The periphery's progeny: the South African school and its relationship to youth identity in contemporary South Africa

Crain Soudien

Abstract

How one tells the story of the development of youth identity in South Africa (and indeed elsewhere) in relation to schooling has been dominated, understandably, by the great themes of race, class and gender. This paper, drawing on my own work with young people conducted over a twenty-year period, the writings of colleagues with whom I have worked and on a large archive of newspaper reports, attempts to develop an analytic narrative for describing youth development, and the different trajectories it takes in South Africa, in a wider psycho-social frame. This analytic narrative shows

(i) that young people are in a complex engagement with a range of formal and informal structures to produce identities that are at some levels continuous with those of their apartheid antecedents, but

(ii) that new forms of identity are emerging that are troubling and unsettling conventional (both conservative and radical) understandings of what appropriate youth forms of address, deportment and engagement with the new South Africa might be.

The challenge that this constitutes for schooling in South Africa is what this paper focuses upon. It attempts to understand how school works as a site in which meaning is made by young people in the midst of dealing, on the one hand, with the intense experiences of globalisation and modernisation, and, on the other, with older and more traditional understandings of self.

Introduction

Youth studies is a field which is familiar to sociologists of education. Its most important contribution, Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour*, literally forced us out of our slumber showing us how little we understood about the processes surrounding learning, and how much, on the other hand, we had gutted it of its most significant features and, *en route*, turned it into a technical exercise. What people like Willis pointed out was how much, in the first instance,

learning is a social activity, and secondly, and building on this, how complex the relationship is between school and processes of identity formation in students, or 'learners' as we call them in the South African setting. The purpose of this essay is to bring into perspective some of the significance of this discussion for teaching and learning in South Africa. I am attempting to make the argument that the idealised notion of the learner that we have in our South African policy documents, and most clearly so in the South African Schools' Act, and in our educational practices, misrecognises the learning subject and as a consequence sets up inappropriate conditions for teaching and learning. This misrecognition begins in the South African Schools' Act where the learner is projected as "any person receiving or obliged to receive education" (RSA, 1996, p.4). Intended or not, the discursive development in the Act is to position South Africa's youth as passive *receiving* subjects. The way in which the Act frames them is as young people without agency. The National Curriculum Statements (NCS) is somewhat better in that it accords agency to the learner. Muller (2004, p.223) locates this agency in what he describes as 'pedagogical progressivism' embedded in the new curriculum – a "decentralised and individualised libertarianism". Others, such as Harley and Wedekind (2004), have gone further. The problem, they argue, is the 'disappearance' of the teacher from the role of authority in the class room to that of facilitator in a learner-centred classroom, a role that may be at pedagogical odds with the majority of teachers (Harley and Wedekind, 2004). At issue here is the constructivist philosophy of the curriculum with its pervasive middle-class conceptions of the teacher-learner relationship. In this conception, somewhat different from the SASA, pupils were projected as resourceful young learners who would make it an article of learning to take responsibility for their own learning. Reviewing these ideals Harley and Parker (1999, p.212) suggest that the visionary aspects of the curriculum have allowed its protagonists to "overlook the profound inequalities in South African schools and to despatch teachers on a . . . voyage of faith" (where failure was the only possible outcome. They argue, further, that "the single mindedness of the very pursuit of the social vision has undermined itself. . . [because] commitment to a vision of *what ought to be* has undermined the ability of policy to consider seriously *what is*" (Parker and Harley, 1999, p.213). *What ought to be* in the policy is modeled around middle-class agency.

