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Selahle, Nhlanhla

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POLS7013A – MA Political Studies Research Report FT-2024-FYR

Research Report for a master's degree by coursework and research report

Name: Nhlanhla

Surname: Selahle

Student ID: 1947463

Faculty: Humanities

Advisor: Dr Daryl Glaser

THE REJECTION OF LOW-WAGE WORK BY YOUNG URBAN BLACK SOUTH AFRICANS AMIDST SOUTH AFRICA'S UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS

Johannesburg, 30 March 2025

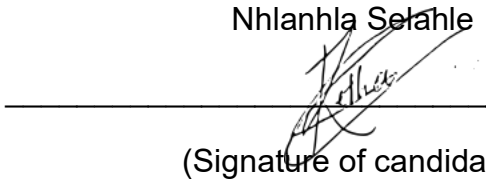
Thesis Statement

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Studies

Candidate's Declaration

I Nhlanhla Selahle declare that this Research Report is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

Nhlanhla Selahle



(Signature of candidate)

30th day of March 2025 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Dedication

This research report is written in dedication to my parents who have lived their lives to ensure that I have access to the opportunities that they were denied as young people raised in the township of Orlando, Johannesburg. Thank you for desiring better for me and making the sacrifices necessary for me to lead a better life. To my mother, Nelisiwe Hlatshwayo thank you for always pushing me to be the best version of myself.

In loving memory of my father

Mohlopheki Selahle

1967 - 2012

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Daryl Glaser, my supervisor, for guiding my research journey and providing valuable critique. I'd also like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my mother and sister who have supported me throughout research journey and entertained my philosophical debates for the past 2 years.

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Introduction

Problem Statement

Why are young black South Africans choosing not to take on low-wage jobs despite being directly impacted by accelerating unemployment rates and generational poverty in the townships? This is an interesting question to position because financial security ,in the eyes of economists, is thought to be the main motivator for individual participation in the labour market. If we assume this to be a rational action on the part of the individual, there must be stronger variables outside of the considerations of economists of the realist persuasion shaping the decisions young urban South Africans make regarding their place and participation in the formal labour market. This research report serves to identify the socio-economic motivators of young township inhabitants in South Africa, beyond the financial motivations identified by economists. I argue that indeed, the rejection of low wage work is a rational choice because there is a lexicon of social, political and historical factors that shape the economic decisions of young black township inhabitants.

The manner in which we define the rejection of low wage work by the unemployed will be challenged as greater thought needs to be given to the language used to describe the agency exercised by young black urban South Africans regarding how they show up in the formal labour market? I am studying this because I am a young black South African whose lineage traces back to the townships for at least 5 generations. I am disheartened by the deteriorating condition of communities I consider to be my home and the spirit of hopelessness that has consumed my peers. I don't believe that assuming that young urban South Africans are simply lazy is a useful nor sufficient explanation for why some township youth choose not to take on low wage work or make the decision, whether consciously or not, not to participate in the formal labour market.

I argue that the positioning of laziness as the reason for high unemployment or the rejection of low wage work, is rooted in Apartheid hegemonic beliefs and demonstrates a complete disregard for the native value sets of black South Africans and how they have evolved in the post-colonial construct of the township. In presenting the rejection of low wage work as a rational action this report will highlight

respectability politics, agency, conspicuous consumption, familial responsibilities and the pursuit of ‘the good life’ among other social concepts identified and highlighted by various authors in the literature who have engaged with unemployed youth from townships across Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town.

This research report serves as a literature review bringing forth a consolidated view of the arguments made by authors in the field regarding South Africa’s youth unemployment crisis and the rejection of low wage, framed by some as ‘job shyness’. I have not conducted any field work however I critically engage with the literature that does exist from an insider perspective, having been raised in the township and having been raised within this unique cultural context rather than being introduced to it as an observer. The arguments recorded in this research report are generalisations made from field work and academic literature produced by other others within the field across different township localities. The primary authors whose work is referenced in this research report are Christine Jeske and Hannah Dawson.

South Africa’s Youth Unemployment Crisis

In the final quarter of 2024, the national unemployment rate in South Africa was announced as 31.9%, with a total of 8 million South Africans being unemployed (The Presidency, 2025). Youth unemployment stood at 44,6% at the time according to Stats SA with a total of 4.7 million young people in South Africa being unemployed. Simultaneously the number of individuals who are economically inactive increased, making up 39.7% of South Africa’s working age population. 37.3% of this demographic is made up of students and 21% is made up of discouraged job seekers. From these statistics it is clear that while unemployment rates may be decreasing due to a portion of the population securing employment, a greater number of people have migrated from being job seekers to being classified as ‘not economically active’ with 44 000 of these individuals becoming students and 111 000 becoming discouraged job seekers, these two categories are solely responsible for the increase in the number of not economically active persons as all other classifications remained the same or decreased in Q4 of 2024 (Maluleke, 2024).

Within the framework of the national unemployment crisis young black South Africans are a particularly vulnerable demographic, consistently having some of the highest unemployment rates of all the demographic groups within the nation. Youth ,also referred to as young people, for the purposes of this research paper shall be defined as individuals between the ages of 14 and 35 years as per the National Youth Commission Act of 1996. This definition is used as it is aligned with the reporting utilised in national statistics when reporting on youth unemployment. In 2024 39,4% of 25- to 34-year-olds were recorded as unemployed, a figure which increases to 59,6% for individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (Maluleke, 2024). This becomes a significantly alarming figure when considering that unemployment rates do not include individuals who are currently full time students or those what are not actively seeking employment. The unemployment rate for Black Africans was reported as 35,8% as of Q4 2024, as compared to the national average of 31,9%, 22,3% among coloured people, 14% among Indians/Asians, and only 6,7% for white people. When considering the subject of unemployment through these variables it is clear that the intersectionality of race and age places young black South Africans at the bottom of the food chain in the labour market (IMF, 2020).

Black Urban Townships as a Study Area

The geographical focus of this research report is the predominantly black townships of South Africa's major metropolitan cities of Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban. Townships for the purposes of this research paper shall be defined as the underserved urban residential areas established by the white minority government for exclusive occupation by non-white residents, primarily African, Coloured and Indian people, through the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Regulations for the Administration and Control of Townships in Black Areas (Proclamation R293 of 1962), amongst other geographic segregation policies of the time (Pernegger and Godehart, 2007) . In this research paper we will focus ,in accordance with the existing literature, on predominantly Black African townships located in the Gauteg, KwaZulu Natal and Western Cape provinces.

Township communities have been identified as an area of study in part because they have some of the highest rates of unemployment within urban areas, as indicated in

the Gauteng City-Region Observatory Quality of Life Survey. Townships such as Soshanguve, Mamelodi, Hammanskraal, and Khutsong have unemployment rates in excess of 50%. Tembisa, Mabopane, Orange Farm, Tsakane, Katlehong and Sebokeng have come to be labelled as unemployment hotspots as these townships have unemployment rates above 80% (Modiba et al, 2024).

The intersectionality of the demographic elements of race and age, as well as unemployment rates and spatial distribution of communities in the post-Apartheid economy, places young unemployed black townships inhabitants as the centre of debates regarding unemployment. Assumptions in public discourse are made that by virtue of being poor, black township inhabitants should demonstrate a greater willingness to participate in the formal economy through low wage work. In the body of this report I expand on some of the social expectations placed upon black township youth regarding their economic participation, and the roots of these expectations in anti-black and classist hegemonic beliefs. This paper evaluates the rejection of low-wage work by young black township inhabitants, an action which may be perceived as irrational in economic terms. The rejection of low-wage works shall be defined as a decision to leave existing employment or not pursue employment within the low wage labour market. Low wage work refers to low-skill jobs that pay at or below the annual minimum wage including entry level jobs in domestic, farm, wholesale, retail, cleaning and construction work amongst others.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study in the form of a literature review, concerned with the rejection of low wage work by a demographic experiencing very high unemployment rates. Data is collected through a literature review of existing work on unemployment and job-shyness specifically in South Africa. My contribution to the field through an analysis of work on the subjects studied by the various authors in the field is to provide a consolidated view of the rationale behind the rejection of low-wage work by young black township inhabitants. This methodology has been selected as there is substantial existing literature on the subject containing engagements with subjects from townships across the country. It has also been

selected due to time constraints, as I am a part-time student working full time outside of my field of study.

I interpret and contextualise the work of authors such as Jeske and Dawson from the perspective a young black South African. I have spent different parts of my life residing in and frequenting the township. ignificant attention will be given to the language of the township on the purpose of work and how we define success, using etymology as a basis to understand the rational choice of rejecting low wage on an individual, societal and institutional level for young black people from the township. As such my intent is not to problematise unemployment or the rejection of low-wage work by young black township inhabitants but rather to position this as a rational choice within the landscape of the unique history, demography, spatial design and economic standing of the township within the greater city.

Literature Review

The primary author on the rejection of low-wage work in South Africa engaged with in this literature review is Christine Jeske, who challenges what she calls the “laziness myth” and the concept of the “good life”, which is deemed in her work as the reason why people engage in economic activity. She captures the experience of young black South Africans in the township of Mpophomeni KwaZulu Natal, participating in the formal labour market well in her book saying, “In this picture, employment scarcely overlaps with the good life at all. In this way of thinking of the world, jobs are likely to be painful and disappointing in various ways – much about work detracts from what makes life good. People expect to have little chance of finding jobs that improve their lives. Jobs may be a necessary part of life, but not the part that makes life good. There are certainly ways to achieve the good life, but probably not through work.” (Jeske, 2020, p.9) Christine identifies township youths who make a conscious decision not to participate in the formal labour market through low-wage work and the alternative activities they do choose to participate in, in the pursuit of a good life. According to Jeske, respect within the value set of young black South Africans takes precedence over employment. For Bullet, a young man who dropped out of law school as a consequence of not feeling belonging, the good life was enshrined by

gangsters in the movies he watched as a child, who had the money, the cars, the girls, the guns and the respect. Not the lawyer, as he goes on to state that no one dreams of being the lawyer (Jeske, 2020, p.2). While acknowledging that the ‘fast life’ may results in death or prison, Bullet posits that the risk is worth it, for the chance at a good life. His assertion seems all the more rational as Jeske notes that it is rare for people from the township to achieve the good life through employment.

Not all alternatives to employment involve illegal activity, moreover. A rather interesting respondent she engages with is a young lady named Jabu, who begins their interactions by describing her father as an individual who has, ‘never, ever worked in his life’ (Jeske, 2020, p.26) . Despite this assertion, she goes on to describe a man who provided for his family, paid for his children’s education in what would be described as model c schools, operated as a mechanic, owned taxis and started a farm in his garden which went on to employ three other people. This descriptor that Jabu uses highlights how when discussing the unemployment of black people in South Africa, the lines between the terms work and employment are often blurred, if not completely ignored. I’m inclined to view this not merely as an oversight but as insidious, as Jeske highlights that hegemonic assumptions of laziness thrust upon black people are rooted in racism, as the negative perceptions placed upon unemployed black youths often do not extend to their white counterparts. This conflating of employment with work also ignores the types of economic participation which exist outside of the white domain. Within black communities exists an entire economy which emerged to provide for the economic demands of the township and its black residents, during Apartheid as they were deliberately excluded from many forms of participation in the formal economy. This economy, whether described as an informal, township or black economy, persists to this day and does indeed constitute work. In challenging the assertion of black people as lazy, Jeske highlights that Jabu’s dad, ‘was not staying at home avoiding work because he or people who resembled him are lazy, he was refusing indignities endemic to white spaces, and sculpting a life of respect in his own community.’ (Jeske, 2020, p28) Jabu’s dad did indeed work, in fact he was an entrepreneur who created employment opportunities for others within his community, but he was perceived negatively by white society and unfortunately his own daughter because he was never employed. What is encouraging is that Jabu evolves to change her opinion. Where she was once a child

ashamed of the potatoes her father came to sell at a market day at school which he had grown in his own garden, she grows into an adult who states, “my dad’s a real hard worker” and comes to respect his decision not to participate in the formal economy (Jeske, 2020, p28).

