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MAKING CHANGE AGAINST THE ODDS

Entrepreneurial pursuits among young professionals in South Africa

Lieve de Coninck

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Acknowledgments

After years of proclaiming that I was definitely not interested in pursuing a PhD, I found myself wandering the hallways of the Anthropology department at the University of Amsterdam, pursuing a PhD. I had just met with Rachel Spronk—who was to become my promotor—for the first time, and I had told her about my ongoing fascination with the purposefulness with which my South African peers seemed to take up their lives. Instead of pointing out the misery of an academic career, as many others I had consulted about it thus far had done with the best of intentions, Rachel had said, "Yes, good idea, why not." I am most grateful to her for that initial affirmation (and for the many thereafter in the following years, too, of course).

Taking up the project of this dissertation has allowed me to deepen my connections with several of the many interesting people I have met in South Africa since I first visited as an exchange student in 2006, and to add wonderful new ones. These relationships and the times I intermittently lived in the country have been extremely formative. They have led to a practical understanding of my own and everyone's cultural particularity over and above a theoretical one. Trying to live smack in the middle of unfamiliar, deep inequalities has shown me the potential and limitations of human connections across social and material boundaries, and the -inner- work they take. So much possibility, so much strain. And so much love. Rene, Ray, Terry, Sandra, David, Terah, Katlego, Fidel M., Nkateko and Mpho, Kelebogile, Lesego, Tshepang A., Rucera and Fidel, President, Candice, Sizwe, Elvis, Moepi, Justin, Andre, Palesa, Tumaini, Tshepang K., Lisa, Jeffrey and all the others: thank you. I hope we will keep running into each other.

Writing this book, as I have kept calling it for motivational reasons, was a remarkable process. Remarkable and long. It was remarkable because I mostly enjoyed it, a lot. It was long, not only because Covid-19 and then the birth of my son Raf shook my routines, but also because it took me a while to muster the courage to speak loud enough on these pages. That I was eventually able to do so, I owe to a long line of inspirators, co-thinkers and supporters. At the University of Amsterdam, I want to mention Vincent de Rooij, whose kindness and professional interest I was lucky to enjoy for many years, in many capacities; Marijn Kraak and Yvette Jansen, without whom it all would have been but a vale of tears; Francio Guadeloupe, whose words continue to challenge me; my co-promotor Oskar

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More than in this manuscript, the value of the project that became this dissertation, I feel, lies in the time I spent with all of you, sharing and sharpening our minds. I hope that it was worthwhile for you also. Still, now that this text, this book, is here, I hope it will serve as a reminder, to myself as much as to anyone who may come across it, that "you can do it, because I did it."

On to the next book. Although of course I am definitely not interested in writing another one anytime soon...

INTRODUCTION

I t was an enthusiastic reunion in Rosebank's Starbucks, one of the wealthy northern suburbs not far from the business center of Johannesburg in September 2016. Keletso and I had last spoken in Cape Town, in 2008, where he was working as an adviser to one of the major banks and I was doing research among the so-called "new black middle class" at the time—a theme that the newspapers covered extensively in those years. Several mutual acquaintances from the University of Cape Town (UCT) had told me that I absolutely had to speak to Keletso. If anyone represented the concept of the young, visible-success-oriented professional, or "black diamond," as it was coined in a controversial marketing term, it was him, they said. Indeed, I had been impressed by Keletso's outspoken ambitions, his self-confidence, his perspective on his generation, and his impeccable business attire. I knew through social media that, since then, he had become his own boss and an advocate for entrepreneurship, entirely in line with the new public discourse about the future of the country and economic change.

Sipping our coffees, Keletso filled me in: he had started out as a budding entrepreneur with a small, online PR company in an incubator in Cape Town previously. After a few years of success with the PR business, he had started a platform for aspiring entrepreneurs in and for the townships, called Sethala. Applying his networking skills and personality, he had become known within the local start-up world quickly, had moved to Johannesburg to branch out, and was now involved with several business incubation programs and start-up hubs. He invited me to accompany him to one of the hubs where he worked regularly. He said I would certainly be able to meet other young entrepreneurs there and become acquainted with the "ecosystem" around entrepreneurship that had developed in Johannesburg in recent years.

And so, one weekday morning not long after we reconnected, I sat down with Keletso and four other young professionals in another coffee bar, just past the reception, in a refurbished warehouse somewhere in downtown Johannesburg. We all had a laptop open on the table in front of us, but our main activities were talking to each other and greeting the continuous stream of passers-by in the hub. There was much extensive shaking of hands and amicable and loud catching up. My table companions were all young men, one with an established security software company, the other with a yet-to-be-launched app for community organizing, a third involved in new forms of waste processing and a fourth in urban agriculture. It wasn't immediately clear to me what exactly their companies delivered or where they were in the start-up process, but they all spoke of their entrepreneurship with conviction and enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, Keletso was continuously engaged in conversations with people passing by on their way to the large co-working space behind the coffee bar. Observing his interactions with one young woman, I gathered that they knew each

other from UCT, too. Apparently, their paths had crossed again in Johannesburg and Keletso had set her up with business coaching to kickstart her lemonade business. He asked how the production and marketing were coming along—he had noticed it was now sold here at the hub's coffee bar, and wondered what price she had agreed on with them. Was she happy with the product as it stood? And, with a mischievous smile: Was the taste any good? The woman said yes, it really reminded her of the root beer from her childhood, the way her grandmother used to make it "at home." Keletso said, "Yes, like, it needs to have that kasi [township] flavor, right. Like, are we *ekasi* [in the township] or are we at Woollies [Woolworths, a fancy supermarket associated with the upper-middle classes]?!" The woman said, "No, no, no, don't worry, we're not at Woollies, it's ekasi!" They both laughed loudly. In their juxtaposition of the township and "Woollies," and in their explicit stance-taking, I recognized the self-conscious positioning of social risers, and the public debates about their social responsibilities as they had played out in South Africa for a while now.

