

MAKERS & BREAKERS

Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa

Edited by

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I Children & Youth in a Global Era

1 JEAN COMAROFF & JOHN COMAROFF Reflections on Youth from the Past to the Postcolony

Prolegomenon

... philosophy does not concern itself with children.

It leaves them to pedagogy, where they're not in very good hands.

Philosophy has forgotten about children.

(Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.141)

There has long been a tendency in the public discourse of the West to speak of youth as a transhistorical, transcultural category. As if it has existed everywhere and at all times in much the same way. This is in spite of the fact that anthropologists and historians have insisted, for almost as long, that the cultural meanings and social attributes ascribed to 'youth' have varied a great deal across time and space; recall Malinowski and Margaret Mead, not to mention Philippe Ariès. It is also an anthropological truism that the way in which young people are perceived, named, and represented betrays a lot about the social and political constitution of a society. Thus it is that, in nineteenth-century Britain, down-class juveniles were referred to as 'nomads'; their terrains, the internal colonies of the industrial metropole, were called 'jungles,' even 'Africas' (Hebdige, 1988:20). Similarly, in late twentieth-century North America and South Africa (Seekings, 1993:xii, citing David Everatt), white pre-adults are typically termed 'teenagers', while their black counterparts are 'youth'; adolescents with attitude, so to speak. In this manner, language racializes and demonizes difference without explicitly marking it. 'Words,' Joseph Conrad (1957:11) once said, are 'the great foes of reality'. But they also open a window onto its secrets.

Far from constituting a universal category – a social status generated by the abstract sociological principle of generation – youth, as we speak of them here, are the historical offspring of modernity; modernity, that is, as the *ideological formation* which arose during the Age of Revolution, 1789–1848 (cf. Hobsbawm, 1962), and was honed in the fraught dialectics of empire; modernity as an ideological formation which naturalized its own telos in a model of human development (Lukose, 2000) that casts 'youth' as both the essential precondition and the indefinite postponement of maturity.¹ Industrial capitalist society has been more or less unique in making childhood into a site of self-conscious cultural reproduction, releasing its young from the workplace so that they might

¹ Constructs like 'racial adolescence', deployed by civilizing missions abroad to measure the (lack of) 'progress' of colonized peoples towards 'modernity', demonstrate the ideological uses of this form of developmentalism; see W.C. Willoughby (1923:239) for a South African instance.

enter the rarified world of education, the latter being the space in which the nation-state seeks to husband its potential, in which it invests its human capital, in which, says Foucault (1976:81), it 'hides its dreams'. Yet juveniles are also the creatures of our nightmares, of our social impossibilities and our existential angst.

It is in this latter sense that, for Hebdige (1988:17), youth enter modernist narratives only when they stand for trouble. But the matter is more ambiguous than this suggests. Trouble, Butler (1990:vii) insists, need not merely be cast in the negative. It can also imply the productive unsettling of dominant epistemic regimes under the heat of desire, frustration or anger. Youth, in other words, are complex signifiers, the stuff of mythic extremes (Blanch, 1980:103), simultaneously idealizations and monstrosities, pathologies and panaceas. This has been true for a very long time. Witness the ambivalent appearance of the young in Dickensian London, on the one hand as orphans and artful dodgers, yet also as the bearers of Great Expectations. Or the discordant images of juvenile activists in late twentieth-century Africa: contrast, for example, the preternatural child soldiers of Mozambique or Sierra Leone, the very epitome of civil disintegration (Honwana, 1999), with the heroic 'young lions' of South Africa, who were the harbingers of democracy and the end of *apartheid*. Such contrasts are likely to persist: in Brazil, homeless children have come to symbolize *both* the collective shame of the nation-state and its future resurrection through proper planning and legal intervention (Veloso, n.d.).

In short, 'youth' stand for many things at once: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future. For old hopes and new frontiers (see De Boeck in this volume). In all of these tropic guises, of course, they are figures of a popular imagination far removed from more nuanced social realities.² This is crucial to keep in mind as we interrogate the place of young people in the late twentieth-century nation-state – especially those neoliberal nation-states currently in difficulty – in Africa and elsewhere.