Similarly Hannah Dawson’s work on conspicuous consumption and social mobility in South Africa identifies some of the economic activity black township youths engage in as a means of generating income, some having been unsuccessful in finding employment and others consciously rejecting participation in the formal labour market through low wage work. While the idea of pursuing “the good life” persists, the reality is characterised by conspicuous consumption, debt and accusations of “faking it” made by the subjects of Dawson’s study against peers in their township who are more privileged or the black middle class with its luxury cars, frequenting the social hubs of the township on weekends seeking out entertainment and external validation (Dawson, 2022, p.145-162). The young township inhabitants of Zandspruit, Johannesburg see no true path to the good life as they similarly critique the employed alongside those engaged in the informal economy or criminal activity, as faking it. For the former this critique indicates that they are living a life style well beyond their means afforded through credit and for the latter it means while their money allows them to parade certain luxuries in the township, it is not enough to get them out of the township. I look to the perspectives of the youth of Zandspruit to speak to the disenfranchisement of township youth with the formal labour market and low wage employment as a path to achieving financial security, social mobility and achieving the good life while meeting ones social responsibilities. The critiques made by these young men against black people in a relative position of privilege, whether residing in or outside of the township, suggests that from their perspective there is no real good life for black people.

John Spyropoulos’ doctoral thesis on money and the moral economy of the youth of Khayelitsha, a black in township in the city of Cape Town, is the most closely aligned with the objectives of my research report. Spyropoulos successfully contextualizes the unique social environment within which young township inhabitants make their choices regarding labour participation or are pushed into different employment statuses (Spyropoulos, 2022). In this body of work he acknowledges the limitations in

how we measure employment and how it may be an inaccurate reflection of the economic reality of ‘employed’ South Africans. In particular, identifying how a significant portion of the individuals reported as employed are seasonally employed, underemployed or do not earn liveable wages, which is especially true for low-wage workers. He comments on the social perspective of township inhabitants during the Apartheid era on crime as a more respectable occupation that low wage employment at the hands of white ‘masters’. I agree with Spyropoulos that the rejection of low-wage work is based on motivations of consumption and status, but I suggest that it also serves as a form of protest against the oppression of the Apartheid state and the inequality that persists today. I argue that many of the Apartheid era township perspectives on low wage work and crime persist today, evolving into different forms as class dynamics overtake racial factors in informing the types of crime black township inhabitants participate in. I build upon Spyropoulos’ work to argue that low wage employment does not provide workers with any more financial security or social mobility than unemployment or labour market participation through the informal economy would.

Nattrass and Seekings in their work on class, race and inequality in South Africa identify how the current social, economic and political landscape of the nation has been shaped by Apartheid, acknowledging that while segregation as a policy of governance is no longer, it’s structural and systematic implications continue to be felt. They identify class as the principal determinant of social mobility and acknowledge the strong correlation with race, as a consequence of the economic policies of Apartheid. Given the lack of transformative restructuring of the economy and it's instruments, they highlight economic growth in post-Apartheid South Africa as primarily benefitting the privileged classes, this is aligned with assertions made by later authors in the field, who argue that the gap between classes is widening and the black majority do not have tangible paths to economic stability and social mobility. This is a sentiment echoed by the youth of Zandspruit in Dawson’s work (Dawson, 2022). While acknowledging the policies employed by the post-Apartheid government to address systematic inequality, Nattrass and Seekings state that these policies have been of little impact. On the labour participation choices of black youth they assert that the pay and working conditions which characterise low wage employment, were viewed as unattractive and unaligned with the economic goals of black youth

during the early democratic period, an observation that I link to the work of other authors who acknowledge that the rejection of low wage work existed as early as the colonial period and persists to this day (Nattrass & Seekings, 2005).

I build upon the work of these authors amongst others who have contributed to the study of unemployment in South Africa to provide a consolidated view of arguments on why some young black South African youths are consciously rejecting participation in the formal labour market through low-wage work. I use some of the elements of their interviews with live subjects to identify the language of the township and what it indicates about the perspective of young black South Africans on low wage work, social mobility and the post-Apartheid economy. This research paper aims to build upon the determinants of the labour participation choices identified by the authors in the field and un-problematize the rejection of low wage work by young black township inhabitants. My intent is to brings us to question how we measure employment within the literature, why many aspects of the township economy are ignored and why we expect we expect the marginalized groups in South Africa to take on low wage work despite acknowledging that this form of labour participation does not provide a viable path out of poverty. I hope to shine a positive light on the informal activities pursued by the young black youth of South Africa's townships, or at least bring academics to acknowledge the agency and rationality employed by this demographic, while also legitimizing the perspective of the unemployed youth of South Africa's townships on the economy, inequality and employment.

I argue that a portion of South Africa's young black unemployed township residents are rejecting low wage work in favour of seeking out better economic opportunities in the formal economy, careers aligned to their pursuit of self-actualization, entrepreneurship, participation in the informal economy or illegal economic activities due to a number of historical, social, structural and spatial variables which disadvantage them within the formal labour market and make low wage employment an inadequate path to financial security or social mobility. Based on these factors, choosing unemployment over low-wage employment or underemployment becomes a rational choice for many black youths of the townships of the cities of Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Are young township inhabitants rejecting low wage work?

I suggest that a portion of South Africa's working age population which is statistically classified as unemployed or 'not actively seeking work' is attributable to the rejection of low wage work by young black people, especially in the case of the townships. Spyropoulos in his work notes that there is a segment of unemployed township youth who leave low wage jobs in favour of unemployment, with the hopes of finding better employment opportunities. He argues that this rejection of low wage despite not having other available job prospects is based on the anxiety and insecurity felt when employed in low-wage work. The young respondents Spyropoulos engages with from the township of Khayelitsha in Cape Town, generally felt that their wages were insufficient to meet their financial obligations and social desire for performative consumption (Spyropoulos, 2022).

The experience of wages being inadequate is not just a feeling held by young people but a reflection of their expenses, which Spyropoulos groups into two categories of regular anticipated spending and irregular unanticipated spending. I would instead like to identify four primary groups of expenses black youth must cover with their wages based on their responses throughout the literature review. Firstly, regular household expenses which constitute their contribution to the collective needs of the household in which they reside. The expenses may take the form of purchasing food or electricity, or making a monetary contribution towards household expenses and household projects such as renovations. Secondly, regular personal expenses which include mobile data, transport expenses for the commute to work, and stokvel contributions which may serve as a form of investment or insurance. Thirdly, irregular social expenses which speak to the communal expectation for collective monetary support from friends, family and neighbours for significant social events such as funerals, weddings, lobola and initiations. Finally, I chose to distinguish debt as unique category based on the significant impact it has on the finances of township inhabitants. This debt may take the form of informal loans from friends and family members, store credit, high interest loans from mashonisa, formal credit from financial service providers and debt money lenders within the community. It is important to circle in on debt as a major expense as within the lives of the employed,

underemployed and unemployed debt is a constant, utilized to cover a myriad of expenses from monthly groceries to educational expenses, alcohol and even clothing (Spyropoulos, 2022).

Spyropoulos identifies that of the 6.25 million youth reported as employed in 2015, over half earned low wages and did not have consistent employment. This irregular form of employment produces volatility within the finances of low wage workers and the households they form a part of. Young township inhabitants and their families often accept the rejection of low wage work in favour of unemployment, while looking for better opportunities. During this period of unemployment the other members of the household will pitch in to cover the regular household expenses of the individual who is now unemployed.

Spyropoulos traces back the rejection of low wage work to the 1960s through the writing of Posel, who identifies a ‘tendency to quit employment without another job to go to’ (Posel, 1991). Even under the Apartheid system where the types of employment opportunities and compensation available to black township inhabitants was legislatively restricted, the youth of the township chose a life of unemployment or crime over being low wage workers. The rejection of low wage work by black South Africans precedes the construction of townships and the Apartheid system itself, with various groups throughout the colonial period rejecting subjugation. With early colonialists developing the hegemonic narratives of Zulu people, in particular, being lazy when they realized that they could not be compelled into fulfilment of the continuous labour requirements of the colonial state (Jeske, 2020). Within the colonial setting Zulu people were among some of the indigenous groups who opted out of economic participation in favour of maintaining the pre-colonial socio-economic order of their communities. It must be noted that the imposition of taxes by the colonial government was the catalyst for mass participation of black men in the white economy, not based on desire but rather the need to earn a living in Western terms and meet their tax obligations. The introduction of the ‘Hut Tax’ in Natal in 1849 required a payment of 7 shillings from each adult male residing in a hut, in a society where wealth was traditionally measured in livestock and trade took the form of bartering, money could only be earned through employment in white society (Kadmar, 2025).

Report Outline

I begin the next chapter by providing historical background on the formation of black townships during the Apartheid era. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a view of how black youth have historically been restricted to low wage work, which is an important foundation for understanding the unique history of the township as communities exclusively built to provide housing for black migrants working as menial labourers in the city. Within this historical context black township youth were viewed by the Apartheid state and white economy only as a source of cheap unskilled labour. I speak on the legislation of segregation which impacted education, town planning, labour practices and economic activity to fulfil the white economy's need for cheap labour through black township inhabitants.

I provide additional background on South Africa's economy, unemployment rates and labour market dynamics to provide a view of the context within which black township youth choose not to take on low wage work. The purpose of this section is to illustrate the conditions of deprivation that have historically existed and persist within the township and contrast them with the economic and structural privileges experienced by other communities within the wider urban environment.

The research problem theory in this report is divided into two distinct components. The first builds on the background provided in the above sections to illustrate how Apartheid policies and practices continue to impact township communities, shape current distributions of income and assets producing severe inequality, influence labour practices by limiting the opportunities available to black township youth and in turn have produced a culture of consumptive performance amongst black township youth.

Where the previous section speaks to the labour, economic and consumptive practices in post-Apartheid South Africa with particular focus on unemployed and underemployed township youth this section focuses on the perspectives of young people on the above mentioned factors. Providing a lens into the thoughts, values

and desires of black township youth and how it has been shaped by their lived experience and environment.

The chapter on research results identifies the determinants of black township youth's economic behaviour. This speaks to their motivations for labour and the reasons why a notable portion of the young people engaged with by the various authors cited in this report are rejecting low wage work. Framing the rejection of low wage work as a rational choice these determinants may be social, historical, economic and spatial but they uniquely culminate to shape the decisions of black township youth.

The next section within the research results serves to identify the alternative ways in which black township youth exist and participate in the economy, having rejected low wage work. These alternatives are identified through the assertions of the respondents from townships in the provinces of Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape, engaged by the various authors in the field. I provide a view of how these alternatives to low wage work are perceived by black township youth, their families and communities, and other demographics outside of the township yet within the broader urban and South African context.

I conclude this research report by asserting my arguments on why young black township inhabitants are rejecting labour participation in the form of low wage work. Validating this economic decisions as a rational choice being informed by a culmination of historical, economic, social, political and spatial considerations. I recognise the rejection of low wage work by unemployed black township youth as an exercise of agency, self-determination and ultimately protest.

Background

The History of the Township as a Labour Source for the City & Suburbia

In understanding the unemployment rates and economic conditions of the township today, we must begin by noting that South African townships were designed by the Apartheid state. Black people were allowed to reside in the township with the exclusive intent of providing low wage work for the white economy. Thus it is important to understand the historical relationship between black township inhabitants and low wage labour, to understand why there may be expectations for black township youth today to participate in low wage work today. This history also provides a significant basis for the rejection of low wage work by black township youth today.

The town planning employed in the establishment of urban townships is described by geographers as "'exclusion by design" and denotes the fact that townships were designed to be excluded from the economic and social fabric of the cities of South Africa. Most townships were established following the enactment of the Group Areas Act of 1950, a segregation policy designating neighbourhoods by race and criminalising habitation in a location which did not match your racial designation as defined by the Apartheid state (Group Areas Act, 1950).