These conceptions of the identity of young people, as that of a lack of agency or of middle-class agency misrecognise who the young of the contemporary South African school are. To substantiate my argument I seek to show that very different forms of identity to those imagined in the policy prescripts of the country are emerging. These forms are rooted in the deepening of what one

might call cultural syncretism and the evolution of a kind of individualism that is not in alignment with the experience of schooling. These two forms pose fundamental challenges to our current understandings of pedagogy, and education more broadly. Pedagogy, embodying and in some ways expressing the deliberate discourses of the particular view of education one holds, in many of the forms it currently takes, is almost wholly inadequate relative to the challenge that modern identity possibilities constitute. If pedagogy and education are our most important collective sites for the attainment of that which we value most dearly – the development of individual and social identity, the degree of their irrelevance is frightening. In none of the major approaches to teaching and learning, at least in South Africa but I suspect also in most parts of the world, whether it be the patronising back-to-basics regimens of the new right or the supposedly liberal guidelines of the constructivists, is there a real appreciation of the complexity of modern youth formation. What I am arguing here is that the condition of 'multiplicity' – as defined by Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) but which I hope to resituate here – has come to demand of us in education, and indeed in other arenas of public life, pedagogies that are simultaneously more considered and more daring than everything we have done up to now. Dimitriadis and McCarthy make the comment about the United States that "mainstream educational thinkers have drawn a bright line of distinction between the established school curriculum and the teeming world of multiplicity that flourishes in the everyday lives of youth beyond the school. These educators still insist on a project of homogeneity, normalisation and the production of the socially functional citizen" (p.2).

The approach I take is influenced by the 'post-colonial' argument developed by Dimitriadis and McCarthy. I want to reposition the argument, however. The approach taken by them is fundamentally accessed through an engagement with the aesthetic. They say, for example, that "Post-colonial aesthetic formulations. . . have powerful implications for curriculum and educational practices in contemporary schools, challenged as they are by the rising tide of diversity and cultural change" (p.3). But the issue is more than about culture or style. While it expresses itself as a cultural or stylistic phenomenon, and in those terms is situated inside of the weak vocabulary of fashion – of that which might be almost intensified or weakened at will – I want to make the argument that there are deeper sociologies that we have to unpack in coming to understand how we might engage young people pedagogically. These sociologies, of course, contain complex age, race, class, gender, religious and place, *inter alia,* factors, but are always articulated inside of particular kinds of political dynamics.

Central in these political and social dynamics, for a country such as South Africa, are the country's transition from apartheid and its complex entry into the globalised arena. What these politics do is to situate South Africa and its youth in particular in distinctive kinds of ways. While there are a number of parallels and continuities between the South African youth experience and that of young people elsewhere, the history of democratisation, and the particular ways in which race, class, gender, religion and place come together, is to frame growing up as a process of new possibilities and new dangers. These new possibilities and new dangers constitute the central challenge that the school as a site of pedagogy and inter-generational dialogue has to engage with.

Youth and their context

With South Africa well into its second decade of democracy, the world confronting the youth of South Africa, both black and white, is considerably different to what it had been under apartheid. Black youth, from having fought apartheid, are now having to fight for what Phillipa Garson (*The Teacher*, June 2001), a commentator on youth and school issues, calls 'a normal life.' How they are defining this 'normal' life is significantly shaped by their class and gender locations. While the boundaries between the urban and the rural have eroded both physically and conceptually, it remains true, as I have suggested above, that rural youth are distinctly different to urban youth, or youth with strong traditional links with those who have committed themselves to modernity. White youth, also referred to above, particularly males, while still considerably more privileged than anybody else, are learning to live in a political environment where the colour of their skins no longer provides them with the privileges and entitlements they were used to. Looming large for everybody, as for young people elsewhere, are the intense challenges of globalisation and modernisation. This globalisation is pervasive and is deeply embedded in the structures of their every-day worlds. It is present in the choices they are having to make about dress, leisure time, friendships, and, most significantly, careers (see Dolby, 2001) and is pushing black and white, at some levels, towards an increasing homogenisation of their adolescent identities.