Generation Trouble

The meaning of globalization, at least as an analytic concept, might still be in dispute in some circles. But few would deny that one global feature of the contemporary world – from Chicago to Cape Town, Calcutta to Caracas – is a sense of crisis surrounding the predicament of juveniles. Although it is always locally mediated and modulated, that predicament appears to arise out of the workings of neoliberal capitalism and the changing planetary order of which it is part. It takes many forms, patently. But it seems everywhere to be founded on a counterpoint, a doubling, a contradiction perhaps. On the one hand is the much remarked exclusion of the young from national economies, especially from their shrinking, metamorphosing productive sectors. As the frenzied expansion of the free market runs up against the demise of the welfare state, a process that manifests itself in an ever widening gulf between rich and poor, the commonwealth of all but a few sovereign polities has been drastically eroded. In the upshot, most are unable to sustain previous levels of social services and benefits, to afford the cost of infrastructural reproduction, or to underwrite a labour market in which there is regular or secure

² Apart from all else, 'youth' are always only a fraction of those not yet adult: that fraction whose anomalous agency asserts itself in honour or breach of communal order. Often they are the mutant citizens of the modern nation, purveyors of its violent undersides. This is a point to which we shall return.

employment in any abundance. Even in advanced industrial societies, the modernist dream of infinite progress – a narrative according to which each generation does better than its predecessor – is constantly mocked; mocked, by conditions that disenfranchise many people,³ disproportionately the young and unskilled of the inner city and the countryside, from full waged citizenship in the nation-state.⁴ This, despite the claims by some that the current generation of mainstream American 'kids' is more compliant, less cynical than those who came before them (Howe and Strauss, 2000). To be sure, patterns of polarization and exclusion, among youth and across the age spectrum at large, are ever more palpable in these neoliberal times.

On the other hand is the recent rise of assertive, global youth cultures of desire, self-expression, representation; also, in some places, of potent, if unconventional, forms of politicization to go along with them. In the cyberspace age, juveniles have an enhanced capacity to communicate in, and act effectively on, the world at large. Generation has become a concrete, quotidian principle of social mobilization, inflecting other dimensions of difference, notably, race, gender, ethnicity and class.⁵ Transnational youth activism, and the mutually comprehensible signifying practices on which it is based, are facilitated by planetary flows – of currencies, people, value – across old sovereign boundaries (see Venkatesh n.d. [a]:6; Appadurai 1990). The young have taken to the internet and to the streets in growing numbers as post-Fordist economics recasts relations between capital and labour, profoundly altering global geographies of production. More of this below.

In the late twentieth century, in sum, youth have gained unprecedented autonomy as a social category *an und für sich*, both in and for themselves. This is in spite, or perhaps because, of their relative marginalization from the normative world of work and wages. In many Western contexts they, along with other disenfranchised persons,⁶ add up to an incoherent counter-nation with its own illegal economies of ways and means, its own spaces of production and recreation, its own parodic patriotisms. Elsewhere (1999b), we use the term 'alien-nation' to describe the phenomenon; in like vein, Žizek (1997:127f) treats these disenfranchised persons as the 'symptoms' of late-capitalist universalism, whose imminent logic ensures that their equivalent deprivations never find unified voice in some 'rainbow coalition, notwithstanding progressivist liberal hopes and expectations'. As this suggests, youth embody the sharpening contradictions of the contemporary world in especially acute form. Take South Africa, for example. Here, in the *apartheid* years, the juvenile black counter-nation had a palpable opponent in the racist state. With

³ This theme was sounded repeatedly by proponents of Ralph Nader's Green Party in the 2000 US elections. Michael Moore, radical film-maker and anti-corporate activist, described Nader as the champion of 'young people, who feel disenfranchised and dispossessed by mainstream American politics' (special election report, 348, National Public Radio, 6 November 2000).

⁴ While it might be argued that, constitutionally, citizenship in liberal democracies has never included a right to work, the provision of unemployment benefits, workers' compensation, and pensions to the nationals of welfare states has implied entitlement to an income. Such benefits are widely under threat in this neoliberal age, but the obligation to sustain the highest possible levels of employment continues to be one of the taken-for-granted expectations of government everywhere, notwithstanding the ferocious realpolitik of market competition. In this essay, we use the notion of 'waged citizenship' to imply social and moral membership in the national commonweal.

⁵ This is not to imply that youth forms a 'homogeneous, sociological category of people which thinks, organizes and acts' in coherent ways (Seekings, 1993:xiv); but the same may be said of 'working class politics' (*pace* Seekings, *loc. cit.*). Youth, like the working class, is a politically constructed category; both are rooted in their relationship to the means of production and consumption. Increasingly, moreover, they are entailed in each other (see Corrigan and Frith, 1976; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000a).

