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Youth and the politics of generational memories: The Soweto uprising in South Africa

Jeunesses d'Afrique du Sud et mémoire générationnelle des émeutes de Soweto (1976)

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Résumés

English Français

This article deals with the individual histories of local politicians and activists in urban South Africa (Cape Town), in which the past is situated in relation to the present. It looks at those who were youths during apartheid and who are now involved in urban politics. This article sheds light on how members of the historical generation of Soweto have produced knowledge, and how these textured experiences have steered them towards certain political commitments. Through their stories, it can be seen how the Soweto generation is commonly taken to symbolise the outbreak of the youth rebellion in 1976. Taking the narrative of the Soweto generation from apartheid to democracy as a point of departure, this article suggests that a historicising, gendered perspective is vital to understanding the continuities and discontinuities in the speeches, representations, and rationales for action in youth activism and local politics in contemporary South Africa. The diverse ways of experiencing and remembering Soweto not only structured pathways for specific actors, but became part of the symbolic repertoire of politics as such in South Africa.

Cet article traite de la biographie d'hommes politiques et de militants en Afrique du Sud urbaine (Le Cap), dont le passé personnel est situé dans sa relation à l'actualité. Il s'intéresse à ceux qui étaient jeunes à l'époque de l'Apartheid et sont maintenant engagés dans la politique municipale. Cet article met en lumière la façon dont les membres de la « génération de Soweto » ont produit des connaissances et comment ces expériences marquantes les ont poussés à certains engagements politiques. À travers leurs histoires, on peut voir comment la génération Soweto est considérée comme le symbole de la rébellion de la jeunesse en 1976. Prenant comme point de départ le récit de la génération Soweto, de la période de l'apartheid à l'instauration de la démocratie, cet article suggère qu'une perspective à la fois historique et genrée est essentielle pour comprendre les continuités et les discontinuités dans les discours, les représentations et les justifications de l'activisme des jeunes et des politiques locales dans l'Afrique du Sud contemporaine. Les diverses façons d'expérimenter et de se souvenir de

Soweto n'ont pas seulement structuré les parcours d'acteurs spécifiques, mais sont devenues partie intégrante du répertoire symbolique de la politique dans l'Afrique du Sud contemporaine.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : émeutes de Soweto, genre, jeunesse, mémoire générationnelle, politique urbaine

Keywords : Cape Town, gender, generational memories, South Africa, Soweto riots, urban politics, youth

Géographique : Afrique du Sud, Le Cap

Texte intégral

¹ This article deals with the individual histories of local politicians and activists in urban South Africa in which the past is situated in relation to the present.¹ This historicising approach shows how social and political events experienced by youths during apartheid are constructed and remembered. It sheds light on how members of the “Soweto² generation” have produced knowledge, and how these textured experiences have steered them towards certain political commitments. These members’ narratives provide further insights into “the wider society or social segment of which they are also [a] part” (Arnold and Blackburn, 2005: 43, quoted in Jeffrey and Dyson, 2008).

1. Apartheid, post-apartheid, and the “Soweto generation”

² During my eighteen months of fieldwork (between 2005 and 2007) with women and men engaged in local politics in Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha, two adjacent former townships located in the City of Cape Town, remembering the colonial history of apartheid proved essential.³ In talking to these local politicians and activists about their current political and societal engagements, and by observing informal and formal political events during the ethnographic research, it emerged that they often linked their present-day activities to the past, particularly referencing *their experiences as youths during apartheid*. A biographical approach and event analysis became important methods for understanding the gendered patterns of local politics.⁴ This study elucidates how local politicians and activists have situated themselves with respect to salient events and how they use retrospection as a rationale to explain their present agency as women and men.⁵ In this context, urban politicians and activists explained their commitment through memories of their youth, mostly with reference to specific violent events of the apartheid regime, such as: the Sharpeville massacre, when on March 21, 1960, South African police began shooting at a crowd of people protesting the pass laws in the township of Sharpeville (Frankel, 2001); the Soweto uprising in 1976, when police opened fire on pupils protesting the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in the township of Soweto (Khulu, 1983; Baines, 2007); and the United Democratic Front Movement launched in Mitchells Plain in 1983, which acted as an alliance of organisations and people across classes and racialised classifications protesting against the apartheid regime (*Dawn Journal of Umkhonto we Swize*, 1983; Seekings, 2000). The way these politicians and activists described their previous and current political engagements was significantly shaped by their present-day perspectives. Retrospection “conditions the selection of memories, the temporal and thematic linkage of memories, and the type of representation of the remembered experiences” (Rosenthal, 2004: 50). The

past is saved in memories, from which experiences are converted into knowledge and integrated into specific stocks of knowledge (Spiegel, 2010: 39). People hark back to their respective stocks of knowledge to select relevant meaning, meaning which is linked both to current events and to earlier periods in their lives (Schütz and Luckmann, 1973; Rosenthal, 2004).

3 Being young during apartheid meant experiencing forced removals according to housing provisions that differed for so-called Coloureds and Black Africans, suffering discrimination at school, being forced underground, imprisonment, rape, experiencing the criminalisation of activism, and being on the run—i.e. it entailed “territories of difference” (Escobar, 2008). In Cape Town, apartheid legislation forced people out of central urban areas designated for “Whites only” and into suburban peripheral regions, i.e. the area locally known as the Cape Flats. Beginning in the 1960s, people were racially segregated into so-called Coloured and Black African townships (Western, 1996). In contrast with classified Black Africans, people classified as Coloured received preferential treatment from the state in terms of education, housing, labour, and social cash transfers. During my research, it became clear that in South African society today, the sense of belonging to a particular grouping/collectivity remains informed by what the apartheid political system had hierarchically categorised as White, Coloured, or Black African. These categories continue to be salient; they function as markers to maintain and reproduce historically-rooted racialised, gendered, cultural, and social boundaries. In this respect, I am guided by authors who have pointed out that government ascriptions about being Coloured have not only been imposed on society but also negotiated within it, and therefore should not be conceived as homogenous or static entities (Erasmus, 1998, 2001; Salo, 2004; Adhikari, 2005; Jensen, 2008).

