

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Youth: “Born Frees” and the Predicament of Being Young in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4n6485ww>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 38(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Mokoena, Hlonipha A.

Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed

Youth: “Born Frees” and the Predicament of Being Young in Post-Apartheid South Africa¹

Hlonipha A. Mokoena

Abstract

If South Africa’s intellectual history is defined in generational terms then it is possible to speak of a “generation gap” in the history of political and social ideas. Whereas in the 1940s, the elitist and quiescent leadership of the African National Congress was jostled into action by the “Young Lions” of the Youth League; and whereas the literary opposition to apartheid was led from within the Afrikaner/ Afrikaans community by the Sestigers—“the Generation of the Sixties”—“youth” in South Africa today is not synonymous with political and philosophical innovation. This paper will explore the problems of “youthfulness” and “rejuvenation” in South African political thought by describing the ways in which the “Born Frees” could conceive an intellectual “manifesto,” as both an alternative to the post-apartheid “death of ideas” and as a revision of the historiography on “youth” that has been the foundation of narratives about the young since the 1976 Soweto uprising.

Even philosophers are young men for a time. They must be born somewhere, some time and begin to think and write. . . .it is impossible to choose one’s beginnings. (Althusser 2005, 63-64)

Children scratch sores—sleep / bitten by the tsetse flies of Soweto / of June 16. (van Wyk 1986, 49)

The two epigraphs above hint at the core presupposition of this paper, namely that the history of South African political thought cannot be written without considering how the country’s writers and thinkers were once young people. The second epigraph especially points to the fact that at one historical moment in the history of South Africa, being young was synonymous with being “bitten by the tsetse flies of Soweto.” In other words, to be young was once a spectre of revolution and a rationale for political action. This

paper is an attempt to explore the various ways in which political ideas were and continue to be constructed and contested by young people. The word “youth” presents a myriad of problems when it is used to mark the development of an intellectual or philosopher. It is even more slippery and unwieldy when used to define a country’s history of social and intellectual thought. This was Louis Althusser’s problem—to try and describe how the notion of the “young Marx” wasn’t a useful criterion by which to categorise Karl Marx’s work or to understand the influence of German philosophical traditions on him as a young man. Part of the problem that Althusser deals with is that the concept of “youth” conflates age with intellectual influence and development. In the case of South Africa, this is a particularly acute conflation in which the history of “the youth” is rendered synonymous with the history of the student revolt of June 16, 1976. This paper doesn’t attempt to reverse this conflation or explain it. Rather, the objective is to map the different trajectories of “the young” that have shaped South African ideas and use this map as a means to explicate a “manifesto” for contemporary young intellectuals in South Africa. The term “Born-Free” in the title is meant to stand in for this generation of intellectuals: born at the butt-end of apartheid, with few or no memories of protest literature, June 16, or other iconography of the struggle, and groping about for an intellectual and cultural agenda that doesn’t merely reflect that of the state and its cultural apparatus. In short, the paper aims to articulate a manifesto for young South African intellectuals by journeying through the past of youth. It is a paper about generations—namely, how the history of South African political thought is a history of generational transition, transmission, conflict, and innovation. To bring out this relationship between past and present generations this paper relies on an oversimplification of the history of youth in South Africa. It describes two very broad trajectories in this history: first is the informal oppositional youth cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, which are represented in this history by the Afrikaner youth collective known as the *Sestigers*—the generation of the 60s. Second is the formation and mobilization of formal youth organizations, prominent amongst which was the ANC Youth League, which was established in 1944. One of its founders and theoreticians was Anton Lembede, and his ideas on “Africanism” and the role of youth permeate both the self-conception of the League at its

founding and its contemporary role in South African politics. To understand the ANC Youth League is to understand not only the influence of Lembede, but also the effect of his early departure from the life and politics of this youth movement, since he died in 1947, barely three years after the establishment of the ANCYL.