Deep differences in the experiences and identities of adolescents from different groups in South Africa, however persist. Opportunities have improved dramatically for some, but for most life remains grim. Race, class,

gender, language and place of birth continue to shape their life-chances. While there has been a dramatic increase in the black middle class, most black people live in extremely poor conditions with unemployment estimates as high as 40 per cent (see *Cape Argus,* Monday, 10 July, 2006, p.9).[1] As the gap between rich and poor black people increases, almost inevitably, black adolescents continue to bear the brunt of the problems of living in South Africa (Bhorat, 2004, pp.36–37). White young people especially males, despite reports in newspapers which graphically describe the difficulty they have in getting jobs, continue to dominate the top jobs in the economy. The levels of unemployment amongst them are in the order of less than 10 per cent. Even the new black middle class is aware of these developments (*Business Report,* Sunday March 5, 2006:1). The overwhelming majority of people polled for the Black Diamond Survey (see Footnote 1 below) felt that the new economic arrangements in the country had not trickled down to ordinary South Africans and only favoured the privileged few.

Structural realities in South Africa continue to define the pathways of adolescents to adulthood. These realities – the orders of race, class and gender

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[1] There are indications that the black middle class (according to this definition those who earn above R5,900 a month) now stands at approximately 10% of the African adult population, 2 million people out of 22 million (*Cape Argus,* Monday, July 10, 2006, p.9). New research is also suggesting that more than 2 million 'working-class people' have made a "dramatic leap upwards into the country's hottest economic group; LSM (living standards measure ranking the poorest at 1 and the richest 10) 5 and 6" (*Sunday Times,* Sunday, May 15, 2005, p.5). Silindile Motha is profiled in this report: "A clerk living in a backyard room in Instant grass, a trend-spotting agency in Cape Town Soweto all she hoped to qualify for was a government rent subsidy. Now, still a clerk, Motha, 32, says: "My bank will actually lend me a little money to go and blow on a holiday in Victoria Falls. Can you imagine?" (*ibid.*). The Black Diamond survey conducted by the Unilever Institute at the University of Cape Town between November and December 2005 amongst more than 750 urban African participants estimated that the black middle class was growing at a rate of 1,2% per year and that between 2001 and 2004 there was an annual increase of 4,5% amongst people classified in LSM 9 and 10. "This group could mostly be black because of a 30% growth in the taxation system" (*The Cape Argus,* Wednesday 15 March, 2006, p.14). The survey differentiates the black middle class into the following segments: The established who are older, most of whom have been married for seven years or more with 81% having school-going children. This category includes 780,000 (39%) people of which about 91% are in full-time employment and are between the ages of 35 and 49. The Young family has children under six and is likely to be led by a single mother between the ages of 25 and 34. This segment makes up 22% of the group and numbers approximately 440,000 people. The Start-Me-Ups are next consisting of single male professionals between the ages of 18 and 29 and making up 21% of the group and numbering 430,000. Then finally there are the Mzansi youth, male and female, who are still likely to be living with their parents. Eighteen per cent of the group they are approximately 350,000 in number (*ibid.*).

– shape the identities of youth as rich and poor, African, white, coloured and Indian, and male and female. In the discussion below I attempt to show how youth have responded to these circumstances. The argument, drawing on the identity discussion above, is that, within the structural constraints surrounding them, youth continue to exercise choice and agency. The crises which confront them, however, keep changing their character and dynamics. In these choice-making decisions, individual responsibility looms large but is always mediated through the specific social support mechanisms and structures that young people have access to. Given these specificities, not unexpectedly, crises take on different forms for different groups of people and bring into play distinctive strategies of resistance and accommodation in different communities and amongst different groups of people. In terms of the universal demand they all go through of having to make themselves up all over again and to reinvent themselves anew, they tend, however, to feel alone and isolated. They have role models in the generation that had just gone before them, but this is not enough. Their world is sufficiently different to feel that they are on their own.

