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Youth, the Kenyan state and a politics of contestation

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Abstract

This paper serves as an introduction to the Special Collection on “Youth, the Kenyan State and a Politics of Contestation”. It focuses on youth and the heterogeneous ways this social category responds to inordinate state action. Specifically, we foreground the role that the Kenyan state has played in the construction and subsequent politicization of Kenyan youth in a variety of ways across time and space. In elaborating this main contention, this introduction frames the six papers in the Special Collection within a three-pronged argument: First, while we present youth as heterogeneous social category, we argue that their similar experiences of state surveillance and violence warrant analyzing them through a comparative lens. Secondly, we reject ahistorical renderings of youth politics often presented in youth bulge studies, arguing that such analyses have served to both disregard and delegitimize the political grievances of Kenyan youth and flatten the diversity of their political activities. Finally we call for an approach to the study of youth politics, which seeks to expand ‘the parameters of the political’, taking oft-neglected informal spaces of youth political activity as important discursive and material sites of investigation. In taking these spaces seriously as objects of analysis, the papers on offer here are able to provide a more nuanced assessment of youth as political actors, which problematize reductive dichotomous narratives of youth politics that pit resistance against co-optation.

Keywords: Youth, heterogeneity, political agency, securitization, Kenya

On July 7, 2020, thirty years after the first Saba Saba day protests were organized, young Kenyans came together to take to the streets of Nairobi. While they were commemorating Saba Saba and building on the democratic spaces opened by this earlier movement for ‘political and constitutional reforms,’¹ they were also here to demand the freedoms that were

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still not guaranteed twenty nine years after the restoration of multiparty democracy, and ten years after the 2010 Constitution was promulgated. The initial Saba Saba day protests were organized on the seventh day of the seventh month of 1990 (hence the use of *saba*, Swahili for seven) by activists and veteran, mostly male, politicians, and it ‘heralded the beginning of week-long urban riots that came to symbolize the determination of Kenyans to maintain their demands for an increased democratic and political space that had been throttled by a dictatorial Moi and a despotic KANU party.’² Now, a generation later, and although many of those in attendance at these most recent Saba Saba protests were likely born after 1990, the objectives were much the same: to contest widespread structural oppression that was becoming exacerbated in a, seemingly, one party dictatorial state.³

For the youth coming from the different poor urban settlements of Nairobi, the goal was to march from their neighbourhoods and connect at a single artery in Mathare Constituency that would take them to town and onwards to Harambee House, where they hoped to present a petition to the President. They were coming from Kayole, Dandora, Mathare, Kiambiu and elsewhere, and their rallying cry was an end to state violence, manifested, concomitantly through the harassment and killings of poor urban youth in Nairobi, the lack of jobs and the criminalization of poverty, amongst other legitimate laments. The Citizen Demands written by the youth-led social justice movement that organized this Saba Saba march, also recognized that the government had ‘taken everything from us [youth] including our dreams for a better future.’⁴

Though an exaggerated police presence forcefully dispersed protesters before they got to town, a violation of their constitutional right to a peaceful demonstration, this did not stop the protestors from boarding *matatus* and finding their way to The National Archives in the city centre, where they would regroup to collectively chart the way forward. It was in

town where they would meet with other unexpected constituents: middle class young people with various affiliations – student leaders, young lawyers, queer activists, liberation theologians, artists and others – who were joining this poor youth-led march for the first time since it began in 2018. They were joined remotely by others of their generation in Kisumu and Vihiga, located in the South-West of the country. And though all of the youth that participated in the march did not embody the same histories and relationships to the state, they were brought together by a solidarity that had implicit within it the recognition that their generation continues to bear witness to a state surveillance that crosses geographies, gender and class dimensions. As the teargas, exploded before them and many were then bundled in police cars and cells, no matter their affiliations and origins they were all framed the same; their charge sheets officially confirming that they were criminal before the state.

Bringing the State Back in: Youth and the Kenyan State

Seventy percent of the Kenyan population is below 30 years of age, and as this youth demographic constitutes the majority of the country's population, it, certainly, warrants scholarly attention. However, in this Special Collection we focus on this age grouping principally because of the need to interrogate the particular ways this demographic has been conjured by the Kenyan government, and the heterogeneous ways youth respond to inordinate state and international attention directed at them in this moment⁵. As we argue here, the Kenyan state has played a central role in the construction and subsequent politicization of what counts as 'youth' in a variety of ways across time and space. Within this conjuring and problematization of this social category, youth have often been framed as potential 'criminals' or 'radicals.' While this construction politicizes youth as a problematic category, it simultaneously rejects most political configurations of and by youth, as the Saba Saba account

above demonstrates. Therefore, in contributing to and provincializing ‘critical reflexivity in considering the growing attention being paid to youth as a social category,’⁶ this Special Collection takes up three main objectives.

