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**Locating generation X: Taste and
identity in transitional South Africa**

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Introduction

When Douglas Coupland (1991) published *Generation X* in 1991, South Africa was undergoing massive political and social transformations. The preceding years had been marked by political turmoil, the danger of imminent civil war and violent clashes between the apartheid state's security forces and angry protesters against the apartheid regime. The government's racist policies were ostracised by the international community – boycotts and sanctions were throttling an economy already at the brink of collapse due to the monstrous costs of an institutionally divided society and the lack of a sizeable affluent and well-educated middle-class. In 1989 Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and at the time of Coupland's writing negotiations were in full motion in preparation for the country's adoption of a new constitution and its first democratic elections in 1994. Thus the characteristics of Coupland's (anti-)heroes, their aimlessness, whininess, "slackness" and very fictionality stand in stark contrast not only to the US black and white youth protesters of the 1960s, but also to the ambitions, anger, harshness and the very reality of most young South Africans during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The one thing that South Africans did not suffer from at the time was "Historical Underdosing"¹: the Cafe Latte in the hand of a slacker lost in a suburban mall replaced by the rock in the hand of a young angry protester on the streets of Soweto as the gaze shifts across the Atlantic.

Thus, on first sight, the search for South Africa's Generation X appears rather futile and it is not surprising that the term itself has never found the same foothold in the South African public consciousness as in Western societies. Although it is frequently used in market research and related fields as a demographic category, its usage in scholarly articles is very rare, ambiguous and commonly in connection with 'Y Culture'² – the emergence of a hedonistic and

1 Historical Underdosing: To live in a period of time when nothing seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts (Coupland 1991: 7).

2 Two of the very few direct references to Generation X in South Africa actually portray it as Y Culture's parent generation:

Y culture, increasingly also known as 'loxion kulcha' ('loxion' being a rescripting of the word 'location'), has emerged since 1996 from Johannesburg's suburbs, in particular Rosebank, and is crafted by urban black youth, but cross-over in its appeal, occupying the borderlands of the local and the global. 'Y' is a living letter, the livewire sign of the times in

apolitical generation of South African urban youth who experienced their formative years during the transitional years of South Africa's young democracy during the 1990s.

In addition to South Africa's historical peculiarity, the ambiguity within Generation X itself, seen in its original North American context, does not make the search for its South African equivalent easier; although Generation X is commonly associated with the disillusion, aimlessness and cynicism of the post-baby boomers, there is also the interpretation by the marketing experts who tried to get a grip on this generation of supposed slackers by rendering their cynicism as smartness, their lack of values as flexibility, their lack of commitment as independence. Yes, America's twenty-somethings of the 1990s had lost their parents' belief in the grand narrative of progress and self-development, the marketing experts maintained, and they were immune to the selling of washing powder and cool drinks as the keys to happiness and success, but they still wanted to have a good time and a comfortable life, and they were even prepared to work hard for it (as long as it was in Silicon Valley or a trendy advertising agency), not because it was the right thing to do, as for their parent generation, but because if nothing else matters, you might just have fun while at it:

Burdened by college loans and facing a shifting job market, Gen X yearns for affluence. In that, it takes after its grandparents more than its parents. A generation ago, small was beautiful and materialism had fallen out of fashion. Only 31% of twentysomethings in 1973 agreed that money is "a very important personal value." Today 64% of Xers and matures say, "Material things, like what I drive and the house I live in, are really important to me." Only half of boomers feel that way. Fewer twentysomethings seek "a simpler life," and, strikingly, a third of them agree that "the only meaningful measure of success is money." (Hornblower 1997)

Perhaps it is just too forced an attempt to find Generation X in South Africa, seeing that its US American origins differ so significantly from the South

Johannesburg, now widely known by young hip South Africans as 'Jozi'. It stands for Youth, but also for 'Why? It inscribes itself against, kicks loose from, X (the name given to the generation who fought in the anti-apartheid struggle and subsequently had difficulty finding a place in society). (Nuttall 2003: 235)

And:

Sometimes known as the Y Generation, contemporary black youth finds itself straddling cultural spaces. On the one hand, this generation is linked to its collective political and cultural past. On the other, it seeks, through conscious innovation, to establish an identity apart from (though not free of) Generation X, its parent culture, the politically active youth of the 1960s and 70s. This Y Generation and its ideals are evident in most contemporary popular culture media, mainly music, television and fashion. (2002)

African situation. After all, Generation X is the result of a combination of factors, most of which are particular to the demographics, political climate and economic development of the USA in the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless a comparison of this particular generation between the two countries proves to be fruitful as it reveals some of the flows underlying the processes of glocalization at a time of intensified cultural exchange and media frenzy. On first sight this exchange appears to be rather unidirectional; Bob Dylan being the icon for South African alternative rockers, house DJs and American gangster rappers the inspiration for kwaito stars (even if there has been a number of attempts of reversing the trend by showcasing kwaito in the USA). But by taking the stark contrast of the racial binary in the South African context and projecting it on America's Generation X one starts to see a pattern which otherwise would have remained hidden: Generation X's obsession with suburbia (not the ghetto), grunge (not hip hop), melancholy (not anger), Kurt Cobain (not Dr Dre) is more than anything evocative of www.stuffwhitepeoplelike.com (not www.thesource.com). This chapter aims to provide a detailed overview of the different ways in which South African youth adapted to the changing political and social climate during the transitional period and how they are related to certain themes in common descriptions of Generation X. At the same time usage of the term as an all-encompassing label for the multiplicity of lived experiences in a racially divided society will be avoided. By doing so the hidden ambiguities and silent assumptions concerning race and class within common scholarly treatments of Generation X become pronounced, opening the debate about the general lack of engagement with race and class issues in literature on Generation X.

