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GUEST EDITORIAL

Urban Youth – Engaging Young People and Their Futures in African Cities

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Abstract

The twin reality of Africa as the world's demographically youngest and most rapidly urbanising continent should, by default, make it a hotspot for youth-centred urban research. And yet, the voices of young Africans remain grossly absent in public discourse, policy debates and mainstream research on issues that directly affect them. This lacuna propelled the conceptualisation of this themed volume, entitled *Urban Youth – Engaging young people and their futures in African cities*. Showcasing submissions that not only push the envelope in terms of conceptual debates but also reflect in unconventional ways on experimental methods of co-production, this volume contributes to contemporary youth scholarship in three ways: firstly, by bringing together empirically rich, theoretically profound and collaborative scholarship from Africa; secondly, by showcasing cities in general and African cities in particular as productive, epistemological and relevant socio-political settings; and thirdly, by highlighting the importance of collaborative, multimodal research *with* youth that takes seriously their agency, aspirations and lived experiences, as much as the everyday structural challenges they face. To situate the volume, we first look briefly at common representations of young people, and particularly young Africans, within global media and policy discourses. To outline the broader knowledge project this volume connects to, we then discuss a few basic epistemological overlaps between the emerging fields of Global South Youth Studies and Southern urbanism. Introducing the rich array of creative, rigorous, experimental and propositional practices and research-based contributions that make up this themed volume constitutes the heart of this editorial. In conclusion, we argue that to secure our common urban future, it is pivotal

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to centre the voices of Africa's youth. For this, creative multimedia approaches to knowledge co-production and representation will be needed, as will robust, multimodal Afro-centric partnerships.

Keywords

Urban Futures; Southern Urbanism; African Cities; Engaged Scholarship; Co-Production

Introduction

*Ek sal dit nooit gebelieve het
Die epidemic was lank al predicted
Ons was te worried oor Facebook en Mxit
En nou moet jy gan vir 'n toets as jy siek is
Hulle se jy moet releks en...
Terwyl jy wag oor die next plan
Die virus mutata soos 'n x-man*

*I would have never believed it
The epidemic has long been predicted
We were too worried about Facebook and Mxit
And now you have to go for test when you're sick
They say you must relax and ...
While you wait over the next plan
The virus mutates like an X-man*

Fortuin cited in Mazetti et al. (this volume, p. 9)

"New voices must be heard, there must be much more space to have these conversations", youth participant, cited in Sitas et al. (this volume, p. 14)

Contradiction, hyperbole and paradox persistently shape perceptions of today's youth: young people are cast as the pinnacle of hope, as our global social, environmental and political consciousness tasked with somehow squaring the circle between socio-economic progress, planetary sustainability and socio-cultural wellbeing. And yet, they are often unseen and unheard; remaining systematically excluded from decision-making, either because they are belittled as mere recipients of adult care, infantilised as 'empty vessels' (Fuh 2012) not (yet) fully capable to comprehend the consequences of their actions; or because they increasingly disengage in conventional socio-political structures, fueling the stubborn myth of political 'youth apathy' (Cammaerts et al. 2014; Malila 2015; Mattes 2012).

This themed volume, *Urban Youth: Engaging young people and their futures in African cities*, emerged from our shared interest in understanding how youth are actively shaping urban life across the continent. As applied and action-oriented researchers, based at the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town, we were keen to invite submissions that not only contributed conceptually, but also pushed the envelope with regard to what it means to research *with* rather than just *on behalf of* youth. Moreover, that the majority of articles included in this themed volume have been co-authored by collectives of two or more people illustrates the benefit of sustaining diverse knowledge partnerships beyond the data collection phase, to also inform collaborative modes of analysis and writing.