First, we show the divergent experiences of being young that are glossed over by Kenyan state discourses. By simultaneously holding in focus the experiences of youth within university student movements, located in North Eastern Kenya, secondary students, and those navigating the structural violences of the poor margins of Nairobi, we make evident that youth should be considered a heterogenous analytical category. At the same time, while highlighting their diverse responses to state actions, we foreground the intersectional valence of state surveillance that homogenizes their experiences vis-à-vis the state: from students to youth made marginal by their geographies, the experience of state violence is common. Against the persistence of dominant narratives that allow youth only the privilege of being ‘demographic dividends’ or ‘time bombs,’ we flesh out the heterogeneity of youth agency as well as their similar position vis-a-vis the Kenyan state.

Second, in contesting the homogenization of this demographic, a stereotyping which contemporaneously travels overwhelmingly through ‘youth bulge’ narratives, we point to how this inordinate focus on youth is tied to a local and global political project of securitization. This ahistorical project conjures youth as an inevitable security threat, which serves to disregard or delegitimize the specific nature of youth grievances. In this way, youth violence is constructed as fated and when it does occur, rarely as an articulation of justifiable discontent. By charting the histories that inform particular state-youth relations, in this Special Collection we seek to contribute to an appreciation of the historical specificity of young people’s political grievances, which are often glossed over by a securitization narrative sutured through youth bulge discourses, that frames them as threats.

Finally, by highlighting the histories and particular practices that shape youth responses to how they are constructed by the state, we seek to make evident that Kenyan youth's heterogeneous actions offer discursive and material sites to discern the 'intentional political action' of young people. Even with the structural violences in place – codetermined by ethnicity, gender, class, religion and geographical location – we show how their 'agency in tight corners'⁷ embodies political action. In this regard, by examining youth agency in Kenya through modes and nodes not often considered, this Special Collection recognizes that African youth, in attempting to avoid the censure of the infantilizing post-colonial state, have evacuated formal spaces of political action and sought participation in novel and, at times, unexpected informal spaces.⁸ By taking these informal spaces seriously as sites of political activity, the analysis offered by the articles in this Special Collection seek to broaden, what Michael Schatzberg refers to as, 'the parameters of the political'.⁹ Certainly, by collectively dwelling on 'politics-from-below' not often prioritized in comparative analyses of African politics, our Special Collection highlights the agential voice of a cross-section of Kenyan youth, past and present, who take up political action using a variety of strategies.

While a recollection of the discursive articulations of youth in Kenya is particularly illuminating for unpacking the dynamics perceived between the state and youth politics, we also seek to go beyond debates about 'octogenarians' in government, generational angst and the absence of *ituika* (the traditional Gikuyu handing over from one generation to the next), to discuss the layered and visceral impacts brought about by the formal narrative and material mechanisms that configure youth as an inevitable security problem. Ultimately, we argue that the historical ways the concept of youth has been taken up by the state legitimates an array of scripts about the potential of this social category to be, principally, radicals or criminals and

this, as the six papers we assemble in this Special Collection show, can have very profound consequences on young lives.

In an attempt to both address lacunas in the literature and to offer critical alternatives to the dominant approaches to the study of youth politics in Africa summarized below, the papers presented here will focus on the historical relationship between different cross-sections of youth and the Kenyan state, within both informal and formal spaces. Essentially these papers ask: What role, real and discursive, has the state historically played in excluding youth as citizens within the national polity? To what extent has the state served to marginalize or criminalize certain, often spatial, sections of Kenya's youthful populations? And how has the state's relationship with youth varied depending on gender, class, ethnicity, and geographical location? Finally, what have the implications of the state's interventions been for violence and political mobilization among youth in Kenya both in the past and in the contemporary moment?

In answering these questions, the papers recognize that the power of the state in Kenya is not total, and it is, perhaps, its absent-presence that has prevented it from having a more central role in the pre-existing literature on youth politics. Still, the literature we examine in the sections below—coming from sociology, anthropology, political science, NGO advocacy and even journalistic reportage — are united by their downplaying or outright disregard of the key role of the state in politicizing the social category of youth and shaping trajectories of youth activism/participation/(dis)engagement and survivals broadly. This Special Collection's primary contribution, therefore, is in highlighting and documenting the importance of state-youth relations both historically and contemporarily, in order to show how these tensions bring about narratives centered on 'radical' or 'criminal' youth. In this way, we go beyond extensive discussions of, for example, identity, waiting, generational

anxieties and economic conditions to show how youth experiences are moulded by the state's intentional practices, which privilege surveillance and gunspeak¹⁰.

In the following sections, we discuss the literature that has shaped previous studies of youth in Africa and critically situate our main arguments and the collective contributions of this Special Collection in relation to these debates and contextual dynamics. Here, we present a more detailed discussion of the three main contributions of the Special Collection: youth as a heterogeneous category, a call for a historization of youth politics, and an expansion of the parameters of youth politics without over-celebrating youth agency. These arguments engage two main strands of literature on youth in Africa, namely that of youth bulge literature and the interdisciplinary scholarship on youth, culture and agency.

