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Permanent juniority: black youth politics in the Vaal under late colonisation

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the political subjectivity of black youth took shape within the violent period of late colonialism in South Africa known as apartheid. As a historico-philosophical inquiry that aims to understand the historical modalities of subject formation and political practice, the thesis is grounded in extensive original research on black youth politics in the townships of the Vaal region south of Johannesburg during the 1980s and early 1990s. At the same time, the thesis interprets the findings of that historical research through a critical engagement with the philosophical work of various thinkers (including Hegel, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Foucault, Fanon, Mamdani, Mbembe, Zizek and Maldonado-Torres, among others) in an effort to address the problem of freedom in relation to the black subject under colonial and post-colonial rule. The thesis shows how colonial authority and governance both posits and aims to reproduce what I call the 'permanent juniority' of blacks generally, and of black youth in particular. Key sites for the exercise of such authority and governance in the townships under apartheid included the street and the school, where blacks were subjected to social, infrastructural and disciplinary violence. In examining one 'Bantu' high school in depth, I show how black youth were subjected to what I call a 'pedagogy of offence' – a mode of socialisation and discipline based on the premise that black youth, merely by virtue of *being* black, are always already guilty of breaching the socio-political order and are therefore addressed as delinquents. The thesis shows how a collective black youth subject constituted itself in revolt against this disciplinary regime. In the course of this revolt, the figure of the outlaw comrade, or 'com-tsotsi', emerged, occupying an ambiguous position between political resistance and illegal criminality. This figure is shown to have a genealogy originating in slavery and the Frontier Wars in the Cape, and extending to the early period of mining and industrial capitalism in Johannesburg. In the concluding chapters, which explore the underground activities of Self-Defence Units as violence on the Vaal reached its apogee in the early 1990s, the thesis probes the ethical ambiguity that emerges when violence is used in the service of a politics of love and emancipation. Here, I argue that the constitution of a collective black youth political subject in revolt also suggests a theory of black emancipation: of subjectivity beyond object-hood, of political love and everyday life beyond colonial violence and death, and of a political optimism oriented toward freedom.