Extenuating Circumstances, African Youth, and Social Agency in a Late-modern World

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> Work on "African identities" often occludes one of the most important and fascinating aspects of the lives of youth in the postmodern Postcolony: an ability to live productively through the fractured, experimental, and decidedly unfixed nature of what it means to be African in the world today.
> —Danny Hofmann , *The War Machines* (xv)

Introduction: The Idea of Late-modernity

Although first coined by the Spanish-born Hispanic American scholar, Federico de Onis, in the context of Hispanophone literary criticism in the mid-1930s, particularly in describing an emergent literary movement by new poets that sought refuge from the stifling perfectionism of modernism, the term "the Postmodern" only gained traction in the Anglophone world two decades later in a rather different context, i.e. as an epochal rather than aesthetic category and primarily concerned with making sense of the crises and destructive contradictions engendered by the powerful forces of industrialism and nationalism in the Western world (Anderson 1998). Arnold Toynbee, in his eighth volume of the *Study of History*, used the term "the postmodern age" to describe the development of a new Western civilisation marked by two major developments: the emergence not only of an industrial working class, but also the struggles of an emerging intelligentsia outside the Western world to master the secrets of modernity and turn those same secrets against the West (Anderson 5-6). Since Toynbee's use of the term in the 1950s, however, "Postmodernity," variously dubbed "late-modernity," "high-modernity," "post-industrial civilisation" and so on, has now assumed wider meanings and significance, shaped by different political-economic, cultural, spatio-temporal, and intellectual contexts. In spite of its varied contextual and disciplinary meanings, however, the discourse of Postmodernity in general has been contoured by the contention that there have been major shifts in the political, economic and cultural life in the Western world that have drastically redefined the ways in which human beings experience their social environment, particularly since the early 1970s (Harvey 1989).

In the 1980s the term "Postmodernity" again gained new intellectual force and popularity, particularly in the social and cultural sciences, mostly in capturing the emergence of what is now perceived to be a daunting global history where information matters more than production—a post-industrial age wherein knowledge has gained primacy over the economic forces of production transnationally, thus undermining the power and legitimacy of not just nation-states, but also all grand narratives in culture, politics, and the economy (Lyotard 1984). For postmodernist thinkers, then, late-modernity marked the beginnings of the phenomenal changes in the global human condition with huge implications for the radical transformation of humanity. Framed as the climax of the project of modernity, Postmodernity thus has been seen in apocalyptic terms, beset by narratives of disintegration and disjuncture, of crisis and uncertainty (Harvey 1989, Jameson 1990, Lyotard 1984). In many ways, therefore, the shift from the early modern world to the late-modern society has been perceived as being essentially about "the challenge of existence and integration" (Morch & Anderson 66).

The peculiar challenges of the postmodern era are traceable, as some scholars have now argued, to its unprecedented liquidity and fragmentation, generating not only cynicism and anxiety, but also enormous risks for contemporary life (Baumann 1990; Bewes1997; Ulrick Beck 1992). Thus, Anthony Giddens argues that the new cultural order of Postmodernity "differ[s] from all preceding forms of social order in respect of their dynamism, the degree to which they undercut traditional habits and customs, and their global impact" (1). And although the concept of late-modernity has less theoretical purchase these days than it did in the last three decades, the key ideas and debates floated by its proponents are still critical to many of the discussions about contemporary society and culture. Put differently, the idea of late-modernity has "vital things to tell us about how we engage with and are shaped by our [global] cultural milieu today" (Mapals 6).

"A World without Guarantees": Late-modernity and Global Youth Cultures

The emergence of the varied debates around the condition of Postmodernity also triggered a huge discursive shift in the global sociology of youth, especially since the 1990s. Within the broad ambience of youth studies, there has been a radical shift away from the ground-breaking theoretical work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s. The CCCS model is now seen as inapplicable to contemporary youth analysis in the face of Postmodernity's tremendous social and cultural changes which have now brought about different seismic impacts on young people worldwide. Since the early 1980s, the initial optimism that marked youth experience between the late 1940s and

the 1960s has given way to unrelenting pessimism. The emergence of late-capitalism and globalization, with its emphasis on the internationalization of markets, the intensification of competition through privatization, liberalization, and deregulation, and the de-territorializing capacities of post-industrial mass media conglomerates have all led to widespread contraction of social and economic opportunities for young people all over the world (Mills and Hans-Blossfeld 2005). Youth culture scholars have thus begun to mobilize the discourse of late-modernity in making sense of contemporary youth cultures in relation to a relentlessly fast, fluctuating, and dodgy global civilisation (Cieslik & Pollock 2002; Fornas & Bolin 1995; Furlong & Cartmel 1997; McRobbie 1994).