Theorizing Youth: Heterogeneity and State Surveillance

In this Special Collection, youth is defined, following Mshai Mwangola¹¹ as 'the transitional stage of life between childhood and adulthood characterized by the transfer of societal responsibilities affirming the change of status from the former to the latter.' Such a definition recognizes that the boundaries of youth are not biologically determined, 'self-evident data,' but rather that it is a 'socially constructed' category.¹² Indeed, it is precisely because 'the cultural meanings and social attributes ascribed to 'youth' have varied a great deal across time and space,' that one cannot provide a universal, trans-historical definition of this term¹³ It is important to recognize, as the papers in this Special Collection attest, that this category is by no means a homogenous one¹⁴, but it is mediated by factors such as class, race, gender, geography and ethnicity.

At the same time, even with the heterogeneity within this grouping and the recognition that youthhood is shaped by situated dynamics, increasingly, in view of the growing disproportion of young people as a percentage of the overall adult population, this demographic is now lumped together within the descriptor ‘youth bulge’. This is a term associated with political instability, violence and criminality. While the youth bulge debate has, generally, been phrased in dichotomous terms, where this demographic is presented on the one hand as future potential, and on the other as latent threat, state interventions and public discourse seem to give emphasis to the more negative aspects of this binary. In such depictions, (predominantly male) youth belonging to large age cohorts, almost exclusively situated in the Global South, have come to be represented as an imminent security threat to the global social order¹⁵.

Africa has the world’s fastest growing youth population, with over 200 million people between the ages of 15-24¹⁶. With the emergence and spread of violent formations like Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, and the student protest movements in South Africa, anxieties about the ‘spectre of youth radicalization’ among policymakers, donor agencies and NGO’s, academics, and journalists alike, have been particularly acute across the continent¹⁷. The attendant negative theorizing about youth in Africa as unpredictable political agents has gained particular traction over the last decade, and enables a cross-cutting state surveillance of youth associations and events, as this Special Collection demonstrates, beyond those customarily understood as violent.

In turn, these anxieties over youth have inspired academic literature that engages the issue from predominantly two broad approaches: youth bulge theory in the disciplines of political science, sociology and economics, and a culturalist literature emanating out of the disciplines of history and anthropology. While these approaches have added to our general

understanding of the predicament of youth on the continent, they also tend to either ignore the political and historical dimensions of youthhood, or neglect the underlying processes of deliberate marginalization within and against the construction of youth as problematic social category. The articles in this Special Collection situate themselves in these gaps and present an interdisciplinary dialogue on the mutually constitutive relationship between youth politics and the state based on diverse empirical material from the Kenyan case study.

Kenya is by no means an exception to the demographic developments described above. Ranking above both the world's (15.8%) and Africa's (19.2%) average, but more or less on par with neighbouring countries, those in the country aged between 15 – 24 currently account for 20.3% of the population¹⁸. Cumulatively, over 70% of the population is below 30 years of age¹⁹. Beyond these demographic indices, Kenya presents itself as an exemplary case for exploring the relationships between youth and the state, the dynamics of political contestation, the related institutionalized productions of marginality and criminality and the surveillance that travels through all of these associated phenomena.

This is because, historically, Kenyan politics has always been characterized by deeply entrenched generational dynamics. At independence, a young well-educated elite was granted political power and today their aging sons form a 'new' old guard still clinging to power²⁰. Prior to that, the militant struggle for independence by overwhelmingly young Kikuyu men in the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), popularly referred to as the Mau Mau, was labelled rebellion. At the turn of the millennium, the traditionalist roots of the Mau Mau struggle inspired the Mungiki Youth Movement's fight for recognition and social change²¹. Similar patterns of enduring generational tensions between the state and youth from particular ethnic or regional communities are reflected in how factions of contemporary youth movements, like the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) and Al Shabaab (meaning youth in

Arabic), are reviving elements of earlier situated secessionists struggles²². The state responses to these and other political youth formations have often been scrutinous and confrontational, and in many cases violent, regardless of whether the youth concerned were part of student movements²³, human rights-based grassroots organizations, or vigilante groups and criminal gangs.

At the same time the state has often displayed an instrumentalist approach to youth, incorporating them in classed neo-patrimonial relations of power. This is exemplified historically in, for example, KANU youth-wingers use of intimidation and violence in the late-1980s and 1990s and is further apparent in much of the electoral violence that has come to characterize Kenyan multiparty electoral politics since 1992²⁴. Similar strategies to control the independent political agency of youth can be read into more recent ostensibly youth-centered government initiatives like the *Kazi Kwa Vijana* (“jobs for the youth” in Swahili), Youth Fund, and the National Youth Service (NYS) community projects. In addition to this tendency to instrumentalize and depoliticize this demographic, these initiatives have been awash with corruption scandals, inevitably depriving youth of the, often meagre, funds they require for carrying out state supported socio-economic initiatives. As a consequence, there is a large-scale distrust of these ‘youth’ programs, which also provokes questions about whether the government is actually concerned with supporting this demographic.