4 This article adds a new perspective to studies on the “master narrative” of the Soweto uprisings, which have argued that the Soweto uprisings were institutionalised by the African National Congress (ANC) Government in the interests of supporting nation-building processes (e.g. Baines, 2007). It builds upon studies that have focused solely on the experience of Soweto and those in the former Black African townships in and around Johannesburg (Bennell and Monyokolo, 1994; Ndlovu, 1998).⁶ It also complements research on youth and generational connections in South Africa and other African countries (Boesen, 2008; Reynolds Whyte et al., 2008), which has matured from conceiving the youth of the apartheid period as a “lost generation” (Cruise O’Brien, 1996; Seekings, 1996a) to characterising them as “AIDS orphans, child soldiers, disaffected and marginalized young men, and sexually active teenage girls [who] represented the dangers and tribulations of a historical generation at a troubled juncture of Africa’s history” (Reynolds Whyte et al., 2008: 1).

5 Among local politicians and activists in Cape Town, the “Soweto generation” is commonly seen as symbolic of those who experienced the outbreak of the youth rebellion in 1976. For those of this generation, the outbreak of the youth rebellion gave rise to a differentiation in their politicisation and political pathways, and began to shape the diverse landscapes of informal and formal politics that one finds in South Africa today. The biographical perspectives presented in this paper show different gendered forms of doing politics established after apartheid: as an activist in a social movement, as an NGO activist, as a ward councillor,⁷ as a personal assistant of a mayoral committee member, as a community development worker,⁸ as a voluntary social worker, etc.—in other words, it shows the plurality of aspirational, associational, organisational, and institutional positions and components that constitute political culture in modern-day South Africa. Taking the narrative of the Soweto generation during the transition from apartheid to democracy as a point of departure, this article suggests that a historicising, gendered perspective is vital to understanding the continuities and discontinuities in the speeches, representations,

and rationales for action in youth activism and local politics in contemporary South Africa. The rhetoric of legitimising current politics with historically suffered deprivations has found its way into the language of today's youth activists. The diverse ways of experiencing and remembering Soweto has not only structured pathways for specific actors, moreover it has also become part of the symbolic repertoire of politics as such in South Africa.

6 This article is organised as follows. In Section 2, following Karl Mannheim's sociology of generations and knowledge, I conceptualise the Soweto generation as a social generation, an "index" for locating youth in a particular historical social structure. Based on Mannheim, the life trajectories of local politicians and activists presented in Sections 3 and 4 reveal a shared, gendered location of that generation and how various individuals opted to become opposing activists, cooperate with the regime, or remain impartial during the Soweto uprising and thereafter. In Sections 5 and 6, based on this historicising perspective, I look at continuities and discontinuities between the past and present in the speeches, representations, rationales for action, and political commitments of those interviewed, as well as with regards to current youth activism on the whole in South Africa.

2. Violence and ruptures

7 The Soweto uprising broke out in the township of Soweto on June 16, 1976, when police opened fire on approximately 10,000 students protesting the use of the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction. Introduced in 1974, a regulation forced all schools in the former Black African neighbourhoods to use Afrikaans and English in a 50–50 mix as the languages of class instruction, while local languages such as isiXhosa were only to be used in religious education, music, and physical education. After the initial revolt, resistance spread nationwide and persisted for several months with arrests, deaths in detention, and trials. Many different areas joined in the resistance, including 22 townships in the Transvaal, 16 areas around Cape Town, 4 townships in Port Elizabeth, and 9 townships in other towns (Ndlovu, 1998: 350). In Cape Town, riots started in early August 1976 with a student boycott at the University of the Western Cape, and then developed into further protests and mass disturbances in the townships. The most serious incidents of street conflict in Cape Town took place on the 2nd, 8th, and 9th of September 1976, when approximately 40 deaths were recorded during township protests (TRC,⁹ 1998: 413). The 1976 revolt can be seen as an event that politicised not only Black Africans but also, to a certain extent, built solidarity with Coloureds who were opposed to the state's (educational) policies (ibid.: 392). By the end of February 1977, the official death count, as recorded by the so-called Cillie Commission, stood at approximately 580 people, including around 80 "Coloured", 2 "White", 2 "Indian", and 496 "Black African" people. Ndlovu (1998) points out that a variety of explanations for the Soweto uprising have been proposed:

Some highlight structural changes in the economy and society, including political changes brought about by apartheid [since 1948]; some stress the emergence of youth subcultures in Soweto's secondary schools in the 1970s; some emphasize the transformative role of Black Consciousness and its associated organizations [...] (Ndlovu, 1998: 317).

8 It is important to take all of these explanations into consideration when trying to understand why the Soweto uprising occurred. The ways in which local politicians and activists of the Soweto generation have engaged in the construction of the memories of their youth—one which placed them in an environment of violent uprisings, segregation politics, forced displacements, and arrests—show how this environment has continuously detracted from and destabilised their sense of

belonging to particular places in peripheral urban environments. Following Karl Mannheim,

[...] the social phenomenon “generation” represents nothing more than a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related “age groups” embedded in a historical social process. While the nature of class location can be explained in terms of economic and social conditions, generation location is determined by the way in which certain patterns of experience and thought tend to be brought into existence [...] (Mannheim, [1927/1928] 1952: 292).

9 In this respect, the trajectories discussed here show how certain patterns of experience speak to gender relations and the gender order that were formed during the struggle against apartheid, with its territorial politics. The method of producing political trajectories allows us to identify the specific circumstances under which political engagement evolved, as guided by the actors’ conceptions, dispositions, and agendas. In this respect, the thematic field of local politics is grounded in their socialisation in certain social milieus, day-to-day political perspectives, positioning in political events and political parties, etc. These biographical aspects and life strategies correspond to sets of “resource continuities” (Goffmann, [1974] 1986: 287–294), encompassing specific stocks of knowledge, records of events, symbolic meanings of public functions, memberships in institutions, and so forth. Consequently, resource continuity can be regarded as a constitutional element of a political trajectory shaped by the actors’ positioning and their navigating between various positions. The trajectories thereby capture a process of remembering, i.e. the process of placing oneself as part of a particular history, as a part of wider society, and as a part of the social segment of the Soweto generation.