In a paradoxical Postmodernity which vacillates absurdly between the profuse abundance of frivolous materialism on the one hand, and genocidal military capabilities on the other; in an age in which acclaimed promoters of democracy only pay lip-service to the fundamental ideals of freedom and human rights on the one hand, while diligently perpetuating egregious acts of outright human rights violations on the other; in which youth worldwide now spend countless years in colleges only to be underemployed many years after school and training; in which social iniquities pervade our global social experience in spite of the promises of globalization to erode social disparities through privatization, deregulation, and liberalization, young people globally are now seen as encountering what Iain Chambers describes as a postmodern "world without guarantees" (9); a new global social and economic order that poses enormous dangers and pressures to the project of futurity, the very province of youth. In the face of a new world order of neo-liberalism, young people are increasingly being asked to "turn inwards—to themselves and in some cases their families—in order to respond to the uncertainties and risks associated with the precariousness of modern life" (Kennelly, Poyntz & Ugor 257). In fact, young people are ever more being reminded of the *Kennedean* dictum to ask what they can do for the government and not the other way round. Thus, Andy Furlong argues that in "many ways being young has become more difficult: the outcome of many pathways are obscure and young people frequently fear economic and social isolation" (134). What we are dealing with here is not only the sordid picture of a generation whose entire futures are at stake, but also one whose futures are now on permanent hold (Pomerance & Sakeris 1996; Shaffer 2003). While the postmodern age is framed as a world with endless potentials, it is also one with almost unconquerable obstacles for young people. The youth of the late-modern world are now seen as living under extenuating circumstances where they negotiate a set of risks that intrude on all aspects of their daily lives. Thus, globally we have begun to witness how youth are now reacting in different ways and degrees to not only the contradictions of a global late-capitalist economy that promises so much and gives very little, but also the great ironies of a postmodern civilization where youth are living a paradox, with their futures on hold or on a speedy reverse to a bottomless abyss.

But the emerging studies on youth cultures in the late-modern age have not only focused on the peculiar challenges of our post-industrial civilization for contemporary youth globally, they have also pointed to the ways in which youth all over the world are also now responding pro-actively to such phenomenal global social changes and challenges through the mobilisation of all kinds of postmodern cultural resources that include the body, space, fashion, sports, and a vast genre of popular art forms. Although almost overwhelmed by the great contradictions of late-modernity, many of the world's youth now seek alternative social avenues for negotiating an illogical and contradictory Postmodernity which promises great futures in the midst of an indeterminate and precarious present. What has emerged, then, is a new generation of global youth who invent new sites of social negotiations that are inherently complex and contradictory, at times even dangerous both to self and others, but yet imbued with new forms of social agency and change. It is this emerging global cultural geography of youth and its articulations in the African Postcolony that this special issue addresses. Although rarely used in contemporary debates mirroring the massive social changes in the African Postcolony, the political-economic, philosophical and cultural transformations that have taken place in the postmodern world today have not done so exclusive of Africa. The challenges and opportunities brought about by the far-reaching alterations in scientific and technological innovations in places all over the world have been felt and responded to in Africa too, and what the authors in this special issue do is identify and track the ways in which African youth now stand at the very heart of what Deborah Durham (2000) calls the continent's social imagination; and not necessarily as sufferers, but as active social operators who undertake deliberate, calculated and productive "moves" that not only help reshape their respective societies, but also how they experience those societies.

Postcolonial Crisis, African Youth, and the Question of Agency

In spite of the gloomy picture of the crises confronting youth all over the world, nowhere else have young people been hemmed in as witnessed in Africa, particularly after the onset of the structural adjustment programs foisted on the continent since the mid-1980s. Since then African youth have been battling huge problems such as a lack of education and training, poor housing, unemployment/underemployment, lack of healthcare, violent conflicts and wars, and many other socio-economic disjunctures that threaten not only the daily lives of young people, but also their very futures and the futures of their communities at large. Not only do young people feel betrayed by the failure and/or collapse of the nationalist agendas on which the political movements for freedom and self-governance in the continent were built, the continuing catastrophic