Against this background, ironically, on September 24, 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta was declared a UN Global Champion of the Young People’s Agenda, an accolade that did not escape the ridicule of many young Kenyans on social media. The prominence of discussions about youth and who is young in Kenya, mostly vis-à-vis the ostensive government actions for youth, is apparent in many spheres. On a more formal front, these are articulated within state-sanctioned discussions and projects such as the NYS or the Youth

Enterprise Development Fund mentioned above. In more mainstream conversations they can be channeled through, for example, the media, music and youth-led fora. These popular discourses tend to focus, principally, on the difficult and complicated presents and futures that youth are subject to because of government actions.

Within this Special Collection, the article by King et al demonstrates the heterogeneity of youth experiences, while, at the same time, further making evident the comprehensive political perspectives harboured by this social category. In dwelling in the opinions of secondary school students, a sub-set of youth rarely considered, the authors argue that ‘seeing like students’ is ‘critical to understanding Kenya today as well as its future.’ The other papers in this special collection also position themselves within the perspectives of their respective youth interlocutors to understand their politics within the prevailing Kenyan political context. Through a survey that includes the experiences of close to 5000 secondary school students, 52% of whom are young women, King and her colleagues makes evident that ‘secondary school youth in Nairobi are perceptive about the challenges facing the country, civically engaged, and hopeful for the future.’ In presenting these findings, this important intervention challenges the apocalyptic portrayals of youth forwarded by the hegemonic youth bulge narratives and dispels the dominance of localized framings of youth as potential ‘criminals’ and ‘radicals.’

Similarly, Tomas Zak challenges the explanatory potential of conventional securitization theory to fully understand the dynamics of youth politics and resistance during the ‘Usalama Watch Campaign’, which targeted Kenyan Somalis in 2014 by, amongst other problematic interventions, framing this population group as terrorists. Zak shows how Twitter and other social media offered new platforms for the Somali youth in Eastleigh to carve out a voice of their own and to take charge of their stories, so as to challenge demeaning state

representations. In important ways, both the secondary students who are the center of King et al's analysis, the young Somali Kenyans behind the Twitter campaign analyzed by Zak, and those who are at the center of the other youthful experiences shared within this Special Collection perform youth heterogeneity, while similarly discerning and dissecting a singular state narrative that is suspicious and monitoring of youth practices. These analogous actions by a broad array of youth challenge the surveillance and securitization of their demographic and, in doing so, open up the space for actual youth-centered political participation and agency.

Beyond Youth Bulge: Historicizing Youth Politics in Kenya

First conceived of in the 1980s by Gary Fuller during his time as a Scholar-in-Residence at the CIA²⁵, youth bulge theory came to public prominence, principally, following the 9/11 attacks. In the almost two decades since the US declared a Global War on Terror, a slew of large-N studies inspired by this theoretical approach have argued that while youth bulge demographics do not make revolution and rebellion inevitable, they do increase 'the risks of political turmoil and revolt' under certain conditions²⁶, particularly in contexts of economic decline or stagnation. Complemented by a proliferating archive of policy literature from, for example, the United Nations (UN) and the African Development Bank (AfDB), these studies have hypothesized that youth bulge demographics are a structural cause of a number of destabilizing political outcomes, including mass political protest²⁷, low-intensity political violence²⁸, civil and 'ethnic' conflict²⁹, revolution³⁰, terrorist recruitment³¹ and repressive authoritarianism³². Indeed, as Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock note, '[t]he most important way in which global youth have come to be linked to global security is through the concept of youth bulge.'³³

While youth bulge studies should be commended for attempting to identify ‘broad comparative patterns’ in their research³⁴, such approaches have been hindered by a number of important shortcomings. First, their tendency to ‘stai[n] all youth in certain places –most frequently those in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa—with the mark of danger’³⁵ has meant that they have often provided one-dimensional conceptions of African youth as a deviant or problematic category³⁶. Second, these studies tend to focus disproportionately on war-torn cases³⁷. As such, the predictive power of youth bulge theory when taken into consideration in African cases is ‘weak’ and ‘inexact’³⁸. Indeed, the fact of the matter is that in many of the African countries with youth bulge demographics, recent civil conflicts have not ensued and even where those conflicts have occurred, ‘the vast majority of young men do not get involved in violence’³⁹, nor do these conflicts generally take place in densely populated urban settings with large concentrations of urban youth⁴⁰.