⁶ Most notably, immigrant workers and non-autochthonous minorities; see Comaroff and Comaroff (2000b).

the demise of the *ancien regime*, the dispossessed won the right to enter the workplace as 'free' individuals. But, in a tragic irony, this occurred just as the global impact of neoliberal capitalism began to kick in. Now large-scale privatization, the loss of blue-collar employment, and the erosion of working-class identities vitiate the prospects of building an inclusive social democracy. Young people of colour, would-be citizens of the 'new' millennial order, must find their place in a society whose hard-won nationhood is already subverted by forces that compromise the territorial sovereignty of its political economy.

But we are running ahead of ourselves. In order to push our understanding of the contemporary predicament of youth beyond the merely superficial, to explore further the doubling – the ambiguous threat and promise – inherent in its formation, it is necessary to dig a little deeper into the modernist archaeology of the category. For it is here that we are likely to find the source of contemporary generation troubles, or, at least, our apprehension of them.

A Brief History of Youth

Foucault (1976:80) may or may not have been correct in claiming that modern Western society is unique in accentuating the gulf between children and adults. But we *do* appear to have romanticized and commodified that space, making it a site wherein immature carelessness confronts full-grown desire, wherein an irrepressible sense of invincibility seems to drive precocious power. Of course, the nation-states of Europe were not alone in marking out 'youth' as a life-phase whose liminal force could be tapped for the collective good. Age-based societies in Africa mobilized premarital warriorhood to this end as well; indeed, those who languish between corporeal and social maturity, debarred from marrying or establishing families, have become the footsoldiers of adult hegemony in many places. Youth, from this perspective, are everywhere a *potential* category of exclusion and exploitation, a source of surplus value.

It is arguable that twentieth-century European polities, with their technologies of mass production, communication, and coercion, have been singularly well positioned to idealize and utilize the physical and imaginative resources of the young. Yet one of the hallmarks of the present moment, of the age of globalization and postcoloniality, has been a diminishing of the capacity of governments – if not of the market forces they foster – to control adolescent bodies, energies, or intentions. From the spread of global youth cultures and environmental politics to the sprouting of urban gangs, soccer armies, and neo-Nazi cadres, the nation-state plays host to forces that it can no longer adequately rein in. Often, moreover, the more radical of these forces name themselves – Hip Hop Nation, Gay Nation – in ways that both mimic and mock it, all the better to trouble its sovereignty. Thus the phalanxes of football supporters in the new Europe savage people and property, assault police, and transgress boundaries at home and abroad – all in the name of national pride (Buford, 1993). Likewise, the rise of libertarian militias, whose youthful troops declare war on established government in the name of purer forms of patriotism, albeit often at the behest of more cynical, less visible father figures.

How has this come to be? Whatever its resemblance to comparable usages in other periods and places, the Euroconstruction of 'youth,' we repeat, is the outworking of a specific set of social conditions; its evolution, still ongoing, bespeaks a submerged history of modernity and its imperial underbelly. While those covered by the term have long had

their deviant identity thrust upon them (see below) – and, since World War II, sold to them – they have increasingly made it their own. A brute *deus ex machina* propels this unfolding story: the complex relationship between capital and the nation-state. Industrial capitalist economies were capricious in the ways in which, Janus-faced, they both begat and undermined equalities of citizenship and entitlement; and their post-industrial counterparts have cumulatively subverted national sovereignty and the substantive rights of subjects. The sanguine expectations that once framed bourgeois cultures of progress and their civilizing missions abroad – ideals that vouchsafed the young a future under the sign of 'development' – are, as we have already said, sorely compromised by the growing inequalities wrought in the name of neoliberal capitalism. Postmodernity is often characterized as modernism bereft of its hopeful, utopian thrust.

Concomitantly, the new age of globalism might be seen as one in which the worldwide fabrication of desire, of the promise of infinite possibility, meets the impossibilities occasioned by widening disparities of wealth, itself a corollary of the devolution and decommissioning of economies of manufacture. In the face of all this, many youthful entrepreneurs, having been raised in advanced commodity cultures, find their own ways and means. Sometimes these involve the supply of hitherto unimagined 'services,' sometimes the recommissioning of the detritus of consumer society, sometimes the resale of purloined property of the state, sometimes the short-circuiting of existing networks of exchange. For a burgeoning number, they entail entry into the lower reaches of the transnational trade in drugs, and/or into a netherworld in which the deployment of violence becomes a routine mode of production and redistribution – often in a manner that replicates the practices of international business. And visibly corrodes the authority of the state. But more of this in due course.