South African town planning was characterised by racially homogenous neighbourhoods separated by legislatively mandated physical buffers such as rivers, high ways, mountains, railways or unused land. Townships were specifically located on the periphery of the city with limited transportation links into suburbia and industrial centres, to allow for a severing of communication channels when deemed necessary by the state (Pernegger et al, 2007). The race of any given community determined the resources it would be allocated by the state, with resources being allocated on a scale where white neighbourhoods were at the top and black neighbourhoods at the bottom. The perspective of the Apartheid state is summarised as such, "Since 'Natives' were considered as 'children', the 'Township under the jurisdiction of European local authorities can form the immediate training ground for the Bantu' to be civilised." (Demissie, 2004)

For black South Africans in urban areas there was a clear understanding that the city was not their home and the state did not recognise them as citizens. Firstly, black residents were not allowed to own land or houses outside of the homelands as prescribed by the Natives Land Act of 1913, therefore they could not own the homes they lived in within the townships (South African History Online, 2012). Secondly, in urban areas black South Africans were required to carry what they came to colloquially refer to as a “dom pas”. Various pass laws were enacted by the state to restrict the movement of black people within the colony and later the old Republic of South Africa (Britannica, 2018). Black people were given access to “white” South Africa and allowed to reside in townships as a means to provide cheap labour for the white economy. In order to receive authorisation to enter the city, black people needed to provide proof of employment, without employment they would be required to return to the homelands. In Particular, the Native (Urban Areas) Act 21 of 1923 allowed local authorities to send back to the Bantustans, any black persons they perceived as ‘surplus to the labour needs’ of the white economy or living an ‘idle, dissolute or disorderly life’(South African History Online, 2012).

Despite these policies on land and racial mixing, the need for cheap labour in the mining industry led to the introduction of state taxes. The states tax requirement forced Black Africans to participate in the formal labour market and led to a migration of men to the cities to earn an income (South African History Online, 2017). As described by Western, cities in South Africa were designed for white people and black people were only permitted to be in the city as a source of labour for suburbia and the economic hub, while they worked they resided in the township which was established as a concentration of workers barracks rather than a community(Worden, 2007, p.43). Black Africans were viewed as migrant labourers; upon the completion of their work they were expected to return their families in the homelands rather than build a life and family in the cities. The Chairman of the Institute of Race Relations, A Cutten in 1948 acknowledged the reliance of South Africa’s white economy on black labour, necessitating the construction of black communities in white spaces, as urban areas would had been classified at the time (Cutten, 1952, p.75).

This is confirmed by the architecture of the township, as referred to by the state as ‘native housing’ which was one of the tools used by the state to enforce segregation.

Townships were designed to ensure the state's control over black people in the city, drawing on the principals of Le Corbusier, the architects of Johannesburg's townships in the 1950's viewed town planning from the perspective of supporting an economy based on mass production and thus viewed the family as an economic unit rather than a social one. Houses were designed not as individual unites but rather single cells within a wider machine, and he described his design as a 'house-machine' primed for practicality and a rotation of tenants rather than a permanent residence (Demissie, 2004). As such these houses were designed to take up minimal living space, serving as boarding for the city's labour source, with limited consideration for comfort, liveability, or capacity to accommodate a growing family.

A group of architects who came to be known as the Transvaal Group, aimed to incorporate the segregationist policies of the Apartheid state into their modernist designs, localising architecture to fit the socio-political order of the time. This group of architects produced a thesis on native housing which came to inform the state's approach to construction of houses in South Africa's metropolitan townships (Demissie, 2004). The writings of these architects were incorporated into the state's housing projects as they sought to address the problem of overpopulation in black townships in the 1940s. The state embarked on a project to construct homes for black urban residents at minimal cost, thus they used minimal space, uniform construction standards and alternative materials.

Townships under the Apartheid state ,and to a lesser degree today, are characterised by shoe box houses. Per the state's prescription each person living in native housing was allocated an average of 65 – 77 sqm as a means to save costs (Demissie, 2004). Cutten prescribed that native housing should be in the 'form of a horseshoe with an entrance at one end' (Cutten, 1952, p.84). The state sought to ensure separation from the white communities of the city and suburbia, to allow for a degree of control in the event of unrest, when the township would be cut off from the rest of society. By the 1950s the majority of housing built by the state for black urban residents were hostels, large scale barracks built to exclusively house male labourers (Western, 1996, p.308).

More than 30 years on there has not been an undoing of the construction of the Apartheid era township but rather an expansion as black people have been allowed to move more freely within the country, many have migrated to the cities in search of employment. Expansion geographically has been initiated both by individuals and the state as people have built flatlets to rent out, informal settlements have spawned to neighbour many existing townships, and the state has built RDP[1] housing to address the affordable housing crisis. By virtue of the placement of RDP housing on the periphery, the government has been critiqued as reproducing the spatial structure of Apartheid as those living in these houses are subjected to the same conditions as township residents (Ballard and Bobbins, 2015). Policies instituted by the state have been successful in extending access to basic services to the black majority, which was not the case under the Apartheid government, but they have failed to transform the spatial structure of the city. The poor black majority remains on the periphery in communities that lack infrastructure, are underserved and are disconnected from the centres of production (Nel and Rogerson, 2009).

The architecture and town planning of the Apartheid state remains evident, despite the efforts of black people to turn the township into communities through expansion of their homes and the creation of businesses and other forms of infrastructure to serve their communities. The township of Langa in Cape Town provides a good example of this, as it remains geographically isolated from the rest of the city, a design created with the intent of segregation and surveillance. Highways feeds into the only two motor entrances into the township and there are no connections into the surrounding suburban neighbourhoods. Most of the formal structures are those built by the Apartheid government, characterised by attached cement houses packed closely together. The architectural addition of the post-Apartheid era can be seen in

[1] RDP is an abbreviation for the Reconstruction and Development Programme, a policy framework introduced by the African National Congress in 1994 to address the socio-economic inequality created by colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa. As part of this policy framework the post-apartheid state built subsidised housing to previously disadvantaged communities in South Africa. (O'Malley, P. Nelson Mandela Foundation, 1994)

the form of shacks which have bloomed across the township to accommodate the growing demand for affordable housing (Austin, 2016).

The post-Apartheid government has largely maintained colonial economic structures, while protecting the interests of national and international businesses which are largely white owned. The ANC elite has introduced itself to get a piece of the economic pie (Austin, 2016). Thus, townships continue to be some of the poorest communities in urban South Africa and black township residents are still largely expected to journey to the city and suburbia to access job opportunities. As positioned by Nigel Gibson, in the post-Apartheid era we have “economic apparatus that continues to oppress the majority of South Africans in a neoliberal era” (Austin, 2016). Apartheid ended because it was ‘bad for business’ as a consequence of the sanctions placed on the country at the time (Ross, 2008). I argue that we have not experienced significant economic transformation for the majority of black people in South Africa, because both the national and international business interests which shape our economy are premised on the extraction of material resources and exploitation of cheap labour.

Given the establishment of urban townships as a source of cheap labour, the educational institutions and system which existed for black people were intentionally designed by the Apartheid government to produce menial workers. In particular, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 extended the Apartheid state’s segregationist policy to the education system. The Bantu Education Act prescribed that black children be trained for manual labour and menial jobs, as such their subjects at school focused on needlework, handcraft and agriculture. In addition, the funding to black schools was limited leading to a shortage of educators and resources, as well as overcrowded classes (Bauer, 2025). Schools in predominantly black neighbourhoods today, despite no longer being segregated or prescribed to Bantu Education, continue to be some of the most under resourced and as a consequence, many produce some of the worst academic outcomes in the country.

Leibbrandt et al in their work evaluating racial differences in school advancement in urban South Africa identify difference in educational outcomes post-Apartheid which

later impact the employability of black youth. Of the sample of learners from Cape Town studied, black learners were among the most likely to repeat a grade or fail out of school. In addition to the racial link to educational outcomes, they identify household income and assets as determinants of testing outcomes and grade repetition (Leibbrandt et al, 2010). This means that black township youth by virtue of race and economic status are the post likely to have negative academic outcome even within the post-Apartheid basic education system. They identify that in predominantly black schools there are high rates of enrolment leading to overcrowding, high rates of grade repetition, high educator absenteeism, ineffective administrations and assessments, as well as a lack of resources, all of these factors culminating into a less than conducive academic environment (Lam et al, 2010).

There are various social factors impacting the academic outcomes and employment prospects for poor black students in Cape Town that cannot be ignored. Firstly, given that their parents were subjected to Bantu Education they are unlikely to be able to provide their kids with much academic support. For this sample of students black parents on average had 4-5 years less of schooling than white parents. This also meant that black parents were less likely to be employed, 77% of black parents with less than 12 years of schooling were unemployed compared to 26% of white parents with the same education levels. This impacts the school's student attend with 75% of black youth attending former Bantu schools, with tuition averaging R326 per annum and 91% of white youth attending formerly white schools with tuition averaging R5817 per annum. Another factor for consideration in the academic outcomes among black learners in Cape Town is that English and Afrikaans are mediums of instruction in most schools in Cape Town and the languages used for national assessments. This means that black students unlike their white and coloured counterparts are tested in their second language rather than their home language of isiXhosa (Lam et al, 2010).

The economists also found that race impacted patterns of work experience amongst young people aged 14 to 22. Where more than half of white learners would have obtained some work experience by the age of 17, only 1% of black females and 7% of black males would have work experience at the same age. By the age of 22 76% of white females and 88% of white males had work experience, a strong contrast to

only 24% of black females and 35% of black males (Lam et al. 2010). This indicates that even without a matric certificate or tertiary qualification, white youths still have greater access to employment opportunities. Having identified that education is not a barrier for entry to employment for white learners, they highlight the role of spatial factors in affecting employment disparities. Black township youth in this study have the least access to employment opportunities by virtue of the Apartheid era spatial barriers which continue to separate them geographically from Cape Town's economic centre. This means it is easier for white youths to find employment irrespective of their educational level when compared to their black counterparts because proximity to the economic hub results in greater acces to job opportunities.

In an analysis of the communities in the City of Thswane which is located in Gauteng, Hamann and Horn identify strong relationships between household income and tertiary education, tertiary education and unemployment, and household income and unemployment. Such that those communities with high median household incomes are more likely to have residents with tertiary qualifications and are employed, and on the inverse communities with households with no tertiary education qualifications, having lower median household incomes and higher rates of unemployment. While the authors are not able to identify a relationship of causation between the three variables, there is a clear correlation. The negative outcomes, in this case which are low median household income, low rates of tertiary qualification and high unemployment rates are concentrated in the predominantly black township communities which find themselves on the periphery of the city. This geographic separation of the townships in Thswane from employment opportunities correlates with the high rates of unemployment and low median income which they experience (Hamann and Horn, 2021).

From this data we can conclude that many young township inhabitants are less likely to obtain tertiary qualifications as the median income in their communities would mean they cannot afford the cost of said education, the long term effect of this is that they would have limited job opportunities by virtue of not having a qualification and thus would likely have low future household earnings. This pattern creates a cycle of unemployment and poverty which other communities and demographics aren't subjected to. As their economic standing serves as a barrier to entry in accessing

tertiary education. Their lack of tertiary education serves as a barrier to entry to employment opportunities, specifically higher paying skilled employment opportunities. The community they live in also serves as a barrier to employment based on the distance from economic centers. They do not have the option of moving closer to job opportunities due to a lack of affordable housing near the centres of production.

I'd like to close this chapter with a quote from the work of Hamann and Horn, "The spatial legacy of Apartheid is evident in all South African cities …"(Hamann et al, 2021) This spatial legacy of Apartheid is not merely one of geographic segregation of racial and ethnic groups, it is a legacy of inequality and the exclusion of the township and its black inhabitants from employment opportunities. If the spatial legacy of Apartheid persists it is perhaps unsurprising that black youths experience the highest rates of unemployment among all demographics in South Africa. If the inequality of the past persists in regards to the employment opportunities made available to township inhabitants, it is no wonder that young people are rejecting the low-wage jobs which their parents were restricted to in generations past - jobs which do not provide a path to economic stability or social mobility, but harken back to the segregation, exploitation and dehumanisation of a very recent past.

Framing the South African Economy & Labour Market

This chapter shall serve to frame the South African economy and labour market, with specific focus on the urban communities and their surrounding townships. Important context will be provided in this section on the cost of living in South Africa's cities, and the pay to be expected from the low-wage roles which are the focus of this study. The objective for this chapter is to frame the economic landscape and define the low wage labour market.

South Africa is often described as one of the most unequal countries in the world and predictably race plays a significant role in influencing ones socio-economic standing. Cape Town provides a remarkable case study for the inequality that exists and the racial lines along which inequality exists. As of the 2022 census, Black Africans have the worst outcomes among the dominant population groups in Cape Town, in most of

the key indicators measured. Black Africans in the City of Cape Town are less likely to have access to electricity for lighting, only 73% have piped water inside their dwellings, 15% don't have refuse removal on a weekly basis,14% don't have flushing toilets connected to a public sewage system in their homes, 7% are illiterate and only 11% have internet connections in their homes (Stats SA, 2022).