Life on the move

Syncretism, understood here as cultural borrowing and adaptation, is a process that has accelerated in the last ten years. Youth, Dolby (2001) argues, have been captivated by the global flow of popular culture. Important though, is the fact that they are not, as she says, simply the recipients of this global culture. They are also active participants in its creation. This is evident in the innovative ways in which young coloured and white students at Fernwood School in Durban, a multicultural school and a site of Dolby's (2001) work, appropriate 'rave' music. They embrace it and together turn it into a space in which new social relationships are forged and new social identities are developed. From being a 'white' preserve, it is quickly adapted into a practice that marks the students as members of a wider and more global community. A young student in Cape Town I interviewed in 2000 explained in response to the question of what 'her culture' was:

> I think it's a mixture, it's like I'm going through things, I'm just borrowing. I feel that I should try and be as unique as I want to be. You know I don't want. . . to be the stereotype of a coloured person who goes to clubs with coloured people. . . I'm into the alternative types of music.

Following these examples, the work of Kapp (2000) makes clear how the desires of young African young people, particularly their preference for English over their home languages, is shaped by an awareness that they live in an internationalised world. The youth, and their parents, want to learn English because they want to be members of a wider community. They recognise and retain a consciousness of themselves as Africans, but Africans with a difference. Mgxashe, (2000, p.11) writing about youth in the new millennium, says that there is a conscious debate taking place amongst many African youth about their exposure to 'foreign' cultures. He quotes a young woman called Lindi Jordan who says

> . . .when we start talking about the African Renaissance we are not necessarily talking about living strictly in accordance with our traditional values. . . we are more bent towards African values which are a kind of hybrid of all our exposures and experiences.
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> (Mgxashe, 2000, p.11)

These trends have caused consternation in many circles. Kwesi Prah, a Ghanaian intellectual living in South Africa has bemoaned the direction that youth cultures have taken in the country. He remarks that, "(s)ince the dismantling of classical colonialism, the vision (of struggle) has by and large been lost. . . (The youth is made up of) types who in substance represents the interests of the metropolitan powers of the world" (Mgxashe, 2000:13). However, as several South African documentaries and the highly controversial television program *Yizo, Yizo,* based on everyday youth life in South Africa, have shown, the youth appear to have lost interest in the preoccupations of their parents and the older generation. There is, especially amongst African youth, a flowering of hip-hop music, fashion and artistic expression (see www.hiphop.co.za) in which they are consciously attempting to build their own cultural styles and traditions. As interviews on youth web-sites show, they are in passionate debate about issues of representation, their cultural roots, the cultural influences they have at their disposal and the differences amongst them. Within these debates are a variety of accents and directions. Critical, however, is an acknowledgement of their links to American music and art (particularly black music and art) but their commitment to making their own way in South Africa.

In terms of these developments, as Dolby (2001) has shown, popular culture is a key terrain of identity-making in South Africa. She argues that it is on this ground that 'race is negotiated', contested and struggled over). It is here through what she calls the dynamics of taste that race is remade. I wish to take this engagement in a different direction and suggest that it offers a terrain for

considerable tension, and as a result of this tension, innovation in working out new ways of being African and even South African. Race does not go away, but it is rearticulated into new forms of difference within and always in conversation with gender, language, class and a whole host of other often less visible factors. Some vignettes from white students who had recently entered university in Cape Town illustrate the articulation of these factors. How this articulation works is complex. One male student talking of his relationship with the social world of black people explains:

> I've been to Velvet which is a black club. I loved it, it was hilarious. I danced the "sika lelikhekhe" (cut the cake). I kinda know black culture because I've got black friends and I did some upliftment charity work in school so I've been exposed to the black culture a lot more than most white people. I don't know everything but I know some stuff.

Another gives a sense of how young white students 'try out' new experiences:

> I've been to Cybar. I think it's a black club as well or at least it was the night I went. It was a lot of fun. I went with Zama my black friend and she was showing us around.