activities of thieving postcolonial political elites have vandalized the once vibrant economies of a promising continent. All of these factors have held Africa down for decades, and at the receiving end of these cycles of stupidities are the young people in the continent. The persistence of political instability and chronic economic decline has fractured the once smooth biographic trajectories of young people in a continent that initially held so much promise. Thus, what we have begun to witness in the continent since the 1990s is "the dramatic irruption of young people in both the public and domestic sphere" (Diouf 3). From the explosive rebellious activities of militant youth in the Niger-Delta area in South-eastern Nigeria between 2003-09 to the xenophobic outburst of youth in Johannesburg and Soweto, South Africa; from the dare-devilry of Somali pirates in the high seas of the horn of Africa to the killing fields of Sudan; from the heart-chilling violence and rituals of Liberian, Ugandan and Sierra-Leonean child-soldiers to the Para-military activities of Mande hunter-guards in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea; from the somewhat Mephistophelian proportion of religious violence by youth in Northern Nigeria to the homelessness and gang culture of street youth in Morocco, it is obvious that young people in Africa now stand at the very heart of the continent's cultural imaginary, generating new concerns and anxieties about the future and stability of the entire continent. Africa's youth have not only become the new face of war (Dunson 2010), but also a poignant marker of what Henry Giroux (2012) has described elsewhere as young people's disposability in a late-modern world pervaded by a culture of cruelty.

But these violent *youthscapes* in Africa do not in any way suggest that Africa's youth have an intrinsic capacity for violence any more than youth in other places, as is often suggested in sloppy scholarship.[1] Indeed, as the new literature on youth and violent conflicts in Africa has begun to show, much of what is often rationalised as "senseless violence" by African youth is in fact the desperate measures, in the form of subjective violence, in response to the prolonged histories of structural violence either by inefficient and/or indifferent postcolonial African regimes or transnational economic forces in much of Africa (See Bay & Donham 2006; Honwana 2006; Peters 2011; Hoffman 2011; Argenti 2007). Indeed, as Paul Richards (1996) reminded us in his study of war, youth and resource struggles in Sierra Leone, much of the pervasive youth violence in Africa has functional links to the comfort and luxury in the so-called first world which we often gloss over. I argue, therefore, that the persistence of youth conflicts in the African continent are indeed novel signatures of social struggles by young people desperately finding meaning, hope and certainty in their lives in the face of a merciless neoliberal economic order on the one hand, and the systemic violence unleashed by unjust postcolonial governmentality, on the other.

Now, although the harsh circumstances that shaped the popular reference to African youth as a "lost generation" many years ago have continued to persist in varying degrees in many African countries,[2] it

would be a serious error of judgement, Jon Abbink argues, "to deny African youth intentionality of action and agency, as has so often happened in Africanist discourse" (2). While difficult political, economic and social conditions persist across the entire continent, Africa's youth, like their counterparts all over the world, are finding new and ingenious ways of making sense of not only their own lives, but also those of their families and communities at large (see for example Evers *et al* 2006; Sommers 2011). It is these new existential metrics and cultural stratagems of survival amongst marginalized youth in modern-day Africa that this special issue addresses. All of the authors in this collection demonstrate how African youth in different national settings, in the midst of late-modernist neoliberal economic agendas and ruthless postcolonial governmentality, have remained resilient, making meaning of their lives in "a climate of social instability and endemic conflict" (De Boeck & Honwana 2). As Karen Hansen has argued, although African youth are often constrained by weak postcolonial economies and restricted by society's dismissive view of the young, many young people in Africa today contribute invaluably to the reshaping and, sometimes, outright transformation of dominant meanings of youth as docile and servile social beings to young people as social subjects who take action (17). This special issue offers us diverse portraits of young people in Africa taking action with huge political, socio-economic and cultural consequences for their different societies. And such examples challenge us all, whether academics, policy-makers, military strategists, or even economic and moral entrepreneurs in the continent, to rethink the ways in which we perceive and frame African youth as subjects (or even objects!) in our various discourses. Indeed, the story of the African youth reminds us all that however defeated a people are, they are never ever completely powerless, without any political subjectivity and agency.

Recurrent Themes in the Special Issue

This special issue explores the situated effects of the global era in which we are now living, variously called "late-modern," "post-industrial," "high modern," and "globalized," and the activities and cultures of young people in Africa in response to such phenomenal global social transformations. All over the world, the new sociologies of youth now point to a growing concern about the ramifications of globalization, late-modernity and general, global, social, and economic restructuring for the lives and futures of young people. But amidst the lingering fears about the future of the young, scholars have also called for a deep reflection and rethinking of young people's own resilience and agency in the midst of these turbulent times. For, as Steven Miles argues, it is fine and well to say that the world is changing and that young people are changing with it, but we must ask questions about and track exactly the precise forms those changes take.