If, to return to the earlier moment, it was the rise of industrial capitalism that first created the conditions for the emergence of a semi-autonomous category of 'youth,' it was in the exploding cities of modern Europe that this category first took on a manifest sociological reality. Hebdige (1988:19f; see above) has argued that the young first showed their insolent face, across modern Britain, in the 'delinquent' crowds that gathered in manufacturing towns, where the offspring of the rising working-class were often left to survive, and to create their own social worlds, independent of paternal or patrician control (Blanch, 1980; Gillis, 1974; Jones, 1984). Observers were particularly disturbed by children and adolescents in urban slums, by the 'wandering tribes' or 'young Arabs' who inhabited the internal colonies at the heart of London and Manchester (Mayhew, 1851:277f). These were the artful dodgers of the Dickensian inner city, to whom we alluded above, the mutant citizens of its alien-nation. They inspired a civilizing crusade, prompting the founding of Ragged Schools and Reformatories, and, in due course, a compulsory system of state education – also a pedagogic mission to 'the dark places' of the earth. One might note, with the hindsight of history (Willis, 1977), not least South African history, that state education would not so much eradicate the alien-nation as reproduce it by different means. The South African Broadcasting Corporation, in collaboration with the Department of Education, recently commissioned a team of the country's most gifted young film-makers to make a docudrama on *postapartheid* schooling.⁷ They painted a chilling portrait of endemic frustration and routine violence, prompting widespread and anguished national debate.

Youth as a sign of contradiction, as the figuration of mythic bipolarity, is enshrined in *7 Yizo Yizo*, a thirteen-part series, broadcast on SATV3 in 1998. It was created and written by Mtuuzeli Maishoba and Angus Gibson, and directed by Angus Gibson and Teboho Mahlatsi.

the foundations of the modern collective imaginary. In the abstract, the term congeals pure, utopic potential. In everyday reality, however, 'youth' is a collective noun that has all too often indexed a faceless mass of persons who were underclass, unruly, male, challengingly out of place – and, at once physically powerful and morally immature, always liable to seize the initiative from their elders and betters. They personify the failure of moral reproduction, the dangerous obverse of capitalist optimism, the limits of a meliorist, bourgeois social vision. The tensions embodied in this pre-adult population, exacerbated where differences of race or creed colour those of generation, have peaked in periods of economic slump. For, as surplus citizens, youth are not born. They are made by historical circumstances. And rarely as they like.

But if these young people have embodied the threat of civil disorder, they can also be harnessed for state projects of organized violence, in particular, for mobilization as soldiers. Often, those not yet deemed ready to live as full citizens of the nation-state have been called upon to die for it. (Remember, in this respect, the Africans who served the colonial powers in both world wars; see, for example, Bent, 1952.) This is the flip side of the story of youth and modernity: adolescence as the infantry of adult statecraft, as the ever more reluctant blood and bone of national aspiration. At the core of the making of 'modern' youth, then, has been the role of the state in naturalizing, exploiting, and narrating the relationship between juveniles and violence, a relationship all too neatly eclipsed in the disciplinary logic of peacetime discourses about adolescent deviance.

And so it is that the association of juveniles with the threat of precocious, uncontained physicality – sexual, reproductive, combative – has haunted popular and scholarly perceptions alike in the twentieth century. In the 1920s, a rapidly professionalizing sociology (first in America, then in Europe) depicted 'youth' as a disruptive masculine force in the city, as purveyors of violent crime and ready recruits to the barbarities of life in gangs. Functionalist sociology turned historical contradiction into social pathology, and took these youth to be its epitome. They were tribal, feral beings who hunt in packs, anti-citizens, an affront to bourgeois family values and social order. Delinquent, down-class, male, and violent, they were also increasingly black. Nor is this true only in the northern and western hemispheres. Recent South African history is another instance. In the final years of struggle against *apartheid*, the category of 'youth' expanded to include diverse classes of freedom fighters: students, workers, even criminals. In this story, it is true, not all young blacks are youth. But all youth are black. Also overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, male. And if some people never become 'youth,' others seem unable to outgrow the label, even in middle age (see Buford, 1993; Seekings, 1993:11). Shades here again of Mannheim's foundational insight, recalled by Bundy (1987:304) in the African context, that generation is a social, not a chronological, category. It is also a political one – with deep material roots.