10 In this article, the different ways of talking about past activism are linked to experiences of violent discrimination firstly at school and later in prison at the hands of state authorities, to an illegal status as a Black African on the run, to a status as a Coloured and the resulting privileged access to resources, and so forth. Mannheim uses the term *Lagerung* (“location”) to indicate common features displayed by certain individuals, “not by conscious choice, but merely by virtue of being placed ‘here’ rather than ‘there’ along a continuum” ([1927/1928] 1952: 22). The trajectories indicate that violence and ruptures represent common features of a shared, gendered, and social location. This shared location hints at “certain definite modes of [action:] behaviour, feeling and thought” (ibid.: 291).

11 To speak in Mannheim’s terms, the Soweto youth participated in the same social and historical circumstances and were being exposed “[...] to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization” (ibid.: 303). This, in a contingent way, crucially influenced their subsequent different pathways to independence. Following Mannheim, the individuals discussed here share specific similarities simply because crucial first experiences brought them into contact with the same circumstances. However, their trajectories clearly illustrate that belonging more or less to this same generation did not in itself determine the entirety of their social and political orientation and gendered positioning within society. In this process of “dynamic de-stabilization”, their trajectories depict, for instance, not only how women were the recognised backbone of the struggle, but also how they established a certain mode of political action in order to manage and organise their daily survival. In this context, Mannheim points out that “generation” is superimposed upon other historical and cultural elements and dynamics. The trajectories highlight that even within one historical category, such as the “Coloured” in Cape Town, members of the same age group split into sharply differentiated gendered, economic, and racialised positions along political lines in times of social struggle. In accordance with Mannheim, individuals of various age groups of the Soweto generation became polarised into opposing “generation units”—either becoming oppositional activists, cooperating with the regime, or belonging to those

who remained impartial during the Soweto uprising and thereafter.

12 Members of the Soweto generation have in common experiences of violence and ruptures stemming from their place in a “structural whole”, as well as their gendered social position and location. These commonalities are at the fore even in terms of place-based social location, i.e. in the peripheral urban spaces (still) known as the townships. The segregation politics of apartheid instigated political processes of “place-making” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 6), which led to inhabitants developing over time a sense of attachment both to the places where they lived and to their respective segregated groupings. Inhabitants themselves then became involved in place-making through political networking and engagement, cultural practices, and social and economic life. Through these activities, they gained a richly textured knowledge of the places in which they lived, and started to develop a sense of “specialised channels of knowledge” (Lachenmann, 2004: 127) in these spaces. The mapping of historically remembered place-based events during the struggle, such as the launching of the UDF in Rocklands in Mitchells Plain, street committees and civic structures, informal tuck-shops selling mainly groceries, informal shebbens selling liquor, drug lords and gang territories, hotspots, and no-go areas, developed as a significant asset for local politicians, enabling them to better identify common issues in the harsh daily realities of their neighbourhoods, for example, when their children got involved in “gangsterism” or “doing drugs”. This detailed knowledge can be described as a spatial orientation that locates a “history of place”, and covers such diverse entities as housing structures, sanitation systems, or (informal) local economies within the wider area of the townships. In what follows, I trace in detail how such people have constructed their “history of place” by examining how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis the Soweto uprising.

3. Youth involved in the struggle: Under arrest

13 During the era of apartheid, both young and old mobilised in political organisations, forming movements and developing practices in the fight for independence. The opposition, which formed in the townships was progressively outlawed by the apartheid state. Accordingly, opponents shifted their focus and advocated for revolution rather than reform, since the system did not accommodate any allowance for change or oppositional activism. Protest actions were criminalised and politics became polarised, turning the struggle at its peak in the 1980s from a multi-sided one into a two-sided battle: “for or against” the apartheid state, the opposition becoming known as the liberation movement.

14 Mr Kal-El Check¹⁰ grew up in Manenberg in the Cape Flats. He portrays himself as being married according to Muslim law and as the father of two children. He began his involvement in politics during the 1976 Soweto uprising, as a stone-throwing youth opposed to the apartheid state’s repression in the Cape Flats, expressing solidarity with the protesting students. In order to become part of the apartheid liberation movement, he felt obliged to reject the Coloured identity prescribed to him by the apartheid state and the privileges related to it. His perspective corresponds with those Coloured people who identified with the struggle by identifying as being “black of a special type” (Erasmus, 2001: 19). However, his subsequent arrest and detainment by the police under extreme conditions changed Mr Kal-El Check’s political attitude:

[M]y very first time when I got locked up in jail, I was a minor kid of 13 years old, but I just got off with a few lashes, you know, six cuts, I have still the scars today. Then when I was 17 years old, I got caught up again by the security police. I was interrogated and held under what we called “the Security System

Act". It stood for "detention without trial", where again they kept you for an amount of days, years, months, as long as they wanted—without having a fair trial on that matter. When I ended up in jail, that's where my political career started, because I met other activists with political experience and we exchanged ideas. I decided, instead of being killed or being shot by the police, I decided to put my ideas and my living expertise for what I believed in—and this is the freedom and the justice for everybody (Mr Kal-El Check, December 20, 2005, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018).¹¹

15 Rather than getting more involved in anti-apartheid politics, after his release he began working for the apartheid government. In his words, he realised that countering the apartheid state meant living on the edge, and thus "instead of being killed", he changed sides, leaving the liberation movement and becoming a member of the Labour Party. The Labour Party was officially accepted as a legal political party in the 1980s and was organised by self-defined Coloureds to ensure the representation of Coloured affairs in the Tricameral Parliament, a body where the interests of classified Black Africans were not represented (Terreblanche, 2001).¹² In this respect, Mr Kal-El Check represents a special type of politician¹³ in contrast to many of his "comrades" with similar backgrounds of discrimination and racism, who remained activists or became apolitical during apartheid and rejected the Labour Party as "a puppet of the white people, the apartheid government" (Ward councillor, December 16, 2006, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018). Mr Kal-El Check depicted his decision to work for the apartheid local government as follows:

I did not want to enrich myself, but it was to empower myself with the knowledge, to learn how the system can be manipulated to suit not myself but the people out there without education (Mr Kal-El Check, December 20, 2005, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018).

16 He pointed out that his goals were twofold: to surmount the political cleavages tearing society apart and to gain expertise and knowledge to thereby improve the conditions of classified Coloureds within the system. It is evident that he both rejected and then re-adopted the racialised categories implemented during apartheid, reacting to the various related opportunities and life chances which were available to him when he was in his twenties.