Of particular interest to this research paper from the 2022 Census results is the concentration of these negative outcomes in the communities of Langa, Gugulethu, Nyanga and Khayelitsha, which are all black townships in the city of Cape Town, as well as Mitchell's Plain which is a coloured[2] township. The indicators described above decrease quality of life and impede upon one's ability to access both education and employment. Of particular concern amongst these indicators for young people, is the illiteracy rate which is 7% amongst Black Africans above the age of 20 in the City of Cape Town (Stats SA, 2022). This decreases the prospects of black youths within the labour market as the lack of secondary schooling specifically matriculation, will become a barrier to entry for a number of salaried positions. Job prospects and particularly socio-economic mobility are further limited by the fact that only 9,8% of black people in Cape Town hold a tertiary qualification, this increases to 13,1% for coloured people and 52,9% for white people. This means that higher paying jobs which typically require a tertiary qualification are inaccessible to a significant proportion of black township youths.

Even if young black township youth make it to the small percentage of their communities with tertiary education, they are still likely to grapple with the growing unemployment crisis. A growing trend has emerged in South Africa of unemployed university graduates. In 2022 10,3% of tertiary graduates found themselves without formal employment (Labour Market Dynamics Report, 2022, p.6). Thus for many young black South Africans tertiary education is not a direct path to employment or economic mobility. The effect of these negative household indicators culminates into unemployment rates for Black Africans which are higher than all other demographics

[2] Coloured is a South African ethnic classification for individuals of mixed heritage which was legally defined by the Apartheid state.

in the country, at 35,7% for black men and 39,6% for black women (Labour Market Dynamics Report, 2022).

Only 11% of Black Africans in the City of Cape Town have internet connection within their home. This directly impacts the unemployment rate for black youths as they have less access to searching for job opportunities through the internet and they are unlikely to qualify for remote or digital work as internet access, particularly WIFI within the home is often a prerequisite. The communities in which most black youths live are on the periphery of the city, as intended by the architects of the Apartheid state. This increases the relative cost of physically searching for a job, as young people would have to commute significant distances into the city to access the job opportunities available in the centre of production. Given the economic standing of their communities, they are likely to be among the roughly 15 million South Africans reliant on minibus taxis to commute due to their affordability and accessibility within the township (Stats SA, 2020). A form of transportation which is notoriously unregulated and prone to strikes and violence, impacting commuters, community members, taxi drivers and owners alike.

These key indicators cumulatively cement the social, economic and geographic boundaries of the city, as education and employment are the dominant vehicles through which people improve their economic standing and subsequently their standard of living. By virtue of living in the township and the impact location has on educational and employment opportunities and outcomes, black youths in the City of Cape Town are the least likely to secure employment and they are the least likely to secure stable salaried employment. As a consequence race in Southa Africa continues to be a determinant of economic status, specifically in the case of white and black people who find themselves on the opposite extremes of the economic scale. This is true for the City of Thswane as well, “…,black Africans are overrepresented in the ‘lower class’ and underrepresented in the ’upper class’. The opposite is true of whites in the study area, while coloureds and Indians/Asians are not overrepresented or underrepresented in any one socio-economic category.” (Hamann et al, 2021)

There are a myriad of contributors to high unemployment rates which Jeske identifies from public discourse and her engagements with the youth, employers and community members of Mpophomeni and Howick in KwaZulu Natal, which is the neighbouring economic hub. Firstly the unequal distribution of earnings, as pay for executives is disproportionately high, it benefits a select few to the detriment of wage workers. The lack of skills training in the nation leads to a mismatch between the labour supply and the jobs that are available within the market. The head first dive into the neoliberal globalized economy has led to a migration of production to countries with cheaper labour to the detriment of local production and local employment rates. Unregulated migration into South Africa has produced an influx of labourers without proportional growth in the economy to provide sufficient employment for the growing population. She identifies a commonly held belief that the welfare state has disincentivized the poor from working. Finally many of the employers and even some of the unemployed that she interviews make assertions that the unemployed or Zulu people as an ethnic group are generally lazy. While Jeske goes on to challenge some of these assumptions they are useful in understanding the perspectives of different demographics within South Africa on the subject of unemployment (Jeske, 2020).

While unemployment is a matter of concern, it exists alongside issues of income and asset inequality , as described above, between different racial groups which has been caused by the policies of the Apartheid state. 30 years post the dawn of an inclusive democracy the economic conditions of most black South Africans, relative to other demographic groups has not significantly changed. Black African households had an average annual income of R143 632 in 2023, well below the national average of R204 359 as well as the averages of R260 816 in coloured homes, R416 431 in Indian/Asian homes and R676 375 in white homes (Income & Expenditure Survey 2022/2023). This illustrates that black youths are the least likely to receive economic support from their family members by virtue of simply not being able to afford it. This may also be indicative of why black youths would reject low-wage work in favour of unemployment, as the job simply does not meet their economic responsibilities. This is a theme we'll explore more as we speak on the comments made by the black township youths engaged with by the authors in the literature review.

Based on economist assumptions of rationality, we would assume that the economic position of black township youths means they would take on any job opportunities available to them. The educational background of black township youth both in Cape Town and across other metropolitan areas in the country, would suggest that the jobs accessible to them would be low-wage jobs, due to lower demographic rates of secondary and tertiary education. For the purposes of this research paper low wage work shall be defined as unskilled or low skill employment with compensation at or below the national minimum wage of R28,79 per hour (Department of Employment and Labour, 2024). While the minimum wage is applicable to all workers with exception of those in the Expanded Public Works Programme, the jobs to be focused on in this paper as low wage jobs are those in farming, domestic work, the restaurant industry, manufacturing, cleaning, construction and textile industries. Specifically we will focus on the minimum wage or sub-minimum wage jobs in these industries which do not require any qualifications, and are labelled as unskilled or low-skilled (CHRO South Africa, 2022).

The low wage labour market as of Q2 2024 employed approximately 5 377 049 people in South Africa, this includes both full time and seasonal employment. Of these workers only 1 853 148 were employed on a permanent contract, that amounts to 35% of the total employment subset, meaning the majority have very limited job security. These workers are predominantly employed in the trade, customer service, finance, domestic service and agriculture industries (The National Minimum Wage Report, 2025).

On average they worked 44.44 hours a week and earned R16.98 which is well below the 2024 minimum wage of R27.58. For the majority of these workers their wage has been determined independently by the employer without negotiation with the employee, union or a bargaining council (The National Minimum Wage Report, 2025). Based on these figures alone we can deduce that they are not earning a liveable wage as the department of labour and employment prescribes the South African minimum wage as a wage floor, acknowledging that it is below what would be described as a living or decent wage.

The conditions of these workers largely do not meet the requirements of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Labour Relations Act. These laws entitle employees to a minimum of 21 days of paid annual leave per calendar year, the minimum wage report found that less than half of low wage workers have access to paid leave (Basic Conditions of Employment Act Ch 3 20.2a, 1997). In addition to this, 78% don't have a pension fund, 92% don't have medical aid, 1 755 173 only have a verbal contract with their employer, and don't have an unemployment insurance fund. All of these factors place these workers in an extremely vulnerable condition as they are subjected to low wages, limited job security, limited financial security and limited labour protections.

Research Problem Theory

The Legacy of Apartheid and the Language of Labour, Economy and Consumption

This chapter will look at the structural issues which impact South Africa's unemployment rates, and subsequently impact the youths perspectives on employment and the low-wage labour market. A central consideration is spatial inequality which continues to define South Africa's cities, and has economic and social implications on township communities specifically. This includes discussions on distance from centres of work, transport costs, access to education, distribution of wealth and social mobility. Here, I will also look at the impact of government grants and black tax on the labour decisions township youths make. As well as look at labour patterns and unemployment rates across races.

There are a number of townships today which directly neighbour previously white communities, as economic growth has led to the eventual erosion of some geographic buffers between neighbourhoods. One of the most popular examples of this expansion and case study for the nations inequality is the township of Alexandra bordering Sandton, which has come to be heralded as the richest square mile in Africa. Despite this close proximity to wealth and the nation's economic hub, Alexandra has some of the worst living conditions in the city and some of the most severe and frequent interactions with the nations inequality (Hamann and Horn, 2021). While the removal of geographic barriers to economic hubs is theoretically an indicator of socio-economic transformation and desegregation, Alexandra in Johannesburg and similar townships such as KwaMashu in Durban, experience living conditions that are in stark contrast to their rich neighbours. While the separation of these communities is based on class differentiation, the Apartheid era race and class distinctions remain evident (Hamman and Horn, 2021).

Black township inhabitants across the country are directly confronted by the reality of their lived experience in poverty and the juxtaposition of the privileges of the middle class and the excess of the upper class. This confrontation with inequality may take place as a result of geographical proximity to wealthier neighbourhoods as described

above, or within their own communities as members of the black middle class visit the township for social engagements and flaunt their position of privilege through conspicuous consumption. Dawson in her work acknowledges that the occasional return of black suburban residents to the townships reflects a sense of not belonging in the previously white neighbourhoods in which they now reside (Dawson, 2022).

Under the Apartheid state black people were relegated to low wage jobs which often involved manual labour. The state through legislation specifically prescribed well-paying jobs as the exclusive domain of white people, thus they benefited from legal privileges and protections which assured they had better working opportunities and therefore better economic standing (South African History Online, 2017). In particular the state instituted legislation to protect poor white workers migrating to the Witwatersrand from the 1910's, ensuring them job opportunities in spite of their limited education and skills. The Civilized Labour Policy of 1924 guaranteed white workers a higher wage for doing the same jobs as black people, this was legislatively prescribed as a civilized wage, in addition to being given preference over their black counterparts in the hiring process. The Mines and Works Act of 1911 reserved for white workers the skilled jobs on mines. The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 introduced trade union protections for non-black workers. The Wages Act of 1925 introduced a compulsory minimum wage for all white workers in the unskilled labour market. The Mines and Works Act of 1911 reserved skilled jobs for white people and the 1926 amendment restricted certification for skills in the mining industry to white workers only, thus non-whites could not "qualify[3]" for skilled jobs (Apartheid Museum).

The legacy of these policies persists as in many corporations today white people continue to out earn their black counterparts in similar roles, are more likely to be employed, and are more likely to secure high paying employment. White South Africans have the lowest unemployment rates at just 6,7% (Stats SA Quarterly

[3] Qualify in this context does not refer to the experience and education of the black workers for skilled labour but rather the fact that under the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926, black people could simply not be considered for skilled work.

Labour Force Survey, Q4 2024), white people continue to out earn black people by 5 times in post-Apartheid South Africa (Income & Expenditure Survey, 2022/2023), and as of 2019 white people continue to occupy 66% of top management jobs, 54% of senior management jobs, 35% of professionally qualified roles and 18% of technically skilled roles despite only making up 7,3% of the country's population as of the 2022 Census Results (CEE Annual Report, 2019/2020).

The language of labour and economy in the townships also provides insight into the residual impact of these policies on black perceptions of success or "the good life" as referred to by many young people engaged by the primary authors in the field. In township culture terms such as "umlungu wami" and "legoa laka" are used to refer to one's boss or employer yet they directly translate to "my white person". This harkens to an era gone where employers or management positions within the formal labour market were the exclusive preserve of white people. In post-Apartheid South Africa these terms are colloquially used to refer to one's employer or manager irrespective of their race or ethnicity. In this context any individual in a position of power or perceived to be of a certain economic or social standing may be referred to in this manner.

Similarly in Afrikaans black workers were expected to refer to their white managers or employers as 'baas', which directly translates to boss or master. For many black people this term carries a negative connotation due to the dark history of exploitation, discrimination and abuse which existed in the working environments where it was used such as farms and mines. Particularly degrading for adult men and women working in domestic environments, was the expectation that they refer to the children of their employers as 'baas'. This practice existed in strong contrast to the social norms of black society, where older people are referred to with terms such as 'mama' meaning mother, 'baba' meaning father, 'sisi' meaning sister, and 'buthi' meaning brother, as terms of respect rather than indicators of familial relationship. Instead of these terms of respect which they were addressed with in black communities, in white society black workers were referred to as 'boy' or 'girl' by their employers and the children of their employers alike as a means to dehumanize and subjugate them. This practice of infantilization has led to black communities looking down upon low

wage work especially where reporting to white employers, this is a perspective that persists to date (Jeske, 2020).

