Thinking Women's Worlds

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Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the process and products of an action research project focused on exploring young women's experiences of student-life in South Africa in the early years of the twenty-first century. The paper presents 1) a visual ethnographic account of the spaces of campus and how young women navigate these spaces of belonging or alienation, particularly with reference to sexual "safety"; 2) an analysis of points of (dis)identification with the world of the university or the academy and how other dimensions of identity, including "race", gender and sexuality, intersect or conflict with student and intellectual identity; and 3) reflections on how the visual narrative medium adopted challenged us as researchers to explore the process of meaning making in an unfamiliar mode, enabling us to see the academy through the eyes of our students. The research process made evident the ambiguities and ambivalence in university experience for young women who, on the one hand, feel a sense of institutional pride and personal achievement, and on the other, a pervasive sense of being outsiders, not "at home" in the work and play spaces of campus, despite their legitimate status as students.

The research team at the University of the Witwatersrand interpreted the broad rubric of the Africa Gender Institute project as an opportunity to explore the meanings of intellectual identity and academic life for a group of senior undergraduate / junior postgraduate women students, to think about the worlds of "thinking women". Working in a participatory action-research paradigm (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Maguire, 2000) meant that the women students in the team were both subjects and objects of their own research process, thinking about their worlds in a critically reflexive way. It is the stated aim of the University of

Witwatersrand to create a "university we can call our own". Our participation in this project afforded us an opportunity to explore to what extent young women students experience the university in this way, and to actively engage with making this vision a reality. Our explicit aim was to create conditions for the students to generate new perspectives on their experiences, to learn new ways of "reading the world" (Freire, 1972, 1973), creating articulations between the lived experience of being a student and the formal academic tasks of theoretical work, between life and learning. This is our understanding of the ubiquitous phrase "critical thinking" which is advocated as the central task of university study and provides the pedagogical orientation for apprentice researchers.

Methodology and Process
Participants
The project was conducted under the leadership of the authors of this article, Peace Kiguwa and Jill Bradbury, from the department of psychology, School of Human and Community Development at Wits. Five young women students were identified as co-researchers. The team members were Ayanda Khumalo, Mabogoshi Matlala, Hlengiwe Mchunu, Daphney Mogopudi and Zandile Ngubeni. We wish to acknowledge their active participation in the project, collection of extremely valuable data and their insightful analysis of the university world, both in the creative process of photographic documentation and in the next layer of interpretation. For this reason, the usual convention of anonymity in research participants has not been observed, with the permission of the participants who wish to assert their voices here in the text.

Two of the women were from the psychology honours class, the only two black African women in this cohort. The remaining members of the group were all participants in the International Human Rights Exchange (IHRE) Programme. Participants were therefore selected in terms of three primary criteria: 1) proven undergraduate academic track record indicative of potential future contributions as intellectuals and researchers; 2) disciplinary area: the question of identity is central to programmes of study in psychology and human rights; 3) marginalized gendered identities: the project created an opportunity to engage young African women in research, encouraging this under-represented target group to participate in knowledge production and to consider research careers.

The Process of data collection: interpreting and documenting the world

We held a series of seminars and workshops, mostly over weekends, constrained by timetables and the long distances that some members of the group had to travel daily to and from campus. Even in these logistical practicalities, the structural effects of gender and "race" made their impact felt: working in the evenings was simply not an option for the group due to the risks for women travelling long distances to apartheid dormitory townships at night. The reading programme for these seminars was of necessity modest as all of the students were in their final year of study and the demands of their formal studies increased as the year progressed. All students in the group had previously completed modules on gender and sexuality as part of their degree studies, and were therefore able to bring a relatively high level of theoretical and conceptual engagement into discussions. We read and discussed papers about action research (e.g. Maguire, 2000) and narrative theory (e.g. Freeman, 2003) and university policy documents about equity and transformation. Quite early in the process, we settled on visual autobiography (Squire, 2011) or reflexive photography (Schulze, 2007) as a methodological approach. Squire's work in the UK suggests ways in which narrative methodologies might be augmented by visual methodologies, particularly where the focus is space and place. Schulze's project documented the experiences of white, male academics at the University of Pretoria, identifying aspects of the physical world that had symbolic significance for this group's attachment to academia and their sense that their power was being eroded by processes of institutional transformation. Our project raised a question as a counterpoint to this study: if academic spaces are documented from an-other perspective, from the perspective of black women students, what dimensions of power, belonging and loss might then emerge? We began working with a professional photographer and film-maker, Iris Dawn Parker, who offered basic photography skills workshops and facilitated critical discussions about the personal and political possibilities of documenting the world in images.