17 During my fieldwork, I encountered other activists who too had experienced physical violence exerted by the apartheid state as a crude response to the activism of their adolescence. In each case, the exercise of state violence failed to hinder their political engagement with the apartheid state, even if they ended up taking different paths. Mr Khumalo, being classified as a Black African, encountered the apartheid state's prohibitions at school in the form of behavioural restrictions, violent treatment, and arrest in his environment in the former Transkei, now known as the Eastern Cape. After dropping out of secondary school, he migrated to the Cape Flats to join the military wing of the underground movement and to become an active member of the African National Congress Youth League, which was overseen by the Lilian Ngoyi African National Congress Branch in Khayelitsha.¹⁴ He received military training from the so-called Self Defence Unit, which was formed by *Umkhonto We Sizwe* combatants linked to his neighbourhood's ANC branch, and subsequently military training in Cuba.

18 Similar to Mr Kal-El Check and Mr Khumalo, Mr Jeferson was also arrested. He now lives where he grew up, in the poorest area of Mitchells Plain (Tafelsig), with his partner and second son. According to Mr Jeferson, political activists like him were trained to be thieves, and the bounty from their thefts used to maintain the ANC's underground activities. He describes this process as the criminalisation of activism. He has spent sixteen years of his life in prison for several attempted murders. In contrast to Mr Jeferson's depiction of the criminalisation of activism in order to support the underground movement, Seekings, in his article on the "lost generation"

and “youth problem” in South Africa, points out that many anti-apartheid activists were

worried about the brutal ways in which young protestors enforced consumer boycotts or stayaways and rendered townships “ungovernable”. [...] But it was often difficult to distinguish between self-serving “tsotsis” (or young gangsters) and over-zealous “comrades”, hence the appearance of the term “comtsotsi” (i.e. “comrade-tsotsi”) (Seekings, 1996a: 104).

19 While Seekings focuses on the youth in former Black African townships, similar processes also occurred, to a certain extent, in the former Coloured townships. Gang activities known as “gangsterism” have been endemic since the township areas came into existence and coexisted with the apartheid regime (Gastrow, 1998). The “traditional” view of gangs sees the former Coloured areas being dominated by the so-called *skollies*, and the former Black African areas by so-called *tsotsis*.¹⁵ However, many authors contend that gang activity decreased in the 1970s because large portions of the country’s classified Coloured and Black African population groups became involved in the struggle for freedom against the apartheid government (Van Wyk, 2005). Militant youth were more into rallying against the apartheid political order than into joining gangs, which subsequently led to a decline in gang activity. Many gangs became alienated from their neighbourhoods, and “anti-crime campaigns”, often directed by ANC-aligned youth, led to violent reprisals against gang members. In some environments, youths organised themselves into so-called defence gangs to protect themselves from victimisation by older and larger gangs. According to Campbell (1990), many young women also supported young men in their actions towards the prevention of or the punishing of criminal activities. This calls for a closer look at the remembering of activism from a gendered perspective.

4. Gendering a generation and their political action

20 According to Schäfer (2000: 84), around 80,000 women and men were detained for political reasons in the 1980s. Between 1960 and 1990, around 10% of all political detainees were women. However, it is hard to say how well these figures reflect the wider pool of female and male activists. How many young women were active in the underground movement, or were arrested and subject to forms of sexual violence, remains unclear because of insufficient baseline records. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was one of the first platforms to provide a space for victims to talk about their experiences of cruelty and violence and supported the view that the apartheid state maintained a total control of women’s bodies and sexualities. However, there were many factors that hindered the TRC in providing an adequate space for victims, especially female victims, to be heard. For instance, the TRC did not institutionalise a special committee for sexual violence against women, with sensitive, trained committee members encouraging women to talk about their past traumatic experiences. Furthermore, it was and remains a strong societal taboo for female activists to talk about sexual violence exerted on them by their male comrades (Schäfer, 2000: 88; Sooka, 1998; Cock, 1991). During fieldwork, I was often confronted by this taboo, which made it difficult to more profoundly understand female activists’ history in the struggle. Significantly, among the female activists I met and befriended, only one gave me any sort of account of sexual violence during the struggle: a sheet of paper upon which she wrote down her experiences.

21 To understand women’s positioning within apartheid society, it is crucial to take the emergence of “structural violence” (Galtung, 1996) into consideration, especially in relation to the historically-rooted gender order in South African society and the

forms of violence that directly affected women. Sexual and racialised violence was a central aspect of the apartheid state's control of the population and thus one of the foundations upon which apartheid was constituted. In prisons, rape and other brutal means of torture were used more often against classified Black African and Coloured female activists than against White female activists, as a tool to exert control and extend threats against further protest or revolution. Schäfer highlights that the police apparatus targeted classified Black African and Coloured women in particular in order to demonstrate racial and male dominance, to break their spirits, and to cause lasting harm (2000: 85). For example, pregnant women were intentionally beaten in the stomach or threatened during hearings that chemicals would be forced upon them in order to kill their fetuses, and thus prevent another generation of fighters against the apartheid system from being born.

22 At the level of administration and structuring urban spaces, the apartheid state's intervention strategies decisively enforced "traditional activities" and hetero-normative gender relations in society. These strategies included the racialised forced removals to the urban outskirts, institutionalisation of the "homelands", and allowing only male migrant workers to reside in city hostels and dormitories. Consequently, this meant that classified Black African women had to either remain in the homelands or illegally migrate to city hostels and informal settlements.¹⁶ The poor living conditions in townships, the subordinate positions of Black African women and men as potential sources of cheap labour, and the illegal residential status of women from the homelands created an environment that rendered women as targets within vicious, violent cycles of domestic and sexual violence (Lulama, 1983: 23–25; Schäfer, 2000: 146). The gendered, racialised, and economic dimensions of structural violence resulted in the destabilisation of social relations among population groups conceived as non-White (Schäfer, 2000: 84; Britton, 2006: 61).

23 The destabilisation of social relations between male inmates and their families also occurred outside prisons through the intimidation and pressuring of wives, mothers, sisters, and other family members of detainees by various means, including (sexual) violence. Some women went underground, were constantly on the run, or fled into exile; others were banned from certain areas and/or under house arrest; others cooperated with the apartheid regime or remained apolitical. To illustrate these matters, I discuss how some women remember their adolescence during and after the Soweto riots.