In this dissertation, I discuss the uptake of entrepreneurship by young professionals in Johannesburg at the intersection of ever wider shared aspirations for middle-class lives, entrepreneurialist development discourses and practices, and increasing economic insecurities. Over the last few decades, "the global middle classes" appear to be on the rise: More and more people across the world either live or aspire to consumerist and professional lifestyles associated with middleclassness (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012; Donner 2016). At the same time, a framework promoting entrepreneurship as a route to development and emancipation has become mainstream in international development discourse and practices (DeHart 2010; Mosse 2013). Yet, income security, labor security and financial stability have diminished for most people worldwide (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011; cf. Barchiesi 2012). Together, these contradictory trends present a complex historical situation for current generations trying to build their lives.

To begin with, the story of the rise of Africa's middle classes has received extensive coverage over the last decade. An increasing number of people noticeably have educational and professional careers or patterns of consumption associated with middleclassness. Their lifestyles are increasingly on display, and their power and responsibilities as agents of development are topics of ongoing public debate. With slogans like "Africa rising," journalists, governments, and global financial institutions have celebrated the apparent emergence of middle classes in African societies as signs of economic and political progress on the continent (Ballard 2012;

McKenzie 2016, cf. Handley 2015). [1] In this frame, being middle class connotes contributing to economic growth and prosperity, as well as democracy.[2] However, there is hardly consensus over the contours of these middle groups and how to define them in the first place.
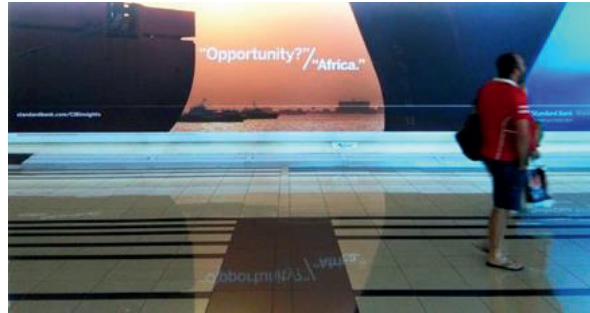
Figure 1 - An advertisement at O.R.Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

By now, it has become clear that income-, occupation-, and lifestyle approaches to the middle classes are limited in their grasp of the realities of arguably middle-class lives on the African continent (Melber 2013, 2017; Spronk 2014, 2018; Neubert 2014, 2019; Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer 2018; see also Campbell 2020). The commonness (and volatility) of multiple income streams, the elasticity of households, and the instability of careers in salaried employment that characterize life in many African societies mean that the classic indicators of middle class as an objective category do not work (Kroeker, O'Kane and Scharrer 2018).[3] There is agreement that more analysis of the historical trajectories of African societies and their stratification processes, as well as of middle-class subjectivities, is required to grasp the realities of the so-called new African middle classes (Lentz 2015; Melber 2017; Mercer and Lemanski 2020). As a way forward from the limits of an objectified category, scholars have called attention to middle class as a cultural practice (Spronk 2014, 2018; see also Liechty 2003), and to its relational nature (Mercer and Lemanski 2020; Lentz 2015). Rather than a pre-existing category, it is the changeable product of people's social relations and their perceptions of these relations, including their self-understanding, as much as of access to resources (see

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[1] See reports by International Monetary Fund (Juma 2011), African Development Bank (2011a and b), World Bank (cf. Corral, Molini and Oseni 2015), policy analyses (e.g., Kingombe 2014), and media such as the *Economist* and BBC (Africa Debate).

[2] Over the last few years, critical notes on the assumed size and relative impact of these middle classes have also appeared in non-academic media (a.o. the *Economist*, CNBC Africa, *Mail & Guardian*).

[3] A special issue of *Africa* (2020, vol. 90 (3)), devoted to the lived experiences of African middle classes, underscores and takes up this point.

also Kroeker 2018, 273). It follows that instead of "something out there" (Spronk 2018), middleclassness comes into being as people make and unmake social ties and identities. Notwithstanding the slippery nature of the African middle classes as a concept, it is clear that the possibility of upward mobility and cosmopolitan lifestyles have taken a more prominent place in African societies and everyday lives.

In addition, policies and practical initiatives propose entrepreneurship as a tool for the economic and social upliftment of poor and disadvantaged groups across the globe, such as indigenous peoples in Chile (Di Giminiani 2018), unemployed urban youth in Nairobi (Dolan and Rajak 2016) and poor inner-city residents of Addis Ababa (Di Nunzio 2015b); or as a tool for economic restructuring, for example, in Oman (Steiner 2019). This trend has its roots in the global proliferation of neoliberal economic logics of free market reign since the 1980s, but has gained particular momentum over the last two decades (e.g. Scaramuzzi 2002, see also Di Nunzio 2015b). Investments in entrepreneurial training programs and infrastructures by the World Bank, the IMF and the European Union, as well as national governments, embassies and multinational corporations, have produced something of a hype around business incubators, accelerators and start-up hubs (Friederici 2018).

For the African context in particular, transnational institutions such as the World Bank, the British Council, and the African Development Bank actively put forward entrepreneurship as a means for economic growth and emancipation. For example, the 2017 African Economic Outlook (annual report by the African Development Bank) states that Africa's "entrepreneurial spirit" will help it "grow faster and more inclusively." Placing entrepreneurs in the role of economic pacemakers, it states:

> Despite a decade of progress, 54% of the population in 46 African countries are still living in poverty. It is essential to double efforts to empower Africans with the necessary skills to promote development from the bottom up, driven by domestic innovation and investment. This is why the African Economic Outlook focuses this year on the role of entrepreneurs in Africa's industrialization (African Development Bank 2017, 5).