In order not to confuse the aims of this paper with a study of “youth trends” or subcultures, it is important to point out that there exists in South African Studies a historiography on state welfare reforms and policies that were directed at the “African family” and concomitantly at “the youth.” Just one example will suffice: in her book chapter titled “The Case for a Welfare State: Poverty and the Politics of the Urban African Family in the 1930s and 1940s,” Deborah Posel (2005) argues that in the midst of rapid urbanization of Africans in the 1930s there emerged a discourse of urban African welfarism whose main tenet was that the “social instability” and “moral degradation” among Africans in the cities was at root, the consequence of the destabilization of the African family. Within this discourse, the “syndrome of juvenile delinquency” became a central theme that culminated in the convening of a “Conference on Urban Native Delinquency” in 1938 (Posel 2005, 68-70). This and other studies of social welfare and its links to segregationist and apartheid urban policies hints at the fact that there is a relationship between urbanization and the emergence of “the youth” in South Africa’s intellectual history. In fact, it could be stated that the history of black political thought in South Africa is essentially a history of black urbanism. Whether one is looking at the history of the ANC Youth League or the Sophiatown writers of the 1950s, the “City” looms large as the inspiration and site of thought and action. In the conclusion of this paper, I hope to demonstrate that part of the problem with framing a manifesto for the Born Frees is that there hasn’t been a new or post-apartheid urbanism that has emerged to continue or reimagine the urban cultures that were created in the 1950s.



1976 June 16. Copyright © I See A Different You. Used with permission.

“The Hour of Youth Has Struck!”² Anton Lembede and the ANCYL’s Philosophy of Africanism

As the founding father and theoretician of the ANC Youth League, the ideas and writings of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede (1914-1947) are instructive in unravelling the position and meaning of the young in 1940s South Africa. His personal biography consists of elements of the rural and urban; it is emblematic of the aspirational attitude of many Africans with like educational backgrounds. Like his contemporaries, Lembede only became “political” when he moved to Johannesburg in 1943. Since he was politically active only in the years 1943-1947, his eloquent biographers Robert Edgar and Luyanda ka Msumza state, “Lembede did not have the opportunity to develop many of his ideas fully because of the short time period in which he was politically active. Consequently, it is difficult to chart precisely the evolution of his political ideas” (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 2).

When the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) it was largely composed of the elite of African society—educated lawyers, teachers, and clerks. Although aware of themselves as a “class,” the educated Africans were focused on their grievances against segregation and their exclusion from the “Union” of South Africa and not on mass mobilization. This lack of “class consciousness” became the main theme of contention in the 1940s and created the context within which the ANCYL emerged. For Lembede, the crucible in which his identity as a thinker and politician was formed was urban

Johannesburg, but he often reminded friends that he was “proud of my peasant origin” (Lembede, quoted in Edgar and Msumza 1996, 2). As a student at Adams College,³ he wrote papers in the college newspaper that indicate that he was influenced by Booker T. Washington’s ideas on industrial education and self-help, which were transplanted to Natal by John Dube (Edgar and Msumza 1996). Before his move to Johannesburg, Lembede glimpsed the configuration of urban youths by the official state bureaucracy and nongovernmental organizations. In June 1943, he contacted J. D. Rheinallt Jones (the director of the South African Institute of Race Relations) offering to do research for the Institute. Jones asked Lembede to “conduct a study of how African youths became ‘delinquents’ by examining records of the Diepkloof Reformatory to determine how young people had run foul [sic] of the law” (quoted in Edgar and Msumza 1996, 10). Edgar and Msumza argue that although there is no record of this report, his experience is probably reflected in the “occasional comments on the deleterious impact of urban life on African youth that were woven into his political essays” (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 10).

Although inexperienced in the politics of the “Rand,” Lembede was not a political novice when he moved to Johannesburg but had been involved in the All African Convention (AAC), which was established in 1935 to challenge the disenfranchisement of Africans by the “Native Bills” proposed by Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog. The fact that Lembede’s formative political ideas occurred within the context of the AAC signals the ascendance of this movement in the 1930s and the decline of the position of the ANC as the representative of African opinion. The 1930s are also important in Lembede’s intellectual biography since it was also in this period that he was influenced, rather paradoxically, by Afrikaner nationalist ideologues: he read Hendrik Verwoerd’s column “Die Sake van die Dag” [“The Affairs of the Day”] in *Die Transvaler* and was said to have imbibed fascist ideologies (Edgar and Msumza 1996). As his biographers note, “he saw no inconsistency in taking ideas from non-Africans to construct an Africa-centred philosophy. . . he warned against critically borrowing ideas that had no application to the African continent” (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 22-23).

However, as Gerhart observes, the relationship between Lembede and A. P. Mda—another Youth Leaguer and Johannesburg resident—disabused him of his fascist leanings. It was while living

in Johannesburg and sharing ideas with Mda that Lembede decided to study for a master's degree in philosophy, a decision described as “an almost unprecedented undertaking for an African, and his friendship with Mda rapidly developed into an intellectual sparring partnership in which the two read, argued, and reasoned their way together . . . toward a new philosophy that could serve the interests of African emancipation” (Gerhart 1978, 53-54).