We are thus pleased to present an exciting array of research and practice-based articles that are putting the voices of Africa's urban youth centre stage. 'We' are Laura Nkula-Wenz, an urban geographer working

on the nexus of urban governance, cultural production, engaged pedagogy and critical urbanism ([Cupers et al. 2022](#); [Nkula-Wenz 2018](#)), Rike Sitas, a researcher on the humanities side of the social sciences interested in the role of youth, culture, technology and artful methods of urban enquiry ([Sitas 2020](#)), and Mercy Brown-Luthango, a researcher interested in issues of socio-spatial justice and inclusion in the city, with a focus on youth and marginalised communities ([Brown-Luthango 2019](#)). To situate this themed volume, we start by looking at how Africa's youth is commonly viewed and talked about in global media and policy discourses. We then go on to highlight how this volume straddles the shared epistemological space between the emerging fields of Global South Youth Studies ([Swartz et al. 2021](#)) and Southern urbanism ([Parida & Agrawal 2022](#); [Pieterse & Simone 2014](#)). Following a brief discussion of why co-production matters in collaborative research processes, particularly when it comes to engaging Africa's young people, we introduce the individual articles included in this volume. We conclude by arguing that engaging young urban Africans in research processes can reveal how they develop aspirations and exercise profound agency in adversity, indicating how centring youth voices is pivotal to securing a common global urban future.

ENGAGING (FROM) A YOUTHFUL CONTINENT

With a median age of 20, and 60 percent of the population under the age of 25, Africa is considered the world's youngest continent ([El Quassif, 11 March 2021](#)). The consequences of this 'youth bulge' have been discussed in a rather polarised fashion: on the one hand, young people and, in particular, young men are viewed as a danger to society, 'as both troubled and trouble' ([Fuh 2012](#)). Notwithstanding the reality that youth have, of course, been central in creatively and vociferously demanding political change across the continent, from Tunisia's 'Jasmin revolution' igniting the Arab Spring to Nigeria's #EndSARS campaign against police brutality, this 'trouble(d) youth' narrative frequently reduces young people to mere spectres of protest, violence and mass migration. On the other side of the spectrum, young Africans are hailed as an untapped reservoir of cheap labour and consumer power that can prop up both 'Africapitalist' futures ([Ouma 2019](#)) and more established international marketplaces that have to contend with their rapidly ageing populations. These bifurcating perspectives see African youth as either merely instrumental cogs in the wheel of economic growth, or as grit in the clockwork of staid political systems. This ignores the reality that young people across the continent are savvy and connected. They wield social, cultural, economic and political agency, and are exercising their influence in new and ever-surprising ways that we have yet to fully grasp ([Honwana & Boeck 2005](#); [Cuervo & Miranda 2019](#)).

The category of 'youth' is a broad and unwieldy one and can include someone anywhere between the age of 14 and 35, depending on where you are. It is therefore disingenuous to even claim the category as homogenous or universally applicable. Yet, the UN Population Fund has aptly noted: 'How we meet the needs and aspirations of young people will define our common future' ([Kollodge & Das Gupta 2014](#)). While there is nothing to disagree with in this statement, it implies that we already accurately know the needs and aspirations of young people today and can make decisions *on behalf* of youth, based on this knowledge. In fact, though, we know considerably less about young people – what motivates them, the challenges they face and how they perceive the world – than is frequently assumed in global policy programs and actions. This imbalance between assumptions and actual understanding is further skewed when considering Africa's youth and how their lives are shaped by cultural, environmental, psycho-social, political, economic and spatial factors that are marked to a far greater extent by poverty, unemployment and precarity than those of their Euro-American peers ([Banks 2015](#)).

Filling these knowledge gaps is what propels the thriving interdisciplinary field of Youth Studies ([Cuervo & Miranda 2019](#)), whether in its more psychologically oriented form that focuses on individual adolescent development, or in its more critical form, which grapples with more systemic questions of youth marginalisation and social justice ([MacDonald & King 2021](#)). Particularly in its more critical rendering, Youth Studies present a platform for questioning 'the dominant social constructions of youth' that can

‘reveal the motives and strategies of the powerful’ ([MacDonald & King 2021](#), p. 288). Recently, this critical line of inquiry has also been expanded by using approaches of ‘Southern theory’ to problematise the way in which Youth Studies ‘often assume universal generalizability, despite rarely making the Global South, or its youthful populations, ontologies, values and politics the focus of research’ ([Cooper et al. 2019](#)).