Young South Africans during the 1980s

The South African contemporaries of Coupland's Generation X in the USA lived in entirely different circumstances. Whereas young Americans – especially suburban, white Americans – in the 1980s were largely apolitical, reacting against the 1960s radicalism of their parents' generation, young South Africans in the 1980s lived in the hyper-politicised environment of the final years of apartheid. Indeed, it was primarily young men and women who maintained this politicisation, often reacting against what they saw as the passivity and acquiescence of their parents. By the 1980s apartheid – the system of institutionalized racial discrimination and segregation – was under strain from a variety of sources. The growing and changing economy required more skilled labour than the privileged white minority could provide, so growing numbers of black South Africans were upwardly mobile into skilled blue-collar, white-collar, and even professional and managerial occupations. There was a dramatic

expansion of secondary and even tertiary education among black South Africans, especially among the first large generation to have grown up in towns and cities. Black households with rising incomes nonetheless experienced poor living conditions because of severe restrictions on development in black townships. At the same time, rural poverty pushed many poorly-schooled young men and women into the towns, fuelling the growth of an underclass of largely unemployed youth. The combination of frustrated, upwardly-mobile skilled working and nascent middle classes and growing numbers of poor and unemployed young men entailed a volatile mix.

In 1984 black townships around South Africa exploded in protest. Initial protests were often focused on specific municipal and educational grievances, but they soon developed into a “township revolt” against apartheid as a whole. The state responded with inadequate concessions and repression that escalated conflict. Even severe repression served only to contain the revolt. By the end of the 1980s it was clear to the apartheid state that there was no alternative to a negotiated settlement with its principal opponent, the banned African National Congress (ANC). Young black people played central roles in the revolt. For some observers, the township youth were the heroes – the “young lions” (as the ANC called them) or “young warriors” (Marks 2001) – of the struggle for liberation, rendering townships “ungovernable” and undermining the apartheid state. For other observers, black and white, these same young men (and, less often, women) were villains, coercing and threatening ordinary people into supporting unpopular campaigns, including consumer and other boycotts, the imposition of order through ‘people’s courts’, violent attacks on alleged ‘collaborators’ whose guilt had not been demonstrated, and the sexual abuse of young women. Sometimes being a villain was simply the other side of the coin of being a hero. Often, however, the villains and the heroes were different people. Some young participants in resistance had clear political ideals, or were motivated by specific educational or civic grievances. Others were attracted to protest and conflict by the slogans, songs, and a search for camaraderie, or even by the ambition to be a warrior-hero (which, for most young people in more ordinary times, remains a fantasy). There were some who were motivated by greed, and some who had prior histories of criminal or anti-social violence. The participants in ‘resistance’ were highly diverse (Straker 1992; Seekings 1993; Marks 2001).

The more politicised young people forged a distinctive subculture, defined in part by the embrace of non-racialism, at least as an ideal. Non-racialism entailed, in practice, a degree of elitism, and maintaining a distance from some of the more “corrupting” aspects of township life. In Durban, the ANC-aligned “matsatsatsa” preferred jazz music, kept their hair short and dressed smartly and

fashionably. They were attracted to activities, such as weight-lifting, that were associated with both “discipline” and the middle-class life outside of the townships (Dlamini 2005). In Soweto, also, being a “comrade” precluded drinking or drugs, and entailed stringent discipline. ‘The comrades developed their own sub-culture involving a certain asceticism, an avoidance of frivolous activities. Instead of going to shebeens and parties, the comrades would read, have political discussions and go to meetings’ (Marks 2001: 59). At the time, it was widely assumed and sometimes asserted that active participation in political protest was the norm. ‘Certainly among the youth it was the majority who participated in the eruptions’, wrote Straker (1992: 19); ‘the youngster who did not participate in these popular uprisings was the exception rather than the rule.’ It was certainly the case that, in many parts of South Africa in the 1980s, childhood and adolescence were framed by political protest and violence (1986; Dawes & Donald 1994). But it is unlikely that actual participation extended beyond a minority of young black men, and even fewer young black women. Indeed, many young people strove to avoid political activity; especially in parts of the country (notably KwaZulu-Natal) where partisan rivalry between black political organizations meant that any display of partisanship exposed one to possibly fatal retribution.

For many young black men and women, even in the 1980s and early 1990s, life revolved around home, school (despite disruptions), church and sport. Indeed, in townships around Durban, where rival black political organisations competed violently, soccer clubs were characterized by a ‘code of silence’: players did not talk about themselves or their lives outside of soccer, because this might lead to political topics. Some churches went further still, and defined politics as an unchristian practice, forbidding their members from engaging in political activity (Dlamini 2005).