A serious consequence of youth bulge theory’s common preoccupation with violence and instability is not simply that it is not a very accurate predictor of political outcomes, but that such theories obscure the remarkable variation in African youth politics and the role that historical and political factors have played in shaping such trajectories of youth public engagement⁴¹. In the last few decades, youth participation within the public sphere in African states has taken many ‘new avenues of political action and expression that may be violent or non-violent, formal or informal’⁴². So, while it is true that youth have often engaged as primary protagonists in armed conflicts (often as child soldiers), or in criminal networks, as members of vigilante bands, protection rackets or criminal gangs⁴³, this does not come close to encapsulating the totality of their activities. African youth have also played a crucial role in resisting or opposing postcolonial authoritarian states, most prominently by helping to organize and lead broad-based social movements⁴⁴. Additionally, they have

actively taken the lead in catalyzing and supporting informal mediating institutions (i.e. transportation, food services in parallel markets, etc.), or what Christian Lund refers to as ‘twilight’ institutions⁴⁵ that help to provide services to people when the state is no longer willing or able to perform them⁴⁶. Finally, youth have been instrumental in many of the continent’s burgeoning transnational religious (i.e. the rise of Pentecostalism)⁴⁷ and cultural movements⁴⁸.

The diversity and dynamism of African youths’ engagement in the public sphere, therefore, has demonstrated some of the prime limitations of youth bulge theorizing. Namely, in their emphasis on demographic and socioeconomic factors and their construction of youth as a security threat, youth bulge theories within political science ‘have tended to evacuate the social category of youth of its political and historical content’⁴⁹. Analyzing youth politics through such a securitization lens, therefore, effectively disregards and, indeed, delegitimizes the sources of youth political grievances and the content of their political action or engagement. As a result, this theoretical approach has tended to offer ahistorical analyses of youth politics, which have not adequately examined the historical processes that discuss and position, in their situated variances, youth as radicals in Africa.

To better appreciate how this broader historical context and the structuring political dynamics can come to shape the production of youth, the articles in this Special Collection focus on the ways in which ‘changing technologies of governance, often shaped through western discourses and the knowledge industries of social science, target and redefine youth through schools and other educational initiatives, through programs on health and sexuality, and through attempts to control population movements’⁵⁰. In particular, the articles on offer here attempt to not only foreground the state in their analysis of youth politics, but also to situate the political activities of Kenyan youth within a broader historical context. In so

doing, these articles chart the historical development of the relationship between the Kenyan state and different segments of the country's population of youth, which are situated in distinct temporal and geographical spaces across Kenya's political history.

Hannah Whittaker's article, for example, charts the historical relationship between the Kenyan state and ethnic Somali youth in Northeastern Province (NEP) dating back to the colonial period. In so doing, Whittaker contends that the construction of ethnic Somali youth as a security threat in Kenyan society is not a novel historical development of the 21st Century, nor can it be simply explained with reference to structural variables like population pressure or resource scarcity, as youth bulge studies would suggest. Rather, her article argues that targeted state interventions, whether one is referring to contemporary counter-terrorism strategies or their historical antecedents of 'forced resettlement, movement restrictions and collective punishment', which have persisted in NEP since colonial times, have played a key role in perpetuating processes of youth radicalization in Northeastern Kenya. In supporting this main argument, Whittaker demonstrates how the Kenyan state's 'hegemonic narrative of the violent potential of Somali youth' has, in the past as in the present, served to justify and legitimize its continued role 'in producing youth marginality, violence, and instability' along ethno-regional lines.

Luke Melchiorre's article on the student movement at the University of Nairobi in the late-1990s focuses on a more elite, urban-based sub-section of Kenyan youth than that of Whittaker. While Nairobi university students occupied a more privileged political status in Kenyan society, and a more influential role in the country's national politics than that of their counterparts in NEP, Melchiorre demonstrates that they too were routinely subjected to state surveillance and arbitrary political violence, particularly during the turbulent decades of the 1980s and the 1990s. In analyzing the impact of processes of political liberalization on

student politics at Nairobi in the 1990s, Melchiorre, like Whittaker, foregrounds the central, evolving role that the Kenyan state, and in particular national political parties, played in shaping trajectories of youth politics in Kenya. In particular, he argues that with the restoration of the University of Nairobi's historic student union, Student Organization of Nairobi University (SONU), in 1998, campus politics became increasingly influenced by external political actors, who were instrumental in driving the processes of ethnicization, commercialization and militarization that came to dominate student politics at the university during this period. In documenting this history, Melchiorre demonstrates that 'the relationship between student leaders at the University of Nairobi, national politicians and processes of democratization in Kenya became vastly more complicated [in the late-1990s] than has previously been depicted in the existing literature.'