Moreover, the report proposes that "human development" and "entrepreneurial growth" are mutually interlinked preconditions for Africa moving forward (AdFB 2017, 97–120). The idea that entrepreneurship is a way to build a society over and above a means to generate economic growth is also mobilized in nationalist developmental projects, for example, in the roll-out of a national entrepreneurial education curriculum in Rwanda since 2009 (Honeyman 2016). In South Africa, various policies and funds to raise the number of successful entrepreneurs have been established, and citizens are urged to "seize opportunities … to unleash an entrepreneurship revolution" (South African minister of Small Business Development Lindiwe Zulu, 2014). In particular, business initiatives based on

technological innovation, so-called "tech entrepreneurship," receive much attention and support on the African continent. A celebration of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution," the economic possibilities unleashed by the internet, accompanies a boom in programs and infrastructure geared to IT for development (Friederici 2018; Irani 2015). Business incubators, accelerators and innovation hubs attract and (are deemed to) facilitate the efforts of ambitious individuals to develop enterprises, especially in large cities such as Lagos, Johannesburg and Nairobi (e.g. World Bank 2016; AfDB 2017, 193-4).[4] In these settings, a globalized discourse of entrepreneurship as a catalyst for societal and personal progress is turned into practice as it links up with personal lives.

However hopeful the apparent rise of African middle-classes and the potential of entrepreneurship for development, they have coincided with an increase in economic inequality and insecurity in the global economy. Worldwide processes of financialization, digitalization and the flexibilization of labor relations have led to growing disparities between those with and without access to capital, increased un- and underemployment, and precarization (e.g. Harvey 2005, Barchiesi 2012, Lorusso 2020, cf. Munck 2013). This affects not just the poor; the careers of higher educated professionals have become insecure, too (e.g. Chan 2013, Gallie et al. 2017, Bolt and Rajak 2016) Against the backdrop of its population growth, the decrease in opportunities for stable and "decent" employment (Ghai 2003) has a strong impact on the African continent. Despite reports of high economic growth in terms of gross national product in the last decade (but halted in recent years) in several African economies (e.g. Angola, Nigeria), social and economic insecurities and inequalities on a continental level have not lessened.

Together, the increasing prominence of middle-class standards of living in African societies, the developmentalist promotion of entrepreneurship, and the growing economic inequalities and insecurities provide an uneasy mix of incentives to aspiring Africans. The increased display and discussion of middle-class lives in the public arena raise expectations for upward mobility, and for the contributions of those considered middle-class to wider economic development, while the odds for economic inclusion and success are low or dropping (Melber 2017, 149–151). Entrepreneurialist public discourse and the proliferation of support programs

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[4] See, for example, this blog post and map by GSMA, a global mobile communications conglomerate aimed at furthering technological entrepreneurship around the world in cooperation with large corporations and aid organizations. It lists 442 "active tech hubs" on the African continent, with South Africa as one of the main locales. It illustrates how (international) flows of capital, government and non-governmental organizations, and entrepreneurialist development discourse combine and actively shape both stories of and opportunities in "Africa.": https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/blog-2/africa-a-look-at-the-442-active-tech-hubs-of-the-continent/ (accessed 14 June 2023).

propose entrepreneurship as the key to both personal and economic transformation, yet it requires levels of investment that are unrealistic for many, and it may increase rather than alleviate economic insecurity.

These tensions between the expectations, possibilities and realities of economic success are particularly acute in the case of South Africa. Since the official demise of apartheid and the transition to democracy in the 1990s, hopes and promises of not just political but also economic enfranchisement have been great. On the one hand, the much-discussed emergence of what was called a new black middle class in the early 2000s strengthened the prospects as well as contestations of widely shared upward mobility (Krige 2011, 294–311; James 2015, 2019). Although black middle classes existed prior to the democratic era (Mabandla 2013; Krige 2012), the increased opportunities for those classified as not-white to access credit, higher education, and professional and political careers proliferated after the transition. This has stimulated further and more visible social stratification (Burger et al. 2014; Visagie and Posel 2013; Southall 2016; James 2015). Moreover, over the last decades, the label "middle class" has become a marker for self-identification for people in a surprisingly wide array of material conditions (Phadi 2010; Phadi and Manda 2010; Phadi and Ceruti 2011). In turn, the meteoric upward trajectories of some and the consumerist displays of success at the same time as a debt crisis sparked much public contention about the breadth of the new opportunities, the sustainability of the new wealth, and the social responsibilities of those on the up (Chevalier 2015; Iqani 2017, 2015b; de Coninck 2018). So, new middle-income groups and middle-class lifestyles have gained a public profile as markers of new possibilities as well as new social tensions.

On the other hand, the overall picture of the distribution of wealth has not transformed significantly under the democratic government (Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Leibbrandt, Finn, and Woolard 2012). The lasting impact of the apartheid legacies of structural, racialized inequalities and segregation mean that barriers to upward mobility remain for many, despite repeated promises and much policy effort at economic transformation. In broad strokes, the majority of wealth in South Africa remains in the hands of a small minority, while a large percentage of the population is poor, unemployed and/or otherwise economically excluded along racialized lines (e.g., Marais 2011). In fact, economic disparity as well as precarity have worsened in the last decade, in line with global developments, but aggravated by local political volatility and crises.[5] Even for new middle-income groups and those in professional careers, job and income security are dwindling (Southall 2016; Hull 2017; Bolt and Rajak 2016). This net result after more than twenty years of

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[5] For example, in the last two decades, ruling party ANC has seen various internal leadership battles, consecutive governments have been confronted with corruption scandals and violent protests, while unemployment has continued to increase.

democracy has generated ample disappointment and frustration, as signaled by regular and often violent public protests and strikes, and the intensity of ongoing public debates about the lack of transformation and corruption (Alexander 2010, Paret 2015). At the same time, the pressure on younger generations to capitalize on the freedom and opportunities for schooling and careers now arguably available remains, and indeed heightens as joblessness and a dependency on welfare affect ever more people.

