Gambian economy, young men often feel multiply marginalised and access NGOs both as routes to local empowerment and as portals to another realm, both real and imagined, of global opportunity. However, it is important to note that, like young working-class boys in the UK, young Gambian men are also exerting their agency in innovative ways, and many of the young men I worked with were using the Sports Leadership course as a stepping stone to coaching careers, community work or even teaching (see Wignall, 2017). With this ambiguity in mind, in the following sections I explore these tensions through a series of ethnographic moments and portraits of young men in the Sports Leadership course, highlighting how YMCA spaces operate as sites of negotiation, agency and expression for young people struggling with their own situatedness in the local and global sphere.

### **‘It’s good for your mind’: embodying aspiration in the UK**

*Today, on a brisk March afternoon, I am sat amidst the faded green paint of the YMCA youth centre’s upstairs training room. I’m here to observe and assist a Sports Leadership session run on behalf of the local council for young people excluded from mainstream education. Sat around a group of hastily arranged tables, a group of young people sits, or rather slouches, their hands tucked deep in their pockets or playing with their mobile phones. Some slouch onto the table, their heads resting on folded arms, looking like they’d rather be elsewhere. All are dressed in a variety of sportswear blazoned with big brand names like Nike and Adidas. One is dressed conspicuously in a dull grey tracksuit and hoody, a grey beanie hat perched precariously on the top of his head. This is Benny, and he is currently playing with his mobile*

*phone. I drift behind him to see what he is doing and he is moving his fingers rapidly over the screen, playing a well-known football game highly popular with young people in the UK and around the world.*

*I return to my observation seat at the back of the class as the tutor Stacey<sup>6</sup> calls for the students' attention. I notice that most ignore her, some partially and others completely. Rather than get annoyed she says with, a heavy sigh, 'Come on guys.' And then, referring directly to Benny, 'What have I told you about mobile phones?' Benny looks up from his game and simply nods. A few of the other students smirk in Benny's direction. One yawns emphatically to show his disinterest. Earlier in the day the students successfully took charge of coaching sessions at a local school, with Benny performing particularly well. Now, Stacey begins going through the day's sessions, asking the students to write down some of their reflections on their activities: Have they done well? What could they have done better? She tells them they need to fill out their learning diaries, to which one student rolls his eyes. She then turns to the board and begins writing up some example sentences for them to copy, at which point Benny surreptitiously resumes his game under the table. Eventually Stacey stops writing and turns and with exasperation says 'Benny!' Benny looks up with a sheepish grin and, with Stacey still glaring at him, slips his phone into his trouser pocket, his hand resting there as if ready to resume his game at any second. (Fieldnotes, 16th April 2011)*

This vignette demonstrates the delicate and often problematic process of trying to transform the young men who join the course. For many of the Sports Leadership candidates I met, YMCA spaces operated as safe havens away from complicated home and school lives, where they felt alienated, confused or even threatened. YMCA courses were designed to counter these feelings, as for working-class boys especially crossing the threshold from their local



neighbourhood to more formal institutional settings can create problematic feelings of inferiority and ambivalence that drastically impact their long-term aspirations (Ingram 2009, p. 422; cf. Evans 2006; Roberts 2011).

In Benny's life the tension between his own fragile aspirations, his sense of place and his embodied pleasure were worked out through the Sports Leadership course. As he told me, the Sports Leadership course has changed the way he thinks about his own life, helping him to identify possible paths that were seemingly closed to him:

it's alright like, if I didn't come here, I would of [sic] just spent my teenage years being in school ... here I've been fishing on a boat, I've worked in a school ... I've done rock climbing ... I've done kayaking.

As he was encouraged at the YMCA Benny's passion for sport began to develop into something more: a viable career option, and the opportunity to do what he enjoys:

Sport is a bit of a religion. You can have debates about it. You can talk about it forever. It's a good life to live, to have a bit of sport in your life. It's good for you. It's good for your mind. It gets your mind off things. If I got paid to do sport, even if it was just minimum wage, I'd be happy.

Benny's summation of the reasons he loves sport replicate the plural impact sport can have beyond the body. First, it has shaped his body and embodied practice, making him 'healthy' and 'fit', which he codes as 'good'. Second, he suggests that sport has distracted him from his problems, giving him an improved sense of wellbeing unavailable to him in other institutional

settings. Finally, sport has helped Benny to be more ‘social’, able to communicate his feelings, express himself and connect with people, an integral part of the YMCA re-engagement process.