Expanding the Parameters of the Political: Youth, Culture, and Agency

While youth bulge literature tends to 'paint youth with a brush of danger', anthropological accounts have tended to romanticize the political activities and impact of youth agency. Securitization approaches reflect anxieties about youth violence, in contrast to anthropological studies which tend to celebrate youth agency in its various iterations, often in difficult, sometimes conflict ridden, circumstances. As a consequence, youth politics is typically understood in dichotomous terms, where youth are either presented as violent perpetrators or helpless/powerless victims. The articles in this Special Collection offer a more nuanced appraisal of youth politics, which move beyond the dichotomous narratives that pit youth resistance against youth co-optation. To better appreciate the content of African youth's political activity, therefore, the articles in this Special Collection, informed by some of the best anthropological work on youth politics in Africa, expand the 'parameters of the political' analyzing sites of youth political activity, by privileging Twitter content or situated war

vernaculars that are often ignored in conventional analyses of African politics. In this section, we draw out central aspects of the anthropological discussions on youth, culture and agency to provide for a more diverse understanding of youth politics.

Over the last couple of decades, African Studies has produced a voluminous, interdisciplinary literature on youth agency that focuses on identity, culture, and politics⁵¹. This presents a much different approach to the theorizing of youth politics in Africa than the youth bulge literature. Questions of youth and generation, previously a central preoccupation of Africanist anthropologists of the 1940s and 1950s, once again became central to the study of African politics and societies from the late 1980s and onwards⁵². In such works, scholars like Durham have insightfully highlighted the need ‘to examine [African youth’s] potential for social and political sabotage, and to understand them neither as autonomous liberal actors nor as overdetermined victims’⁵³. That said, certainly, the bulk of what is written about African youth from this perspective looks at how they are ‘remixing socialities’, assembling and disassembling⁵⁴ stories and symbols from a diverse array of influences to perform certain subjecthoods that can be ‘counter-hegemonic site [s] of resistance and rebellion’⁵⁵. Or, above all, how youth are struggling: are seen to be unable to partake either in the local rites of passage to adulthood—broadly seen as secure jobs and family life—or in the globalized youth lifestyles that by now have become familiar⁵⁶. Inspired by the classic anthropological work on liminality and rites of passage, part of this literature approaches youth in transformative and relational terms and provides a dynamic understanding of contemporary African youth as situated not only between childhood and adulthood, but also between tradition and modernity⁵⁷. The papers in this collection reveal how youth in resourceful ways actively draw from these and multiple registers, overcome the challenge of either/or and, instead, engage notions of tradition and modernity as a question of simultaneity. Kimari and

Zak's papers show how youth live out such simultaneity by incorporating a localized war vernacular and social media in their general efforts to become adults, and how they creatively use the same in their struggles to become recognized as human beings and as political actors.

The reading of youth as both a period of 'being' young and a process of 'becoming' an adult has particular resonance in African contexts where more recent demographic and socio-economic developments provide an often transformative and unstable foundation for this generational transition⁵⁸. The analytical notions of 'social navigation' and 'social shifting' have been crucial in highlighting youth agency and its prospective dimensions even in constrained or uncertain situations (e.g. armed conflict or enhanced poverty)⁵⁹. While this Africanist literature has proven more adept at recognizing that youth is a heterogeneous social category and emphasizing the creativity and agency that African youth have utilized to confront their precarious social circumstances, it has fared no better than its youth bulge counterparts in attending to the political dynamics which underlie the very real and intentional production of youth marginality.

While the special collection pays attention to youth agency, especially collective political expressions of agency, the papers also look at the particular government sanctioned (re)productions of youth that are influenced by space and time and contingent ethnic, regional, urban, gender and class imaginaries, both formal and informal. In contrast to previous studies of youth in Kenya, the papers foreground the role of the state in producing youth, not to diminish the agency of this demographic, but to show how radicalization discourses that allow for the criminalization of segments of youth are shaped by the very real histories of intentional government action, neglect and surveillance.

Wangui Kimari's contribution to the collection provides strong examples of how a sheng-based war vernacular adopted by young residents of Mathare and Nairobi's informal

settlements broadly, offers insights into how young residents of these areas perceive their relationship with the state. In a similar vein as Zak's paper does, she reveals how a policing imposed in marginalized space can prompt a lexicon that confers both identity and the potential to work as unifying and mobilizing force for political action. Her analysis is a fine account of how the parameters of the political are expanded through creative practices as she shows how a localized war vernacular serves to build a collective identity and installs in the speakers a sense of political possibility.

Likewise, Rasmussen and van Stapele's paper demonstrates how youth groups easily traverse positions as victims of state sanctioned violations and structurally marginalized in one moment, and perpetrators of violent electoral campaigning in the next. As with Melchiorre's paper, these actions are not recounted as contradictory, rather both aspects are part and parcel of what they conceive as youth politics, and both aspects entail agency or opportunities for agentive action that expands the parameters of the political. Their ethnographic study of the complexities of youth mobilization during the primary elections of 2017 challenges the dominant narrative of patronage in studies of youth mobilization in Africa. They argue that the devolution of government has recast the possibilities for participation and opened up new avenues for youth to seek inclusion and to influence and shape democracy, even if it is in unexpected and sometimes uninvited ways.