Beyond being a mere empirical lacuna, understanding young people in the Global South also presents an urgent political-epistemic project, one that has been powerfully spelled out in recent publications such as *Youth, Inequality and Social Change in the Global South* (2019) and the *Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies* (2021). As part of this nuanced debate, it has been aptly noted that ‘the South’ is not a predefined cardinal direction or fixed geographic location. Rather, it is, first, a research-political stance that seeks to destabilise the ways in which social theory is being developed in and from non-Western locations, reorienting modes and places of theory production. And second, it is a relational ontological category that can include ‘those everywhere, whose livelihoods have been made precarious by geohistorical processes of colonialism and globalizing capitalism’ ([Leitner et al. 2008](#)), echoing [de Sousa Santos’s \(2014\)](#) articulation of the Global South as ‘that large set of creations and creatures that has been sacrificed to the infinite voracity of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy’.

As [Swartz et al. \(2021\)](#) point out, pursuing Youth Studies ‘for’ the Global South does not mean to outrightly dismiss all scholarship that has been formulated based on the experiences of youth in Western Europe or North America. In fact, they acknowledge the contribution of this scholarship as ‘invaluable’, yet note that many of their contextual and material assumptions are at odds with the lived realities of young people in Africa, Latin America and some Asian countries ([Cooper et al. 2019](#)). Moreover, theorising from and for the South does not just mean challenging erroneous assumptions of universality by pointing to local differences. Rather, and more ambitiously, it shows how experiences, tactics and strategies of young people in the Global South – including how they contend with the intergenerational trauma of colonialism and structural violence, and adapt to high levels of precarity, political disenfranchisement and increasing environmental risks to name but a few – can contribute to imagining alternative futures in different locations, including Western Europe and North America (*ibid.*). In other words, the aim of adopting a Southern lens in social science scholarship is not to exclude and ostracise, but rather to include and take seriously different ways of knowing and being in the world.

And this world is an increasingly urban one. Not only is Africa home to the world’s most youthful societies, but the continent is also leading the charge in terms of having the most rapidly growing cities worldwide ([Kopp 13, August 2021](#)). In other words, the present and future of Africa’s cities are inherently linked to that of its young people, and vice versa. In his rich ethnographic study of youngmen (sic!) in Cameroon, [Fuh \(2021\)](#) aptly describes African urban youth as ‘fixers’, i.e. agents of positive social change who shape the realities, institutions and structures of living in the city, as ‘urban innovators and accomplished social veterans’. How African urban youth are forging a future for themselves and the planet in the interstices of the city has also been recently shown by [Kimari \(2022\)](#), who has studied youth-led greening movements across Nairobi’s ‘slum’ settlements. Debunking the myth of youths’ alleged political apathy, she stresses: ‘[t]hese actions are not informed by an apolitical environmentalism, an aesthetic preoccupation with green devoid of intersectionality. Rather, this “outlaw” greening is invested with a radical desire to change socio-ecological and material conditions and to question the very logics that consider these areas unworthy of nature and basic rights.’ Yet, with all this transformative energy on display, it remains important to flag how African cities remain places where young people’s dreams are routinely deferred, and their aspirations exploited ([Adeniyi-Ogunyankin 2022](#)).