Moreover, Benny’s equation of sport to religion points to deeper connections between behaviour, language and emotions, which are carefully structured in religious rituals to produce specific types of people (see Mellor & Shilling, 2014). Benny discusses this idea in terms of how the Sports Leadership course has led him on a journey of reinvention, starting with re-narrating his past:

Before I didn’t have something to look forward to, just a ... dull future. It gave me more options and made me look, more open-eyed and that. I’ve seen ... that there’s more in life, and it’s nice when you’re just teaching kids ... you’re working to make them better.

Re-visioning his past through his present has also given him new ways of seeing his future. Benny’s ‘dull future’ was going to be being a plumber, a job many working-class families encourage as good, solid work but which leaves Benny cold:

I wanna be a PE [physical education] teacher or coach, or like they do here. I wanna do something with sport, a job, career in sport ... that’s my dream. What I wanna do with plumbing? I don’t want to spend my life under a toilet seat.

Benny’s attachment to the YMCA has allowed him to gradually draw away from the tightly woven fabric of aspiration and place which he felt he was destined to inhabit. A key element of this movement has been his budding relationships with some of the staff at the YMCA like

Stacey and me who were prepared to offer him a chance to chase his dream of becoming a sports worker. Many of these workers have also been young people coming through the YMCA system themselves. For example, both staff members Justin and Stacey joined the YMCA as volunteers after completing the Sports Leadership course. This personal experience of transformation often helps them to form meaningful bonds with young people, as they find points of commonality and identification. They are also close in age to the young people, and may come from similar areas or schools offering multiple coordinates of familiarity for the students to identify with (see Robb et al., 2015).

However, the system is far from foolproof. As Benny's resistance suggests, the fragility of the emergent subjectivities makes them prone to volatility and unpredictability (see Batsleer, 2014; Robb et al., 2015). Many YMCA tutors have been threatened with violence during a course or had to fire students for serious breaches of discipline, a violent reminder of the limitations of this template. For example, another young man in Benny's cohort who identified as a potential YMCA leader was less inclined to leave behind his destructive past. I first met Callum on a previous Gambia exchange programme, where he impressed with his confidence and willingness to help out. However, he finished the trip under a cloud, by repeatedly disregarding group rules and subsequently disappointing tutors like Stacey who had placed their faith in him. As he went on to tell me, despite severe acts of violence leading to his expulsion from school he had 'changed a bit' and 'matured quite a bit'. However, he confessed that he was still in trouble with the police for various offences which, although they had occurred in the past, were having an impact on his present ability to attend the course. In contrast, Callum's journey and ongoing problems reflect the provisional nature of YMCA transformation, where the permeable nature of YMCA spaces is reflected in the mutability of young lives in flux and the 'local' is forever threatening to reclaim its occupants. Reflecting on these issues, in the

following section I transfer my analysis to The Gambia, showing how local systems of authority were both undermined and reinforced by the bonds forged within the YMCA's walls.

### **'It's like a family to me': spaces of care in The Gambia**

*It's a blistering hot Saturday morning and I have taken my Sports Leadership students out of the YMCA training room onto a half-built basketball court in order to run some coaching exercises. The students are lined up to one side of me and they are taking turns to deliver their coaching sessions. One by one they are stepping into the role of 'coach', taking command of their peers and taking them through a series of drills and exercises. At the end of each session, I step forward, take them to one side and give them feedback, what they did well, what they could improve, etc. Later we will return to class and they will write this feedback up and it will help them improve their practice.*

*As we are nearing the end of the session a young coach called Bubba steps up and starts taking the students through his drill. However, he seems to forget what to say, mumbling and looking down at his coaching sheet. His fellow students gaze at him patiently, waiting for him to take charge of the situation. Joe tells him to take his time and to 'be confident'. He then begins to speak again but does so very quietly. The other students gaze on bemused as they can't make out what he's saying. Joe asks him to 'speak up' and reiterates the need to 'be confident'. He coughs to clear his throat and re-starts his session. This time his voice is louder and, though he stumbles over some of the words, the students can understand him and begin carrying out his instructions. Occasionally he falters and the students hesitate and look to him for*