Soweto Kliptown. Copyright © I See A Different You. Used with permission.

Socially and politically the establishment of the Youth League coincided with local and international pressures that underscored the urgent need for a changed strategy within black politics. The post-World War II political environment in South Africa was characterised by an increased pace of African protest on the Witwatersrand—the wartime economic boom that had resulted in an increase in employment and consequently an increase in the prices of basic goods (Edgar and Msumza 1996). For their part, the ANC leaders of the 1940s “remained aloof from this protest” and the newly elected the president of the ANC, Dr. A. B. Xuma, remained committed to change through constitutional means (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 14-15). Despite this conservatism, the conditions and inspiration for the formation of the YL were present in society. They included: the proliferation of numerous youth and student organizations (for example, the National Union of African Youth, established in 1939); the first strikes at the university college of Fort Hare⁴ in

the 1940s, when many future Youth Leaguers were students there; and the campaign of the Transvaal African Teachers' Association (TATA) to improve wages and working conditions of black teachers. This was significant since "African teachers were to form a significant constituency in the Youth League (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 16)." The ANC was once more challenged as the premier voice of the African population by the formation of another organization, the African Democratic Party (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 16). In sum, as Edgar and Msumza surmise, "whatever their backgrounds, the common denominator for young ANC activists was their impatience with the unwillingness of the ANC's Old Guard to adopt militant tactics to contest white rule (Edgar and Msumza, 16). The intransigence of this "old guard" formed at least one element of Lembede's agitation for a Youth League. As Gerhart argues: "When the Youth League challenged the Congress old guard, as in the controversy over boycotts [e.g. the Native Representative Council, est. 1937] . . . often such controversies masked, and only thinly at best, conflicts of a deeper and more personal nature between competing generations of African leadership. Thus in Lembede's writings some of the most vicious language is aimed not at whites but at leaders of the older generation" (Gerhart 1978, 81). This kind of generational transition and competition continues to animate contemporary debates between the ANCYL and the mother body, but in the context of the 1940s the main tactic at stake was the effectiveness and advisability of boycott and noncollaboration. For the Youth Leaguers, these tactics became "the symbols of youth's new mental emancipation from the outworn perspectives of the past" (Gerhart 1978, 82).

The document that was drafted as the manifesto of the ANCYL in 1944 is a monumental text, defined as much by its diagnostic elucidation of the South African problem as a "race problem" as by its critique of the dubious history of white "trusteeship." While these elements of the manifesto are worthy of close reading, our focus is on the manner in which the manifesto scripted the role of youth in Congress politics. In short and sharp commands, the scribes of the manifesto exhorted the youth in the following terms: "African Youth must be united, consolidated, trained and disciplined because from their ranks future leaders will be recruited" (Lembede 1996, 58).

The link between "the youth" and the fate of the African National Congress and its creed of Africanism, were explicitly stated:

In response to the demands of the times African Youth is LAYING ITS SERVICE AT THE DISPOSAL OF THE NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT, THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, IN THE FIRM BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE AND CONVICTION THAT THE CAUSE OF AFRICA MUST AND WILL TRIUMPH. (CYL Manifesto 1996: 65)



Mayfair, Johannesburg South Africa @blinkstefanus. Copyright © I See A Different You. Used with permission.

The Congress Youth League must be the brains-trust and power-station of the spirit of African nationalism; the spirit of African self-determination; the spirit that is so discernible in the thinking of our Youth. It must be an organisation where young African men and women will meet and exchange ideas in an atmosphere pervaded by a common hatred of oppression (CYL Manifesto 1996: 65-66).

By placing the youth in the vanguard of the opposition to “oppression” the manifesto was signaling the passing of the baton from an older to a younger generation. It was no longer the imperative of the elders to determine the right course of action; the youth were being tasked with assuming a role that belonged to them solely on the basis of their youth—namely, to be guardians of the “spirit of African nationalism.” Since Anton Lembede was instrumental in the formulation of this version of African nationalism or Africanism, one can summarise the general import of the manifesto in the

same terms laid out by Gail Gerhart when she states, “As a first attempt to formulate a creed of orthodox nationalism for black South Africa, it initiated a tradition on which later nationalists were to build, and supplied that tradition with its foremost intellectual hero—Lembede himself” (Gerhart 1978, 54).