24 Ms Thompson is married, is the mother of three children, and grew up in a number of townships in the Cape Flats before moving to Mitchells Plain (Eastridge). She was educated as a Muslim until she was 20 years old. She converted to Christianity due to marriage, but does not belong to any specific church. Similar to Mr Kal-El Check's trajectory, as a teenager Ms Thomson also participated in the 1976 uprising:

I was part of the riots in '76, the uprising. So we stood with the Black Africans because they wanted freedom, but after that in the 80s I decided, no way, I am not interested in politics anymore. Because you fight and you fight—but what were we fighting for? And we brought the fights here to our Coloured neighbourhood, that damaged our roads and everything, burnt down the shops. We suffered in the end. Generally, I still say that when the apartheid government was in power we Coloureds were much better off. [...] The NP government gave us these houses, so I am proud that my children can be raised in a proper house whereas we were raised in shacks. So they have done something for me—they gave me a better house, not a shack. [...] I am favouring anytime the old South Africa without apartheid but as a free person (Ms Thompson, December 20, 2005, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018).

25 Despite Ms Thompson's initial phase of political activism against racial and economic inequality, she subsequently distanced herself from the resistance

movement. In this context, she referred to the social mobility experienced by her family and those classified as Coloured in general. For Ms Thompson, the struggle negatively affected her neighbourhood: in her words, the battles that took place between activists and the police in the streets of her neighbourhood destroyed infrastructure, such as pavements and stores. Furthermore, she mentioned that her having to raise children during apartheid caused her to abandon her political involvement in the struggle. She was neither involved in the UDF nor voted for the Labour Party. She silently accepted her privileged status as a Coloured, as shown by her lack of active support for the Tricameral Parliament, which she did not vote for.

26 Many female activists interviewed argued that motherhood certainly led them to be more hesitant and challenged their ability to be politically active, though it did not completely prevent them from developing other vocal modes of resistance during apartheid. Ms Roosevelt, for example, lives in the same neighbourhood as Ms Thompson, within the so-called low-to-no-income section of Eastridge in Mitchells Plain. Ms Roosevelt, however, identifies the Group Areas Act as a benchmark in her life, reflecting upon its consequences as her first experience of being classified as a Coloured and therefore socially discriminated against by the apartheid system. She was part of the Soweto uprising as a “witness”—not as a participant, but engaged in a civic organisation. She explained that, being forcibly moved to the Cape Flats, she had to adapt to the conditions of a “rude” and violent neighbourhood, which led her to become active in a civic organisation called Crisis Line. Among other things, Crisis Line helped out families in situations where relatives had suddenly disappeared, been arrested, tortured, and/or died in the struggle. Connected with this point, she spoke about her son who was arrested by the police in the late 1980s for selling Mandrax¹⁷ and ended up in prison. She stated that the children who were socialised under the conditions of apartheid are now those who violate laws and engage in criminal activity in her neighbourhood:

[...] it is sometimes a hard way to educate your child and teach them not to get involved with crime. It is our children who do the armed robberies and murders; it's got to do a lot with poverty and living conditions [...]
(Ms Roosevelt, February 28, 2006, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018).

27 Like Ms Roosevelt, Ms Parrow is also an activist and, when remembering her youth, she also claimed that she solidarised with Soweto activism while not actually having been an active part of it. She shares the same migratory background as many of those who now live in Khayelitsha; she left the former Transkei in order to escape rural poverty and to find a job in Cape Town. The creation of the township of Khayelitsha in 1984 was in line with a government decision to bring the mushrooming informal settlements under control (Tshehla, 2002: 47). In contrast with the people in Mitchells Plain, Ms Parrow was categorised as Black African and therefore had no civil rights in Cape Town, no work permit, and limited permission to stay in urban areas. Related to this point, Ms Parrow stated that:

My [third] son Mapelo was born in 1986 in the church in Wynberg [Cape Town]—that time was very bad in Cape Town for me and the other comrades. That time they killed the people in Nyanga [Black African township]. That time was very, very bad in Cape Town. You know, those people [in power], they burned the houses in Crossroads [Black African township], and all of us, we had to flee to the church. The people of the church, they took us, the people, to the churches, Anglican churches. Mapelo, you know, the last one was born in 1986 in this church—because at that time it was very, very bad. My son grew up here in Khayelitsha, he grew up here. But my other two children grew up in the Eastern Cape and then came back to Cape Town, like I did (Ms Parrow, April 25, 2006, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018).

28 Ms Parrow explained that she was confronted with harsh circumstances in organising her everyday life during apartheid in Cape Town; she went on the run

with her children and received refugee help from the Anglican Church. According to her, it was these exact experiences that led her to politics. She joined the ANCWL and worked with street committees that were active at the lowest level of “informal rule” in the townships, i.e. beneath executive committees known as “civics” which were in turn organised under an umbrella body (Burman, 1989: 154), termed the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO). SANCO is a broad, mass-based organisation that is considered to have been at its strongest during apartheid when it organised large popular mobilisations against the state (Zuern, 2004). Presently it maintains a significant yet weakened presence as a national body with local branches in former Black African townships. Ms Parrow was also part of the UDF movement and United Women’s Organisation (UWO). While youth and civic movements grew in numbers during apartheid, non-racial regional women’s organisations also emerged. In 1981, a wide range of women’s organisations allied and formed the UWO in the Western Cape, with the explicit aim of ensuring that women participated in negotiating the transition from apartheid to democracy (Meintjes, 1996). Many activists, like Ms Parrow and Ms Roosevelt, were linked to and active in various political organisations, networks, forums, and campaigns. This intricate network, linking together former youth activists of the liberation movement, set the groundwork for subsequent activism in the townships, local organisations, and formal politics in the post-apartheid era, where structural violence continues to shape feelings of insecurity in residents’ everyday lives.

29 In a way, these narratives contradict the depiction of women as the “backbone” or “silent strength” of the liberation movement (Britton, 2006; Liebenberg, 1995), whereas men were its voice. Instead, as these stories recall Soweto and beyond, “many faces of anti-apartheid activism” (Russell, 1989) of women and men have surfaced, carving out particular female and male modes of political action (Strulik, 2015¹⁸: 228–231)—while at the same time operating within a strong hetero-normative rationale of action.