In spite of a long history of political rhetoric that centralizes productive employment as the basis for social inclusion (Barchiesi 2008, 2016), in current public discourse the onus of change lies increasingly with small business development and entrepreneurial individuals. Government speeches contain laudations of private business initiatives and repeated calls to citizens to be entrepreneurial (Zulu 2014; Ramaphosa 2019; Patel 2021). In magazines, on radio and television shows, and online platforms, successful entrepreneurs are presented as examples of new forms of leadership, change-makers and as overall inspirational figures[6]. Through these channels, a public narrative that marks entrepreneurs as true change- and wealth-makers continues to rise. Concurrently, claims to entrepreneurial futures are rife among students and young professionals in South Africa's large cities.[7] This celebration of entrepreneurship as a tool for transformation and as a viable career has developed alongside widespread suspicions of business success as based on corruption or collaboration with "white monopoly capital" to reproduce racialized inequality. Moreover, entrepreneurial success has been associated with so-called "tenderpreneurship": business based on "the allocation of public tenders by public servants and politicians that is skewed towards family and friends as well as those enjoying political connections to ANC [ruling political party—LdC] elites" (Southall 2016, 131).[8] While entrepreneurship is becoming more central to imaginations of better lives, the rise of black businessmen and women is thus both celebrated and suspected.

Nevertheless, the celebratory entrepreneurialist narrative has since been accompanied by a booming enterprise development sector in the 2010s, funded and run by an amalgam of multinational corporations, local industry, parastatals, non-profit organizations, and (international) government agencies. In 2017, the

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[6] See, for example, Entrepreneur South Africa magazine and the eNCA broadcasting channel.

[7] In research conducted for my Master's thesis and for a 2015 pilot study, students and young professionals in Cape Town and Johannesburg commonly claimed to want to "be their own boss" and mentioned famous local entrepreneurs such as Richard Maponya and Patrice Motsepe as role models.

[8] There is ongoing public debate in South Africa on so-called "tenderpreneurs." For more on the background of the term and its meaning, see Piper and Charman (2018).

Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs South Africa noted 340 organizations providing "support in the entrepreneurial ecosystem" on their "Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Map" (ANDE 2017) against 214 in 2015 (ANDE 2015). Although there is widespread consensus among international and national funders that such programs work (e.g., Davies 2009, 6; African Development Bank 2017), the effectiveness of business incubators and start-up hubs remains a topic of contestation (Littlewood and Kiyumbu 2018; Friederici 2018, 194), and the formal small business sector in South Africa seems small compared to other African countries (Herrington et al. 2010, 2017; TIPS 2017). Despite various forms of affirmative action in post-apartheid years, the lion's share of formal trade remains in the hands of a select number of large corporations established well before the transition to democracy and/or with significant levels of foreign ownership (Chabane, Roberts, and Goldstein 2006), with less than a quarter of shares on the national stock exchange "black-owned," according to recent analysis (Anwar 2019). Moreover, according to consecutive Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) reports, bureaucratic barriers to register a business and to show eligibility for funding as a new entrepreneur are high in South Africa (Herrington, Kew and Kew 2010, 2014; Bowmaker-Falconer and Meyer 2022). While the rise of the enterprise development sector strengthens the notion of entrepreneurship as an avenue for upward mobility, continued barriers to capital and formal trade lessen the likelihood of its attainment. And so, more entry points into entrepreneurship arise, while entrepreneurial success remains a long shot.

Research question

Entrepreneurship provides a compelling lens onto the tension between aspirations for middleclassness and the realities of economic insecurity. In this study I am concerned with the ways in which pressures for middleclassness, the proliferation of entrepreneurialism, and pervasive insecurity intertwine in South African lives. More specifically, I am interested in the lived experience of this intertwinement, and the way people grapple with the inherent tensions. To understand this, I have developed an ethnographic case study of the way young professionals in Johannesburg take up entrepreneurship. Focusing on participants in urban entrepreneurial programs, I have investigated how young professionals come to aspire to entrepreneurial lives, the role of incubators and hubs in the cultivation of these aspirations, and how they contend with the volatilities of entrepreneurship.

These questions contain various riddles. First, ambitions for entrepreneurship are not self-evident given the constraints to access and thrive in business in South Africa and the publicly dubious character of post-transition business success. Moreover, much is expected of those with access to good education and professional careers in terms of redistribution to kin and community. Against this backdrop, how do young professionals come to aspire to an entrepreneurial life?

How does it make sense in the context of fraught national and personal histories of upward mobility? Second, despite the historical dominance of a discourse of productive labor, a rising enterprise development sector taps into and feeds widespread aspirations for better lives and economic change. At the same time, the majority of incubators and hubs are selective. Connecting entrepreneurialist discourse, funds and networks to personal lives, they are powerful nodes of turning aspirations into practices, but only for selected members or clients. What does this process look like? And what does it have to offer? And third, as much as the public discourse of entrepreneurship revolves around the pursuit and attainment of success, most start-ups fail, and only a small percentage survives the first years (Department of Small Business Development 2014; BER 2016). Yet, they require extensive investments in time, energy and material resources. Many starting entrepreneurs thus struggle, for prolonged periods of time, for an outcome that is unsure, especially in the context of the instabilities and recent downturns of the South African economy. Yet, they remain committed, even after failure. How should we understand such continued engagement with something so capricious as entrepreneurship? I will lay out my conceptual and methodological approach to these questions below.

Debates and concepts

In her ethnography of Barbadian middle-class entrepreneurs, Carla Freeman explores the link between entrepreneurialism and the local history of middle-class lives for the case of Barbados (Freeman 2014). She shows how a new form of entrepreneurship entails "a subtler, generalized way of being and feeling in the world…[that] connects market practices with self-making" (1) over and above an economic practice of income generation. Noting how it holds "a new promise of upward mobility and social esteem" (34), she shows how the flexibility and autonomy promoted in "neoliberal entrepreneurial*ism* [my emphasis]" interconnect with the aspirations for upward mobility and self-determination that characterize middleclassness. By untangling the intricate ways in which a globalized discourse connects to Barbadian registers of "reputation" and "respectability," Freeman shows how entrepreneurialism has come to constitute new forms of middle-class belonging on the island, for women in particular.[9] The intersections between entrepreneurialism and middleclassness that Freeman thus teases out in their historical and local specificity provide a useful analytical direction for this study also.