Fundamental to our interest in Africa’s urban-youth nexus, and underpinning our editorial approach, is the desire to show what engaged scholarship *with* youth can look like, while not shying away from also leaning into the various challenges and limitations of this co-production of knowledge and practice. Co-production is, of course, a much debated concept within disciplines such as planning ([Galuszka 2019](#)),

organisational management and the social sciences more broadly ([Brown-Luthango & Arendse 2022](#); [Culwick et al. 2019](#); [Durose et al. 2022](#); [Simon et al. 2020](#)). Whilst there are many definitions and forms of co-production, here we think of co-production as a process which involves multiple actors that contribute their unique resources, knowledges and skills to the production of knowledge that is context-specific, context-sensitive and mutually beneficial. Though we recognise that structural power differentials, such as the uneven distribution of financial and social capital, affect co-production processes, rendering them not always truly equal, we contend that co-production can still contribute to a process in which a community-based partner, such as a youth group, can influence the direction and focus of the collaboration to meet their specific needs at a particular time. Over the course of the collaboration, this can result in mutual learning, shared reflection and, in some instances, can even inform a redistributive politics.

In summary, recognising both the relevance and urgency of understanding the challenges, needs, dreams and aspirations of young people as a vital precondition for our ability to imagine and ultimately create alternative planetary futures, this themed volume contributes to contemporary youth scholarship in three distinct ways: firstly, by providing context-sensitive, empirically rich and theoretically profound insights from different African locales, which remain underrepresented in global scholarship; secondly, by affirming the urban as a productive empirical, practical and epistemological space for engaging youth and their variegated lived experiences; and thirdly, by advancing the methodological discussion of how we produce and make sense of our data in a way that takes seriously the lived realities, concerns and aspirations of Africa's young people. Hence, contributions to this themed volume are not merely interested in youth as research subjects but rather – in line with *Gateways*' focus on engaged scholarship – in how we can deploy different methodological approaches of collaboration and co-production to research *with* youth. We are thus delighted to introduce the rich mix of research and practice-based contributions that make up this volume.

CO-PRODUCTION IN ACTION: COLLABORATION AND PIVOTING TOWARDS YOUTH-ORIENTED URBAN RESEARCH

When it comes to understanding how young people experience and drive social change today, one of the most popular and complex thematic has been the question of how they navigate what Alcinda Honwana has called 'waithood', i.e. the 'prolonged, difficult, and dynamic transition into adult life' ([Honwana 2019](#)). Several articles in this themed volume take a thorough empirical look at how young people experience being stuck, suspended in a perpetual state of waiting, but also what they do 'in the meantime' and how they exercise agency against the odds.

For example, in their comparative study of Ethiopian and South African youth, Rubin et al. (this volume, p. 4) demonstrate that 'waithood is not an absolute state' and that young people's experiences of being stuck in structurally untenable situations are interspersed with moments of movement. In other words, young people do not 'just wait' passively but are consistently making moves to counter stasis, 'hustling' to piece together a livelihood that can generate both financial independence and a sense of personal fulfilment. In deploying a cornucopia of engaged research methods – from the co-production of research instruments via life history interviews to media training – the project generated rich information on the different dimensions of youth's agency and struggles. Unintentionally from the side of the authors, and without discounting the larger structural dynamics that continue to marginalise youth in both places, joining the project, in itself, became a way for some of the young people to use the skills and relationships forged through the research to come unstuck and realise moments of personal incremental progress.

Recognising the ability of Africa's young people to be nimble and maintain a 'capacity to aspire' ([Appadurai 2013](#)) amidst the many structural challenges they face is also the main focus of Brown-Luthango and van Rooyen's contribution to this volume. Using narrative Photo-Voice as a methodology to research with youth from resource-poor neighbourhoods across Cape Town, the authors provide a rich

meditation on what it means to – in the words of one of their participants – ‘own your freedom’. While youth across the continent arguably wrestle with their individual and collective (in)capacity to realise different dimensions of freedom in their daily lives, the authors show how South Africa’s young people have to contend with a distinct additional layer of societal expectations based on their country’s recent history. Referred to in public discourse as the ‘born free’ generation, those born after the end of the Apartheid regime in 1994, are commonly expected to reap the benefits afforded to them by the advent of democracy. However, as Brown-Luthango and van Rooyen show, young people of this generation do not necessarily feel free and grapple with the extent of their agency and their ability to make good choices in the face of persistent social, economic and spatial inequality. Despite an acute awareness of the numerous structural challenges which impact their experience of different kinds of freedom on a daily basis, the youth find different means to construct hope for a better future for themselves and their communities.