5. The rhetoric of shared suffered deprivation, racism, and violent experiences

30 The legal abolition of apartheid and the declaration of the Republic of South Africa in 1994 were heralded as the end of a system that was internationally condemned for racist segregation and dehumanisation. However, apartheid’s legal abolition did not end the daily experiences of forms of discrimination and disempowerment. After 1994, townships were declared by the new ruling party, the ANC, as spaces of democratisation and development intervention, with a stated overall aim of integrating them equally into South African society. Individuals of the various age groups constituting the Soweto generation entered the new democratic arena as adults, seeking to make a living and create better conditions for their own families and wider township society. In this respect, their aforementioned specific knowledge of their place and the networks established over time subsequently functioned as a resource for entering the democratic arena and getting jobs in local government or non-government organisations. The institution of ward councillors, the establishment of housing and violence prevention programs, and a booming third sector presented various windows of opportunity. In the following, I briefly investigate the multitude of aspirational, associational, organisational, and institutional positions and components that constitute the current political culture in South Africa by looking at how individuals repositioned themselves in the townships post-apartheid.

31 Mr Kal-El Check (see earlier discussion, Section 3), Ms Thompson, and Ms Parrow (see earlier discussion, Section 4) were elected as ward councillors between 2001 and 2006. In their cases, being a “Coloured” or a “Black African” emerged as a resource directly related to shared suffered deprivation, racism and violent experiences, along with knowing the place, demonstrating a very detailed spatial knowledge, and sharing a common language—the same “township-talk, our own little Coloured slang” (Mr Kal-El Check, December 15, 2005, quoted in Gukelberger, 2018). Not only during their daily work but also during election campaigns in 2004 and 2005, they made use of their detailed knowledge and thereby played into notions of racialised belonging in order to obtain votes.¹⁹ In this context it is important to note that all of the female ward councillors argued that they had had to fight twice as hard to keep their position within the male-dominated spheres of local government, due to an entrenched hetero-normative belief that men are more capable of doing politics than women. In the elections of local government representatives in the years 2001 and 2006, despite some women running at the top of party lists, i.e. for high-profile mayoral positions, only one-third of all candidates were women, far from the goal of equal gender representation defined in the White Paper on Local Government (Local Government Bulletin, 2006: 6).²⁰

32 Mr Khumalo remembers himself as being classified Black African and, like Mr Kal-El Check, was arrested after the Soweto uprising, but, in contrast to the latter, he joined the underground liberation movement (see earlier discussion, Section 3). With the help of his activist network (which included Ms Parrow), he succeeded in establishing a project in his neighbourhood post-apartheid. The project on Urban Conflict Management was conceptualised and financed by what was formerly the German Technical Cooperation²¹ and focused on unemployed young people, both female and male, helping them to obtain basic training in life skills and conflict management. This crime prevention strategy and many related anti-gang interventions were implemented by the state starting in the mid-1990s to counteract the resurgence of gang activities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to Van Wyk:

Tentative indications are that the numbers [of gang members] have remained static due to many gang leaders reportedly being killed or imprisoned, while recruitment of new (young) members continued at the same rate (Van Wyk, 2005: 51).

33 Similar to Mr Khumalo, Ms Roosevelt, who remembers herself as being classified Coloured and being active in a civic organisation during the apartheid era (see earlier discussion, Section 4), continued her work against post-1994 violence in the Cape Flats. She became an active member of the ANC in 1994, and built up her own NGO, following a rights-based approach to development and becoming engaged in a global network of activism, which aims to structure translocal political spaces.

34 With state efforts concentrated on strengthening local government and building up lines of cooperation with NGOs, the period immediately following 1994 was characterised by a weakening of so-called civic organisations (Seekings, 1996b), a trend which persisted until the emergence of so-called “new social movements”—e.g. movements formed to protest against the privatisation of public services such as water and electricity, or to support the growing number of AIDS victims from 2000 on. Service delivery protests organised by these “new social movements” were not entirely new, as they had their roots in the apartheid boycotts of payment for service deliveries. Mr Jeferson, who remembers himself being classified as Coloured and being arrested and detained for his criminal activities (see earlier discussion, Section 3), began protesting against the post-apartheid government in the late 1990s. He considers the ANC’s “Growth, Employment, and Redistribution” plan to be a neoliberal strategy, with the associated market liberalisation measures contributing to increasing poverty and unemployment rates in the Cape Flats. Mr Jeferson’s

frustration with the ANC government culminated in his activities as one of the founders of a new social movement, the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), in 2001. The AEC has the aim of encouraging resistance to forced evictions and service cut-offs which result from the nonpayment of electricity and water bills.

35 In this respect, many activists of the new social movements, who also participated in uprisings and disturbances in the townships from 1976 to the 1990s, held the strong conviction that they did not drop out of school and fight for independence in the apartheid era only to enrich a small post-1994 political elite. This was evidenced at an event initiated by the mayor to provide a platform for the residents, activists, ward councillors, academics, and officials of Cape Town to enter into a “social dialogue on racism, diversity and integration in Cape Town”. Mr Jeferson and Mr Thabo, a youth activist from a new social movement in Khayelitsha, participated in this session. In his address to the audience, Mr Thabo described his personal experiences of social and economic marginalisation as a youth in contemporary South Africa. He described his mother rushing from Cape Town station “because she worked from three o’clock in the morning”, of being unable to afford housing, and of being subject to electricity and water cut-offs. In Mr Thabo’s words, “[d]ue to this cost recover policy we witness or we see water and electricity cut-offs in our townships and that’s racism... I didn’t fight against apartheid only to enrich few. I fought against apartheid to ensure that all of the South Africans have freedom in this country” (Mr Thabo, 30 January 2006). In recounting his youth, he articulates an ongoing struggle stemming from the dashed hopes of democratisation and from sorrows, sufferings, sacrifices, and deprivations with respect to ongoing racial discrimination, exclusion from access to education and the job market, and the impossibility of receiving decent basic services. Many former members of the liberation movement who left school during the struggle have recounted their initial excitement of being part of heralding in the “true romance of democracy” (Gukelberger, 2018: 33). Soon after this transition was complete, however, and the first corruption cases against top ANC politicians emerged, this euphoria turned to disappointment. Although the post-apartheid political system is perceived as exclusive and corrupt, and despite their disappointment with unfulfilled expectations and the continuation of the daily struggle to survive, all of the local politicians and activists discussed here have been actively engaged in challenging old mechanisms of gendered and racial discrimination and segregation in order to transform them into inclusive ones, rather than giving up or resigning themselves to defeat.