The Rise of Global 'Youth Culture'

The rise of neoliberal capitalism on a planetary scale has further complicated the modernist construction of youth. Often associated with the events of 1989, this epochal transformation was heralded by the thoroughgoing shifts in global power, economy, and modes of communication set in motion in the wake of World War II, shifts that would reshape the structure of international capital and intensify its workings. As we shall see, these shifts would not merely reconstruct colonial relations, national economies and

international markets in goods, services and signs. They would also globalize the division of labour, remake human subjects, alter the relationship between production and consumption, and reform identities and citizenships across the world. While in no sense homogenizing, this process involved novel forms of space-time compression, as well as the reformulation of boundaries and localities everywhere. It also ushered in a new moment in the history of youth; to be sure, as we noted earlier, an electronically mediated 'youth culture' was one of its earliest, most expansive cultural expressions, providing a lexicon for the ever more explicit assertion of juveniles across the globe as agents in and of themselves.

It is significant, in this respect, that the USA – 'the only victor' of the Great War (Fussell, 1975:317) – emerged as *the* major economic and cultural force on the international scene after 1945. For here, where postwar affluence and pronatalism combined to usher in a fresh phase of expansionist capitalism, the 'teenager' became the new model consumer-citizen, the term itself an invention of the marketing industry (Cook, 1998). Equipped with disposable wealth to spend on commodities and 'leisure' (Cohn, 1969; Hebdige, 1988:30), this was the first generation set loose to craft itself in large part through consumption. Capitalists for the first time saw youth as a market with its own infinitely cultivable needs. 'Fawning like mad' (Cohn, 1969:15), they manufactured the means – clothes, music, magazines, dances – for creating age-based collectivities with unprecedented self-awareness, visibility, and translocal potential.

The capacity of the languages of youth culture to mark emergent identities and consciousness was shown when the 'rebels without a cause' of the 1950s became rebels with causes aplenty, from the romance of white hippy flower power to militant Black Panther antiracism. And while the naive self-absorption of lifestyle politics and rock resistance might have been evident from its roots in Haight Ashbury, the mass protests against the Vietnam War demonstrated that a self-conscious youth counter-culture could engage mainstream politics. Artful dodgers became draft dodgers, and the right of states to commandeer the means of violence, especially in the bodies and purposes of youth, was seriously challenged. Neither was this a purely parochial struggle; that much was attested by simultaneous upheavals among restive students in many parts of the world. The historical significance of these youth uprisings remains an open question. But one thing about them is clear: youth activism was a precursor of new sorts of social movements, movements born of the creative refiguring of local means and ends in the light of global, media-driven identities, ideologies, and vocabularies. The sounds of the 1960s, perhaps the true Age of Youth, traversed a multicentred, electronically unified planet, fuelled by transnational commercial interests. Amidst a rapidly proliferating flow of signs and values (Appadurai, 1990; Hannerz, 1989), youth culture began to construct an 'elsewhere' – a universe-wide, alienated age-grade – that gave pre-adults the language for an identity apart from the 'soiled and compromised parent culture' (Hebdige, 1988:30).

This age-grade, purely a figurative community, of course, was inherently tenuous and virtual. Its imagining could seldom fully transcend the limitations imposed by the commodity-dependence of mass cultural forms. As actors-through-consumption, teenagers bought – literally – into mainstream interests at the same time as they contested them. In so doing, they typified the predicament of would-be subversives in advanced capitalist contexts, of those who struggle to seize control of commodified signs and practices, thus to use them in ways that do more than merely reaffirm the *status quo*. Located far from sites of primary production, theirs is often a politics of style. Its iconoclasm is effected on camera-ready bodies, or, more recently, along digital frontiers where hackers

and 'cyberpunks' protest freedoms lost as computer technology becomes ever more subject to corporate control (Coleman, n.d.). To the critically minded, like Hebdige (1988:35), their exertions appear ambiguous, as 'neither affirmation nor refusal'. Their iconoclastic play with mainstream commodity forms often signals subversion – as in the case of Punk and Rap – and may discomfort the guardians of property and propriety. But it must always struggle to remain ahead of encroaching market forces, forces that threaten to neutralize its effects by reducing its creativity to bland consumer goods.