Institutional collaboration and Audiences

One of the stated aims of the project was to engage young women not only in research but also in activism, seeking to impact upon institutional culture. The

Transformation Office[1] of the University was a supportive collaborative partner and the Wits Arts and Language Experience (WALE), an annual festival in the faculty of Humanities, provided a focal point for the preparation of the work to be communicated to a wider institutional audience of fellow academics and students. The process of learning to attend to the world in new ways, to "see" the world (Sontag, 1966) and document these experiences, entailed layers of interpretation for multiple audiences: 1) individual participants photographing their worlds and writing up journal entries, "private" documents for the self, textualising experiences that are usually simply lived, and in the process "rewriting the self" (Freeman, 2003); 2) the sharing of these texts in the research team, exploring lines of similarity, thinking about how individual stories articulate with wider social stories; 3) the selection of particular storylines and images for presentation at the Africa Gender Institute workshop in Cape Town with the other participating universities (Universities of Cape Town, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe) in which important points of similarity and critical contextual differences emerged in dialogue; 4) the Wits university audience for the exhibition which included members of the hierarchy of university management, academic teachers and students, all sharing the common identity of "witsies" but quite differently positioned and interpellated (Althusser, 2000) by that identity.

These different audiences, both imagined in anticipation and in their engagement with the images and texts produced, created and shaped the telling and re-telling of the students' experiences (Reissman, 2008). The process therefore entailed an adaptation of Freire's (1972) generative codes which, in our case, were generated by the learning community themselves, rather than created by educators, creating texts for conscientising ourselves and others. Iris Dawn Parker, who worked alongside us in the process, enabling these beginner photographers to develop both technical skills and critical acuity in generating the images, curated the final WALE exhibition in April 2011. From her "outsider" position as neither a formal member of Wits staff, nor a South African, she provided an important "audience" in the process, requiring articulation of things that might otherwise have been taken-for-granted, encouraging the team to see the world through new lenses, to articulate it in new ways. Iris coined a new interpretation of the "witsie" identity, seeing an acronym that none of us had spotted, "Women

Intellectuals Transforming Scholarship in Education" which became a new thread for weaving our identities within the institution. Her comment on final products of words and images for the exhibition reflects the impact created:

> The work of the student photographers has exceeded my expectations. These emerging scholars have produced images that reflect a wide range of experiences and fire the imagination. By capturing and recording brilliant moments and personal experiences, the students have contributed to documentation and history making. They have occupied the academic space and through that process and this exhibition are sharing their perspectives with peers, mentors, the academic community and the world at large. Making the exhibition has been a process of engagement with family, with political student activists, with academics, and with fellow South Africans, even on the long taxi rides to and from campus.

Intersectionality

The project was framed in terms of our recognition of the intersectionality of identity. Although the explicit focus of the Africa Gender Institute project was on gendered experiences of university studies, more particularly, on questions of sexuality and reproductive health, we proceeded on the understanding that women are always "more than (just) women" and that the selection of a single dimension of identity as most salient is always contextually contingent and fluid (Ndlovu, 2012). The initial phase of the process was therefore very open and unstructured, with participants themselves identifying the critical dimensions of their university experience to be documented and interpreted.

The first sets of images reflected fragmentation and multiplicities of experiences across the group but also for each individual woman. The narrative accounts of the images entailed attempts at coherence, both diachronic, linking the images to tell a story of movement in time, and synchronic, across multiple roles and dimensions of identity (McAdams, 2000). These stories revealed home as a territory that one leaves (Billington et al, 1998) and the future as aspirational, as a destination. University is quintessentially a transitional space, a liminal identity, away from the home of childhood, orientated towards the future of adulthood. The accounts of the student experience made evident the multiple roles enacted by these young women, often contradictory and entailing simultaneously centred, insider and outsider "other" positionings: home and away, women and students, black

and upwardly mobile, "witsies" and yet not. These lines of (dis)identification are complex and fluid, requiring constant negotiation.