This special issue of the *Postcolonial Text*, entitled "Late Modernity and Agency: Contemporary Youth Cultures in Africa," reflects on the varied contours of youth responses to social change in contemporary Africa. While young people in Africa continue to face extraordinary social challenges in their everyday lives, they continue to devise unique ways to reinvent their insufferable circumstances and keep afloat in the midst of seismic global and local social change. The papers gathered here cover a wide range of topics on African youth that understand young people not only as victims but also as active social players in the face of a shifting and dodgy late-modernist civilisation.

In the first article, Lord Mawuko-Yevugah gives a scintillating account of students' activism in Ghana between the late 1990s and early 2000s that connects stifling neo-liberal economic agendas, postcolonial governmentality and political subjectivity by disgruntled youth in Africa. Accurately mapping the phenomenal shift from state-led welfare education policies from the pre-SAP years to the era of the privatization of education in Ghana marked by "the implementation of specific market-led policies" foisted on the country by powerful global political-economic forces, Mawuko-Yevugah demonstrates eloquently how an engaged youth movement in the form of students' activism reversed and redefined merciless neoliberal economic reforms that had huge implications for formal education and the project of futurity in Ghana. The real import of the portrait of students' activism in Ghana presented by this author is how it privileges insights into the oftentimes ignored role of African youth in "the dynamics of domestic politics" in the Postcolony where youth are indeed powerful agents in the "reconfiguration of power" between low and high impact forces.

The second essay by Leslie Robinson and Maria-Carolina Cambre is a collaborative piece offering us fascinating insights into the world and work of *artivists 4 life*, a Ugandan youth group outside Kampala that deploys craft-making, visual art, drama, dance, and almost every other available cultural resource around them, not only to generate income support for the everyday sustenance of their individual members, but also to create both individual and collective social awareness about moral, cultural, political-economic and even health issues in their different communities. As Cathy Mashakalugo, a member of the *artivist 4 life* youth group, said in a panel session at the Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference in Paris in July 2012, "we have become our own doctors, teachers, directors and so on." The *artivists 4 life* "chokolo" project, for instance, involves the creative recycling of bottle tops (chokolo) to produce earrings and other jewellery products which the youth collective uses to generate modest income for its members. Thus, we encounter the *artivists 4 life* collective as "culture creators defining their own futures through the development of new sociabilities as a result of the actions of the collective." The *artivists 4 life* group is a classic example of how young people in Africa reinvent acutely unbearable conditions into a

fertile environment of creativity and agency, leading to both individual and communal empowerment.

Marisa O. Ensor's contribution sheds significant light on an aspect of post-conflict life in Africa often ignored by Africanist cultural studies. Rather than dwell on the stereotypical image/theme of the African child-soldier that dominates youth studies today, her article offers fascinating insights into the identity politics of young returnee refugees in South Sudan who now mobilise varied postmodern cultural resources to redefine their identities in an environment marked by acutely limited opportunities, mutual suspicion and general uncertainty. Ensor's spotlight on the everyday life politics of returnee youth in South Sudan in many ways reaffirms Nadine Dolby's thesis that for most youth in contemporary Africa, whether in urban or rural spaces, "identity is patched together from sources that bubble up all over the globe" (63). Her work thus demonstrates powerfully how African youth are strategically located at the intersection of a changing local cultural imaginary, the urbanization of modernity and larger globalizing processes linked to late-modernity.

My own essay takes on issues of subjectivity and agency in relation to the armed insurgency waged by disgruntled youth in the oil-rich Niger Delta region in Nigeria between 2006 and 2009. Locating the Niger Delta youth insurgency within the context of a long history of structural violence unleashed on the oil producing region by both the Nigerian state and global oil giants, the article examines the particular repertoires of resistance mobilized by the Niger Delta youth in challenging the unrelenting history of exploitation and oppression let loose on its people. Focusing on the particular ways in which the warring youth deployed space and illegal oil bunkering in the context of the insurgency, the paper offers an exhilarating demonstration of the creative ways in which an entire generation of angry and dissatisfied youth in the Delta region mobilized subjective violence in rewriting the political-economic dynamics between them and an indifferent postcolonial ruling elite, on the one hand, and global oil capitalism on the other. The essay argues that while some scholars have framed the Niger Delta youth as "a cursed generation," closer attention to the history of the insurgency in the region reveals a stunning example of the exceptional ways in which exploited African youth may tap into both local and global networks of political, economic and cultural power to reinvent their futures and those of their local exploited communities.