The political situation changed rapidly in the early 1990s, following the unbanning of the ANC and release of its political leaders. Negotiations between the government and the ANC culminated in democratic elections in April 1994. Political leaders from all sides grew concerned about the so-called “lost generation” of “marginalized youth”, i.e. adolescents who had boycotted and failed to complete school, who had fought with the security forces in township streets, who had challenged the authority of parents and teachers, and who had used violence against other township residents in the name of ‘the struggle’. The media fuelled a series of moral panics over the political, social and moral threat posed by this supposed generation, and both the apartheid government and ANC-aligned groups commissioned research on young people (Seekings 1995; Seekings 1996). These research programmes found that only a minority of young people could be considered marginalized and very few should be

considered as “lost”. Young South Africans were shown to be religious (more than two out of three young people attending church at least twice a month), active in church choirs, sports clubs and other associations, critical of crime and delinquency, and generally positive in their outlook. Young people described themselves most often as “ambitious” (Slabbert 1994; CASE 1993). At the same time, market researchers began to pay closer attention to young people as consumers.

Disillusionment – Young Afrikaners in the late 1980s

Black South African youth were not the only ones who were protesting against the apartheid regime in the late 1980s. Young white South Africans were the beneficiaries of apartheid, and for the most part enjoyed lives of comfortable and safe prosperity, but in the 1980 not even they were insulated from the political conflict. Through the 1980s, young white men had to perform two full years of national service in the security forces, and thereafter had to serve for shorter periods. Many were exposed to conflict, both on (and over) the South African or South-West African (Namibian) borders (especially in northern Namibia and southern Angola), or in townships inside South Africa. Recent research has documented how unpopular national service was: ‘Many young men, straight out of school or university, were not staunchly patriotic and did not want to give two years of their lives to the military, mothers didn’t want to lose sons, and South Africa’s apartheid government was condemned internationally for fighting an unjust war’ (Thompson 2006: viii:). National service entailed routine and often brutal humiliation during training, followed by exposure to combat on the borders or to the stress of policing townships inside the country (Thompson 2006; Blake 2009). The overt refusal of an increasing number of white South Africans to risk their lives for a cause they did not believe in or even rejected was eventually channelled into the establishment of a concerted movement against the continuation of compulsive conscription, the End of Conscription Campaign (ECC), in 1983. From 1987 to 1988 166 men publicly declared their objection and refused to report for duty, prompting the banning of the organisation by the government in 1988. In order to fully comprehend the decision to object, one needs to understand it was not merely a political one; military service played a major role in white South Africans’ images of citizenship and masculinity during apartheid; not to participate was thus seen as a failure to be a “real” South African man (Conway 2005).

The growing disillusionment not only with apartheid politics, but also the very values and ideology on which they were founded, among at least some young

white South Africans is further illustrated and exemplified by the success of the so-called voëlvry movement. Although voëlvry (directly translated meaning “free as a bird” or actually, and more accurately, “fugitive” in Afrikaans) was almost exclusively produced by and directed at Afrikaners and therefore only affected a relatively small part of South African society. Yet its impact should not be underestimated as it signifies the transition (or break) from the conservative tradition of romanticism and naiveté in Afrikaner “volksmusiek” to a contemporary and progressive type of socially-conscious Afrikaner rock, and, on a broader level, meant nothing less than an exploration of the possibilities of a new Afrikaner identity beyond the narrow definitions and restrictions propagated by the apartheid government. In the light of this it surprises that one of the major influences for the movement came from the music of an “English” South African, James Phillips, who had been fronting a string of punk-influenced underground bands in Johannesburg since the early 1980s. In 1985, bilingual Phillips brought out a protest album in Afrikaans under the pseudonym Bernoldus Niemand, with the anti-conscription song “Hou my vas Korporal”. The album made a lasting impression on alternative Afrikaans artists and musicians, such as writer and singer André du Toit (aka André Letoit aka Koos Kombuis) who travelled from Cape Town to Johannesburg in order to meet Phillips and see him play at his regular hang-out, the Jameson’s. Letoit eventually joined Phillips on the independent Shifty label, which was known to sign almost exclusively “subversive” bands without any chance of getting airplay on the strictly censored radio stations of the state broadcaster SABC. Back in Cape Town, Letois befriended and started performing with the singer Ralph Rabie (aka Johannes Kerkorrel) who, rhetorically gifted and outspoken, would go on to become the movement’s figurehead. In 1989, Koos Kombuis, Bernoldus Niemand (as Bernoldus Niemand en die Swart Gevaar together with his old band The Cherry-Faced Lurchers), Johannes Kerkorrel (as Johannes Kerkorrel en die Gereformeerde Blues Band) and a number of other alternative Afrikaans musicians went on the notorious voëlvry tour through South Africa which is today regarded as a watershed in the evolution of Afrikaner music and the defining moment of Alternative Afrikaans music.