"Race" and Class

The first forays out with the simple instruction to "photograph your experiences of being a student" produced accounts that primarily focused on the racialised spaces of the university. Despite the enabling contexts of constitutional democracy and institutional policies, the group described their experiences at university as highly racialised. The *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (Soudien, 2008) made it evident that participation in the sector as a whole remains racially skewed, that the apartheid profile of institutions catering primarily for distinct "race" groups remains relatively intact and that practices and experiences within institutions are characterised by racism and a lack of thorough-going transformation. Soudien (2008) has argued that universities are historically "white spaces". The Schulze project at the University of Pretoria provides the perspective of white, male academics and their perceived loss of power and sense of belonging in the context of institutional transformation. However, the perspective of the young black women students in our team, suggest that these power dynamics have been less radically altered or eroded.

Figure 1: Racialised spaces: Ayanda Khumalo

> Ayanda: ... racial division still occurs and people do not talk about it but by observing student culture and tendencies such as the places where they relax when not busy, one begins to see these dynamics. ... When one walks from the Matrix building to Senate House ... the dominant race is Black, students sitting in large groups smoking hubbly bubbly. Moving towards the grass, it is mainly white students who are playing soccer, sitting under the trees or playing in the pond. As you move up the steps ... Indian students in large groups, likely to be playing cards.

It was particularly sobering for us to hear from students who had attended "Model C" schools that their experience of university had re-racialised their social spaces rather than diversifying their relationships. However, the Wits of today is in some ways dramatically different to its racially homogenous white history and access for all "races" is open on the basis of academic merit. This meritocratic system is highly valued by the students, who recognise even their entry into the university as an achievement, as a mark of academic success.

> Daphney: It was always my dream to study at this university, this opportunity was an honour and a privilege and it marked a new phase in my life and identity.

> Mabogoshi: ... it is a prestigious university where an excellent club of students are accepted.

However, achieving entry is of course only the starting place and the students commented on persistent financial anxieties throughout their studies.

Figure 2: Gaining Entry: Mabogoshi Matlala

Mabogoshi: … the glass doors at the university offer an illusion of transparency in the system whereas if one takes a closer look inside, one finds that doors of learning are only half-open and financial means serves a transparent exclusionary measure.

Daphney: In order to study at an institution like Wits you have to be able to pay fees, buy books, pay for photocopying, transport money and residential fees. For me, the lack of sufficient financial resources was the most challenging part of being a student in this institution. The challenge was not simply about doing the assignments well but included constant anxiety of having sufficient funds to print the assignment.

The rhetoric of increasing access both in terms of entry into the institution and what Morrow (2009) has termed "epistemological access" for academic success is a pre-eminent objective of the university which prides itself on balancing the objectives of excellence and equity, aiming to transform the institution into a place that all "can call their own". This is however a complex process and historical inequities of "race" and class intertwine in the narratives of these students who ambivalently experience access and exclusion.

Figure 3: Wasting Time: Daphney Mogopudi

Daphney: Transport-related difficulties have been at the core of my most memorable experiences and encounters. Manoeuvring from home to school, part-time jobs and NGOs where I was volunteering, required frequent use of public transport. This involved long queues waiting for transport and spending approximately four to five hours on the road every day. By the time I got home I was usually exhausted and ready to call it a day.

Ayanda: Leaving university late would mean being stuck in long queues at the bus stop or at the Bree taxi rank ... This strips one from having the ability to fully enjoy what university has to offer (outside lectures and tutorials) and also a chance to make new friends.

The students did not feel that the university always takes these more subtle forms of exclusion on the basis of class seriously and recognised that the fight for transformation is not over. The spaces of political action were described as integral and defining of their university experience, including for one participant, a formal role in student governance:

Zandile: ... Constant engagement with University staff and management made it clear that some battles were better fought militantly as well as intellectually. Having to play dual positions in one space, often left me tired but the experiences were priceless.