Following this line of inquiry, my object of analysis is people's engagement with a historically situated entrepreneurialism, a way of being and doing in the specific

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[9] See, for example, *The Oxford Handbook of Entrepreneurship* (Casson et al. 2006) for multidisciplinary perspectives on the workings of small business, or Davidsson, Delmar, and Wiklund (2017) for a discussion of the emerging field of "entrepreneurship research."

context of present-day South Africa. To be clear, I do not consider the practices of entrepreneurship in a formal economic sense: I am not concerned with how a private business may or may not generate revenue, profit, or opportunities for employment. Others are better equipped to do that. Instead, my analysis is geared towards understanding the uptake of entrepreneurialism as a cultural practice, and the lived experiences from which this uptake springs and that it in turn produces. To do so, I foreground an actor-perspective that may complement studies of the economic and political structures of today's global economy and of South African realities specifically. The main scholarly debates I lean into, then, are those concerned with neoliberalism, the global and (South) African middle classes, and moral economy. In this section I discuss the particular threads in these debates I link up with, the conceptual tools I take from them, and the contributions I aim to make.

The problem of entrepreneurialism

Entrepreneurship, and by proxy the figure of the entrepreneur, has received something of a "bad reputation" in scholarship as the archetypical figurehead of a violent neoliberalism (Freeman 2007; see also Ferguson 2010). In a well-established line of analysis in the social sciences, the promotion of entrepreneurship by powerful institutions and in popular culture is part of a historical process of deepening political and economic inequality and insecurity that is based on the exaltation of free market logic (Bourdieu 1998; Harvey 1989, 2005; Graeber 2009, 2011, 2012; Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy 2016). The flexibilization of labor and the individualization of risk and reward in policies and practices of governance that characterize this process are commonly seen to increase the (labor) insecurity and exploitation of many in the service of a few. Bourdieu calls neoliberalism an "infernal machine" (1998) and foregrounds the "conditions of insecurity, suffering and stress" under which a competitive "struggle of all against all" erodes collective structures. In this frame, entrepreneurship is a straw man for the dismantling of social solidarity. Harvey (1989, 2005) has meticulously dissected how an entrepreneurialist mode of governance has taken shape in global processes of deregulation, financialization and labor flexibilization, accompanied by normative notions of individualized competition, innovation and flexible accumulation since the 1970s. Understanding these processes in terms of an exploitative capitalism, he furthermore emphasizes how neoliberalism, as a theory of human well-being based on the release of entrepreneurial potential, has become hegemonic (2005, 2–3). Graeber, in turn, calls the effects of neoliberal reforms around the globe "an unmitigated catastrophe" (2009, 81) of increasing inequality and responsibilization of the poor (84). In his analysis, the "language of creativity, initiative and entrepreneurialism" that has come to suffuse life is "meaningless" (2012, 14) insofar as a neoliberal capitalist system ensures capital remains with a select few

and precludes dramatic social change. He furthermore emphasizes neoliberalism's deceptive character: a political project of making people believe in growth that will not benefit them (2011, 112). The assertion that the deregulation of markets and reduction of state bureaucracies has increased insecurity in both the Global North and South, and that as a result also those who are seemingly middle-class struggle to find work and secure their income, has become familiar ground. In short, the rise and celebration of entrepreneurship around the world is commonly assessed as a symptom of a pervasive global economic force that increases inequality and insecurity.

In addition, scholars have pointed out how this hegemonic, neoliberal force or structure has promoted new notions of self and agency based on market rationality and risk-taking, implying that "individual people…[are] simply smaller versions of corporations," and require reflexive self-management (Gershon 2011, 541; see also Urciuoli 2008; Mirowski 2014; Houghton 2019). Ample attention has been given to the ways in which entrepreneurialist self-understandings and practices of self-making legitimize precariousness and lure people into self-exploitation (e.g., Monahan and Fischer 2016; Lorusso 2020). With regard to questions of how people become and remain incorporated in exploitative neoliberalism, Berlant's (2011) argument of "cruel optimism" has gained particular traction. Her analysis focuses on the affective dimension of attachment to aspirational horizons such as upward mobility, job security or durable intimacy in a global context of structurally increasing insecurity. When such ideals or aspirations are at once "objects of desire" and "obstacles to [people's] flourishing," there is a cruelty to the optimism they spark, she argues (1-2). Building on Berlant, Bracke (2016) looks at the way the notion of "resilience" as a "desired good" entrenches people in the very conditions that cause their crisis and/or dispossession under hegemonic neoliberalism. Together, analyses of contemporary entrepreneurialism and associated technologies of self-making have foregrounded the (re)production of structural inequalities and suffering.

Notwithstanding their critical importance in understanding the way in which capitalism has developed and plays out unequally, these approaches have their limitations in understanding the uptake of entrepreneurialism in the world today. For one, they are ill-suited to discerning the heterogeneity of everyday entrepreneurial (or otherwise neoliberal) life around the globe. Freeman, among others, warns against the tendency to understand "neoliberalism" as a homogenizing juggernaut:

> For if there is little doubt that neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism reverberate across the world in the interest of global capitalism, the kind of subject being mobilized, the nature of the labor they are performing, the feelings rallied and produced within this

supple and unstable system, and the meanings these affects hold cannot be assumed to be consistent. (2014, 4)