“Rediscovery of a Remembered Youth”: The Sestigers and Afrikaner Literary Culture

If the formation of the ANCYL represents formalized political engagement of “the youth,” then the emergence of the Sestigers represents a cultural and “internal” assault on Afrikaner culture. In this regard two texts are central to the argument I present here. The first is the Introduction to an anthology of prose and poetry edited by André Brink and J. M. Coetzee. The anthology was aptly titled *A Land Apart: A Contemporary South African Reader* (1986) and it consisted of a medley of prose and poetry written in English and Afrikaans as well as poems translated from the Zulu language. Although intended to introduce an anthology, this text also functions as a definition of not only who the Sestigers were, but as a description of the “generational progress” of South African literature. The second text of interest is the 1973 lecture given by the poet, writer, and painter Breyten Breytenbach at the University of Cape Town’s Summer School. This lecture was titled “A View from Outside,” a reference to the fact that Breytenbach was living in self-imposed exile at the time, having left South Africa in 1959. The lecture was included in the travelogue that Breytenbach wrote of his three-month visit to South Africa in 1973. The book was called *A Season in Paradise*. The lecture is notable for at least two qualities: first, its startling and almost irreverent definition of the role of the writer, and second, its defence of the “naivete” of the Sestigers. In general, the lecture is a curious political statement about the responsibility of the Afrikaner writer to “dismantle” the “tribe in power” (namely, the Afrikaners), since Breytenbach shockingly asserted that the fate of South Africa lay in the hands of “black and brown” South Africans. In his introduction to the book, André Brink, another Sestiger, points to the poignancy of youth in the imagination of his collective’s relationship to Afrikaans culture and its South African context. He pleads on behalf of Breytenbach by noting that “there is nothing simplistic about

this rediscovery of a remembered youth. . . The paradise he is groping for coincides with the geography and the mysticism and the mythologies of Africa” (“Introduction” Breytenbach 1980, 15). It is also significant that Brink wrote this introduction in 1979 while Breytenbach was serving a seven-year prison sentence for involvement in a clandestine organization called *Okhela* (Zulu for “to ignite”), which was meant to be a counterpoint to the “black consciousness” movement through conscientizing white South Africans. This aborted attempt to initiate a “white consciousness” movement can be viewed as an important bridge between the two positions I outlined at the beginning, namely, the informal “cultural” opposition espoused by the Sestigers and the organized liberation movements that launched an armed struggle against apartheid in 1960 (Karis and Gerhart 1997).

The Writer as Philosopher and a Prophet

In titling their anthology *A Land Apart*, Brink and Coetzee were referring to the literary and cultural divisions that had been superficially and wilfully imposed by the political system of apartheid. The anthology was therefore a symptom of the South African condition of apartness. The notion of a “land apart” implied all the connotations contained in the word *apartheid* itself: separation, alienation, fission, division etc. The anthology was therefore a kind of suture stitching together otherwise separate peoples and expressions of literary imagination. This suturing was achieved partly by narrating the history of South African literature and the “culture of letters;”⁵ incidentally, Coetzee would later publish a book on the history of “white writing” in South Africa. In this introduction, the history of South African literature was synonymous with the history of generations of writers. Thus, the authors immediately confess a bias in their selection of which authors to include:

The bias in this selection has been toward the younger writers, in particular toward the “generation of 1976.” The generation that went (or was forced) into exile in the 1950s and 1960s is represented only by Kunene [Mazisi]. . . history froze when they departed: they can no longer be said to give voice to contemporary South Africa. (“Introduction” in Brink and Coetzee 1986, 8)

The year 1976 thus becomes a marker, amongst others, of an ordinary moment in literature but also in generational progress. The term “generation of 1976” is never explained—the meaning is obvious to those who know what happened in 1976. The assumption of generational progress is contained in that pithy phrase that describes the exiled generation of the 1950s—“history froze when they departed.” This is the other “apartness”; the apartness of generations.

In their excavation of the history of creative writing in South Africa, Brink and Coetzee are most eloquent when they describe the history of Afrikaans literature. Their intimate knowledge of Afrikaans culture is clearly demonstrated in the statement that “Afrikaans literature, barely a century old, initially was no more than the means to an end, that end being the political emancipation of the Afrikaner. Until well into the twentieth century writers also fulfilled the function of philosophers and prophets for the national cause; in many instances they were political and/or religious leaders of their people as well” (“Introduction” in Brink and Coetzee 1986, 9).