Although voëlvry was overtly political and represented and spoke to only a relatively small group of South Africans it deserves special attention as one can find significant parallels to North America’s Generation X in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Most importantly, both groups shared a distinct disillusionment with their provenance in society, in terms of their social origin (middle-class) and, consequently, space (suburbia) as well as the status symbols and rituals attached to them. So just as the main characters in Coupland’s Generation X – three well-educated, wisecracking and confused twenty-somethings – are trying, and failing, to escape the boredom and materialistic

meaninglessness of their previous lives by moving to a retirement village in the desert, the lyrics of Kerkorrel, Kombuis and their peers often contain very direct references to the superficial pretensions of suburbia. This point has been previously made by Andries Bezuidenhout (2007) in an unpublished seminar paper (one of the very few scholarly treatments of voëlvry), in which he cites various song texts alluding to suburbia. Commenting on excerpts from “Tronk” (Prison) and “Ry” (Ride), both by Kerkorrel, he writes that “[b]arking watchdogs are typical of South African suburbs. Kerkorrel sings about “brains” and “thoughts” that are locked in chains – the inability to break out of the constraints of the pseudo-traditional organisational complex of Afrikaner nationalism. In “Ry” [Ride], he sings about the need to escape from suburban life, and the snobbery and class-consciousness of middle-class life in the suburbs.” Another excerpt from Koos Kombuis’ “Paranoia” provides a particular dark and cynical insight into how depressing the hypocrisy of suburbia must have felt for many Afrikaners at the time:

Ek is ‘n doos van Bellville-Oos Jannie moer vir Sannie blou ma se kind ek voeter jou hou op met skrou bly stil ons kyk die Cosby Show	I’m a sleaze from Bellville East Jannie beats Sannie black and blue Mommy’s child, I’ll strangle you stop that crying shut up, we’re watching the Cosby Show
Voort voort in Parow-Noord Ben om die hoek is kwaad want sy ex-vrou lê weer op straat daar’s geen teken van sy E-type sy’s weg met alles tot die hosepipe en vergas haarself met die advokaat en vergas haarself met die advokaat	Onwards onwards in Parow North Ben down the road is angry his ex-wife is roaming the streets there’s no sign of his E-type she took everything even the hosepipe and entertains herself with the advocate and entertains herself with the advocate
Ek droom nou van die Volkskasteller ek is gebuig soos Uri Geller die Swembad is vol chloor maar die tuinjong is vermoor ek het my vinger nog op die sneller ek het my vinger nog op die sneller	I now dream of the Volkskas teller I’m bent like Uri Geller there’s chlorine in the swimming pool water but the gardener has been slaughtered I’ve still got my finger on the trigger I’ve still got my finger on the trigger
Ek is ‘n doos van Bellville-Oos ek weet ek is verslaaf aan drank ek is oortrokke by die bank my dogter is ‘n boerepunk maar dank God ek’s ten minste blank	I’m a sleaze from Bellville East I know I’m addicted to alcohol I’m overdrawn at the bank my daughter is a punk but thank God at least I’m white

Kombuis' lyrics reveal a further commonality between white alternative South Africans and world-weary Generation Xers – the use of irony in order to convey their disdain for the false sincerity of their parent generation. The use of irony as a tool of expression goes beyond stylistic considerations, as irony, especially good irony, has the tendency to become self-reflexive, or: self-irony. This self-reflexivity is sign of a more general self-centeredness, perhaps even selfishness, which is commonly ascribed to Generation Xers. In the case of the voëlvry movement it reveals itself in its failure to move beyond the concerns of “us” (Afrikaners) towards those of the “others”:

But its [Voëlvry's] success also imposed a limitation. It never penetrated the working class, and stayed clear of the townships – physically, as well as in terms of most of its lyrical content. The problem with apartheid was what it was doing to “us” – “alternative” (but middle-class) Afrikaners. The symbols and institutions of Afrikaner nationalism became objects of irony. Afrikaner nationalism was turned on its head, and in elite circles it became fashionable to be an “alternative” Afrikaner. In a sense, the Voëlvry movement provided for an ethnic project without the ethnic politics. Yet the foundation of this was a critique of what apartheid did to the “self”, not the “other”; this was present in the lyrics of the movement, but somewhat marginal. (Grundlingh 2004)

The rebellion against Afrikaner traditionalism and conservatism provided a sense of direction for young Afrikaners, but this sense seems to have become lost after the coming into power of those who had struggled against the same enemy all along. One would expect that the country's throwing off the shackles of its restrictive and racist regime would have provided young Afrikaners, and white South Africans in general, with new hope and space to breathe, but the overriding feeling for many seems to have been one of confusion and anxiety. Indeed, the voëlvry movement was practically over in the moment Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, and most of its members failed or struggled to build on their previous successes.