Beyond the Politics of Metaphor

Still, we mistake the possibilities of the moment if we see youth culture simply as a 'politics of metaphor' (Hebdige, 1988). It is a mistake that flows from focusing more on the *products* of that culture, on its disembodied images and texts, than on their situated production and use. The potential of its signs and objects to be (re)deployed, to be 'cut and mix[ed]', has made them easily available for the fashioning of a wide variety of identities and projects; identities and projects whose sometimes subversive strain, itself often acted out rather than spoken out, underlies the ambivalences endemic to the late twentieth-century representation of the young, *sui generis*. Also, perhaps to the political spirit of the age writ large. For the productive aspect of 'youth culture' has expanded as juveniles have come to participate on a global scale in shaping their own markets, both legal and illegal, as their signifying practices have connived with those species of post-Fordist capital that owe little loyalty to local establishments or economies. Youth have been integral to the opening up of new economic spaces of unprecedented profitability – the fertile Silicon Valleys, where young 'nerds,' eschewing academic credentials and professional regulation, have become multimillionaires, the childlike insouciance that typifies this field, in image if not in terms of real control, being legible in the bespectacled boyishness of an aging Bill Gates.

The libertarian possibilities of electronic technologies that simultaneously privatize and globalize the means of communication are intrinsic to the effects of capitalism in its neoliberal guise, and have generated new openings for juvenile adventurers; ostensibly unfettered by a gerontocratic establishment. This is captured in the equivocal figure of the 'hacker,' an under-age outlaw bent on maintaining the freedom of the information highway, and redeeming his (more rarely her) creative potential from the grasp of evil corporations and imperious governments (Coleman, n.d.). A string of American movies (like *Hackers*, *Wargames*, and *Johnny Mnemonic*) rehearse popular nightmares of electronic whizkids breaking into top security enclaves and threatening to hold the state and its guardians to ransom. Recent reports in the US media, interestingly, tell of teenage e-traders amassing huge fortunes in their bedrooms while putatively doing their 'homework'.

But suburban cyberbrats are hardly unique in their capacity to mine the potential of new economic frontiers. Every bit as inspired and ingenious have been the ventures of less advantaged young people from the inner cities, from postcolonial and postrevolutionary societies, and from other terrors incognita, who seek to make good the promise of world-wide *laissez-faire*. Here, too, liberalization has created room for youthful entrepreneurs to manoeuvre beyond the confines of modernist modes of production, polity, legitimacy. Take the burgeoning 'bush economies' of Cameroon and Chad, where 'mar-

ket boys' cross borders, change passports, trade currencies, and traffic in high-risk cargo like guns and drugs; in so doing, they invent fresh ways of getting rich on the margins of global markets (Roitman, n.d.). Or consider the ferociously escalating teenage diamond trade – another amalgam of danger, desire, and deregulation – that provisions armies in West and Central Africa, setting up innovative configurations of libertarian commerce, violence, and profit (De Boeck, 1999). Or observe the young Mouride men from Senegal who have taken to translocal enterprise with such energy that they talk of New York as 'a suburb of Dakar'; their remittances finance major reconstruction of urban neighbourhoods at home, transform local power relations and, concomitantly, highlight the dwindling capacity of the nation-state to sustain its infrastructure (Mamadou Diouf, pers. comm.; Buggenhagen n.d.). These fluid economies are usually not altogether free of gerontocratic control, of course. Nor do they supplant all formal political and economic arrangements, with which they have complex and multiple interconnections. But they do circumscribe and relativize them in significant ways, thereby challenging their exclusive sovereignty.

In sum, youth culture, in an epoch of liberalization, has shown itself uniquely able to link locales across transnational space; also to motivate the kinds of material practices that, in turn, have redrawn the maps of high modernism. Contemporaneity is its essence. In this, it echoes present-day pop, whose fast moving 'sampling' distends the normative by juxtaposing sounds in startlingly labile ways, not least when it cannibalizes ethnomusics from across the planet. Small wonder that our nightmare adolescent – wearing absurdly expensive sports shoes, headphones blaring gangsta rap, beeper tied to a global underground economy – is a synthesis of street child and corporate mogul.