She lays out how, in the case of Barbados, new entrepreneurial trajectories and experiences represent a complex convergence of different cultural logics of flexibility, one deeply rooted in Caribbean history and culture "*in resistance* to bureaucratic hierarchy and (neo)colonial domination" and the other "firmly in the center of contemporary global capitalist orthodoxy" (35). Rather than a source of alienation, Freeman's work shows how the entrepreneurial logic of flexibility and initiative can also inform and help realize aspirations of self-determination and upward social mobility where prevailing social norms may limit them (Freeman 2007, 257, see also Freeman 2014, 2020). Rudnyckyj's analysis of a reform initiative for factory workers in Indonesia provides another example of the way in which neoliberal logics and incentives may spark new cultural forms and practices (2009). In this program, capitalist logics of "[s]elf-discipline, accountability, and entrepreneurial action [we]re represented as Islamic virtues," and vice versa. The resulting "assemblage of Islamic and capitalist ethics" formed a particular "spiritual economy" (105-6). Rudnyckyj emphasizes how "Islam is not merely a vehicle in this process" (106) but in interaction with economic doctrine and management is also enabled, given new impetus. His analysis shows how "new forms of life and labor" were created (107), rather than how capitalism or neoliberalism one-directionally usurps labor power or non-market-based sources of morality.

To understand the ways of living and the experiences such convergences give rise to, it is thus essential to recognize that neoliberal registers and idioms such as those of entrepreneurship are "only to be found … in a state of messy coexistence" with other cultural registers and idioms (Peck 2013, 139). It is furthermore vital to see the different histories of what is subsumed under neoliberalism itself in different parts of the world (Ferguson 2010; see also Elyachar 2012). In Africa, the structural adjustment measures of the 1980s indeed involved "privatization, and an ideological celebration of markets. But the development of new technologies of government, responsibilized prudential subjects and so on … was very limited", argues Ferguson (2010). And so, "'neoliberalism' in Africa refers to a quite fundamentally different situation than it does in Western Europe and North America" (173). In other words, entrepreneurial ways of being and doing arise and pan out qualitatively differently in different moments and places, and so noting the power of the striking commonalities in the policies, practices and techniques of governance identified as globalized neoliberalism is vital but insufficient to understand them. Moreover, as ethnographies such as those of Freeman and Rudnyckyj make clear, assuming a one-directional dominance prevents us from seeing and appreciating qualitatively new conditions of possibility and ways of life that arise amidst the messiness.

A related pitfall of interpreting entrepreneurialism in terms of hegemonic neoliberalism is to gloss over or put aside its positive potential even if it does not produce a secure livelihood. In foregrounding the ideological or governmental function in a system of inequality and insecurity, the uptake of entrepreneurial ways of being and doing against the odds easily appears misguided. Doing little justice to people's critical capacities to understand their own societies, this also does little to explain situated, everyday economic realities or their lived experience. With regard to African economic realities, Jane Guyer (2004) convincingly argues against interpreting them by taking recourse to theories based on European economic histories, in which monetary stability and centralized (capitalist) institutions are assumed. Understandings of worth in African contexts derive from notably different social and economic histories and experiences. What seems "marginal" in a Eurocentric analysis of formal profit, may hold value in other ways from within African realities. An assessment of gains or advantage and their pursuits in African societies therefore needs to be made in reference to African experiences, which are characterized by long-term volatility and uncertainty (see Cooper and Pratten 2015; Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson 2010; Steuer, Engeler, and Macamo 2017; Haram and Yamba 2009). Put simply, the weighing of risks and possible gains is a different ballgame in African contexts. By implication, the notions of normalized stability that analyses of life under hegemonic neoliberalism tend to depart from—of "secure selves and societies" (Bracke 2016, 58-9)—is arguably of limited explanatory use with regard to the global South (see also Munck 2013). Especially in studies in African contexts, the emphasis on failing economies and concomitant suffering leaves much of African lifeworlds untouched (see also Gikandi 2010). To appreciate the endorsement of entrepreneurialism and entrepreneurial practices in a context of profound insecurity, then, it is necessary to look beyond their seemingly cruel or misguided nature.

The potential of uncertainty

A situated understanding of entrepreneurialism in a place such as Johannesburg, then, becomes possible through a more central engagement with the indeterminacy and uncertainty of life, and the ways in which people experience, understand and handle these. In addition to different institutional and monetary histories, Nyamnjoh (2017) argues that African realities are also couched in different epistemologies: he states that African knowledge traditions are more informed by the fundamental "incompleteness" of being and becoming, as opposed to the dualism and boundedness that dominates Western knowledge traditions. From within an epistemology of incompleteness, the indeterminacy and open-endedness of the world and of life are not so much problematic as they are familiar. They pose not so much a threat as endless opportunity: "Things, words, deeds and beings are always incomplete, not because of absences but because of their

possibilities" (256). In this vein, Cooper and Pratten (2015) assess the notion of uncertainty as an ontological given (anywhere and always), but also as a "dominant trope" in African lives (1). They focus on its "positive and productive potential" beyond the "routinized perception" of the insecurity and instability inherent to life in African contexts as crisis or lack (1–2). Building on John Dewey's (1929) understanding of uncertainty as a fundamental property of experience and practical action, they foreground how "uncertainty about issues that matter (diagnoses, investments, plans) spur[s] both imaginations and practices" (3).

This is, furthermore, a relational process, rather than a circumstance or passive background: people experience and handle uncertainty through their relationships with others, which are in themselves always contingent and open-ended. Rather than casting this in terms of negative vulnerability, it is important to see "that quality of possibility [that] is not always negative or fearsome" (Whyte and Siu 2015, 20), but may also have positive consequences, whether tangible or affective. As such, "[u]ncertainty is a social resource and can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships, and act as a source for imagining the future with the hopes and fears this entails" (Cooper and Pratten 2015, 2). However, "[t]he productivity of indeterminacy is not a given condition. Rather, it is seeing and appreciating the potentialities of indeterminacy that makes uncertainty a productive condition: and this is an existential achievement that people pursue with the means available to them" (Di Nunzio 2015a, 153). So, uncertainty is not just a lack but a potential resource that may be used and not just suffered, and this hinges on people's efforts to appreciate it as such, which vary according to circumstances, needs and means. In this line of thought, pervasive indeterminacy and uncertainty are less obstacles to surmount than facts of life that people can manage to varying degrees and effects. How they do so and what comes of it, then, are empirical questions.