For black South Africans, particularly those in urban settings having lived in close proximity to white Apartheid South Africa, the economic promise of democracy was not just equality but equity which would mean experiencing the economic privileges of whiteness that existed under the Apartheid state (Dawson, 2022). This position is affirmed by the work of other authors in the field who acknowledge that democracy was imagined including access to material goods, opportunities for socio-economic mobility and an expansion in one's economic ability to consume. The Apartheid state constricted the economic ability of black people while privileging white people, if democracy meant political equality in the mind of black township inhabitants there should be a levelling of the economic playing field. As such, markers of success for black South Africans are tied to consumption which serves as a signal to others of socio-economic standing. As described by one of the respondents in Dawson's work, what distinguishes the middle class is their ability to purchase things that others, presumably those in his township community, cannot afford. In his observation he indicate that those in the middle class have been able to take a step forward (Dawson, 2022).

Inequality and low wages are a recurring catalyst for workers protests throughout numerous industries private and public sector. Workers protests such as the SARMCOL[4] strike of 1985 and the Marikana strike of 2012, demonstrate similar attitudes between the response of companies and law enforcement both during Apartheid and post-Apartheid towards low-wage workers and their calls for liveable wages. In both cases the call for better employment conditions and compensation lead to death and injury for a number of workers. This serves as an indication of the lack of interest employers in the low wage labour market have for the livelihoods and lives of their employees. Low wage jobs are generally characterized by exploitative labour practices and a lack of job security. Nobuhle indicated that she left a job after one day after confirming that she would not receive an employment contract, her

[4] South African Rubber Manufacturing Company Limited

wages would only be paid in cash and she would be paid R30 a day. Her employment conditions all contravened South African labour laws, despite working for one of the most prominent business men in Howick, KwaZulu Natal (Jeske, 2020).

South Africa never substantially redistributed material wealth after the collapse of the Apartheid system thus many South Africans continue to experience the same or similar conditions they experienced pre-1994 as the economy continues to grow along unequal racialized lines (Austin, 2016). To achieve a greater degree of equality or at least equity in South Africa there must be an effort to spatially transform the nations urban areas by bringing economic activity to the townships, undoing the segregated town planning of the Apartheid state, and giving young township inhabitants greater access to employment opportunities. This sentiment is shared by Hamann and Horn who express that inequality can be addresses through socio-spatial change and economic developments aligned to transform the patterns of urban demographics and economics that produce more equitable access to employment opportunities (Hamann et al, 2021).

Under the Apartheid state black people were stripped of their humanity, social status and masculinity. Various elements of culture in the township emerged to compensate for the discrimination, exploitation and emasculation black people were subjected to in the city and suburbia, both within and outside of the workplace. There was a shame associated with being black, today this has morphed into a shame of being poor, both of which have been compensated by black people in generations past and present through various forms of consumption. In Dawson's work Mashudu compensates for this shame through dressing top class without buying expensive clothes, the Khumalo brothers drive luxury cars despite living in a shack in the township, and the patrons of Motswako splurge on braai and alcohol, drive luxury cars and live in the suburbs despite being indebted (Dawson, 2022).

It must be acknowledged that the members of the black middle class who make their way to Motswako do not simply do so to 'feel more powerful', as asserted by the youth of Zandspruit (Dawson, 2022). They may do so to feel at home escaping the sense of othering they feel in suburbia, seeking out predominantly black spaces as

many suburbs and cities continue to be ‘white space’ irrespective of how many black people live in them. If the black middle class already feel othered in these environments despite their economic standing, what more for the poor and black township inhabitants who enter these spaces as low wage workers. They cannot mask the dehumanisation which accompanies blackness through funds they do not have, they cannot be themselves as they must subscribe to the expectations of their employers and assimilate to the social normal of white society.

In response to dehumanisation and emasculation at the hands of the Apartheid system black men began performing masculinity through their clothes, a culture which traces back its roots to the Apartheid era, with groups such as the ‘diamondfield dandies’[5] and ‘oswenka’[6] of the 1800s and 1900s respectively and has evolved into the more modern practices of Izikhothane[7] (Ngcongo and Mnisi, 2023). Having been denied their manhood within the working environment, subjugated to menial work and derogatory addresses by their white baas’ whether younger or older, black men sought means to warrant respect in different social settings. It was viewed as socially acceptable for black men to engage in conspicuous consumption specifically splurging on relatively expensive clothing, despite earning low wages as a result of the labour laws of the time. As black people were not permitted to own homes in the township, the manner in which they dressed served as an indicator of their socio-economic standing within the township. Clothes provides a vehicle through which black men could express the agency and status legislatively denied to them by the Apartheid state and white South Africa (Dawson, 2022).

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[5] The ‘diamondfield dandies’ were a group of young men who worked as migrant laborers in Kimberley in the 1880s who developed a fashion subculture of conspicuous consumptions. They challenged racial stereotypes of poverty and civilization by adorning themselves in expensive clothing, creating an identity for themselves outside of the assumptions of white South Africa. (Ngcongo et al, 2023)

[6] The ‘oswenka’, colloquialized slang for the English term swanker, were black low-wage workers living in Jeppestown, Johannesburg in the 1950s who built upon the dandies’ subculture of parading in expensive clothes and held performative battles against other similar groups. (Ngcongo et al, 2023)

[7] Izikhothane are young township inhabitants, predominantly men, who engage in performative forms of destructive consumption which include the destruction of luxury items in mock battles performed publicly. I expand on this practice and culture in the next chapter. (Ngcongo et al, 2023)

This feeling of othering and judgement is articulated by the youth of Langa which Austin engages with in his work on neoliberalism in South Africa. Austin begins by acknowledging how Cape Town in particular is a geographically racialized space, with the townships designated for black and coloured people, being separated or clearly distinguishable from the rest of the city. In the township of Langa people communicate in the native language of Xhosa and exist within the cultural norms within which they were raised (Austin, 2016). We see similar patterns across South Africa as different native languages are the dominant language in different townships based on the ethnic makeup of those communities. In the township there is a culture of greeting everyone, this is strongly embedded in African tradition as greetings serve as an acknowledgement of ones humanity. In Zulu, one greets by saying “Sawubona” which directly translate to ‘I see you’ and it is the norm to acknowledge even strangers in this manner. There is communal way of living and unannounced visits from neighbours are common place in Langa as with many other townships in the county.

This communal way of living is not true in the rest of the city as the youth describe other communities as filled with people who “live only for themselves”. Outside of the township the youth of Langa are subjected to an othering under a white gaze, they are viewed suspiciously and accused of theft. As articulated by Austin, “These experiences of surveillance are connected to the deeply entrenched discourses that define townships as a space of poverty, disorder, and rampant blackness, in contrast to the functional, modern, and globally-oriented city proper.”(Austin, 2016) Although the youth of Langa are permitted to be in the city, it continues to be clear that they do not feel they belong as a result of not being welcomed. There is a paralleling of the township and city with roots in the segregationist policies of the Apartheid state, where one is black the other is white, disorder contrasts disorder, backwardness and modernity, marginality and centrality, where the former is local the latter is global, and lastly poverty is contrasted with wealth. These distinctions are made clear in the infrastructure, demographic makeup and socio-economic status of the township as compared to the rest of the City of Cape Town.

The economic expectations and desires of black labourers in urban areas can be viewed as distinct from black people in rural areas by virtue of the differing economic conditions in their respective environments. The vernacular words used to describe Johannesburg in particular are indicative of the economic assumptions made about the city. In isiZulu, Johannesburg is referred to as ‘iGoli’ which translates to the city of gold, it was described by the youth of Mpopheni as ‘the city where you never go hungry’ and ‘the place where your teeth wear out before the meat runs out’. In seSotho, Johannesburg is referred to as ‘Maboneng’ which translates to the city of lights. In both languages and ethnic communities there is a perspective of Johannesburg as a place of economic prosperity, development and improved living conditions (Jeske, 2020).

The conditions experienced by black township inhabitants in the education system and labour market as a consequence of the structural, economic, psychological and spatial legacies of the Apartheid system are completely misaligned with the expectations and motivations of black township youth about labour market participation and the economic promises of democracy. The language and culture of townships in post-Apartheid South Africa demonstrate a desire for economic stability, social mobility, respectable work and a consumptive capacity which simply cannot be achieved through low wage work. Within this cultural framework it becomes evident why there is an unwillingness among black township youth to accept low wage work, even when they don’t have other job prospects.

The Black Township Perspective on Employment, Economy and Consumption

This study is based on a literature review of writings on unemployment patterns in South Africa’s urban townships; selectivity amongst the unemployed about the types of employment they are willing to take on; the impact of education and economic background on employability or rather likelihood to be employed. This chapter will look at the assertions made by the subjects of the studies done by the various authors in the field to better understand the thinking of black township youths. This paper does not seek to make generalisations but rather identify common threads or

positions of the black youths across the studies and different townships in the country.

As the black youth of South Africa's townships have grown disenfranchised with the low wage labour market they have divested from this form of economic participation. As articulated by Dawson, young black people in townships such as Zandspruit in Gauteng, feel they have been excluded from the economic promise of democracy, instead they are confronted by the reality of inequality as they live in close proximity to the golf estates and middle class suburbs of northern Johannesburg (Dawson, 2022). Numerous young black people hold the position that their pay does not parallel the amount of work they do, thus many opt for unemployment. Young township inhabitants have grown up seeing the incoherence between hard work and reward, as they witnessed the lived reality of their parents as low wage workers, working for the white middle class. The majority of South Africans are earning a pittance and that majority within urban settings is black and residing in townships. Township inhabitants largely do not form part of the black elite or the emerging black middle class (Seekings et al, 2005, p.115).

Hannah Dawson in her work on conspicuous consumption and social mobility engages with a group of young black South Africans from the township of Zandspruit which is an informal settlement in Johannesburg. The majority of the young black men she engaged with had completely given up on seeking out low-wage work and had reverted to generating an income in the informal economy (Dawson, 2022). Throughout the interviews held by the authors in the field we can see that various black township youth choose to leave low-wage jobs despite not having any other job prospects. Dawson references a 29 year old young man named Oscar who left a low-wage job in favour of opening a car wash with his friend Khenzo. For these car wash owners in Dawson's work, success means purchasing a nice house in the suburbs and a vehicle. Judging by the actions of Oscar we can assume that he sees the carwash as a more viable path to migrating to the middle class than working a low wage job (Dawson, 2022).

To rationalize the discriminatory and exploitative economic policies of the Apartheid state and white employers, the narratives of black people as uncivilized and lazy prevailed, tracing their roots back to the colonial era. Jeske acknowledges that marginalized people the world over have been relegated to jobs and industries that are dehumanizing and devoid of purpose and opportunities for career or economic growth. The efforts that workers make in these jobs often do not lead to much material benefit. Despite doing some of the most back breaking work within the economy black people in low-wage jobs have been accused of having something inherently wrong with them that makes them 'especially lazy'. Jeske acknowledges that for centuries black people have been systematically denied the rewards of labour while simultaneously being criticized as lazy, with laziness being described as part of their ethnic culture. Unfortunately for many, this is not just an external imposition by those who benefit economically from this assertion but it has also been internalized by many black people who adopt the label of laziness as a descriptor for themselves and their peers. She summarises this well stating: 'The most insidious aspect of this way of reinforcing power inequalities is that people in subservient groups come to not just accept their subordination but to actually play a part in reinforcing their inferiority by embracing and spreading hegemonic views to others.' (Jeske, 2020)

I make the argument that for black South Africans, especially those raised in the township, the economic promise of democracy or what many have described as "the good life", is the economic reality of white people under the Apartheid state. This substantiates why families are willing to accept young people in their homes rejecting low-wage work in favour of unemployment as described in the work of Spyropoulos. There is both an individual and social desire to secure work with higher wages, due to the prospects of the social mobility it provides for the individual and the family, both immediate and extended (Spyropoulos, 2022). This is further cemented by the assertions of the youth in Dawson's work about successful blacks moving to the suburbs, or historically white neighbourhoods, and the critique they make of their peers with cars in the township not having achieved "the good life" because their conspicuous consumption does not mask that they still live in the township (Dawson, 2022).