These perpetual moments of waiting and the truncated sense of agency that often corresponds with it does, however, not mean that young people are apathetic and despondent. It is quite the opposite, as the remaining contributions to this themed volume illustrate. For example, in her incisive ethnographic study of youth activism in Lephalale, a small town in South Africa’s Limpopo province that is home to one of the country’s largest coal-fired power stations, Lockett challenges the reductionist view of young people as individualistic, apolitical consumer citizens. Her work highlights how young people negotiate the paradoxical politics of securing local urban development and employment opportunities, while asserting their constitutionally established rights to a healthy, clean and safe environment. Using both invited spaces, such as community forums with local politicians and fossil fuel companies, as well as invented spaces like protests, public radio shows and door-to-door campaigns, she traces how local youth activists deploy a variety of different tactics to challenge authority and reimagine a future beyond coal extractivism. Methodologically, Lockett’s article also elucidates that activist research *about* youth, when conducted with an ethics of care and in the spirit of ‘slow scholarship’, can in fact lay a solid foundation for collaborative future research *with* youth.

Sitas et al.’s practice-based intervention also illuminates the contradiction that climate politics rarely consider the voices and visions of young people, though it is them who are already bearing and will continue to bear the brunt of the accelerating global climate crisis. Reflecting on an arts-based participatory action research (PAR) process crafted around the challenge of plastic pollution in the coastal areas of Cape Town, their article centres the voices of their young collaborators to unpack the opportunities and challenges of co-developing knowledge for enhancing climate literacy that is both academically and politically rigorous. Their responses provoke us to grapple with a central conundrum any future exercise in a Southern context must face: ‘How can one begin to reimagine futures when basic physical needs are not being met?’ Thus, the authors show that it is imperative for engaged research to meet young people where they are at, and that collective art-making can be an effective tool for enrolling young people in the co-production of knowledge and climate action. Sitas et al.’s difficulties in realising their final participatory mural also attests to the increasing difficulties faced by young people who seek to use physical public spaces to assert their rights and claim their citizenship.

Given the prominence of central locations, such as Cairo’s Tahir Square, in recent political uprisings, coupled with the urge to conjure the image of a ‘world class’ city, there has been a strong tendency in many African municipalities to increase surveillance and public order policing. While civic engagement in physical public spaces had already been seriously curtailed, the extensive lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic further diminished any possibility for public gatherings. Sharing experiences from #Slam4urLife, an arts-based social media competition carried out in South Africa in mid-2020, Mazetti et al. argue that digital public spaces can act as alternative platforms for young people to be heard and seen (as well as see and hear each other), particularly in cases where this is made physically impossible. Beyond providing a virtual platform for young South Africans to creatively process their complex feelings during the early

onset of a life altering global pandemic, the competition also created a context-sensitive digital archive of everyday pandemic realities in South Africa, as viewed through the eyes of its young people. From a research-tactical point of view, the article also attested to the agility of established community-government-university partnerships that know and can play to each other's strength in times of great uncertainty to spot an opening for innovative and timeous community engagement.

Like Mazetti et al., the contribution of McCole et al. shows that the strategic resourcing of African partner institutions and the involvement of local academics as research leaders – rather than junior partners or mere enumerators, as is still too often the case in many North-South research programs – is a pivotal precondition for realising genuinely engaged scholarship. Through hosting sports camps with community partners in Gaborone (Botswana), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Accra (Ghana), the multi-institutional research partnership, which included international and local university partners, as well as schools and other community partners, sought to show young people's interest in sports can be leveraged to encourage interest in entrepreneurship. The work of McCole et al. also points to a key idea that resonates across this volume: that engaged scholarship is not about 'capacitating' youth, but rather about recognising the abundance of capacity that already exists. Asking, in other words: How do we engage with what is already here?