But this experimentation is grounded in complex socio-economic realities. Not all white young people are privileged to the point of being able to live exactly as they like. Economic issues are present in the choices they are making as is illustrated in the testimony of a Johannesburg student recently come to Cape Town:

> I think my friends from back home are in a similar social class to me but my friends at university are a lot above me and sometimes they don't realise that some of us don't have money to go out all the time. Some of us don't have transport all the time. I mean, when you say, you don't have money; they'll say they don't have money but they don't actually mean it. When I say I don't have money, I mean I don't have money. That's sometimes frustrating but also at the same time, it seems to me that they are quite generous and sometimes they'll actually pay for you. It's not a big issue for them. I don't let it get in the way of things.

For young people who are African it is clear that many are experiencing immense social changes in their lives. These changes emanate directly out of the rapidly changing socio-political environment of South Africa. I present a comment from a young black student also recently arrived in Cape Town to study to illustrate the kind of experiences they are going through.

> Ok. I grew up in a village back in Limpopo. I am Venda speaking. I grew up in a royal family. My father is the chief in the village. I went to boarding school. At the age of 5 going on 6, I went to boarding school which I think was so wrong. In my first grade I actually failed twice because of catching up with the age and I was also getting homesick. Yah, it was a Roman boarding school called St. X. It was far, far away from home because I had to stay

> in boarding school. As a kid, they would go there, drop you at boarding school, you know, dump you there. And they go home, you board school, you get homesick. You know, the first day you cry when mummy and daddy leaves. . . (sighs). There was no one from my village that also went to that boarding school, so I had to get to know new people. I was far from my home, and it was boarding school. So, it was Std.2 that year. I went back home. And I went to another private school. It was called School of Tomorrow. Started there, stayed there, and studied there. In 1997 I came to Cape Town. My father was MP in Parliament. So I studied there, in Goodwood, Acacia Park and I went to JG Meiring High School in Goodwood. Then I went back home again. So I travel, travel. . . travel quite a lot. Back home, I did my Grade 12 at home. . . So you know, up and down travel. Yah. . . well I liked it in Goodwood but I had to go back home. It was a bit hectic but I was adapting. I adapted to the situation. After all I had been to boarding school but just the life, the scene was different.

Out of this emerge identities that are criss-crossed by social difference. Amongst African young people they are distinctly *of* their traditional pasts but always *more* than those. Young white people are different to their parents. While they remain distinctly *white* in their broad cultural orientations, they have had to learn how to live with children of colour around them who are, roughly speaking, their peers and equals. A young white woman from the Northern Cape illustrates this difficulty: "I think my dad was raised in an era where, even though he let me study mechanical engineering, he still struggles to understand that I can do anything that a man can do. But he's learning. And being white Afrikaans I think he still has. . . look I don't claim not to have any prejudices against anyone, that's almost impossible but I try to concentrate on not having any." They have to learn new ways of being. Importantly, the degree of risk young white people are exposed to in their experimentation is considerably lower than that to which young black people, and men in particular, are having to confront.

The stories young white students tell indicate that they are going through and always within range of what one might describe as 'spilling-over' identity-processes. They are having to think hard about their upbringing. But for many young black people the personal and collective stakes are much higher. Let us consider briefly, below, what these situations consist of. Flowing in apparently opposite directions, but holding to the same general principle of excess in identity-construction, let us look at two new developments taking shape amongst young African men in particular. Both, significantly, revolve around the processes of accommodation and generativity, coming to terms with their circumstances and then taking initiative to change them. These developments pivot around the experience of initiation and show how fraught and fragile the period of adolescence is for young African people.

The first development hinges around what appears to be an awakened interest amongst young urban men in parts of the country, but especially in places such as the Eastern Cape (see Duku, 2006), for initiation. Duku's work interestingly shows how interest in initiation has increased amongst young men and how even the supposed *amagents* – the cool young men of the townships – are asserting the importance of having been 'to the mountains' for initiation. What these urban youth are showing, however, is a suspicion of 'ignorant' initiation 'doctors' who are not practising the custom of initiation properly and who often decide to take on the responsibility themselves. Important in making sense of this general process is the generational-conflict contained within it. Youth prefer their own counsel to that of their elders, traditional or not. Interesting social dynamics around these developments are now emerging with evidence that youth are entering a zone of great risk-taking with many dying in the process because of the almost arbitrariness into which the practice sometimes settles. Anna Radebe, an East Rand mother told a reporter for the *Cape Argus* (Monday, July 10, 2006, p.3), the story of how she "had tried in vain to persuade her son [Syabonga] not to go to an initiation school. He didn't want to be teased, she said." The initiation was led by six young 'teachers', including one was 19, who placed a burning tyre on Syabonga and beat him with a wooden pick-handle.