*instruction, but he consults his session plan and gets the students going again. At the end of the session, the students and tutors give him a hearty round of applause, and he steps away looking pleased with himself. When I take him away to discuss his session, I keep it short and simple and tell him simply to remember to 'be confident' next time he coaches. He smiles, nodding vigorously and apparently pleased with this feedback, jogging back to the group for the final session of the day. (Fieldnotes, 12th December 2011)*

In the UK Sports Leadership course, the ritualisation of sport was used to convert young men from a 'tough' street-based version of masculinity (Ward et al., 2017) to 'whole man' versions based around the YMCA principles of transforming body and spirit for positive social engagement. Gambian young men presented a different set of challenges. In the broader schematic of African youth 'stuck' in between youth and adulthood, many of the young Gambian men were also part of a 'sandwich generation', caught between intractable elders and even more discouraged school-age siblings (see Janson 2013). Bubba's reticence was symptomatic of a recurring issue in the course of young men not being able to find ways to appropriately express their authority. As I explore, this problematic negotiation indicated the complex ways YMCA masculinities are embedded in local and global senses of belonging.

In Bubba's case, his reluctance to speak up was intricately linked to both his self-styled Islamic identity and a sense of intergenerational respect deeply embedded in local Gambian culture. In a number of West African contexts, timidity is equated with a complex combination of respect for elders, respect for authority and tradition, and Islamic tenets of humility, kindness and care (see Janson 2013). As one of his managers who was also Muslim remarked to me, Bubba is a 'good person' who is 'very humble', which equated to a very positive form of masculinity in

her view: ‘One thing that has made Bubba the man he is, is his religion; he’s very spiritual because religion teaches a lot of tolerance.’

Bubba’s attachment to the YMCA also reflected a stark socio-economic reality for Gambian young men as they tried to carve out a future for themselves amidst intergenerational discord and rapid shifts in societal patterns of consumption, labour and political power imagined in relation to global inequality (see Wignall, 2017). As Bubba put it to me, his future, ambition and achievement are firmly rooted in the precarious realities of daily Gambian existence: ‘The future is a dream ... I work hard to achieve what I want to achieve but what I want to be in the future is not in my place to think.’

Bubba saw the YMCA as his route into a ‘modern life’, as he strives to differentiate himself from his peers: ‘You could be in a ghetto but don’t stay in the ghetto ... the smart ones or the lucky ones are the ones that are gonna leave the girl behind.’ For many young men like Bubba, the YMCA offered a sense of security both away from their peers in ‘the ghetto’ but also linking them into a global organisation where their aspirations could be realised. When I asked him whether the Christianity of the YMCA worries him, he used the kinship idiom to emphasise the powerful emotional, interpersonal attachment he feels: ‘it’s like a family to me. It doesn’t matter, as far as we are all as a family.’

Bubba’s narrative illustrates that it is worth problematising negative portrayals of African young men as perpetually trapped in ‘waithood’ when in actuality they are striving to escape or transform their circumstances (Honwana, 2012). Whilst young people in The Gambia often speak of ‘just managing’ to make ends meet, they are also deftly ‘managing’ an array of responsibilities, expectations and obligations (see Wignall, 2017). This precarious positioning

in Gambian society became evident when talking to the most taciturn member of the group, Peter. Aged twenty-five, he is a devout Christian and a central figure at the local Methodist church, playing guitar in the choir. However, on the coaching field he was timid and reserved, embarrassed to express himself or be noticed. A trained electrician, he had recently become a part-time coach at the YMCA, though he admitted he would love to go full-time if he could. The Sports Leadership course helped him begin to overcome his timidity and to emulate other students' examples of assertive and vocal communication. It also helped him to develop a greater sense of confidence in his own abilities. As he described here, the combination of session planning and behavioural reflection helped him to hone his sense of expression: 'I'm always a shy guy. The course helps me to learn what it would be like to be a good and proper coach: that you should not be shy. It helped me to know myself and express myself properly.' Though he was aware of his 'shyness', then, Peter's experience of coaching had been coloured by the aggressive nature of many older, Gambian coaches:

Anything you do they will talk ... positive or even negative they will talk, 'This guy's very cool, he's very calm – a coach should not be that cool.' [If] you be [are] aggressive they will say, 'Ah he is very aggressive, a coach should not be this aggressive'.