It is in this moment of confusion where the commonalities between the different branches of white South African youth as well as Generation X are most evident, the uniting bond being the loss of the certainties of the past. This feeling is described in the semi-biographical novel *Sunnyside Sal* by Anton Krueger (2010) about the author and his friend Sal's Kerouakesque coming-to-age during the transitional years, as the protagonist describes his drug-fuelled confusion at the night of Nelson Mandela's inauguration as the first democratically elected president of South Africa:

I realised that night that who we think we are is only an amalgamation

of the systems we know, that though the signs might be arbitrary, and although there's no intrinsic reason why green means go and red means stay, if you fail to recognise the context of a set of symbols then you don't have a self, then you're lost, then you're crazy. As we went over that day from the nationalist regime into a democracy, in those few hours, when everything changed, there was a brief gap in time when the old signs had not yet completely fallen away and the new ones had not yet been born. There was a liminal moment when the threshold was crossed, and it felt to me as though I'd experienced the weightlessness of that transition, and had become momentarily trapped in the no-man's-land between meanings. I had experienced a moment without identity, without a framework. All I had to hold on to in that whirlpool of meaningless motion was the comfort of that immense symbol represented by Mandela. Without having had him to refer to, perhaps many more might have lost their minds in the going over. Perhaps I would still have been stuck in that terrifying place. (Krueger 2010: 72)

Cultures of consumerism in the new South Africa

Even though the political transition never resulted in the gloomy expectations of many white South Africans, it certainly meant a major change in the social and economic realities of most South Africans. Most importantly, the removal of racial discrimination (and the introduction of pro-black affirmative action) resulted in the accelerated growth of the black middle class. The abolition of segregation meant that formerly white schools were opened to black students and formerly white neighbourhoods were opened to black families. Black students soon comprised a majority of the student body at most universities. The racial profile of the senior ranks of the public sector was transformed rapidly, and of the private sector more slowly but still significantly.

But change was not just a matter of policies, spatial desegregation and institutional reconfiguration, as it was also visible (and audible) in the cultural landscape, and one of the most vibrant signs of South Africa's imminent transformation was kwaito. Commonly understood as the sound that accompanied South Africa's discovery of a national discourse which went beyond the trenches of apartheid logic, kwaito embodies the antithesis to the heavily politicised atmosphere of the apartheid years, in that it meant the celebration of freedom and hedonism, and the reinterpretation of the urban

peripheries, the townships, as sites of cultural innovation and ‘coolness’. As such it is usually, and sometimes negatively, stylized as the triumph of commercialism and materialism over ideology among the first generation of young black South Africans who experienced their formative years without having to fight against the oppressive laws of the previous regime. But despite kwaito’s focus on fun and having a good time a (relatively small) number of kwaito songs deal with the legacy of apartheid in terms of racism (e.g. *Kaffir* by Arthur Mafokate) or the challenges of growing up in the townships (e.g. *Mdlewembe* by Zola). In the same vein it would be misleading to automatically dismiss kwaito as music without meaning because of its general focus on beats instead of lyrics (Peterson 2003; Mhlambi 2004), or to locate it merely in the post-apartheid period without making references to its roots in marabi dance, mbaqanga and bubblegum music (Boloka 2003). While it is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of kwaito, and in the lives of black urban youth during the 1990s in general, it is undeniable that this post-apartheid generation were more prone to consumerism than their parent generations, especially from the late 1990s onwards. Part of this development was an opening-up to foreign, especially US or Western, influences, which are evident in the music (house and hip hop³), fashion (US American streetwear) and language (US hip hop lingo), making it at once a truly cosmopolitan and distinctively South African phenomenon. Another sign for the paradigm shift in the cultural, especially musical, sector that occurred during the 1990s was a process of intensifying commodification and commercialisation, exemplified by the way in which one of the first kwaito groups, Boom Shaka, was assembled by music producer Don Laka in 1993 in a similar fashion as British and American boy groups at the time. Another example is the emergence and growing success of Gauteng radio station YFM and associated youth magazine YMag which captured the spirit of kwaito and gave it a name – Y Culture. Young South Africans’ insouciance at

3 Side Comment: Hip hop in South Africa. Following the example of US American hip hop, South African hip hop started at the fringes of society and urbanity in the early 1980s where black youth were looking for a way to vent their anger and frustration with being disadvantaged in an unfair and unequal society. Blackness, however, was the racial identity chosen by those early rappers in the Cape Flats; according to apartheid’s crude categorisation they were considered coloured - the “race of miscegenation”. Hip Hop provided members of bands such as Prophets of Da City and Black Noise to distance themselves from a perceived illicit partnership between the coloured population and the white regime and to align themselves with the Black Consciousness Movement. The 1990s saw the expansion of popular kwaito artists such as Zola and Bongo Muffin into hip hop territory and today genuine hip hop crews such as ProKid and Driemanskap are successfully rapping in the African vernacular in order to reach a large and growing audience of fans who appreciate the depth, sincerity and relevance of much local hip hop. But the currently most successful South African hip hop outfit in terms of international success (thanks to YouTube) is the Afrikaans group Die Antwoord with its self-ironic use of a white trash imagery and slang.

embracing the non-values of consumerism and materialism has been poignantly noted by Gavin Steingo (2005: 351) writing about the inversion from gold as a symbol of apartheid oppression to a status symbol:

In the cover sleeve of Mandoza's album *Godoba*, the artist wears clothes resembling those of a "typical" hip-hop artist, and he wears a thick gold chain. The picture of Mandoza, in almost every way, resembles American and Cape hip-hop artists and gangster rappers. But there is something unusual here, something not typical of those artists: Mandoza is smiling. This is the punctum. For the kwaito artist – and here for Mandoza – wearing a huge gold chain is not an act of subversion; or, rather, it is a double subversion. Mandoza subverts what was previously an act of subversion. What was previously a "refusal by overacceptance" is now merely "acceptance." However, Mandoza does not change the signs themselves; rather, he attributes new meaning to those signs – he subverts the meaning of signs that previously signified subversion. So, at once, Mandoza "naturalizes" the signs – he negates the subversion – and he subverts the meaning of subversive signs and, by acting out a double negative, embraces the capitalist "ethos of consumption." He accepts.