The second example runs in a more positive direction. Here, as told by Ngwane (2002), the arbitrariness of the inexperienced initiation 'doctor' and 'teacher' is replaced with the relative clarity of the educated peer and his deployment of deliberative thinking. In a deeply interesting study Ngwane (2002) shows how young men leaving the city to go to the rural areas for initiation ceremonies are using, as opposed to simply pushing it aside as in the case above, their education to displace older more oral-based traditions and practices during initiation. In these situations young men are rejecting the tradition of their elders as the traditions of what they call 'the ignorant' and are investing them with new forms of masculinity based on the ability to argue and reason. It is one's *individual* prowess as an '*amagent*' or a street-smart young man that has come to count and not the rites of passage defined by older people. Problematic as this masculinity remains, this is an important development in the modernisation equation and shows young people moving towards a greater sense of themselves and their ability to control their own destinies. The shape of their world is filled with themselves as individuals making their own way on the backs of their own efforts. Their way forward is not so much as Xhosas, Zulus, or Shangaans, but as individuals. The shift towards individualised identities within what remain heavily encoded group racialised spaces is important and calls for much more intensive study. But

what is critical is that many of the spaces inhabited by young people, particularly those thought to be heavily invested with the identity of an 'authentic Africa', have been fractured. Nolita, a young woman from Langa, an African township in Cape Town, interviewed late in 2000, commented that living in the city placed a heavy strain on young people's sense of being African "because they don't care. They just throw away their traditions." The point, however, is not that young people are throwing away their traditions, but that they are remaking them.

A series of intense interviews I have conducted with a young parolee in Cape Town released because of his exemplary behaviour adds substance to how much young people are actively reconstituting their worlds. This young man, Q, provides an indication of how some young people are thinking intensely about the world they have inherited:

> It is sad as we're not learning from our mistakes, we're not learning from the things that other people are doing. We are not learning from past experiences. One guy who is related to my grandmother, the wife to my late grandfather A, she was telling me that they went to a funeral about two weeks ago and, because of this fighting some of these youngsters went into the bush to look for a youngster. . . I don't know if he was an enemy or what. . . this guy was in an initiation school and this is quite sad because it seems as if our custom isn't even respected. To go and look for a person knowing that he is in the initiation school. . . not paying that respect and waiting until he finishes that and then after that look for him. I am not saying that I am promoting violence, but respect that custom.

There is a sense among many young people that they have to learn *how* to be in the new environment in which they find themselves. These experimental trends, which, of course, also take interesting forms in the white community, are striking as they take shape amongst African youth and reveal the complexity in both positive and negative terms of our South African hybridities. What this African hybridity or syncretism reveals is the increasing presence amongst youth of a strong sense of individualism and a weakened sense of their attachment to the values of the groups with which they have been traditionally associated. While, interestingly, there is a retention amongst young African men and women of the importance of tradition (South African National Youth Survey, 2001), there is, simultaneously, an ambiguity with respect to and a distrust of the value of the old – a cynicism of the wisdom of the 'ancients'. This cynicism implies, as should be expected, an ambiguity about their identities and the extent to which clan and group affiliations impinge on their freedom as individuals. The outcomes, as we saw above in the case of Siyabonga are tragic. They, of course, are not always so. But we are, nonetheless, witnessing a stark moment of intergenerational distrust, with politics and politicians – give 'us good reasons to vote say young people' as