This history of a literature of “philosophers and prophets” functions as an entry point into a definition of the Sestigers⁶ and the manner in which they departed from the norms of Afrikaans literature. The main characteristic of a Sestiger was that he/she had made a sojourn to Europe and was influenced by the vogue ideas of emancipation and self-reflection current there. According to Brink and Coetzee, poetry was the “first genre to emancipate itself” (Brink & Coetzee, 9) from the grip of the nationalist cause. They observed:

At that stage a group of young writers, most of whom had spent shorter or longer periods in Europe, and more specifically in Paris, consciously introduced the then current vogues of experimentalism, existentialism and post-modernism into a literary scene still largely determined by nineteenth-century techniques and by the severely localized expression of themes like drought, locusts and poor-whites. The enthusiasm with which this new wave of writing was received by younger Afrikaans readers soon added unexpected dimensions to the work of these so-called “Sestigers” (“Writers of the Sixties”). (“Introduction” in Brink and Coetzee 1986, 9)

However, in the context of a repressive apartheid state that didn’t tolerate criticism, the Sestigers could not escape the bureaucratic

and social censure of their work. On the character of this censure by the Afrikaans establishment Brink and Coetzee note:

Within a few years practically all the Sestigers were exploring at least the fringes of a more overtly “committed” form of literature. This development led to a head-on collision with the political authorities who, previously, had appeared reluctant to use the censorship act (first introduced in 1963) against fellow Afrikaners. (“Introduction” Brink and Coetzee 1986, 10)

What is being pointed to in this summary of the history of censorship is that by being Afrikaners and writing in Afrikaans, the Sestigers were caught in a double-bind where the accolades received from the reading public were counteracted by the censorial authority of the Nationalist government, which was also Afrikaner/Afrikaans. This marks, at least for the Sestigers, their exile or departure from the comfortable fold of the “national cause” that earlier writers had inhabited.

This sense of being expelled or cast out of the Afrikaans community is taken further in the 1973 lecture by Breytenbach, in which he describes the Sestigers in metaphors related to death and decay. He opened his lecture with the following “apology”: “Mine will be a funeral oration—a very extremestic funeral oration. . . But death makes me fighting mad. Particularly when the corpse of this young writer from the Sixties is not completely cold yet” (Breytenbach 1980, 151).

As with Brink and Coetzee, he was aware that the Sestigers were able to exist in the 1960s partly by accepting the ambivalence of being both Afrikaners and dissidents. He wryly points to the political meaning of the accolades that his generation of writers competed for:

Is it not amazing that the golden age of the Sixties, that time of harvesting our nice fat prizes and of wanting to fight to the bitter end about who should get the Hertzog Prize, that it coincided with a period when more and more unread, therefore non-existent, books by fellow South African authors were being banned? . . .

I contend that our literature, no matter how clever sometimes, is largely a product of our stagnation and our alienation, and

that it cannot be anything else, given the framework within which it originates.

... Are we nothing then, as writers, but the shock-absorbers of this white establishment, its watchdogs? ("A View from Outside," Breytenbach 1980, 157-158)

These statements are based on the assumption that the time of the Sestigers was already past. Breytenbach used this critique to move the debate into the arena of politics rather than literature. He defined a new role for himself as writer. This redefinition depended in part on him accepting that the Afrikaners had failed and that now the fate of South Africa lay with the black majority. He told his audience: "I am convinced that the salvation of this country, if such an evangelistic word is permissible, is almost exclusively in the hands of my black and brown fellow countrymen. Thus has the line of division shifted and have *we* become the bastard race. As a group we have had our chance, and babbling away we allowed it to pass" (Breytenbach 1980, 154).