Departing from the historically situated "messy coexistence" of neoliberalism with other cultural logics, and the "productive potential of uncertainty," it becomes possible to understand the uptake of entrepreneurialism in contexts of high insecurity beyond both explanations of systemic violence and implications of irrationality or deceptiveness. Focusing on the way uncertainty is generative of particular aspirations and ways of being helps understand people's apparent embrace of precarity and insecurity not as "naïve or disinterested in the further removed forces that affect their lives" (Cooper and Pratten 2015, 7) but as a meaningful and enabling mode of social navigation. To see such an embrace as the work of translating "the unforeseeability of existence … into a terrain of action and hope" (Di Nunzio 2015a, 153) rather than more or less futile attempts to achieve security helps understand their value and meaning apart from outcome. The point is not to downplay or deny in any way the hardships and stresses of making a living

in an unequal world, or the social injustices that underlie economic inequalities, but to draw attention to the multiplicity and the variable logics of these struggles as lived, which analyses of neoliberalism as hegemonic tend to overlook or preclude. Following Gikandi (2010), I want to avoid "confusing the signs of crisis with the lived experience of African actors and agents who may find life hard but do not live in the enclosures of despair" (xiv). For while scholars often emphasize the disjuncture between expectations and realities for young people in Africa, "the present is rarely experienced and navigated as a limbo between the lack of social opportunities and visions of a better future" (Di Nunzio 2015a, 152).

Still, it remains a challenge to "not simply replicate the discursive templates of neoliberalism's ideological character" by "individuating subjectivity, glossing action as preference, or analogizing agency to investment or effect" (Greenhouse 2010, 3). In other words, to recognize and appreciate people's capacities to act and think within neoliberal structures and logics without presenting economic practices as the personal choices of unrestrained individuals or seeing agency only in relation to gain and profit. In line with this, Bähre (2020) calls for an understanding of people's decisions as not just driven by the maximization of utility (within or against structural constraints) but also by desires for change "without really knowing what that change will bring about" (2). Building on Agnes Callard's (2018) concept of "practical rationality," Bähre's (2020) analysis of a South African woman's life choices makes a case for the way people are driven by "transformative potential and the aspiration to cultivate oneself." In other words, rather than merely to achieve a known end goal to maximize happiness, people are also driven by desires for becoming otherwise—"to change values and identities" (2)—without a delineated concept of the outcome of that process, but with good reason. What these ways of becoming and the reasons for pursuing them look like, Bähre points out, are questions of cultural context and social process. This argument foregrounds the activating force of desires for change, and helps see how aspirations for certain lives are socially produced but not determined.

Likewise concerned with the logic of economic action within uncertainty, Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson (2010) put the limelight on the "everyday pragmatics" through which people in African societies push against the limits of what is possible by being creative as well as calculative. Their ethnographic collection brings into view the ambiguous consequences of practices such as informal loan provisions and participation in visa lotteries. It makes clear these are neither mere coping strategies, nor tools of emancipation. Instead, moving away from an evaluation of these practices on the basis of ultimate results, they consider how "people are engaged in a deliberate form of 'self-writing,' fashioning new sovereignties and political subjectivities within structures and moments of constriction" (7) that are nonetheless of social consequence. They thus recast the "hard work" that is making a life and a living under conditions of inequality, volatility and limitation in terms of

a self-invention that is not a matter of liberation versus oppression but of making do. Such ethnographic approaches to economic practices and decisions reveal the proactive, productive and pragmatic ways people relate to the possibilities and impossibilities of their particular environments. This perspective helps in considering life in African contexts of economic insecurity beyond a problem and to include people's own understandings of their lifeworlds, without reducing them to neoliberal automatons or victims, or overly individuating their life trajectories and experiences.

Moralities of success

Seeing people involved in open-ended ways of becoming or in creative, everyday pragmatism does not mean their aspirations are amorphous or their pursuits unfocused. On the contrary, economic practices are informed by culturally and historically specific notions and norms of good and proper ways of living. As the "original moral economists" (Palomera and Vetta 2016) E.P. Thompson and James Scott showed, the way people relate to their livelihood practices and to social others is informed by non-market-based moral logics as much as by capitalist market forces, and it is the historically particular interaction between the two that shape lifeworlds and guide (in)action (see also Liechty 2003, 2015). So, to understand economic and political practices, an analysis of marketplace functionality based on supply and demand alone is insufficient. Just as "a riot is not just a reaction to the stimulus of hunger" (Fassin 2009, 8), so starting a business is not an automatic reaction to a lack of jobs. As much as it may be driven by material needs, it reflects social norms and valuations of economic achievement that are notably moral. To understand how entrepreneurial young professionals configure, experience and interpret their career trajectories, then, it is necessary to consider the moralities of success that inform them. Starting from the substantivism of a moral economy approach, this is a matter of unearthing "the often-contradictory values that guide and sustain livelihood practices" (Palomera and Vetta 2016, 427) in situated social histories. In doing so, it is important not to artificially oppose market rationality or motifs of profit to other cultural logics as if they are not part of the same social context, less morally loaded, or mutually exclusive. Instead, it is vital to see how the moralities of success that may guide and hinder young professionals in South Africa derive from various, messily co-existing registers.