While many of Dawson's respondents aspire to join the middle class and enjoy similar consumptive capacity they question its legitimacy. Critiquing the conspicuous forms of consumption displayed by the black middle class patrons of a popular grill spot in Zandspruit, Johannesburg. The black township youth question the extent of the wealth and the irresponsible manner in which it is spent by the black middle class. They also question the morality of journeying to the township to engage in such displays of wealth, critiquing this behaviour as a means to 'feel more powerful' by virtue of being in a less privileged community and questioning how much of the middle classes lifestyle is a product of debt (Dawson, 2022).

Consumptive capacity is undoubtably a goal for township youths and this is further evidenced by the culture of I'khothane which dominated the townships in the 2010s. I'khothane would take the act of conspicuous consumption to the extreme, young township inhabitants engaging in performances of destructive consumption would pour out Ultramel custard or top shelf alcohol, and tear, trample on or burn luxury clothes and shoes worth thousands of rands (Jones, 2013). Jones views this cultural phenomenon as a means for township youths to increase their socio-economic status and critique the culture of consumption. I argue that this culture existed in the township as the highest form of conspicuous consumption and a performance of masculinity. This perspective is supported by Ncongo and Mnisi who describe the performances of I'khothane as a form of protest against poverty, marginalisation and dehumanisation.

The root word from which the term I'khothane or Izikhothane is ukukhotana which directly translates to 'to lick' but is used in slang to refer to boasting (Ngcongo et al, 2023). Thus, the performances of I'khothane are a means of economic boasting and performative masculinity. By destroying these expensive items they demonstrate that the cost of the items is so insignificant to them that they can readily destroy them, suggesting that they are in a position of economic privilege. Ngcongo and Mnisi in their work identify a link between consumption and humanisation, this principal can be applied not just to I'khotane but all township youth who have been felt dehumanised by society as a consequence of their race and poverty. Through consumption young people reclaim their autonomy and status in post-Apartheid South Africa, as their for-fathers did before them.

For today's township youth the desire to present as wealthy through clothes exists alongside the expectation to purchase a house, a car and take care of one's immediate and extended family. Dawson describes a young lady named Mashudu who prides herself in dressing 'top class' as a means to escape poverty or rather being perceived as poor, regardless of how temporary that may be (Dawson, 2022).

Alongside the individualistic goals township youths may have for themselves, social or communal expectations wheigh heavily within black communities. Those who acquire wealth for self without meeting the responsibility to their extended family and community are readily accused of 'forgetting where they come from' (Jeske, 2016, p.492). Those who 'make it' within the township are expected to take care of their immediate and extended families and communities. By virtue of being employed young people are expected to share their resources with their families and contribute to their households, irrespective of how low their wages may be. The economic expectations of employment and the social responsibilities which accompany this for black township inhabitants, cannot be met by the earnings from low-wage jobs.

For the black youth of Langa, a township in Cape Town, their understanding of the economy and urban society centres on collective support drawing on the social responsibilities which accompany economic participation (Austin, 2016). A job that does not provide the wages needed to meet one's social responsibilities does not fulfil the purpose of work for black youth, therefore taking on low wage work becomes an irrational decision. The relationship of the Real Phandaz[8] with the economy, an NGO created by the youth of Langa, is collective rather than individual. The purpose of economic participation is therefore the advancement of the collective rather than economic competition.

This communal orientation towards economic participation is evident when looking at other businesses in the township of Langa. At the centre of Langa are various shops

[8] Phanda is Xhosa term translated by the youth of Langa to mean 'hustle', which they define as finding ways to make money or build connections within their ever-changing reality (Austin, 2016, p.54).

where residents can access goods and services, with the shop owners being their neighbours working in the community in which they live. While spaces of economic transactions, these businesses often serve as social spaces with young people gathering in these spaces and the owners often being very sociable. While businesses are inherently economic, in the context of the township they are governed by relationship, with the customers and business owners playing a careful dance of relationship management. The same can be seen in the businesses that locals run from their homes, yards, street corners or empty fields (Austin, 2016).

Research Results

Determinants of the Economic behaviour of young black township inhabitants

This chapter further explores the reasons why urban youths make economic decisions from general patterns identified through the literature review. The objective is to identify the determinants that take precedence over financial independence, in the labour decisions made by urban youths. This will then include a discussion of respectability, agency and social status in relation to labour practices and places of employment as an arena for respectability politics. Relevant to these findings would be a look into the historical roots of the township communities perspectives on formal employment, as compared to other demographics. This thus includes at a look at labour dynamics during Apartheid and the remnants that remain in today's low-wage labour market.

According to the young people engaged with by the various authors their socio-economic goal for labour participation is achieving 'the good life', the markers of which include home ownership, living in the suburbs and purchasing a vehicle. As stated by Jeske, "Jobs may be a necessary part of life, but not the part that makes life good." (Jeske, 2020) Some have described those who have achieved the good life, as those who 'are affording' and this descriptor has been placed on the members of the black middle class who can engage in conspicuous forms of consumption on a regular basis(Dawson, 2022). Naturally the economic behaviour of young black township inhabitants would be shaped by the goal of achieving the good life and positive social mobility into the middle and upper classes.

A young man nicknamed Bullet from the township of Mpophomeni in KwaZulu Natal expressed that, to understand the desires of young people and thus the determinants of their economic choices we must take a look at the type of entertainment they are drawn to. In this statement he acknowledges the desire for the good life, conspicuous consumption, social status and adventure. Bullet states:

> “We all respect a lawyer who has a beautiful car in the movie. But you see a gangster with a beautiful car, and we like ‘Oh! That’s it! That’s what I wanna be! I don’t wanna be the lawyer in the movie. I wanna be the gangster in the movie.’ You know, ‘cause the lawyer don’t get nothing, he don’t get the girls in the movie. He don’t get the guns. All he gets to do is sit and read.”
>
> (Jeske, 2022, p.2)

Jeske identifies one of the most significant non-economic determinants of the labour choice of young black township inhabitants as relationships (Jeske, 2018). Relationships in the considerations of these rational decision makers include interactions with colleagues, customers and employers in the working environment; familial relationships within the household and with the greater extended family, which is more immediate in African cultures, and relationships within ones community and society at large.

Jeske identifies 15 individuals from her field work in the townships of KwaZulu Natal who left their jobs due to negative relationships in the workplace, citing maltreatment, racism and sexual assault (Jeske, 2018). Comparatively, of the subjects in her study, only 3 indicated poor pay as a reason for leaving their jobs. While this does not negate the role of monetary considerations, it contextualizes them within the value set of black South Africans, with indigenous cultures that emphasize community, interdependence, equity and social cohesion. Jeske highlights that even the monetary reasons put forward by her respondents were framed within social considerations. She cites 2 of her 3 respondents who left their jobs due to low wages, the one stating, “I was not paid enough to put myself in that danger”, and the other asserting that, “only the old people will take that kind of pay, because they don’t know about the changes happening in the world, and they don’t have a relationship with the boss to speak up.” These statements highlight a valuing of self, safety and agency over money. Considerations in the relationships with employers include trust, collaboration and inclusion of employees in leadership and decisions, and the employer’s conduct towards their employees. In colleague relationships social cohesion takes the foreground as the variables of age, gender, experience and

position, define the balance of how one is perceived in the workplace, and how they are thought to perceive themselves in relation to their colleagues.

Employment status plays a significant role in governing relationships in both the immediate and extended familial structure. In the lives of black township youth, employment comes with a set of financial responsibilities that extend beyond taking care of self to often being a financial contributor or even a breadwinner within their households given the prevalence of unemployment in South Africa. In this context being employed means you become partially or completely financially responsible for the other members in your household (Jeske, 2020). The term ‘black tax’ has emerged within public discourse to describe the frustration of black youths with being financially responsible for their parents, siblings and extended family, resulting in very little of their wages being spent on themselves. Black tax in the work of Spyropoulos is defined as, ‘a colloquial term for financial transfers by Black African middle class to their extended families’ (Spyropoulos, 2022, p.150). Expanding on Spyropoulos definition I’d like to position that this expectation of remittance is not limited to the middle class, but the majority of black South African adults generating any form of income.

Social status within the township environment also plays a significant role in the economics of young people. While there is an acknowledgement that they form part of a lower economic class by virtue of living within the township, there is still a differentiation that exists within the township. Consumptive performance is utilized by township youth to show their position of relative privilege within their communal setting, in the context of young black men it also serves as a display of masculinity. The young men of Zandspruit would save up so they could splurge on food and alcohol at Motswako, alongside the middle class patrons (Dawson, 2022).

While aspiring for the relative privilege experienced by the black middle class or those in the township who engage in performative consumption, young township inhabitants remain suspicious of this wealth. The patrons of Motswako are accused of ‘faking it’, as they are reliant on debt to maintain their lifestyles, and preoccupied with making themselves appear wealthy (Dawson, 2022). This critique of the middle

class is valid as household dept accounted for 40.7% of nominal GDP as of September 2024 (CEIC, 2024). This may be an indicator of the perceived lack of true social mobility young township inhabitants believe is realistic for black people. This awareness of the pressures which impacts those in a position of privilege, may lead to growing disenfranchisement with the idea of true social mobility being possible given that those who have seemingly achieved it have done so in unscrupulous ways or are heavily indebted.

Purchase power and therefore consumption are visible indicators of one's economic ability, however within the township like all other societies there are moral implications to different forms of consumption. Similarly there are moral implications to the manner in which one makes money, with different types of economic activity whether formal or informal carrying different social connotations. Those engaging in criminal activity such as drug dealing, hijacking and heists are often critiqued as taking 'short cuts' and judged for how they spend their illicit earnings. 31 year old Arnold posits to Dawson that given the short period within which they are able to make relatively large sums of money, they have less hesitation in spending it frivolously thus they are more likely to engage in conspicuous forms of consumption.[9] While the young people of Zandspruit were critical of the criminal activities of these young men they acknowledged that 'short cuts' may be the only way to achieve their economic aspirations and the ever so evasive 'good life' (Dawson, 2022).

Contrasted with those taking short cuts are those with 'proper jobs' or 'proper businesses', both being associated with activities within the formal economy and money earned and accumulated over longer periods of time. Those who chose to spend their money building houses, starting businesses, or on more socially oriented purchases were viewed more positively by their communities. Respectability politics plays a role in how young township inhabitants perceive consumptive practices,

[9] In Dawson's work the term conspicuous consumption is used to describe the act of purchasing expensive goods and services to display ones economic and social status. The way this term is used to describe the feelings of township inhabitants carries a negative connotation, often implying that those engaged in conspicuous consumption are wasting their money.

particularly in the case of young men, there is an expectation to build a home and support their families. These social expectations shape both how young people choose to make a living and how they choose to spend the fruits of their labour (Dawson, 2022).

Born frees and their parents alike desire for this generation of black township youth to have better education, employment and income than their parents did. As expressed by Jeske, “Unlike their parents, born free youth grew up hearing that they could be anything and do anything.” Based on this principle of boundless opportunity with which black youths in the post-Apartheid era and the real lived experience of their parents in the low wage market, there is little desire nor patience to engage in the types of labour which their parents were constricted to. Jeske goes on to acknowledge that in making economic choices that deviate from the formal labour market and low-wage work, unemployed black youth are defining their own roles in society and in doing, so rejecting the sub-human role designated to them by the Apartheid state (Jeske, 2020).

Low-wage jobs though ‘proper’ do not meet the economic needs and wants of young township inhabitants. Globally and locally income disparity has widened, with wage jobs offering less job security, increasingly insufficient compensation and unsatisfactory working hours (Jeske, 2020). This is evidenced by the heavy reliance on credit in the township, with the employed, underemployed and unemployed depending on loans from banks, store-credit and mashonisa[10] to meet basic needs, social responsibilities and engage in consumptive performance. Debt is somewhat accepted as necessary but the manner in which it is used in itself takes on different social connotations. Where credit used to buy food or pay for education is viewed positively, credit used on alcohol or fancy clothes is viewed negatively (Dawson, 2022).

[10] Zulu term used to describe unregistered loan sharks. The term ‘mashonisa’ directly translates to sink and is indicative of the excessive interest rates associated with the credit they provide.