Mandoza's acceptance, even embrace, of capitalist consumerism (as seen by Steingo) turns the old (anti-)apartheid logic upside down; while anti-apartheid protesters fighting against the oppressive and racist regime were usually tainted as communist revolutionists by the government, young South Africans are celebrating their hard-won freedom with the same symbols (minus the racist ideology) of the old enemy. A more positive reading of the consumerist inclination of South African black youth is presented by Bhekizizwe Peterson (2003: 210)

For one, the preoccupation with consumption can be interpreted as an acceptance of the larger societal ethos that informs many South Africans of different backgrounds and ages. Alternatively, even in its most nihilistic forms, the celebration of consumption in black youth may attest to their courage and commitment not to give in to the conditions of poverty and strife found in the townships. The success of many artists, actors and soccer stars affords them a measure of upward social mobility, a change in class and status that many find difficult to negotiate. The result is a difficult juggling act between, on the one hand, an exaggerated need to re-affirm one's continued affiliation to the townships, with the ghetto being reduced to the ability to 'hang rough and tough'. On the other hand, there is a compulsion to leave no doubt that with regard to material success, one has left the ghetto and its 'botheration'.

Materialism and aspiration are not confined to the ‘ghetto’, however, as the children of the new black middle class also embraced a new, post-apartheid culture of consumption defined by suburban imagery and comforts. This is described evocatively in the novel *Coconut*, by Kopano Matlwa – herself a young university student when she wrote the novel. One of the central characters in the novel is Ofilwe, who was born in a township but now lives in the security-protected ‘Little Valley Country Estate’. Ofilwe and her brother are ‘Model C children’, referring to the fact that they attend formerly white schools. Ofilwe herself speaks English at home – the ‘TV language’, ‘the one that spoke of sweet success’ (Matlwa 2007: 54). Her family embraces westernisation and distance themselves from African ‘tradition’: They attend an Anglican church, prefer westernized names over African ones, and every Sunday go to the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop (in the Little Square Shopping Centre) to eat Traditional English Breakfasts. In one scene, Matlwa describes Ofilwe musing about how different her life would be if she still lived in a township:

Instead of waking up to my cubed fruit, muesli and mixed nuts on a bed of low-fat granadilla yoghurt, would I begin my day by polishing the red stoep that juts out at the front of Koko’s two-roomed house? When bored, would I pass the time by naming stones and creating homes for them in the wet dirt that surrounds Koko’s self-made outside toilet instead of playing Solitaire on Mama’s laptop, as I do now? Would I steal handfuls of sugar from the former mielie-meal bucket under the sink and run to lie on the grass to let the sweet crystals melt on my tongue instead of forgetting to give Daddy back his change, forget it was not mine for the keeping and forget I was not supposed to use it to buy honey and almond nougat bars from the health shop outside the estate gates. Instead of a decaf Café Latte at Bedazzle on Thursday nights would I freeze my Cool-Ad and save it for a really hot day? Would it matter who my clothes were named after? Would I get into respiratory distress at the thought of wearing garments with no names at all? (Matlwa 2007: 13-14)

Ofilwe’s world – as described by Matlwa – is one that has also been documented by sociologists. Nadine Dolby and Lucert Nkuna provide rich ethnographic accounts of the importance of fashion as a marker of status among adolescents in Durban and Johannesburg respectively. Dolby’s (2001) study focuses on a school in a formerly ‘white’ neighbourhood which, after apartheid, was attended by black, coloured, Indian and white students. The pupils were united by their commitment to a consumerist culture, although different groups of students – broadly but not exactly corresponding to racial groups – had different preferences with regard to the details and brands of clothing, shoes and music. Corresponding observations were made by Nkuna (2006) who examined the

similarly 'mixed' population of adolescents in a Johannesburg mall.

Poverty and the limits to consumerism

The consumerist suburban world described by Matlwa exerts a powerful appeal to young men and women from much poorer backgrounds, even if they have little chance of achieving their aspirations of upward mobility. The second central character in Matlwa's novel *Coconut* is Fikile, who lives in a shack in a very poor neighbourhood; they have no bathroom, and only an outside toilet. But she works in the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop, and aspires to the lifestyle of the shop's rich customers, including Ofilwe. In Matlwa's account, Fikile is hostile to other people who are as poor as her, reflecting her desperation to be different and to escape from poverty herself. To get to work, Mpatlwa writes, Fikile takes a train and then two taxi rides. She disparages the other passengers on the train and taxis:

Sometimes one wants to be alone with one's thoughts and not have to deal with bad breath and body odour so early in the morning. Women are not so bad. They bore me with their questions about how I manage to keep my figure so slim or the stories about their harsh white bosses at work or the long tales of their various illnesses, aches and pains, but I still prefer them to the men. The men still disgust me. All of them are a bunch of criminals. A bunch of uneducated criminals. They look at me like they want to rape me and I know they would do it if there weren't so many people around. They call me Nice and Nana and whisper other crude things as I walk past them hanging against the wall, unclean and smelling of alcohol. I hate them and they know it. They have no respect for women, so why should I have any respect for them? I do not respond to them, even to the ones who greet me politely. I keep my chin up and walk straight past them as if I cannot hear them. Maybe there are some good ones who really mean no harm but unfortunately their peers have sullied their name. In fact, as a general rule I try not to mix with any black men at all. It just makes things easier. (Matlwa 2007: 129-30)

Her journey to work is completed with a walk from the taxi stop to the coffee shop. She ignores any other people she passes.

I am not one of you, I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past here in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because I am not one of you. You are poor and black and I am rich and brown. (Matlwa 2007: 140).

Survey research reveals clearly that most adolescent boys and girls, at least in urban areas, have aspirations like Fikile's; the end of apartheid means that young people like Fikile have some chance of achieving their aspirations, but the chances are slim. Fikile has the advantage of having a job – in an economy where unemployment rates among young people are among the highest in the world. In September 2007, for example, the official Labour Force Survey found that the unemployment rate (using the broad definition favoured by everyone but the government) was 74% among 15-19 year-olds, 60% among 20-24 year-olds and 43% among 25-29 year-olds. In South Africa as a whole, chronic unemployment is the normal experience of most young men and women. Education is the primary route out of poverty, but poor adolescents face huge obstacles in completing secondary school. Adolescents in poor neighbourhoods often grow up in homes and streets where physical violence is commonplace, and emotional abuse even more so. Home environments are often unstable, and parents are rarely able to provide the concrete forms of assistance that children need to perform well in school. Schools themselves are often appalling. Ramphele describes the high school in the area of Cape Town where she conducted research as 'a caricature of what an educational institution ought to be' (Ramphele 2002: 92). The administration was poor, the teachers demoralized, the premises unkempt (see Bray et al 2010: chapter 5). Faced with this, ambitious children (and their parents) aspire to escape to better schools, especially formerly white schools in formerly white neighbourhoods. This, however, can provoke ostracism from neighbours, for 'playing white' (Ramphele 2002). For many young men and women in post-apartheid South Africa, the transition to adulthood entails the slow recognition that you are not going to achieve your aspirations and will remain poor.

Similarly, the focus on consumerism and "Westernisation" in much post-apartheid literature on South African youth tends to distract from the inequality of access to Western popular culture due to socio-economic and cultural (i.e. language) differences. For example: in 1995 36 percent of black participants in the All Media and Product Survey (AMPS) had watched TV the previous day (51 percent within the previous week) compared to 79 (91) percent of coloured and 84 (96) percent of white participants. Moreover, only six percent of black respondents had watched the English/Afrikaans channel TV1, but 35 percent (almost all of black respondents who had switched on the TV that day) had watched the African-language (including Afrikaans) channel CCV. In comparison, 70 percent of white viewers had tuned into TV1, and 23 percent into CCV. The greatest disparity, however, applies to the subscription-based satellite service MNet which provides access to the latest US American and British movies and TV series: less than one percent of black participants had watched it the previous day, while 37 percent of white had done so. Similar

patterns apply to radio and print media consumption (SAARF 1995; see also Strelitz 2005; Schenk 2009).

The obstacles of poverty for many South African youth and the perceived and real effects of affirmative action on young people's opportunities on the labour market are to a large part responsible for a strong diversity of expectations and hopes (or lack thereof) for the future among young South Africans. In combination with the unequal access to global media (in more recent years accentuated by a distinct digital divide) this translates into different ways in which young South Africans make use of foreign influences in order to define themselves and others. Extraordinarily, young people in poor and very poor African neighbourhoods in Cape Town retain an optimistic outlook, and a sense of self-efficacy, into their early 20s at least. Although these kids are very knowledgeable about the latest American and European music trends, especially with regards to RnB and hip hop, they tend to idolise South African house, kwaito and, more recently, hip hop celebrities. In contrast, young men and women in working-class coloured neighbourhoods in Cape Town are generally pessimistic and defiant about their opportunities in the new South Africa. Accordingly, they often tend to identify with the imagery, style and behaviour of American gangster rappers or RnB artists (Hammett 2009), sometimes to the point that they become active members in one of Cape Town's notorious gangs which borrow heavily from their North-American counterparts in terms of music and fashion (Salo 2004; Jensen 2008). Young white South Africans are often adamant in reaffirming their "Africaness" at least in geographical terms, but at the same time express their discomfort with the current political situation by referring to their "European roots" which is reflected in a distinct taste for South African or foreign rock music, including punk and emo, or certain foreign pop and hip hop idols, such as Madonna or Eminem (Basson 2007).