Conclusion

This paper, which serves as the introduction of our Special Collection on "Youth, the Kenyan State and a Politics of Contestation", has focused on youth and the heterogenous ways that this social category responds to inordinate state action. Specifically, we have foregrounded the roles that the Kenyan state has played in the construction and subsequent politicization of Kenyan youth across time and space. In elaborating this main contention, we have set out to

frame the six papers in the Special Collection within a three-pronged argument: First, while we have presented youth as a heterogeneous social category, we argue that their similar experiences of state surveillance and violence warrants analyzing them through a comparative lens. Second, we have rejected ahistorical renderings of youth politics which are often presented in youth bulge studies, arguing that such analyses have served to both disregard and delegitimize the sources of youth political grievances and flatten the diverse variations of their political action. Finally, we have called for an approach to the study of youth politics that seeks to expand ‘the parameters of the political’, taking oft-neglected informal spaces of youth political activity as important discursive and material sites of investigation. In taking these spaces seriously in our collective analyses of Kenyan youth, the papers on offer here are able to provide a more nuanced assessment of youth as complex political actors, which problematize reductive dichotomous narratives of youth politics as either resistance or co-optation.

In presenting these arguments, the Special Collection offers a broad historical scope and methodological diversity which make it unique in the current literature on African youth. In this Collection, we have gathered together scholars from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology (Wangui Kimari, Jacob Rasmussen, Naomi van Stapele), political science (Elisabeth King, Tomas Zak and Luke Melchiorre), and history (Hannah Whittaker), who have utilized a variety of methodological tools, including participant observation, survey data, archival research, oral histories and linguistic anthropological methods, all of which seek to center the voices of youth actors within their analysis. So while the papers on offer here focus on a single-case study, Kenya, the common questions raised and varied insights provided within this Special Collection point to fruitful pathways for future research, which can engage with a wider collection of cases in Africa and beyond.

Acknowledgements

The special collection emerged from a workshop organized at the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) in Nairobi in December 2017. Not all papers in this Special Collection were part of the workshop, and not all workshop presenters are included here. This notwithstanding, all workshop participants have contributed to the wider discussions captured within this Collection: about how the Kenyan state has discursively constructed and materially responded to youth as potentiating a radical and/or criminal cohort. We are grateful for all of their contributions. Special thanks to Maria Gabriela Castaneda for her research assistance. Finally, we would also like to thank the Editorial Board of the Journal of Eastern African Studies and the Readers of this collection for their support and feedback.

Notes:

¹ Mutunga, “Saba Saba at 30”.

² Kahura, “The Gains We Have Lost.”

³ Since the “handshake” agreement between political rivals Raila Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta in 2018, which brought together Uhuru’s ruling Jubilee party and large sections of the Raila headed coalition party Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) there has been effectively no formal opposition in Kenya. This has led many to conclude that we are back to a one party state. For more on this see Mutunga 2020.

⁴ For more of the Citizen Demands, see here:

<https://www.matharesocialjustice.org/solidarity/citizens-demands-by-the-social-justice-movement-in-kenya/>

⁵ Cf. Sukarieh and Tannock, “The Globalization of Youth”,.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Lonsdale, “Agency in tight corners”

⁸ Melchiorre, *Building Nations*, 19.

⁹ Schatzberg, “Political Legitimacy in Central Africa”, 71.

¹⁰ Kimari, “the ‘youth bulge’ discourse.”, 23; Kimari, “Activists, care work”, 23.

¹¹ Mwangola, “Leaders of tomorrow?”, 137.

¹² Bourdieu, *Questions in Sociology*, 96-97.

¹³ Comaroff and Comaroff, “Reflections on youth”, 19.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *Questions in Sociology*, 95; Comaroff and Comaroff, “Reflections on youth”, 20.