Ayanda: This is the place [the steps of the Great Hall] where people gather when there are strikes on campus, a place where you can meet up with friends when lectures are over and also the prestigious place that you take pictures after you graduate.

Figure 4: Student Protest: Zandile Ngubeni

Identifications of class and "race" might supercede other hierarchical divisions within the university and in this context, student or intellectual identity is secondary.

Figure 5: Solidarity: Daphney Mogopudi

Gender and sexuality: space and embodiment

In this section we present an analysis of space, focusing on the issue of sexual safety on campus. We discuss the role of space, not only as subsequent to the social or structured by symbolic power but as constitutive of such symbolic social power. Our argument is thus grounded on the idea that social space is integral to the production of gendered identities and subjectivities. One way that such production occurs is through personal negotiation of social and material spaces imbued with power differentials. According to feminist geographer Doreen Massey, space is not an independent dimension but rather "constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'" (1994: 2). We briefly discuss the consequences of such a gendered system for identity and interaction.

We use the term "body" to refer to the biological and social character of the person and "embodiment" as defined by "perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas, 1994: 12). Thus, we are here concerned with *embodied space,* that nexus where both human experience and consciousness come to assume both material and spatial form.

The spaces which our bodies occupy, and the simultaneous perceptions and experience of those spaces are intertwined in multiple social and psychological networks of meaning. In this sense, Bryan Turner, as early as 1984 argued that biological reductionism prevents meaningful analysis of how the body is inherently both social and cultural. Likewise, Pandolfi (1990) asserts that the biological and psychological do not produce gendered body spaces but rather it is *the inscription of the socio-political and cultural* on the body that are significant in such production and representations. Feminists, theorizing on the female body have explored this notion further by highlighting not only the varied forms of positionality and inscription of women's bodies but also how the body itself may become a site for action and agency (see Haraway, 1991).

The images below depict spatial sites of location that reflect participants' concerns and anxieties at the ways the female [and non-feminine] body is excluded from public space, particularly how the actual and "potential" threat of sexual violence works to control women's participation not just within the academic enterprise but also the social field more generally. In this way both the passive and active presence of hegemonic masculinity effectively works to maintain domination of space and controls the movement of women within these spaces that in turn impacts their academic citizenship. The team produced several images of spaces on campus associated with anxiety about gendered based violence; a few illustrative examples are presented here.

Figure 6: Safe Zone? Mabogoshi Matlala

The image above depicts the drop-off location for students at a student residence situated in downtown Johannesburg's Hillbrow. It is a mixed student residence occupied by both male and female students from the University of the Witwatersrand. The residence is a self-catering unit and is primarily occupied by undergraduate students. The photograph above was taken by one of two participants who lived in this residence and was a trigger for several similar stories about personal safety, both on and around campus, particularly for women students. Although students utilize the free Wits bus service each day to travel to and from campus, this drop-off zone is the space that must be crossed between the relatively safe university spaces, the bus and the residence itself and has been the scene of violent attacks. The idea of the residence as a place of belonging as "home" is undermined by these fears and anxieties. While inside the residence is considered a relatively secure space, the sense of being barricaded against the community in which the residence is located re-inscribes the material and symbolic distance between academia and "ordinary" life, between intellectuals and "ordinary" people. The student residents of this particular residence feel that they are "looked down upon by most Wits students as they are stereotypically branded to be hooligans if they are male students and promiscuous if they are female students … it's coined "hell-bro"!" (Mabogoshi).

Figure 7: (In)Security: Mabogoshi Matlala

Symbols of (in)security such as this bolted door are definitive of life in South Africa; the university is not a distinct enclave but part of this wider social world, a world that remains racialised and fraught with extremely high levels of gender-based violence. Significant practices of academic citizenship, utilizing library facilities in the evening, participating in study groups after hours, participating in student club events on campus in the evening, have to be negotiated in relation to this gendered anxiety about personal safety. "Even after years of democracy, as a woman, you cannot walk freely without fearing for your safety" (Ayanda).