The powerful cultural force now wielded by popular hip-hop musicians in Nigeria is at the core of Wale Adedeji's and Thomas Iyambri's papers. Mapping the complex linkages between the local, national and the global, the two essays illuminate the new cultural politics of creativity associated with urban youth where the personal and the local assume huge critical force in engaging indifferent postcolonial states unwilling and, at times, unable to address the key concerns and anxieties of common people, especially the mass of marginalized youth that now inhabit African cities. The mobilization of local metaphors and dialects,

the invocation of personal biographic trajectories and collective social pain and angst are all new cultural repertoires inflected by creative youth now liberated by new media technologies to engage proactively with failed postcolonial states that have lost the social contract with its young citizens. Thus, the essays by Adedeji and Iyambri reveal powerfully Nigerian hip-hop musicians' cultural power for self-expression and social critique that engenders political subjectivity and agency for young people not just in Nigeria, but all across Africa and indeed the global cultural sphere. Their contributions specifically unwrap an interesting cultural dynamic where youth now mobilise popular hip-hop rap music in order to respond to and critique a failed postcolonial state. Tracing the well-beaten paths already blazed by earlier pop icons in Nigeria's music industry such as Fela Anikilakpo, Osita Osadebe, King Sunny Ade, Chief Ebenezer Obey, Ras Kimono and other pop stars in the country, Adedeji lays bare with panache and detail how a derided genre often linked to youth violence, misogyny, mass consumption, and hedonism has now been reinvented by politically conscious youth to lambast the thieving ruling elite and the sordid social conditions they have engendered in Nigeria. He argues that hip-hop music now functions as a potent social lever through which creative urban youth now encode "emancipatory messages" that give the young hip-hop "artistes an opportunity to convey the 'truth' about life while also sounding 'warnings' about social existence." Both papers call our attention to the unique ways in which an entire youth generation in Africa hitherto made voiceless by the lack of access to institutionalized state mass media have imaginatively tapped into social opportunities created by the democratization of new media and the relentless experimentation and improvisation now associated with postmodern cultural production to not only ask crucial questions of their failing leaders, but to speak truth to power. Indeed, more than anything else, both essays remind us of the multiple ways in which African youth now jostle for social justice in public spaces in contemporary Africa increasingly being marked by institutionalized isolationism and the wanton *irregularization* of citizenship.

Sireita Mullings' essay reexamines and interrogates the popular rhetoric of the mainstream media in the United Kingdom about minority black youth in South-east London. Although examining the activities of black youth in a global city like London, instead of Africa, her article, like mine, sheds very strong light on the ways in which space is increasingly being transformed into a powerful cultural tool of meaning-making by marginalized youth in search of meaning and hope in the midst of dire straits. Her essay pushes for an urgent need for global youth studies to reconsider and refocus on "the spaces where young people find different meanings to their lives and the places where they live." Using the concept of postcode, Mullings, just like Robinson and Cambre, demonstrates succinctly how young people understand and manage the vituperations in their everyday lives through personal artworks produced by them at the 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning collective in South-east London.

What Mullings' essay demonstrates, and powerfully for that matter, is how collaboration between researchers and youth might lead to an insightful understanding and appreciation of the inner workings of the minds of young people not only grappling with long histories of social inequities, but also living in dangerous geographies.

Collectively, this special issue thus reveals the multiple ways in which African youth, facing countless social and economic constraints, have continued to find and create meaning and hope in their lives amidst a crises-ridden, uncertain and risky late-modern world. Often denied any kind of agency and/or political subjectivity on account of the massive challenges that swirl around them in both rural and urban spaces, African youth and their social struggles have often been dismissed as the frantic *politics of the powerless* (Cruise O'Brien 1996). The essays collected here, however, reveal a stunning array of ingenious stratagems invented by young people all over the continent to squeeze out beauty, hope and glory from near nothingness; from a postmodern world without guarantees.

Notes

1. See for examples the work of Robert Kaplan (2001) which insinuates that Africa and its youth are the natural point of departure for any discourse on violence.

2. See Cruise O'Brien, Donal, 1996, 71.

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