As Van Klinken (2012) has shown in the context of Pentecostal worship in Zambia, masculinities are refined by morally coding certain behaviours as 'feminine' or 'weak'. Peter's professed 'weakness' or 'shyness' could easily be read as a sign of humility or respect. The YMCA space offered a chance to escape this scrutinising atmosphere, a chance to nurture and rehearse a respectful masculine demeanour that connected with his own aspirations.

For other students on the Sports Leadership course, sport itself offered a very concrete way of partially transforming their dreams into reality whilst gaining credibility in their local context. Like Peter, Gabriel was volunteering with Joe at the YMCA and at nineteen was a softly spoken young man. Unlike Peter, but like a number of young men from wealthier backgrounds (Proctor 2011), he gave off a self-assured confidence and was using the Sports Leadership course to accelerate his 'big man' trajectory. As Gabriel told me, sport has allowed him to travel and visit 'many, many countries', offering a double chance of distinguishing himself locally as both a sportsman and well-seasoned traveller. As he discussed, the course and his new responsibilities at the YMCA had helped him to understand the value of leadership as an end in itself:

You have to lead. You have to set the example. You have to be their friend. You have to talk to them, advise them. They always look up to you, like 'is Gabriel going to score 100 runs? If the captain can score 100 runs, why can't we score 100 runs?' So I always have to lead them.

Gabriel's valorisation of his sporting achievements indicated how the YMCA was helping to foster alternative notions of youthhood intimately woven into local and global understandings of social becoming. This process helped many young men transform their sporting currency into masculine credibility in the local context (see Ward et al., 2017).

### **Conclusion: ambivalent associations at the YMCA**

As I have demonstrated, nascent versions of selfhood emerging at the YMCA are directly tied to both the immediate experience of spaces, places and feelings of attachment and the complex



imaginaries and aspirations these spaces help to generate, resulting in sometimes conflicting feelings of ambivalence and alienation (Sattar, this volume). In this context of ambiguous and processual senses of belonging, YMCA leadership models designed to engage young men can be understood as a form of 'hybrid habitus' (Mellor & Shilling 2014) that combines strict discipline with feelings of gratification and achievement. Tracing these formations of habitus in the transnational sphere can help an understanding of how these change between both local–global and local–local places and can create difficult tensions in young people's lives (Farrugia & Wood 2017; Nayak 2016; Wyn, Cuervo & Cook, this volume). For the UK-based students, the YMCA space could be considered a liminal or 'third space' (Robb et al. 2015, p. 12) in the sense of a temporary suspension of normality, a waystation or escape from their everyday lives. For young men in The Gambia, the YMCA space also held multiple meanings (see Robb et al. 2015), acting simultaneously as a temporary escape from everyday life, a place to develop their own ambitions away from the familial glare and crucially a way of engaging with the increasingly present field of global opportunity.

At the same time young men are enacting their masculinities in the context of growing inequalities, where unfolding 'landscapes of poverty and privilege' shaped by shifting global 'geographies of production and employment' create new forms of localised inequality and alienation (Farrugia & Wood, 2017, p. 213; cf. Wignall, 2016). Consequently, it is also important to question the rising value of YMCA models of the self-transforming, entrepreneurial subject for a global, neoliberal economy seemingly at odds with the YMCA's core Christian values of love, equality and friendly association. Particularly in countries such as The Gambia stuck in postcolonial forms of exploitation and economic dependency, young people's lives are inherently unjust, and their responsabilisation through belonging only serves to underline their sense of injustice and disaffection. By exploring how YMCA spaces and

senses of belonging help reconcile these ambiguities, however incompletely, we can begin to understand how these inherent contradictions are written back into young people's lives, and, in turn, how they are written into the spatial, corporate and intimate histories of the YMCA itself as it powers forward into a new era of global prosperity.

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<sup>1</sup> I analyse youth as a situational category, but generally defined as anyone aged 13–35 (Wignall 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Davie (2006) characterises the use of religious space in the UK as becoming more like ‘believing without belonging’ (p. 284).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with former The Gambia YMCA manager, 12 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup> UK: 7 focus groups, 41 interviews; The Gambia: 9 focus groups, 62 interviews.

<sup>5</sup> The Gambia is a peaceful, multi-ethnic society but has seen recent tensions around the favouring of certain groups such as the Jola over others by Jammeh’s outgoing administration (see Janson 2013).

<sup>6</sup> All names are pseudonyms.