The multimedia intervention by Chloé Buire gives us a creative and candid response to this question. Taking us along on a journey of collaborative film-making with young Angolans in the capital of Luanda during a critical time of political transition from the autocratic Dos Santos regime, her 'Histórias do Kakwaku' lay bare the nuts and bolts of this politically, logistically and personally intricate process. In doing this, she complicates the simple assumption of documentary film-making as a ubiquitously democratising process, showing both the moments where the collaboration was and was not able to live up to this ideal, and why. Moreover, Buire (this volume, p. 13) does not shy away from sharing how many of her own initial assumptions about her young collaborators – e.g. 'that because they were part of one particular youth political movement, they were automatically friends and somehow all thought alike' – were thoroughly debunked. Ultimately, this level of honesty and process orientation, she argues, opens up new 'spaces of intersubjectivity', i.e. moments of engagement that blur the line between researcher and participant and allow everyone to 'see together' (Buire, this volume, p. 15).

Agency, aspiration and action-oriented youth scholarship in and from Africa

In conceptualising, curating and editing this themed volume, we pursued three interconnected goals: (1) to bring together empirically rich, theoretically profound and collaborative scholarship from Africa that (2) showcases its cities as productive epistemological and relevant socio-political settings for (3) collaborative research *with* youth that takes seriously their diverse constraints, aspirations and lived experiences. To conclude this editorial, we wish to share three observations that cut across the different contributions and that we believe are key to consider for future action-oriented youth scholarship in and from Africa.

Firstly, much of the literature on African youth has been preoccupied with identifying different dimensions of waithood (e.g. stuckness, suspension, dreams deferred), its causes and effects. While several of this volume's articles show how various states of waiting remain an empirical reality for young people across the continent, they also problematise a singular focus on waithood as inadequate for understanding the complexities of how young people exercise their agency in adverse urban conditions. In other words, as much as we need to remain attentive to and explicit about how young people continue to be marginalised and excluded, we also need to find ways to recognise the many dynamic, aspirational and imaginative ways in which young people act and improvise 'in the meantime'.

Secondly, and closely connected to the first point, how to capture and represent the full spectrum of young Africans' lived experiences remains a productive challenge for engaged urban youth scholarship. Here,

the majority of contributions aptly demonstrated the value of mixed multi-media approaches, including digital platforms, social media tools, film and photography for both carrying out the respective research project and representing its findings. While deploying an array of multi-media methods has proven prolific for many of this volume's authors, be it in terms of drawing young people into the research, co-producing data or creating space for collective sense-making, many articles also wrestled with how to accurately share their empirical evidence and account for its depth and rigour. Here, the ability to leverage *Gateways'* flexible, open-access journal format, which accepts both practice and research-based contributions, allowed us to showcase a number of deeply experimental, creative and captivating articles, whose representational registers stretch the boundaries of conventional academic publishing.

Thirdly, all articles in this themed volume underscore an obvious, yet salient point: in order to tackle pressing global issues, such as climate change and the biodiversity crisis, lack of gainful employment, or deepening levels of social, spatial and economic inequality, we need to centre the voices of those who will be most affected by long-term decision-making. This focus has to squarely include young people in African cities who are already bearing the brunt of these problems, but who have rarely been heard and seen at the centre of debates to address them. As this themed volume demonstrates, putting engaged youth scholarship into practice requires multimodal and Afro-centric partnerships between universities, civil society organisations, schools, communities and, not least, young people themselves. Yet, as many of the contributions attest to, building and maintaining these relationships takes time, resources, activism, tenacity and sustained commitment. It also comes with a set of critical concerns around, for example, power and resource imbalances, social responsibilities and research ethics, which need to be acknowledged and continuously grappled with. Overall, however, we believe that this volume shows that action-oriented research *with* rather than on behalf of African urban youth is a matter of both epistemological justice and practical necessity if we are to collectively imagine inclusive urban futures on the continent and beyond.

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