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- ¹⁵ Kirschner, "Youth Terror or Terrorized Youth", 369; Diouf "Engaging postcolonial cultures; Huntington, *The clash of civilizations*; Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy*.
- ¹⁶ Ighobor, "Africa's youth".
- ¹⁷ Cincotta, "Half a chance", 10; Cincotta et al, "*The security demographic*", 3; Botha, "*Terrorism in Kenya and Uganda*".
- ¹⁸ Otuka, "Kenya's youth percentage".
- ¹⁹ British Council, "*Next Generation Kenya*".
- ²⁰ Muna et. Al, "Deconstructing intergenerational politics", 1378-1394; Mwangola, "Leaders of tomorrow?", 137.
- ²¹ Kagwanja, "Clash of Generations?", 83-108; Rasmussen, "Mungiki as Youth Movement"
- ²² Willis and Gona, "Pwani C Kenya?"; Anderson and McKnight, "Understanding al-Shabaab", 536-557; Hansen, "Al-Shabaab in Somalia"
- ²³ Melchiorre, "Creating a 'monster'",
- ²⁴ Kagwanja, "Clash of Generations?", 83-108, 2009; Schubert, "Hybrid Security governance, post-election", 2018; Throup and Hornsby, *Multiparty Democracy in Kenya*, 197; Kagwanja, "Politics of marionettes", 85.
- ²⁵ Interview, Gary Fuller in Melchiorre, "Building Nations", 11.
- ²⁶ Goldstone, "Youth bulges".
- ²⁷ Fuller and Pitts, "Youth cohorts and political", 9-22, 1990; Huntington, *The clash of civilizations*; Cincotta et al, "*The security demographic*: 45-47.
- ²⁸ Huntington, "*The clash of civilizations*"; El Kenz, "Youth and violence"; Goldstone, "Demography, environment and security"; Urdal, "A clash of generations?".
- ²⁹ Cincotta et al, "*The security demographic: Population*: 45-47; Wagschal and Metz, "A demographic peace? Youth", 55-97; Goldstone, "A demographic peace?" 95.
- ³⁰ Goldstone, "A demographic peace?"; Urdal, "A clash of generations?", 607-629.
- ³¹ Huntington, "*The clash of civilizations*", 1996; Lia, "*Globalization and the future*".
- ³² Cincotta and Doces, "The Age-Structural Maturity", 98-116; Weber, "Demography and Democracy", 335-- 357.
- ³³ Sukarieh and Tannock, "*The global securitization*", 587.
- ³⁴ Venkatesh and Kassmir, "*Youth, globalization*."
- ³⁵ Sommers, "Governance, security and culture", 141.
- ³⁶ Seekings, "*Heroes or Villains?*"; Durham, "Youth and the social"; Kirschner, "Youth Terror or Terrorized Youth".
- ³⁷ Sommers, "Governance, security and culture", 296; Gavin, "Africa's restless youth", 69-83.
- ³⁸ Sommers, "Governance, security and culture", 297.
- ³⁹ Barker and Ricardo, "Young men", 181.
- ⁴⁰ Sommers, "Governance, security and culture", 296.
- ⁴¹ ; Gavin, "Africa's restless youth", 74.
- ⁴² Diouf, "Engaging postcolonial cultures", 3; Comaroff and Comaroff, "Reflections on youth", 20; Mwangola "Leaders of tomorrow?", 129-163.
- ⁴³ Abbink, "*Vanguard or Vandals*"; Abdullah, "Bush path to destruction", 203-235; Anderson, "Vigilantes, violence", 531-555; Kagwanja, "Clash of Generations?"; Kirschner, "Youth Terror or Terrorized Youth", 369; Meagher, "Hijacking civil society", 89-115; Rasmussen, "We are the True Blood of Mau Mau"; Richards, "*Fighting for the rain*".
- ⁴⁴ Seekings, "Heroes or Villains?"; Diouf, "Engaging postcolonial cultures".
- ⁴⁵ Lund, "Twilight Institutions"
- ⁴⁶ Rasmussen, "Inside the system"; Stacey and Lund, "State of Slum"; Thieme, "The Hustle"
- ⁴⁷ Lauterbach, "Becoming a pastor";

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- ⁴⁸ Fredericks, "The old man is dead".
- ⁴⁹ Melchiorre, "Building Nations, Making Youth", 18.
- ⁵⁰ Durham, "Youth and the social", 114.
- ⁵¹ Abdullah, "Bush path to destruction"; Argenti, "Youth in Africa"; Burgess and Burton, "Introduction"; Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, "Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood"; Comaroff and Comaroff, "Reflections on youth, from the past to the postcolony"; Honwana and De Boeck, "Makers and Breakers"; Diouf, "Engaging postcolonial cultures"; El Kenz, "Youth and Violence"; Honwana, "The time of youth"; Seekings, "Heroes and Villains?" and Waller, "Rebellious youth in colonial Africa".
- ⁵² Burgess and Burton, "Introduction": 1; Honwana and De Boeck, "Makers and Breakers": 5; Diouf "Engaging postcolonial cultures": 2; Gavin, "Africa's restless youth", 69; Honwana, "The time of youth", 14; Kirschner, "Youth Terror or Terrorized Youth", 369.
- ⁵³ Durham, "Youth and the social imagination in Africa", 113.
- ⁵⁴ Simone, "Waiting in African Cities", 98.
- ⁵⁵ Honwana, "The time of youth", 86.
- ⁵⁶ Honwana, "The time of youth"; Comaroff and Comaroff, "Reflections on youth"; De Boeck and Plissart, "Kinshasa"; Diouf "Engaging postcolonial cultures"
- ⁵⁷ Durham, "Disappearing Youth", 589-605.
- ⁵⁸ Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, "Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood"
- ⁵⁹ Utas, "Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering", 403-430; Vigh, "Motion squared", 419-438; Durham "Disappearing Youth", 589-605.

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