A qualification here. The marginalization of young people, at least in its present-day form, may be a very general structural consequence of the rise of neoliberal capitalism. And 'youth culture' may be increasingly global in its reach. But this does not mean that the predicament of juveniles, or the manner of its experience, is everywhere the same, everywhere homogenized. Neither in its social nor in its cultural dimensions is this the case. It takes highly specific forms, and has very different material implications, in Los Angeles and Dakar, London and Delhi. Hip hop, Air Jordans, and Manchester United colours may animate youthful imaginations almost everywhere, often serving as a poignant measure of the distance between dream and fulfilment, between desire and impossibility, between centres of great wealth and peripheries of crushing poverty. But these signs are always domesticated to some degree. Otherwise they would have very little density of meaning. Appropriated and recontextualized, they are translated into hybrid languages capable of addressing local concerns. Thus it is that rap music is inflected in one way on the Cape Flats, another on the streets of Bombay or Havana. Writes Richard Ssewakiryanga (1999:26):

Today in Uganda, rap music is not only received in its American form, but repackaged by borrowing from some of the traditional folklore to fill in the incomprehension ... suffered by the audience listening to the poetics of American rappers.

Imported images, he notes, quickly penetrate local repertoires of humour, irony, anger. At the same time, these media remain points of intersection, points of connection between here and elsewhere, between sameness and difference, between received identities and a global imaginary.

Partly as a result of all this, youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative,

uncharted borderlands in which the global meets the local; this often being audible in the elaboration of creolized argots – like Street Setswana and Kwaito in South Africa – that give voice to imaginative worlds very different from those of the parental generation.⁸ These frontiers are also sites of tension, particularly for young people who confront the contradictions of modernity as they try to make good on the millennial promise of democracy and the free market in the newly liberalized states of Africa and Eastern Europe. In the late twentieth century, we have suggested, the image of youth-as-trouble has gained an advanced capitalist twist as impatient adolescents try to ‘take the waiting out of wanting,’ thus to lessen the gulf between hope and fulfilment. In the process they have felt their power, power born of a growing willingness and ability to turn to the use of force, to garner illicit wealth, to hold polite society to ransom. Bill Buford (1993:264f) has said that it is only in moments of concerted violence that riotous British soccer fans experience a real sense of community, a point others have extended to gangland wars in US cities, to witchburning in the northerly provinces of South Africa, and to cognate social practices elsewhere. Is it surprising, then, that so many juveniles see themselves as ironic, mutant citizens of alien-nations, finding scant reflection of themselves in the rites and rhetoric, the provisions and entitlements, of a liberal democratic civic order?

Endnote

It was the ANC manifesto that proclaimed
‘jobs for all at a living wage’
Where are the promised youth brigades?
Where are the jobs? Where is the living wage?
Now is the time. (Shaheed Mohamed, *Cape Times*, 29 July 1999)

Elsewhere (2000a) we explore the (onto)logic of neoliberal capitalism, or ‘millennial capitalism,’ as we refer to it, thus to index not merely its epochal rise at the end of the century, but also the fact that it has become invested with an almost magical, salvific capacity to yield wealth without work, money without manufacture. There we seek to show that structural transformations in the material, moral, and signal relationship of production to consumption have altered the very essence of labour and social reproduction; also the essence of – and mutual bleeding into each other – of class, race, gender, and generation.⁹ In the final analysis, it is this epochal history, this analytic *ur*-narrative, that holds the key to any understanding of the present and future predicament of youth, even of its unfolding construction as a category *an und für sich*. Here we have sought to lay out, somewhat cavalierly, bits and pieces of the genealogy, of that *ur*-narrative.

In so doing, we have sought to complicate current talk, at least in populist discourses, of ‘the crisis of youth,’ talk that portrays the predicament of the younger generation in

⁸ For an excellent study of Street Setswana in the North West Province of South Africa, see Cook (1999).