“Wage work is not only increasingly unavailable but has also arguably never provided economic security, let alone class mobility, for the majority of Black workers in South Africa.”(Dawson, 2022) Based on the above assertion by Dawson, I argue that it would be irrational for black township youth to take on low-wage work because it never has and still does not provide a viable path to economic stability or socio-economic mobility. Low wage work is not a viable path to ‘the good life’. Concerningly the restriction of social mobility extends beyond low-wage jobs as even those township inhabitants with ‘proper jobs’ are increasingly unable to meet their financial obligations let alone achieve class mobility. Wage work does not allow black youths to accumulate the material possessions which can be used as a means to reclaim the humanity stripped from them by poverty and the legacy of Apartheid.

For the inhabitants of the township of Langa an important goal in their lives is self-actualization, and their forms of economic participation play a role in achieving this goal. Austin from his engagements with the black youth of Langa comes to define self-actualization as “the common desire that respondents expressed to discover one’s own talents and be able to externalize these features in the social world.” (Austin, 2016) This goal of self-actualization exists in strong contrast to the prescriptions of the current economy, where nearly all managers and employers are white and all low-wage labourers are black. It also contrasts the colonial expectations that black people participate in the economy as a cheap source of labour for the white economy (Jeske, 2020).

Alongside the desire for self-actualization Sipho expresses a desire to live in positivity, which he describes as generating ideas, limitless thinking and communicating these ideas (Austin, 2016). I argue that the low-wage work environment does not allow for self-actualization or positive thinking, as prescribed above, due to the menial and monotonous nature of the work; the strict roles between workers, managers and customers; and the stigmas imposed upon black township youth when working in ‘white’ spaces.

Another important consideration when discussing employment is the relative cost of different types of employment, as various young people expressed that they did not

feel the wages they earned matched the amount of work they did. At a basic level employment is a transaction of the employees labour in exchange for wages, however there are additional costs incurred by both employee and employer. In the case of the employee there is both time and money that must be spent to commute to work. Having already discussed that townships are typically found on the periphery of the city, by virtue of distance the relative cost of commuting to work would be higher for township inhabitants both in time and monetary terms. A good example of this is Nobuhle, a young person from Mpopheni KwaZulu Natal, who worked for an employer in Howick who paid wages of R30 a day which was a third of minimum wage. Her daily wage was barely enough to cover her daily commute to and from work (Jeske, 2020). So for the township youth who are employed in the low-wage labour market a significant portion of their income gets spent on the commute to work. For those that are unemployed, their ability to access employment is restricted. As expressed by Hamann and Horn, “business remains separated from large concentrations of unemployed residents.”(Hamman et al, 2021)

There are external economic variables that must also be considered as shaping the labour participation choices of black township youths. We have already acknowledged a mismatch between the number of jobs available and the number of people seeking out employment. Given that black township youth are particularly vulnerable to unemployment we must acknowledge the perspectives of employers and how they inform their hiring practices. In engaging with different business owners within Howick, she identifies that many of them hold the belief that black people, in particular Zulu people are lazy, and she identifies the very racialised origins of this hegemonic assumption (Jeske, 2020).

Descriptors of subjugated groups as lazy or hard working have been used interchangeably by those in power to support their economic objectives. Historically assertions of black people as lazy have been used as justifications for slavery and colonization, suggesting that they need to be governed or ‘civilized’ by western communities in order to realise their economic potential. One marginalized group begins to be viewed as lazy when another appears that is more readily willing to accept low wages. Communities that are willing to accept low wage work are then heralded as hardworking and given preference in the low wage labour market, while

this label is used to ignore their deplorable working conditions and the desperation which leads them to accept the status qou. This is narrative used in the comparison of South Africans and foreign migrants as workers in the current economic landscape. Jeske gives an example of a farmer in Howick who fired all his Zulu workers and replaced them with Malawian workers, who likely worked without the relevant work visa and thus exist outside of labour protections. Unfortunately this contrasting of subjugated groups as lazy and hardworking often leads to conflicts between the exploited groups to the benefit of white employers. The contradictions in these narratives abound both within current and past discourse. As expressed by Andrew Zimmerman, “ ‘The Negro’ was considered ‘ a servile hard-working, and inexpensive laborer; at the same time, the ‘Negro’ was a rebellious, lazy, and excessively demanding threat to the political and economic order.” (Jeske, 2020)

What social scientists would describe as respectability politics, lies as the common thread through the decision making of black youths and the broader black South African society (Jeske, 2018). In chapter 3 of Jeske’s book she comes to identify the significance of ‘inhlonipho’ ,the Zulu term for respect, as her attempted discussions on work, with a respondent by the name of Nomusa always devolved into the subject of relationships. When recounting her experiences of recurring physical abuse and attempted murder at the hands of her drunken husband, she describes a turning point in their relationship. After having been stabbed and moving out of her home, she confronted her husband stating, “I’m tired of this. You’re not respecting me as your wife.” In the grander scheme of things those words may seem futile but they did in this case lead to an improvement in their relationship. Despite the clear abuse of power on the part of Nomusa’s husband, what called him to order is his moral obligation of respect. Jeske highlights that in Zulu culture respect is not earned, rather it is owed by virtue of being human, beyond this it is all the more important to receive when you are down trodden. Nomusa in her confrontation with her husband reminds him of her humanity, and thus his moral obligation to respect her. Through these engagements she comes to understand respect as the primary indicator of a good life (Jeske, 2020, p.88).

Where it is accepted in the literature that economic conditions impact relationships within the household and community, Jeske comes to identify that the inverse is true

as well. She states that, “Nomusa’s story points to a causality that moves in the opposite direction as well: domestic and interpersonal relationships shape economic conditions.” (Jeske, 2020, p.86) I’d like to expand on this and argue that domestic and interpersonal relationships also shape economic choices. What one must understand is that while respect underpins black culture in South Africa, by design it was stripped out of the South African formal economy, at least in relation to black people. Where age, gender and humanity are the basis for different forms of respect in the black South African tradition, under the Apartheid state race took precedence. One must understand that for individuals who come from a culture where you do not address adults by their first name, nor look them in their eye, but rather address them by the vernacular terms for mother or father irrespective of familial relationship, the social hierarchy and rules of engagement in the formal labour market and society at large under the Apartheid state are blasphemous. Black labourers leave their communities to go to work , consequently leaving behind any form of social status, to be addressed as a ‘kitchen girl’ or ‘garden boy’ by their employer and more offensively the children of their employers. In the labour market under the Apartheid state the order of the day was inequality. Unlike in the United States there was no fallacy of separate but equal. Jeske sums it up as such, “This kind of power inequality and lack of incentive to care was built into the apartheid system, and it continues to be the default relationship for many businesses in South Africa.” (Jeske, 2020, p.87) In this environment an employee cannot call their employer to order by demanding the respect due to them as human, as Nomsa did with her husband. Rather the workplace, particularly in the low-wage industries that black people were subjected to under the Apartheid state, continues to be a space devoid of respect. The relational morality that defines black culture is absent from the low-wage labour market which has a long, traumatic and heavily racialised history.

Alternatives to the low-wage labour market

This chapter serves to identify what urban black youths are doing with their time in the absence of employment in the formal labour market as low wage workers. The first assumption being that despite rejecting low-wage jobs, the subjects of this study do still need to provide for their needs financially. Alternative paths to be investigated include pursuit of better paying jobs, employment in the informal labour market, entrepreneurship, pursuit of a career in sports or entertainment, crime and idleness.

Important in this discussion is establishing the township youths perception of realistic paths to success and social mobility, and the prevalence of hustle culture. Central to this investigation are the township success stories of previous and current generations, and their impact on shaping the youths thinking. It's generally accepted that representation is an effective way to indicate to young people the opportunities available to them, and this is a concept accepted by the youth of South Africa as well. Thembeka from Langa, for example describes her relationship with her mentor and the impact on her personal aspirations as such, in her conversations with Austin:

> "It's the fact that she understands me, right? Whenever I speak to her, automatically she can relate, number one because she's from where I'm from, and number two she's encountered I think the obstacles I have and I'm still to encounter. And the fact that she's from kwaLanga, it motivates me, man. It really pushes me harder that, if she was able to do it, what can possibly stop me from doing it? And succeeding in it?" (Austin, 2016)

Like all other young people, township inhabitants have careers and lives they aspire to and these typically do not exist within the low-wage labour market. This can be seen in the expressions of the youth of Langa, who had yet to enter the labour market as expressed to Austin. Viwe, a first year tourism and business student aspired to utilise his degree to travel the world engaging with and empowering young people. Tabisa who has taken a year to improve her matric results so she could apply for university, hoped to build a career as an environmental science researcher. Similarly, Sandile was improving his results in order to apply for University and pursue a career in business and commercial law. (Austin, 2016)

Austin in his engagements with the youth of Langa came across the concept of hustling as an alternative to participation in the formal labour market through low-wage work. He defines hustle as, "an unbounded process of realizing potential, recasting economic participation as a social project achieved through collective support and success with other young people." In the understanding of the youth of Langa, hustling means using ones talents in areas of interest to generate income for

both self and community. In this case they hustled, by establishing the Real Phandaz, an NGO which Sipho originated for young people to ‘discuss and implement solutions to problems that confronted them across South Africa.’ (Austin, 2016)

Jeske engages with a young lady by the name of Jabu, whose father I believe optimizes the image of a hustler within the black township context. Jabu when initially asked about her father indicated that she, ‘respected her dad for not working’ in this context she views work as formal employment. This skewed perspective becomes clear as Jabu goes on to explain that her father was a taxi owner, prior to which he had worked as a freelance mechanic to provide for his family and put his children through the best school in the area. At some point he had transported children to school and in his taxi business employed multiple taxi drivers. She goes on to describe how during a challenging economic period during her early childhood her father tended to a garden in their yard and employed 3 people. Unfortunately as child Jabu was unable to recognise that her father had always worked and in fact was an entrepreneur creating job opportunities for others in his community and providing for his family. Through the course of the conversation she comes to acknowledge how resourceful her father is and always has been, as she states, ‘You don’t know how hard your parents are working. Up until you actually stay at home with them. My dad’s a real hard worker.’ The contradiction in her description of her father as having ‘never, ever worked in his life’ and the realities of his hustle demonstrate how Jabu had internalized hegemonic assumptions about black people being lazy. Jeske in retelling this conversation rightly acknowledges that Jabu’s father like many other township inhabitants who choose not to take on low wage work are not lazy, but rather have made a conscious decision not subject themselves to the ‘indignities endemic to white spaces’ through low wage work, instead carving a respectable path for themselves within the confines of their own communities (Jeske, 2020).

Two of the young men Dawson engaged with opened a car wash stand, and this would be considered running their own business. One of the young men, Oscar, resigned from a low wage to pursue this endeavour. An important factor to consider when comparing the car wash to low wage work is its social significance for the young men rather than its economic value. Arguably the car wash does not provide a

great deal of financial security however it may serve as a location of masculine affirmation. Where in a low wage job black men would be reporting into someone else, with strict working hours and behavioural expectations shaped by the employer, at the car wash they work for themselves, they are surrounded by and socialize with their peers, and often indulge in alcohol on the job (Dawson, 2022). In the township of Langa, Austin encountered numerous businesses run by locals, providing goods and services such as braai meat, chicken, fruits and vegetables, alcohol, baked goods, catering, medicine, clothing, stationary, appliances, electronics, barber services, tailoring, window cleaning and hair styling (Austin, 2016).

Jeske acknowledges that it is the norm for black people to engage in informal trade to generate income. However this is often not acknowledged as work by statistics, other demographic groups and even self - black people (Jeske, 2020). Food and drinking establishments are often another grouping of businesses which are prevalent within township economies. Dawson references a braai spot names Motswako in Zandspruit which is right across the above mentioned car wash and frequented by the black middle class from surrounding suburbs. The young men she engaged with could not regularly afford visiting Motswako, rather they frequented shebeens and taverns which are commonplace businesses in the townships across South Africa where locals can purchase and enjoy alcohol (Dawson, 2022).

A number of the young township inhabitants sought out jobs or rather careers they felt personally compelled to, this is strongly linked to the desire for self-actualization. Thembeka identified herself as an artist and took a break from school to pursue a career in the arts. In pursuit of this career she started a youth group for young artists to pursue their passions, including music, poetry, literature, dance, visual arts and fashion design. This indicates that there are those who seek out careers in the arts, in some cases rejecting the prospects of a more financially viable career path (Austin, 2016).