The failures of the past for Breytenbach were not just accidental; they were a direct consequence of the narrowness of Afrikaner identity. For him, apartheid wasn't just segregation taken to its extreme or government policy gone awry, it was a pathology of the Afrikaner psyche. He diagnosed the problem in the following terms:

We are a bastard people with a bastard language. Our nature is one of bastardy. It is good and beautiful thus. We should be compost, decomposing to be able to combine again in other forms. Only, we have walked into the trap of the bastard who acquires power. . . We wanted to justify our power. . . We made our otherness the norm, the standard, and the ideal. And because our otherness is maintained *at the expense* of our fellow South Africans—and our South Africanhood—we felt threatened. We built walls. Not cities, but city walls. And like all bastards—uncertain of their identity—we began to adhere to the concept of *purity*. That is apartheid. *Apartheid is the law of the bastard.* (Breytenbach 1980, 156)

By most accounts, Breytenbach's lecture became the talk of the Afrikaans community. The controversy he sparked lasted for weeks. Although not included in this paper, it is possible that the

controversy was as much about Breytenbach's comments about the Afrikaners as it was about his position as an exile and a Settler. He may even have been "tolerated" on the same terms that Brink and Coetzee enumerate in their introduction; that is, as an Afrikaner, the establishment found it hard to legally censor him; it was left to the critics and journalists to publicise the controversy.



Pimville Zone 4 Soweto, South Africa. Copyright © I See A Different You. Used with permission.

Conclusion

The trajectories of youth and youth politics traced in this paper may give the impression that “being young” is the only route to intellectual development in the history of South African political thought. This impression would be incorrect since the main thrust of the paper has been to show that “the youth” has played specific roles in South Africa’s history but that these roles were themselves defined by historical contingency rather than being a consequences of youth action. Also, there are alternative trajectories of intellectual life— the trade union movement; the history of the Young Communist League (YCL), which was officially founded in 1922;

the resurgence of civil society, especially the 1980s ferment that resulted in the creation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), etc. Also notable is the fact that reading two strands of intellectual and cultural development creates its own problems of elision, erasure, and adumbration—“black South African” thought is not fully represented by the course the ANCYL took, in the same way that white or Afrikaner thought is not represented by the writings of the Sestigers. What is at stake in this selection of “youth” as a concept is the diagnostic approach of each generation—how did the thinkers of the 1950s and 1960s diagnose the “South African problem”? Importantly, since apartheid has ended, some of these issues of “generational progress” have receded and given way to musings about the future of South Africa’s democracy, which is itself often described as being in its “teens” or “twenties.”

Print journalists and the media have contributed their own specific verbalization of the problem of youth in post-apartheid South Africa. While she was still the editor of the weekly *Mail & Guardian*, Ferial Haffajee published an editorial titled the “Infantilisation of Politics” (Haffajee 2008). At the time of that writing, Julius Malema was still the president of the ANCYL, so Haffajee’s comments are directed at him and his support for Zuma. She wryly noted:

This is not a treatise against young leadership, but against the infantilisation of our political discourse. Ours is a country, the founding father of which symbolised, in his early days, the value of young thought and strategic radicalism. Nelson Mandela and his generation blew like fresh winds through the ANC of their time, demanding more change more quickly. By contrast, Malema’s rhetoric is mere flatulence unleashed across the land.

Other publications, especially the international media, have largely focused on the cultural dimension of the Born Frees’ predicament. Thus, the American-based *W* magazine published a feature article on Johannesburg as the “Capital of Cool.” Written by Tim Murphy, the article was a snapshot survey of the fashion sensibilities and tastes of Johannesburg’s young urbanites (Murphy 2012). These popular renditions of youth cultures in South Africa are a stand-in for the more complex problem of describing what has occurred in South Africa since Nelson Mandela’s release and the unbanning of the ANC in 1990. Unlike with other African countries,

this moment cannot be called “independence” since South Africa was not strictly speaking under the rule of an imperial power. Neither can the moment be called a revolution because the outcome was a transfer rather than an overthrow of power. These two predicaments have made it nearly impossible for South African intellectuals, especially the younger generation, to conceptualise their own unique contribution to the country’s intellectual culture.

As South Africa celebrates its twenty years of democratic rule, contemporary youth politics and culture remain important for two basic reasons: first, there is a yet-unresolved issue of the place of the “lost generation” in contemporary South Africa, that is, the place of those young South Africans who fought in the urban strife of the 1990s that pitted hostel dwellers against township self-defence units. Second, the ANCYL continues to play the role of “kingmaker” in both presidential and internal party politics. Thus, whether young people are imagined in purely aesthetic terms—fashion, music, art, literature—or in terms of political campaigns—voter registration, apathy, service-delivery protests, social movements etc.—the predicament remains the same. It can be summed up succinctly in this question: What name will history give to the historical period 1990-1999, when South Africans drafted a new constitution, elected their first black president, reckoned with their past through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and held a second successful election in 1999? Although not fully a decade, these years can be described as formative, but what was being formed?