Figure 8: Free to walk? Peace Kiguwa

The image above depicts a tunnel situated near the Wits Theatre, the location of a specific altercation for one of us that instantiated the importance of both gender and sexuality in navigating specific spaces on campus. The threat of violence, not only compounded by her gender as a woman but also as a lesbian, illustrated the often invisible and at times ambiguous experience of occupying material space that reflect power differentials.

> Peace: Following a late show at the Wits Theatre, a female friend and I were standing in the parking lot just outside the tunnel when we were accosted by a group of rowdy and very drunk young men. Although they had initially walked past us, one of them suddenly turns back and speaking directly to me and pointing at my friend tells me to "fuck her". His mates also stop and with hoots and cheers seem to egg me on and that is when

> it dawns on me that not only have I been mistaken for a man, but was also caught up in some form of amorous pursuit with my female companion. In that instance, these drunken men seemed to be participating in what they perceived to be a "male bonding" practice of encouraging me, as a man, to make my move, so to speak. It equally dawns on me that I cannot 'give the game away', that is reveal my identity as female for fear of violence but more than that the very possible realization that if I wasn't 'lesbian', I was engaging in some kind of 'gender-bending' (by virtue of my attire and style as 'non-female'). I shake my head at them (with a smile) and they move on with a parting shot: "Get your game on bra!", confirming my suspicion that I had been mistaken for a man.

The images presented in this section and their particular meanings for the participants demonstrate how hegemonic bodies, the masculine and heterosexual body, are extended and come to take on an omnipresent *facticity* that is accomplished, either through violence or the threat of violence. In the latter sense, violence does not require actual enactment in order to effectively control movement of "feminised" and/or "queer" bodies. Violence is inherent in [heterosexual] space – that implicitly marginalizes and creates specific [gendered] bodies. In his classic text *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) makes the point that habits of the body implicitly produce both cultural features and social structure. His notion of *habitus* is used to describe the simultaneous inscription of the body, mind and emotions as part of the self and to explain the intricate ways that social status comes to be embodied in our lives. Feminists expanding on this approach to embodiment have referred to a "gendered habitus" that is created through the coordination of bodily practices and social dispositions with gendered subjectivity (Skeggs, 2004). The photographs presented illustrate participants' production within specific spaces on campus as "vulnerable women" and further, inscribe dominant, heteronormative modes of being within those spaces. The implications for women's active participation within the academic and social fields of the university are highlighted as problematic and a site for further engagement.

Ambivalence and Agency

The student researchers' accounts of the world of university study reveal how ostensibly innocent spaces are deeply inscribed by social structures and unequally experienced. This points to the extraordinary violence of ordinary life in a deeply

unequal society. In much the same way that "everyday racism" (Hayes,1998) continues to surface in multiple ways, so too everyday practices reinscribe gendered and heteronormative exclusions and constrain participation. However, it also clearly evident that this group of young women students have been successful at finding fault-lines in these structures that allow for movement and both personal and social transformation. Identifications are ambivalent: critique of the institution in no way precludes an agentic interpretation of their lives as students and personal pride in academic achievements.

Figure 9: Aspiration: Daphney Mogopudi

Daphney: Wits University has added value to my life and changed the way in which I view life. It has made me an independent thinker who is able to analyze my world critically. I believe that I can do anything I want as long as I put effort into it. Most of all it taught me that I should be the change and innovation I want to see in the world.

Hlengiwe: Coming from a township school and suddenly going for my practicals in an actual science laboratory, using the internet whenever I wished and having access to big libraries was very exciting for me. It was my dream come true.

Mabogoshi: From someone who was unable to express herself in tuts for fear of being laughed at or misunderstood to having my own tutorial group that I aim to nurture – hardwork and determination builds character. But most importantly, I have learnt that you are only a failure if you allow low marks that you may get along the way to dictate who you can become.

This sense of movement was not only about personal achievement or individual progress and is reflected also in comments about the ways in which new forms of social practices and interactions became possible at university.