The Invisibility of Race in Generation X

What distinguishes this outline of South Africa's youth during the transition from apartheid to democracy from most accounts of Generation X in the North American context is its heavy focus on race. On the one hand this seems to be self-explanatory; a long history of informal and formal racial segregation have left the country deeply divided in spatial, economical, cultural and attitudinal terms along racial lines, and any discussion of South African society needs to take these differences into account, even though some of the redistributive policies since the end of apartheid (and even some from before) have shifted the significance of racial differences somewhat to a more class-based stratification of South African society (Seekings & Natrass 2005).

On the other hand, the silence on racial as well as class distinctions in descriptions of America's Generation X is astonishing given the social stratification in North America. This is not to say that Generation X itself is not diverse; in fact many commentators have emphasised the ethnic diversity of America's Generation X. But the pure acknowledgement, or celebration, of diversity cannot distract from the lack of engagement with its political and social implications, as Ortner (1998: 421) points out⁴:

They have a somewhat congratulatory tone, as if being demographically more diverse were some sort of (white) achievement, or as if it guaranteed a growth of tolerance, which may or may not be the case – no evidence is presented. In any event, despite these indications of greater diversity, the actual Generation X public culture – the journalism, the novels, the films – is almost entirely white. And despite the vast influence and popularity of African American performers in popular music, most of the musicians and groups taken as epitomizing Generation X (such as Nirvana, Beck, Hole, and Offspring) are white. (...)

Or as rapper Dr. Dre put it, “I haven't heard anyone in my ‘hood talking about [GenerationX]... The only X I know is Malcolm X” (quoted in Giles 1994: 64).

My point is not so much that the Generation X representation “excludes” blacks, as if Generation X were some club to which African Americans or other minorities would like admission. Rather, it is that the racialization of the representation, white-not-racially-marked, hides more significant class divisions at work. In my own ethnographic data, young African Americans in their twenties who were stuck in prime Gen X locations (I will get to what those are in a moment) sounded virtually indistinguishable from young white twenty-somethings in the same situation; it is the locations that are

4 The idea of Generation X as primarily white phenomenon is shared by Bakari Kitwana, former Executive Editor of the most influential magazine on black American youth culture, *The Source*, as he writes about the need to establish the idea of a Hip Hop Generation alongside Generation X:

During the mid-1990s, as head editor of *The Source*: the magazine of hip-hop music culture and politics, I began to use the term “the hip-hop generation” to define our generation. Around that time, the label Generation X began to be loosely applied to young twenty-somethings, white and Black alike. Just as Black baby boomers were mostly defined by the civil rights and Black power movements, Black twenty-somethings were more than just Generation Xers in Black face. At the same time, the term “hip-hop nation” was en vogue. Hip-hop kids did not represent a nation any more than they were carbon copies of white Generation Xers. In response, those of us at *The Source* began to use the phrase “the hip-hop generation” to refer to our specific generation. It was our attempt to bring critical focus to the issues that defined our time and that went beyond simply rap music. (Kitwana 2002: xiii:)

obscured by the racialization of the categories.

Ortner makes an intriguing point by singling out class as the actual identifier of Generation X. Race per se is not necessarily what defines Generation X, she maintains, but ignoring the racialisation of class representations – in Generation X's case white middle-class – obscures the true character of Generation X and its location in the public consciousness. She also states in her article that “(...) the question is one of locating it correctly rather than denying its existence.” (Ortner 1998: 420).

In this light the prevalence of Generation X as an all-encompassing label appears remarkable. Perhaps it is the transparency of whiteness, its assumed neutrality, which allows its cultural expressions to pass as mainstream, despite the increasing dominance of black American popular culture in large parts of Western society. To some extent this racial bias in the representation of Generation X is also detectable in the South African context; while studies on local manifestations of global images of whiteness are still rare and rather recent (Steyn 2001; Ballantine 2004; Baines 2008), the influence of black American popular culture, especially hip hop, on black South African youth has long been the object of public and scholarly scrutiny. While one part of the debate has focussed on the apparent negative aspects (reminiscent of the ‘lost generation’ panic), a number of commentators have emphasised the self-sufficiency and uniqueness of post-apartheid black South African popular culture despite the acknowledged influences of a certain ‘ghetto’, ‘hustler’, ‘gangster’ or ‘bling-bling’ trope in its make-up (Peterson 2003; Salo 2004; Haupt 2008).

Generation X's interplay between representations of whiteness and middle-class has significant implications for locating Generation X in South Africa as there are only two groups which fulfil the middle-class requirement in order to pass as Generation X: unhappy white youth at the end of apartheid exemplified by the voëlvry movement and the emergent black middle-class after the end of apartheid represented by Ofilwe. But both cases do not fit easily for different reasons; while the voëlvry protagonists resemble Generation Xers in their search for a way out of suburbia, they did not share their nihilism and were instead highly politicised and anti-consumerist. The black middle-class of the new South Africa, on the other hand, is generally portrayed very differently as apolitical and materialistic. Yet it possesses a certain ambiguity towards the symbols of middle-class which is perfectly depicted in Ofilwe's insecurity about her status and position in society as she feels trapped between what she sees as white and black ways of doing things. The whiteness of middle-class, hidden in Generation X, then reveals itself in the title of Matlwa's book: in South Africa a *Coconut* is a rather offending word for someone who is seen as black on the outside and white on the inside.

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