70 per cent of young people polled before the 2004 election claimed that they wouldn't vote – but also, and we need a great deal more ethnographic work here, with the entrusting of culture – even what is perceived to be tradition – to the older generation (see *Cape Argus,* Tuesday, February 21, 2006, p.10). A new sociological and even psychological reality of immense Giddensian terms has dawned upon the country. New as South Africa is in its headline form, it is its sociological substance which we need to give far greater attention to. We are seeing, as a consequence, a flight from the identity of politics so emblematic of youth life in the long period from the middle of the seventies to the beginning of the nineties. New forms of individualism are beginning to emerge which are shaped by new social forces. In this individualism new trusts and loyalties are being forged. A break and even a breakdown of relationships is immanent in the dialogical arena inhabited by the different generations. Turning their backs on the older generation, young people appear to trust their own, even when these 'own' are patently not equal to the task of providing them with the appropriate direction and leadership. The number of young people who used their right to the franchise in the recent 1999 elections, for example, fell to 48 per cent (*The Teacher*, June 2001). Figures for the 2004 elections were no different (*Cape Argus,* Tuesday, February 21, 2006, p.10). It is as individuals, speaking in their own voices, that they feel they can achieve in the modern world.

Moving into the global order and coming under the influence of globalisation has, however, not been not without its risks. An explosion of experimentation amongst youth has occurred as they have sought to assert their links with the wider world and their individual identities. The Unilever Institute study claims, to illustrate the point, that despite being frightened of AIDS, "the youth are still reckless in their behaviour, particularly under the influence of alcohol or drugs" (Unilever Institute, 2002). It is, however, not just drugs that are propelling this experimentation, it is the very complexity of South African life itself. In it is the unstable fuel of the country's multiple and contradictory histories.

Conclusion

In summarising this discussion, there are a number of key factors that are important to hold aloft. Amongst these, as Dolby (2001) describes clearly in *Constructing Race,* is the ubiquitous reality of popular culture. Popular culture is everywhere and through music and fashion clearly has given current youth life in South Africa a definitive character.

As important, and perhaps more so, largely because they have not had paradigmatic articulation, are the tensions swirling underneath the self-declared optimism of the country's youth that key surveys have pointed to. This optimism is crucial. It gives an edge to youth identities that is important to credit. But it must not be taken entirely at face-value. We would make a grave mistake to see South African youth simply as *southern* versions of their globalised cousins in the UK and the USA. Equally mistaken would be to see them, as I have suggested above, as cardboard cut-outs on the landscape of South Africa's racial history. Their identities are being forged in the tension of their locations here on the southern tip of the African continent which is simultaneously anchored in several different and often discordant waves of history and modes of being.

Central in this tension, I want to argue, using what we have learnt in the section above dealing with the texture of youth's lives, is the constant turbulence defining many young people's passage through their moratoria. These moratoria, that time in their adolescence when they are given some leeway to experiment with their identities, take their character from the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of the country. Young South Africans are exactly like their peers elsewhere in the world. They have cognitive, affective and spiritual needs that are no different to those of young people everywhere else. In this, they are Eriksen's (1968) universal children. They are distinctly different to many of their universal peers, however, in the way the psycho-social extremes of South African life have intensified their aloneness. This is the central tension confronting them. They live surrounded by social structures presided over by their parents and their teachers. The abiding characteristic of these social structures is the custom and the culture of orders of life that remain rooted in the certainties of the apartheid world. These orders are marked by the hierarchies of gender, race and class. As 'orders', however, they do not work for the youth of the new century. Confronting the youth are new questions of social relationships and life decisions which the older 'order' is not equipped to address. This challenge leaves young people having to fend for themselves. The testimony of many young people I have interviewed reflects how much thinking they are having to do about these new contexts by themselves. The tragedy is that the school, as suggested in the introduction to this essay, is structurally not set up to engage with youth as they are. They are, as a consequence, 'alone'. The number of significant others with whom a deep dialogue is possible is limited and restricted. And so without the guidance of significant older mediators, young black poor South Africans are making up their world anew all the time. As a consequence of this, the youth environment in the country is extremely dynamic. Where apartheid effectively disrupted