Zandile: But with that came the realization that as a young woman in a student political organization I had to quickly reconcile whether it was a place for me, as it was predominately male. Or would I allow myself to fade into the background? Having to juggle my academic and student responsibilities proved to be a little more than I could handle at times. The responsibility I carried on my shoulders often took its toll and came with the realization that sometimes attempting to solve the world's problems results in your own, accumulating. In addition, to add to the stress, I was not just a student, but I was a black woman student, placing extra demands on me to prove my skills and abilities time and again.

Mabogoshi: The diversity and vibrancy of Wits life was something totally alien to me, interacting with people from various walks of life, different races and religions. Based on my background with my family I realize that my parents and grandparents had a different experience with white people than me. So for me it was like "no!" And I remember when I came here I was talking to this friend of mine and I remember saying, I wish my grandmother could see me now. I'm speaking to white people and what not". They'd be very scared.

In addition, anxieties about sexual safety and the gendered quality of university spaces, were juxtaposed with even greater constraints in these respects in "home" spaces, suggesting that being a student has offered new vantage points for rethinking taken-for-granted roles and possibilities for new versions of identities that may have seemed fixed.

Zandile: I had managed to find my own special way to show that young women were a force to be reckoned with.

Figure 10: Women in Leadership: Zandile Ngubeni

Hlengiwe: Being a University student offers me an environment in which I can express my femininity without fear of being ridiculed or judged. I find myself wearing outfits that I am not supposed to wear elsewhere which makes me a different kind of woman. In many ways, I am a woman who is free and knows no boundaries as a university student.

Figure 11: Freedom of Expression: Hlengiwe Mchunu

Hlengiwe: There are many signs of gender equality on campus; this picture [inside the residence earlier described as "hell-bro"!] is an example thereof and it gives me hope that things can change. This, however, does not extend beyond the walls of our institution. In the "real world", women prepare the food, they take care of everything and everyone in the home and most importantly, they groom the younger generation of women into the same role.

Figure 12: Bending Roles: Hlengiwe Mchunu

Reflexivity and conclusions

We are both experienced academics, steeped in the world that we wanted to look at through the eyes of our students and we share a common commitment to inclusivity in the academy. Our lines of insider / outsider status vary: one author is a well-established Witsie; one is a newcomer to the institution; one is higher up in the institutional structures, the other more junior but with a long academic employment history. Our positioning along the lines of "race" and sexuality differs but is shared in terms of gender. These lines of identification and difference (Hall, 2000) made for fluid (dis)connections between us and with the students. Our participation in the project was fuelled by the desire for our students to follow us into academia as co-producers of knowledge, at the very least into higher levels of postgraduate studies. Barriers to this longer term, overarching objective were encountered at the end of the project, despite the highly creative and "successful" results within the confines of the project. Although all the students graduated, only one of the students continued into an honours programme at Wits in 2011 and then on into Master's in 2012. One student "just missed" the cut-off for entry into honours, proceeded with applied training in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), the field in which she now works. For another, despite the ostensible commitment of the institution to graduateness and full academic citizenship, the tensions between student politics and studies, meant that she had to continue with her honours studies (now successfully completed) at another institution and is currently working towards a master's degree. For the two psychology students, who both performed well in their honours year, the obstacle to master's level study was quantitative methods. The definition of research in the discipline is premised on the pre-eminence of these masculine modes of knowledge production, reinscribing the earlier exclusionary effects of gendered and racialised access to maths in South African schools and precluding different commitments and research questions – this is an African feminist issue!

Essed's (2004, 2005) concept of "cloning" in organisational cultures, including institutions of higher education suggests that rather than opening pathways for new enquiry and knowledge construction we may be effectively gate-keeping and seeking to reproduce others in our own image. However, despite exclusion from these higher levels of study at Wits, the four students who left the institution have not stopped engaging in the world of ideas and

critical action: they are studying for higher degrees part-time and engaged in political and community activism through political structures and in the NGO sector. These are without doubt, success stories and we are confident that these young women will go on to make important contributions to transforming our social world. The project has enabled us to learn from marginalised subjects how to read a world that we belong to, through using a visual medium with which we were not familiar. This provokes us to continue creatively finding ways to teach for transgression (bell hooks, 1994).

Endnotes

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