36 It is worth noting that in mid-1992, two years before the first and free democratic elections, the conservative international and national media press, survey institutions, and academia began to deal intensively with marginalised youth in South Africa. It is important to clarify the different meanings that were attributed to the term “youth” at that time, including meanings that have much more to do with race than with being young of age. The conservative international and national media press wrote of a lost generation of “[...] ill-socialised young people [...] ‘desperate’, ‘schooled only in street battles and callow rhetoric’ [...]” that had abandoned education, from 1976 to 1990 (Seekings, 1996a: 111)—i.e. “lost” in terms of morality, due to their exposure to violence. Seekings refers in his article to a category of young black men marked by the press as “the youth”, a “lost generation” that encompassed four to five million people. Although the current term “lost generation” was increasingly taken up by the White press at the beginning of the 21st century, its use in this period reflected a preoccupation with the threat engendered not only by the youth but by the “masses” in general. The media, when reporting on so-called non-White people in general, narrowed its focus to the “youth”, in particular from 1994 onwards, effectively retreating to a less explicit manifestation of racism.

37 At the same time, surveys were coming to light that served to correct this predominantly negative image of South African youth—most importantly, these

surveys included young women as well. Seekings (ibid.) states that these surveys indicate young peoples' high levels of engagement in churches, sports, and other activities, and also underscores that they were far from being alienated from the political processes involved in democratising a new South Africa; the narratives in the present article confirm this. Instead of packaging the youth, undifferentiated, into a single crisis or problem, these many faces of youth activities and activism shaping social change should be studied and assessed.

38 As an example, forty years after the Soweto riots we have witnessed the rise of a student movement, the #FeesMustFall movement. This movement, which sought to "decolonise" the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, also mobilised students at universities all over the country (Hodes, 2017; Peterson et al., 2016). According to Hodes (2017: 141), this movement conveys the popular, collective frustration with rising costs and fees, but in this case the students' rage was addressed not only at the government. The state's failure to act in the interests of its people, to provide effective democratic political institutions, and to drive an agenda of democratic restoration were also attributed to the universities. "Universities came to exemplify the failure of 'transformation' and the lasting legacy of institutional racism and Eurocentrism" (Hodes, 2017: 141).²² The 2016 protests differed from those in 1976 not only in their specific usage of social media in spreading alternative interpretation schemes of the problem of youth in South Africa, but also, for instance, in their gendered dimension, as students raised their voices for the first time to protest against sexual violence against women and queers on campus.²³ The gendered, economic, and racialised dimensions of structural violence, such as poverty, unemployment, limited access to social services, poor-quality education, the high dropout rate, crime and gangsterism, rape, and unwanted pregnancies continue to affect young people and society as a whole in post-apartheid South Africa. To speak in Mannheim's terms, despite the generational shift from Soweto to post-apartheid, the social location of youth has remained, for the most part, at the margins of society and continues to resonate with feelings of destitution and powerlessness. The narratives in this article and research studies on youth in the global South in general (Jenkins et al., 2016; Tranberg Hansen et al., 2008; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2009) challenge the image of a "youth crisis", one that has been and continues to be constructed in the media, while acknowledging that the majority of youth were and still are marginalised in a variety of different respects.

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39 This article emphasises the construction of the political self, specifically, the modalities of individual positioning shaped by violence and ruptures in accounts that reflect both diachronic and synchronic aspects of the social changes from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. By providing a picture of youth as it relates to the Soweto uprising and the struggles that followed, we gain a glimpse into a variety of modes of political action, ones which have been established over a period of time. In accordance with Mannheim's concept of social generations, members of the Soweto generation have acted under the same social and historical circumstances within a process of dynamic destabilisation, one that crucially influenced their different pathways, right through to the heralding of democracy. These pathways were not determined in a clear-cut way, but instead were shaped by how members of that generation contingently reacted to the different, gendered windows of opportunity that presented themselves along with changes to the political system. The establishment of a separate chamber for Coloureds within the Tricameral Parliament in the 1980s opened up opportunities for those classified as Coloureds to enter

formal politics. The introduction of ward councillors and quota policies also facilitated chances for entering formal politics and securing a livelihood by way of a regular income. The resources and assets crucial for people to make the most of these opportunities included a detailed knowledge of place as well as distinct, relevant network connections.

40 There are particularly striking differences in the divergent pathways taken by women and men. This divergence is clearly related to structural violence that became institutionalised under the apartheid regime and manifested itself in an uneven distribution of power and resources based on race and gender. For instance, the apartheid state severely restricted the physical and social mobility of classified Black African women, which caused them to develop specific ways of networking and organising their everyday lives illegally in cities (lives that were shaped according to family status, neighbourhood support, economic means, distance to cities, etc.). These intricate practices of networking laid the foundation for later activism, building or participating in local organisations, and formal politics in the post-apartheid era.

41 Finally, the contemporary consequences of the diversity of the experiences of the Soweto generation reach beyond those on whom it had a direct impact, i.e. those who had been politically active throughout the struggle. The rhetoric of legitimising current politics by referencing historically suffered deprivations has found its way into the language of today's youth activists. The various ways of experiencing and remembering Soweto not only structured pathways for specific actors, but they also became part of the symbolic repertoire of politics as such in South Africa. The struggle continues.

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Notes

1 I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, Anne-Marie Peatrik and Muriel Champy, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

2 Soweto is the acronym for the “South Western Townships” around Johannesburg in Gauteng Province (NDLOVU, 1998: 317).

3 Cape Town is located in the Western Cape of South Africa, around 1400 km from Johannesburg. During stationary fieldwork, I lived in Rocklands, a “middle-to-low-income” area in Mitchells Plain, staying with a widower and his children from January 2006 until March 2006. Through contact with relatives of this family, I subsequently had the opportunity to live in Beacon Valley, a “low-to-no-income” area for a further two months (from April 2006 until June 2006). Fieldwork was concentrated in the areas of Mitchells Plain including Beacon Valley, Lenteguer, Rocklands, Tafelsig, and Westridge. During this same period, fieldwork was also taking place in Site C, one of the oldest areas within Khayelitsha. Thereafter, from July 2006 until the end of March 2007, I lived in a residence in the heart of Cape Town’s city centre, continuing my fieldwork in Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha. A more comprehensive reflection on my positionality in this field can be found in GUKELBERGER (2016).