family life by forcing fathers into migrancy and left young people, particularly young men, to construct their identities in poorly signposted environments, and leading them to find intimacy in age-regulated cohorts, post-apartheid has done little to mitigate those challenges. Instead it has compounded those challenges by affecting their familial spaces only marginally but, critically, relocating these spaces from the enclosed comfort, paradoxically, that apartheid provided, into the giddy vortex that is globalisation. Many young people in the rural areas and in the poorer parts of most towns continue to lead lives that are marked by the absence of significant adults but are having, nonetheless, to take major decisions about their futures. In these developments they have been forced to take their most significant growing-up input from their peers. And while young people are extremely innovative, as the Cancele story of youth initiation above reveals, the consequence of this is that their ability to explore a wide variety of identity options beyond the limited boundaries of their physical environments is severely proscribed.

With these foreshortened moratoria, young people, particularly those in poorer and marginalised communities, have become increasingly more dependent on their older brothers and sisters and friends. These older peers, however, offer them role models of circumscribed potential. This potential, unlike that available to middle-class young people, is celebrated, on the one hand, in the limited achievement of attenuated individualism – of youth leaders amongst whom are, on the one hand, exceptional musicians, sports persons, but, on the other, in the doings of leaders with significantly asocial and anti-social habits and orientations. If anything, therefore, characterises the passage of these young people into adulthood, it is their relationship with their older peers. It is in this space that the limits and possibilities of who they are have most deeply impacted on their identities. The chief hallmark of this space is its acute dissonance. The noise of their multiple worlds ringing in their ears, including the haranguing by their parents of their neglect of what is proper and appropriate, young people growing up struggle to filter out what makes sense and what does not. Their lives, as a result, are classically marked by identity struggle and even identity confusion.

What we have, therefore, for the majority of young people in the country is a crisis of representation and self-representation. The majority, those in marginal urban and rural communities, and perhaps even those on the fringes of the emerging black middle class, are marked by fragile identities. What is emerging are indeed the Coca-Cola identities described social-psychologists Stevens and Lockhat (1997), and even the hip identities portrayed by Dolby. As widespread, however, are young people with diffuse identities. This

diffuseness is 'raced' and 'classed' but it is always, as I have argued above, beyond race and class. In that 'beyond' space, young people are on their own having to work out their own ways forward. Being white, African, coloured and Indian is very much part of this exploration, but it is only a small part. How to be themselves, working with their distinctive familial and community environments, in the context of what their bodies are telling them, is enormously difficult.

As a consequence of the issues I talk about here, there is amongst many youth a struggle to articulate the self within them. This struggle is sometimes a burden, but is as often 'played' with and reveled in by many. *Instant Grass*, a trend-spotting agency in Cape Town described one of their 'grasses' (informants) in the following terms: "We have a guy in KwaZulu-Natal who was slaughtering goats and making *umqombothi* (traditional beer) on the weekend, and was having pizza and wine in a flat with his mates during the week. This may seem strange, but it is a natural part of their lives" (*Weekend Argus,* Saturday, January 21, 2006, p.20). They also described another 'grass' who "has all the 'bling' with bangles and jewellery, but her most prized possession is a goatskin bracelet and she hopes one day she will marry a Zulu man and give it to her daughter on her 18th birthday" (*ibid.*).

It is against this that we need to explore much more fully the significance and value of the South African school and recognise that we now have to develop a much more robust sociology to account for the process of growing up in South Africa. Such a sociology has to account for the incredible refusal of the young to succumb to the pressure of the conflicting social forces that surround them, and that seek to squeeze them into the narrowing and unforgiving cage of this or that tradition or to project them into an abstracted modernity that does not recognise their groundedness in the urgency of everyday South Africa.

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Crain Soudien
School of Education
University of Cape Town

crain.soudien@uct.ac.za