The above question of periodization and terminology can be expressed in another way. The one strand of argument that has not been pursued in this paper is the failure of South African intellectuals to “reproduce” themselves, namely, the question of what kind of education—both intellectual and philosophical—should be given to young scholars. This problem is related to the history of formal education and its failure or success at establishing the foundations for a future intelligentsia. In a sense this paper is about the past and continuing failure of the tertiary education system to reproduce itself. Statistically, graduate students at South Africa’s universities are only 29% of the total student body. Of these only 8-10% are doctoral candidates (South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy 2004, 295). Although these issues are telling in themselves, they are not a pointer to the philosophical

and intellectual problems at the root of the dilemma faced by the Born Frees, namely: What social conditions hinder or support the emergence or growth of a young corps of scholars? How does an older generation of thinkers transmit its experience to a younger generation? Importantly, the question facing Born Frees is whether it is possible for them to construct an intellectual manifesto that is not a product of the “past,” that is, an intellectual agenda that is a product of their specific time and place rather than an edited version of previous agendas. Such a manifesto would deal with the problem of being a “freed” intelligentsia and how such “freedom” should be written and thought about. It would separate the Born Frees from the 1940s ANCYL (whose sole aim was to promote the “spirit of African self-determination”), while also distancing the young from the alienating effects of “establishment” politics that the Sestigers experienced. Such an agenda would enunciate a post-apartheid meaning of “freedom,” even while it takes cognisance of the freedoms that were sought and not found by earlier generations.

Endnotes

¹ Thank you to the “I See A Different You” collective for granting me permission to publish their photographs with this essay. Their tumblr page is: <http://iseeadifferentyou.tumblr.com>

² This is the first sentence from a flyer called a “Trumpet Call to Youth.” It was an announcement of a September 10, 1944 meeting and issued by the Provisional Executive Committee of the Congress Youth League (“Document 49,” Karis and Carter 1973, 308).

³ The college was established in 1849 to “train African assistants to European missionaries” (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 5).

⁴ The university college of Fort Hare was founded for African, Coloured, and Indian students in 1916 (Edgar and Msumza 1996, 15).

⁵ This is part of the title of another of Coetzee’s books on South African literature (Coetzee 1988).

⁶ The introduction lists the following writers as members of the Sestigers collective: Chris Barnard, Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink, Abraham de Vries, Etienne Leroux, Jan Rabie, Adam Small, and Bartho Smit (Brink & Coetzee 1986, 10). Interestingly no women are included even though the poet and writer Ingrid Jonker is often described as a Sestiger.

References

- Althusser, Louis. 2005. "On the Young Marx." In *For Marx*. London: Verso Books Original edition, 1960.
- Breytenbach, Breyten. 1980. *A Season in Paradise*. Translated by Rike Vaughan. 1994 ed. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Brink, André, and J. M. Coetzee, eds. 1986. *A Land Apart: A Contemporary South African Reader*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1988. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Edgar, Robert R., and Luyanda ka Msumza, eds. 1996. *Freedom in Our Lifetime: The Collected Writings of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Gerhart, Gail M. 1978. *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haffajee, Ferial. 2008. "The Infantilisation of Politics." *Mail & Guardian*, 21 October. <http://mg.co.za/print/2008-10-21-the-infantilisation-of-politics>.
- Karis, Thomas, and Gwendolen M. Carter, eds. 1973. *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*. 5 vols. Vol. 2. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.
- Karis, Thomas, and Gail M. Gerhart, eds. 1997. *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*. 5 vols. Vol. 5, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1979*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lembede, Anton. 1996. "Congress Youth League Manifesto." In *Freedom in Our Lifetime: The Collected Writings of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede*, edited by Robert R. Edgar and Luyanda ka Msumza. Athens: Ohio University Press. Original edition, 1944.
- Murphy, Tim. 2012. "Capital of Cool." *W*.
- Posel, Deborah. 2005. "The Case for a Welfare State: Poverty and the Politics of the Urban African Family in the 1930s and 1940s." In *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, edited by Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves. Cape Town: Double Storey Books.
- South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy. 2004. Council on Higher Education.
- van Wyk, Christopher. 1986. "It Is Sleepy in the 'Coloured' Townships." In *A Land Apart: A Contemporary South African Reader*, edited by André Brink and J. M. Coetzee. New York: Penguin Books.