4 Biographical data was collected in face-to-face interactions using methods of informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews (SPRADLEY, 1979), as well as participant observation and observing participation (WOLCOTT, 1999). In this respect, fieldwork was further supported by memo writing and the collection and archiving of secondary data. Secondary data included newspaper articles; political pamphlets of political parties, NGOs, and social movements; and minutes of sub-council and council meetings, etc. which were related to the local politicians and activists and helped in the construction of their trajectories over the eighteen months of fieldwork. Data material was coded following the guidelines of Grounded Theory, inspired in particular by STRAUSS ([1987] 2008: 55–81).

5 During the time of fieldwork urban policies, politics, and polity were being shaped by strong hetero-normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity, resulting in the strengthening of concepts such as gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment. This way of seeing and doing politics is based upon usages of static male/female binary (sex) measures as proxies for ‘gender’. Relationships between same-sex people and intersex people were “outlawed” by apartheid policies (SWARR, 2009) but due to limited data, a link between the construction of specific gender aspects (e.g. same-sex and intersexuality) and anti-apartheid activism is not taken up in this article.

6 In what follows I mention townships as formerly Coloured or Black African only in reference to the way that they were conceived of in the past, in the context of segregation politics during apartheid—I do not refer to townships in this way as a reference to racial categories in the current South African context. Nevertheless, the racialisation of townships as either Coloured or Black African remains prevalent in urban politics and everyday life.

7 The institution of a democratically-elected ward councillor was established after 1994 as part of the process of decentralising power to the local level and integrating previously excluded areas into the dominant political system (CAMERON, 1999). Citizens of a geographical area elect a representative: a ward councillor who forms a bridge between the community and the council and is, among others, responsible and accountable for administering the infrastructure of the area.

8 The Community Development Worker Program (CDWP) is a state program introduced in 2005, essentially with the aim of enhancing “community-state” relations. Those who successfully apply for the CDWP are trained and receive a formal qualification certificate as well as a scholarship and later a salary from the state.

9 The “Truth and Reconciliation Report” (TRC) Vol. 3 of 1998, only considers violations reported to the Human Rights Violations Committee (NORVAL, 2007: 196). Critical debates surrounding the TRC have been concerned with giving voice to past failures and individual and public reconciliation with the past and affected citizens (for more detail, see NORVAL, 2007: 200; ROSS, 2003: 327; WILSON, 2002).

10 The names of persons referenced in this article have been changed to allow them to remain

anonymous.

11 From the beginning of my fieldwork, I chose to transcribe my data material in such a way that idiosyncratic elements of speech (i.e. nonverbal mannerisms, involuntary vocalisations, stutters, or pauses) were left out. My research interest concentrated upon meanings and perceptions within speech that construct social realities, rather than linguistic aspects (e.g. KOWAL and O'CONNELL, 2000).

12 At the time, the government created separate countries for Black Africans and the so-called “Bantustans”, who would thus not officially belong to the Republic of South Africa, and who instead were forced into “independent homelands”. Furthermore, people classified as Black African were only allowed to vote for the government of their own “homeland”. The Tricameral Parliament was constituted of three segregated chambers for classified Coloured, Indian, and White voters (SEEKINGS and NATTRASS, 2006: 21). This decision had the intention of partly integrating people categorised as Coloureds and Indians into the South African political system, while its other main aim was to prevent any further alliances between those groups and those categorised as Black Africans.

13 Based on biographical data and event analysis, the construction of ward councillors and post-apartheid activists offered nuanced accounts from which I developed empirically grounded types of actors, characterised by their modes of positioning (GUKELBERGER, 2018).

14 This branch was named after Lilian Masediba Ngoyi (1911–1980), who was a politician and anti-apartheid activist and President of the African National Congress Women's League.

15 PINNOCK (1984: 18–30) emphasises that while gangs had already previously existed in the inner city following relocation they could easily take control of new, even more conducive settlements that lacked both formal and informal civic structures (ibid.: 58–59).

16 The term “informal settlement” refers to the physical housing infrastructure, not to the social life of its inhabitants, who are known colloquially as squatters. There are different types of informal settlements, such as those which are organised according to postal addresses and which are officially represented by ward councillors, thus being integrated into the political system. Conversely, there are informal settlements that the state literally possesses no knowledge of.

17 According to some Internet sources, South Africa is considered to be the largest abuser worldwide of Mandrax, a synthetic drug sold mainly in the form of a tablet that is highly addictive. The active ingredient in Mandrax is Methaqualone (<http://www.drugaware.co.za/mandrax.html>, accessed 15 April 2016).

18 Strulik borrowed the concept of “modes of political action” from Bayart, who does not use it in gender-specific terms, but considers youthful violence in particular as a political act—“*politique par le bas*” (BAYART et al., 1992).

19 This was particularly the case during a short explorative phase of fieldwork, which included the observation of the parliamentary election campaign of the NNP in Mitchells Plain organised in 2004 by Ms Thompson, as well as the campaign of the ID in local government elections in Tafelsig in Mitchells Plain organised in 2006 by, among others, Mr Kal-El Check.

20 The ANC was the only political party that introduced a regulation for a 30% women's quota just before the first free elections in 1994, a move that considerably changed the political landscape. Today, more than 45% of the members of parliament and 40% of members of government are women (NORD, 2012: 6).

21 In January 2011, the German Technical Cooperation merged with the German Development Service and German Capacity Building International to form the German International Cooperation.

22 Hodes critically engages with the term “transformation” by quoting Francis Nyamnjoh, who states that transformation remains “the catchword, catch-all and catch-on about the unfinished business of recalibration of the hierarchies of humanity that had informed relations, privilege and poverty in apartheid South Africa” (NYAMNJOH, 2016, quoted in HODES, 2017: 141).

23 <http://www.okayafrica.com/featured/south-africa-spirit-of-1976-youth-day/>, accessed 21 August 2016.

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