⁹ Age and generation, as the Marxist anthropology of precapitalist societies has long pointed out, may coalesce in self-reproducing structures of exploitation. In many of these societies, youthful cadres provided the labour power, and hence surplus value, for their elders. The parallel with neoliberal capitalism is obvious. Increasingly, ‘youth’ and ‘underclass’, both ever more racinated and ethnicized, run together; note, here, Abdullah’s (1998) suggestive use of the term ‘lumpen youth culture.’

monochromatically bleak terms.¹⁰ As if all were entropy, all catastrophe, all impossibility in this Age of Futilitarianism, this age in which rampant self-interest meets rampant pessimism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a). It is not that these terms are inaccurate. Nor that deep concern is unwarranted. On the contrary. The metamorphosis of the global economy *is* marginalizing many people before they grow to full maturity, excluding them from the prospect of regular employment, treating them increasingly as adults before the law when they transgress the bounds of the normative, demonizing them as they turn to crime in the absence of any other means of livelihood. The young of today, it seems, are more than ever enfranchised as consumers – welcomed into the marketplace in the immediate interests of corporate capital – often then to be excluded from the benefits of mainstream economic participation, political acknowledgement, and civic responsibility (see Venkatesh, n.d. [b]).

But this is only a part of the story.

For one thing, as we have said, the attribution to unruly youth of the standardized nightmares of polite society – not unlike the witch in precolonial and colonial Africa (Wilson, 1951) – goes back to the genesis of industrial capitalism and its bourgeois sensibilities. It is on the back of those situated in the liminal space between childhood innocence and adult responsibility that modernist sociomoral anxieties have tended to be borne. For another thing, it is crucial, if we are to make any real sense of the contemporary predicament of youth, of its neomodern construction as a category in and for itself, that we stress its intrinsic bipolarity, its doubling. Youth is not *only* a signifier of exclusion, of impossibility, of emasculation, denigration, and futility. Nor, by all accounts, is it experienced as such. While they may not, for the most part, have captured the mainstream – and may, indeed, constitute an infinitely exploitable market, an inexhaustible reservoir of consumers, an eternal fount of surplus value to be extracted – the young remain a constant source of creativity, ingenuity, possibility, empowerment, a source of alternative, yet-to-be-imagined futures.

¹⁰ No less problematic are statements of unqualified optimism about a new and undifferentiated ‘millennial generation’ in the US, bereft of the cynicism and rebelliousness of their parents (Howe and Strauss, 2000)

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II The Pain of Agency The Agency of Pain

2 ALCINDA HONWANA Innocent & Guilty Child-Soldiers as Interstitial & Tactical Agents

My first military assignment was to attack a village and steal cattle ... we burnt down that village ... and with my gun I killed the ammunition chief ... I am very sad about my story ... but I had no choice. (Fernando, only 9 at the time he entered the military)

At the age of 10, Marula was kidnapped by Renamo insurgents, during a rebel attack on his village in Gaza province, southern Mozambique. Marula, his father, his younger sister and other villagers, who were also kidnapped, walked for three days, carrying military equipment and items looted from the village, before reaching the Renamo camp. The family was separated at the camp. While the father was sent to the men's ward, and the sister to the women's sector, Marula was ordered to join a group of young boys. A few weeks later Marula started military training. He was not allowed to see his father and sister, but they managed to arrange secret meetings on a few occasions. It was during one of these secret encounters that they agreed to try and run away. The attempted escape went wrong and they were caught. Marula was ordered to kill his own father. And so he did. Following this, his first killing, Marula grew into a fierce Renamo combatant and was active for more than seven years. He does not even remember how many people he tortured, how many he killed; how many villages he burnt; and how many food convoys and shops he looted. After the war, he returned to his village where his paternal uncle (the only close relative who survived the war) refused to welcome him home. The uncle could not forgive Marula for killing his brother, the boy's own father. Eventually, through the skilful intervention of his uncle's wife, Marula came to stay in the house despite his uncle's disapproval. Victim, or perpetrator? Innocent, or guilty? Child, or soldier? What can we make of Marula and his disturbing story?

In the past decade or so the issue of child participation in political conflict has captured the attention of the world. Images of young people carrying guns and ammunition flash across our television screens. Children's involvement in armed conflict is not a recent phenomenon or one that is unique to our times. Historically young people have been at the forefront of political conflict in many parts of the world. However, the magnitude of the problem today is such that this issue has gained new dimensions. Specialists in war studies and other analysts have pointed out the new character of most contemporary civil wars, which make defenceless civilians – especially children – particularly vulnerable (Gersony, 1988; Vines, 1991; Finnegan, 1992; Minter, 1994; Clapham, 1998; Reno, 1998; Kaldor, 1999; Ignatieff, 1999; Berdal and Malone, 2000). These 'new' wars reflect in many respects a 'total societal crisis'. Young civilian populations are frequently