Among the less legitimate means of generating money engaged in by township youths, is participation in the bribery system which plagues state institutions in South Africa. For example, 33 year old Neo brokered bribes between patrons and licensing

department officials to ease their license process, in return Neo would receive a portion of the bribe. Others generate an income by leveraging off of state infrastructure, such as 21 year old Thato who wires informal electricity connections for the residents of Zandspruit. Tebogo, aged 32, less nefariously made a living by selling counterfeit clothes and shoes (Dawson, 2022).

Unfortunately, some of the most outwardly wealthy people within the township tend to be those participating in criminal activity. In Zandspruit, Dawson engages with the Khumalo brothers who are viewed as privileged amongst their peers because they owned vehicles, 35 year old Andile driving a customised Polo GTI and 28 year old Lucky driving a Mini Cooper. The younger of the brothers sold drugs and counterfeit sneakers and the older of the brothers was rumoured to engage in more dangerous criminal activity. This mystique around how some people make money in the township is common place and such individuals are often critiqued as taking ‘short cuts’ (Dawson, 2022). Despite the consequences of a life of crime it is still viewed as a valid choice for some young people. Bullet in his assertions about media and success, expressed a desire for an ‘exciting life’ referring to the lifestyle of gangsters. In the same breathe he acknowledges that ‘an exciting life is short’, a reality he happily welcomes stating that “Nobody wants to be fifty. Fifty for what.” (Jeske, 2020) The manner in which young people discuss crime is indicative of the complex perspective on this way of life. Across all the groups of respondents engaged by the authors in the field, there is an acknowledgement of the dangers of this lifestyle, paralleled by both an envy and critique of the types of consumption it provides access to, as well as an understanding and almost empathy for why those who do choose this path, given the structural limitations that make earning a similar income an unlikely outcome for black township youth engaged in low wage work. In a position of deprivation crime emerged as an attainable path to meeting ones economic goals and social mobility, this is true both in past and present township contexts. As such, in many township communities crime comes to be viewed as acceptable or justified by some.

The other ways in which the young township inhabitants made money include gambling and haggling their neighbours for money. Others yet still chose to be idle, a path which the Real Phandaz of Langa hoped to prevent the young people of their

township from falling prey to (Austin, 2016). Others rely on assistance from the state to receive an income in the form of unemployment grants. These alternatives are typically viewed in a negative light, as Jeske asserts “Other methods of attaining resources – theft, corruptions, gifts from family member, or welfare – are imagined as the immoral alternatives people use to support their laziness habits.”(Jeske, 2020)

While these are the alternatives many young people chose over employment in the low wage labour market, it must be acknowledged that these are not purely economic decisions as many of these endeavours do not provide any more financial security than the low wage jobs being rejected. Rather the economic variables are considered alongside social factors such as familial responsibility, perceived masculinity, agency, historically factors, racial dynamics and respectability politics amongst others.

Conclusion

"If Whiteness has long implied an entitlement to prosperity, being classified Black was tantamount to being judged unworthy of certain modes of consumption." (Posel, 1991)

In the context of Apartheid South Africa we can expand upon the words of Posel to assert that blackness was tantamount to being unworthy of decent wages, decent work or a decent life. While Apartheid has ended its imprint on the nation's economy and labour market practices run deep, impacting even those who have been labelled as 'born free'. Townships continue to be viewed as spaces of 'poverty, disorder and unregulated blackness', and by virtue of association these are the same labels placed on township youth when they find themselves in suburbia or the city (Austin, 2016). What is made clear to black township youth is that they do not belong in the city as it is the domain of whiteness. The only conditions under which they shall be tolerated within these communities is as low wage workers, outside of this they are viewed with suspicion and accused of laziness.

One's employment status and the type of employment they find themselves in shapes their earnings, their consumptive capacity and their ability to be upwardly socially mobile. Employment is a means for all people to meet an economic objective, in the case of the black youth of South Africa's township the primary objectives as expressed in this literature review are achieving 'the good life', self-actualization and meeting ones social responsibilities. The young people mentioned in this study have rejected jobs and career paths which do not meet these objectives based on their personal priorities. Low wage work, for many of the respondents engaged by the authors in the field, does not meet any of these requirements thus the rejection of low wage work can be viewed as a rational action, as this type of employment does not meet the needs of the township youth.

Based on the opinions expressed by the young people of South Africa's various townships across Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape, it appears that there is no reliable path for them to social mobility and achieving the good life. Those

who appear to have done so are in one way or another ‘faking it’ and thus remain in a position of economic vulnerability despite their perceived wealth. While this is asserted by the township youth of Zandspruit in Jeske’s work it is also identified as a sentiment that exists among the black middle class in Spyropoulos’ work. Surveys referenced in his work reveal that the middle class perceive their economic position in relation to the rest of the country, as significantly lower than what it is (Spryopoulos 2024). This is indicative of the middle class feeling economically insecure despite being in a position of relative privileged by virtue of having ‘proper jobs’, access to credit, residing in previously white communities and driving luxury vehicles.

I acknowledge that the absence of in person interviews is a significant limitation of this research report. It is however one I have sought to address by leveraging off of the plethora of human studies conducted by the social scientists who have produced bodies of work in different disciplines on the subject of education, unemployment, inequality and job selectivity. While I believe this is approach is sufficient for a research report, my future explorations into the rejection of low wage work by South Africans will have to include direct engagement with human subjects to produce worthwhile contributions to the field.

An important contribution required in the study of unemployment and the rejection of low wage work by the unemployed youth, is the perspectives of other demographic groups and the determinants of their labour choices. It would be useful to compare the labour participation decision of black township youth with those of coloured township youth, as well as Indian/Asian and white unemployed youth. While unemployment does not impact these communities in the same way I believe it is worth asking whether or not the unemployed within these groups are willing to take on low wage work or if this is even expected of them. Given their relative positions of socio-economic privilege, are they excused from discussion of unemployment and low wage labour? By expanding this analysis we would build a more holistic view of the experiences of the unemployed and the hegemonic assumptions which shape South Africa’s economic landscape.

While the various authors whose work I reviewed, engaged with young people regarding their own perspectives on the economy and labour participation, they largely did not engage with the other members of the societies which influence the economic behaviour of the youth. The only author exempt from this critique is Jeske, who engages with employers and managers from the town of Howick where most of the employed residents of Mpopheni work. As such I believe the lack of direct engagement with the family members of unemployed township youth is an existing gap in the literature which needs to be addressed. Firstly with the older generations, particularly parental figures, to better understand their experiences within the low wage labour market and Apartheid economy, and how that has impacted how they have raised their children and their economic expectations for their children. Secondly with the younger generation still within primary and secondary school, to understand how township perspectives on the economy evolve with age and from generation to generation. Lastly, I believe it would be prudent to engage directly with former township youth who have seemingly achieved 'the good life'. I believe there is merit in understanding their perspective on the economy, labour market participation, how they achieved social mobility and the realities of the black middle class through first-hand accounts rather than relying on the assumptions and critiques asserted from the perspective of township youth as many of the authors did.

The economic reality of most black South African's has not been significantly transformed by post-Apartheid democracy. Most township youth live in the same communities or even houses, that their parents were restricted to during the Apartheid era. As they enter the job market, they seek to achieve economic security and social mobility, to live in an economic reality different from that which their ancestors were limited to. Part of the goal of economic liberation for black township inhabitants, means not working the same low-wage jobs which black people in prior generations were limited to. The rejection of low-wage work by black township youth in particular is a call for economic liberation no different from historical calls for political liberation, a protest against the historic dehumanisation and subjugation imposed by the Apartheid system.

From childhood, black township youth are located within an environment that academically, economically and spatially makes them prone to higher rates of

unemployment. As students, their families' economic standing restricts them to primary and secondary schools that are under resourced, overcrowded and produce poor academic outcomes, meaning they are more likely to achieve poor results, repeat grades and drop out of school. This suggests that the basic education they are exposed to is ineffective in preparing them for the world of work. As a consequence of their secondary school results and economic background, they are the least likely to academically qualify for university and unlikely to be able to afford to pay tuition without external assistance. The geographic location of townships also makes black youths the least exposed to employment opportunities, as their communities are on the periphery of the city away from economic production hubs. These constricting factors are not coincidental, they were designed by the Apartheid state to exclude black people from specific forms of economic participation. The intent of the Apartheid system was to restrict and prepare black youths through the Bantu Education system for low wage menial work. While the legislation of Apartheid has fallen away its educational, economic and spatial constructs persist and there continues to be an unspoken expectation that black youths, by virtue of being poor and having lower levels of education, should pursue low wage jobs.

Austin in his work posits that the young black respondents of his study, "rejected formal merit systems that channel Langa residents into particular professions; they saw most employment options available to them as constraining and alienating, and instead sought to create futures that activated their own passions and interest." (Austin, 2016) Economic participation for black people in South Africa has historically taken the form of low wage work in urban areas as manual labourers and domestic workers, or menial work in mines and farms. The rejection of low-wage work is indicative of the desire of young black township inhabitants to do better than their parents did, by seeking out jobs which are 'respectable'[11], earning higher wages so they can achieve social mobility and meet their responsibilities to take care of home, not subjecting themselves to exploitation by a 'baas' or racists micro-aggressions as

[11] This desire for respectable work existed even during the Apartheid era as black people were able to improve their social and economic position relative to their peers through education and employment. The earliest industries which black people entered as forms of respectable work included teaching, nursing and law.

they serve white patrons. The rejection of low wage work in favour of unemployment cannot simply be brushed off as an irrational decision made as a consequence of youth, as young black township inhabitants continue to exist within a racialized and unequal society. Money is often the only vehicle with which young black people can command respect within this anti-black society, thus the types of employment or economic activity they choose to participate in are impacted by their lived experience.

Although young black township inhabitants may form part of the national unemployment statistics, we cannot assume that they are idle or lazy. We must within academia and statistical reporting acknowledge the economy that exists and thrives within the township. Austin in particular identifies a group of young people who are determined to not fall into a lifestyle of “partying, drinking and idolizing the excess and consumption of American celebrities.” (Austin, 2016, p.46) There are businesses that exist in the township, run by its inhabitants to serve its inhabitants. There are different forms of economic participation within the township economy which have long been illegitimized by colonialist structures, the Apartheid state, western academics and South African citizens alike, irrespective of race, location or employment status.

I believe the rejection of low-wage work by the young black inhabitants of South Africa’s townships is explained well by Mashudu, a young lady engaged by Dawson in her research. “We want to be told we are doing well, even though we are not. We want society to recognize that we can achieve certain things, even though we know in the bottom of our hearts it is a much bigger struggle that we are fighting.” (Dawson, 2022) In this statement Mashudu acknowledged that there are structural factors heavily restricting the ability of black township youth to be socially mobile and achieve ‘the good life’. In the absence of real economic transformation black youths engage in the forms of economic participation that garner respect and status, regardless of how temporary it may be. These social markers of success cannot be garnered through low-wage as these are the jobs their ancestors were restricted to by the Apartheid state, these are jobs where they often report and serve white employers or managers and patrons respectively, these are jobs in communities where they are still treated as outsiders and can only access as workers, these are jobs that do not pay well enough to meet their economic needs and wants.

In rejecting low-wage work young township inhabitants reject the pre-determined paths of employment imposed on them and reject capitalist ideals of meritocracy, the myth that hard work translates to economic success. This disillusionment with the myth of meritocracy among the working class is not unique to South Africa, as the masses have come to realise that despite working hard the good life evades them (Jeske, 2020). Young people do not view the job market or ones position within it, as an indicator of individual merit because they have come to acknowledge the structural factors that impede upon their ability to succeed within the formal labour market. Thus in coming to terms with the inequalities and injustices that have characterised the experiences of township inhabitants in present and past generations, by rejecting low wage work they are protesting against the racialized & classist social expectations of how they should show up in the labour market. As articulated by Bullet in explaining how he selected his unusual nick name to Jeske:

> *"The 'bullet' is the black man who is no longer willing to turn the other cheek; he's had enough. He says it's time to fight back – I'm not gonna allow you to keep treating me like this anymore. I didn't choose to be treated this way, but I am choosing to say this is enough." (*Jeske, 2020)

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