The underlying morality of contemporary entrepreneurialist development discourse and programs is often read as the economic responsibilization of the individual, and as such considered deplorable. In their analysis of an entrepreneurial program for poor and unemployed youth in Nairobi, Dolan and Rajak (2016) summarize the logic of the "new economy of development" it represents as follows:

> Crucially, it is a moral mission that not only catalyses the transformation of the individual into [an] industrious entrepreneurial citizen, but charges them with the responsibility of bringing about a second order of moral transformation, that is, serving the wider societal project of "good growth", a double moral injunction for the "poor to help themselves" in order to help the economy (Elyachar 2002, p. 500). (Dolan and Rajak 2016, 515)

Tadesse provides another example of an analysis of entrepreneurial training programs as forms of problematic responsibilization, as reflective of a "neoliberal governmental logic" (2017, 1) that offloads the management of uncertainty and risk to individual subjects, in this instance in Ethiopia. Though convincingly laying out the way in which entrepreneurialist rationality is linked to the deployment of state power and its developmental agenda, this gives little insight into the way this logic and its effects acquire relevance and meaning for young Ethiopians. Yet, to understand how such programs and discourses speak to people, it is crucial to understand how they tie into other notions of, and imperatives for, economic achievement in their participants' and audiences' social worlds.

Compulsions for economic achievement in African societies have long been noted as elements of kinship systems in which the obligations to augment the intergenerational inheritance and to redistribute income among relatives are widespread central tenets.[10] Recent ethnographic studies make clear that, far from static givens of "tradition," such kinship-based logics of intergenerational reciprocity are impacted by political and economic changes, "with each generation having to carve out its aspirations in relation to kinship expectations and available economic opportunities," as Spronk writes about the "yuppies" of early twenty-first-century Nairobi (2014, 102; see also Kroeker 2018). Behrends and Lentz (2012) note the "difficulties of reconciling … deeply felt obligations to the home community and the need to cope with the exigencies of a modern professional career" as a historical constant in their assessment of generational shifts in trajectories and perceptions of upward mobility in twentieth-century northern Ghana. At the same time, they see the available and preferred ways to contribute to developments "at home" changed with each generation—taking up political office, purposefully moving back or away, sponsoring the education of others, starting women's associations, et cetera (160). And in the South African context, Jeske (2016), for example, has shown how the shift from cattle to cars as prime status symbols and wealth goods indicates "new economic moralities" at work in

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[10] E.g., Richards (1940), Fortes (1969), Geschiere (2000). Other examples include Belk (2000) on the way "nouveaux riches" in Zimbabwe eschew extended family care, or Rowlands (1988) on the kin-based logic of accumulation and redistribution guiding younger generations in Cameroon.

the management of community ties and kinship solidarity.[11] In short, kin-based expectations of achievement and redistribution in African societies remain powerful[12]—but are continuously transformed and renegotiated.

Such transformations and renegotiations over the last half century have been strongly defined by newly won independence and processes of globalization, which have broadened aspirational horizons in former colonies across the world (Donner 2016). New possibilities for and discourses of democracy, freedom and development have generated new visions of a good life, accompanied by new hopes as well as anxieties (e.g., Chua 2014). This is well captured in the way Heiman, Freeman and Liechty (2012) take middleclassness as an increasingly globally shared aspiration: ever more people around the world desire a middle-class quality of life and status. Publicly visible new middle-income groups with cosmopolitan lifestyles affirm and stimulate aspirational horizons of middleclassness in various post-colonies and so-called developing economies, as they embody and display the possibility of upward mobility (Spronk 2012, 2014; Fernandes 2006; Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer 2018; Rutz and Balkan 2009). This is spurred on by official and public rhetoric in which political and corporate leaders hail the middle classes as signposts of development (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012, 7). On the African continent, middle-class terminologies indeed have increasing social presence and significance (Lentz 2015, 24–5; Melber 2013; Spronk 2014; Southall 2016). This concept of middleclassness as a global aspiration thus points out how ever more people are drawn to "middle-class" ways of living.

These ways of living are not just defined by relative material wealth. More than a descriptor of disposable income, education or job security, middleclassness has become "a promise, a pressure and a claim—an imagined site and a standard of normality and respectability that directs people's aspirations and trajectories'" (Schielke 2012, 34). As an ideal of normality and respectability, it signifies a moral project of living a good life and being recognized as such. In this vein, Melber sees Phadi and Ceruti's (2011) finding that a large number of unemployed township dwellers in South Africa self-categorized as middle class as expressions of "a form of pride, of dignity, and of belonging" (Melber 2017, 146). Beyond material lifestyle, then, "middleclassness is a moral and ethical claim to being a specific kind of person" (Srivastava 2012, 57) that centers on notions of respectability and deservingness.

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[11] In another vein, Moore and Seekings (2019) have analyzed how the extensive South African welfare system interacts with kin-based dynamics of support.

[12] Already in *Kinship and the Social Order* (1969), Fortes discussed the irresistibility of claims based on moral obligations towards kin.

What constitutes normality, respectability and deservingness, are of course context-specific, historically shifting matters of contestation. Freeman (2014) shows how the pursuit of "neoliberal" entrepreneurialism has enabled a new way to be both economically independent and respected, especially for women, in the Barbadian case. She emphasizes that it must be read as a new "way of living and feeling" (1) that goes beyond a particular livelihood practice to include desires for companionate romantic partnerships and new forms of child-rearing, leisure and self-care. Providing "a new aspirational trajectory of business enterprise and self making," entrepreneurialism entails a new mode of "enacting middleclassness" (172). On the one hand, it challenges the traditional associations of business as the preserve of either a white elite or a survival strategy for mainly black poor; on the other, it upends traditional forms of marriage and gender hierarchy. As such, entrepreneurialism reconstitutes respectability (Freeman 2014; see also 2012, 87–88, 93–94).

With regard to contemporary Africa, Scharrer, O'Kane and Kroeker (2018) also point to the assumed link between respectability and entrepreneurialism, with the middle classes "reputed to bring not only entrepreneurialism but also strong cultural tendencies towards the deferral of gratification" (13). Middleclassness is in this way closely associated with expectations for economic responsibility and contributions to economic growth. In the South African case, moreover, James (2015) sees the lives of "new achievers" informed by an "aspirational ethic" (58) that entails a balancing act between status competition through consumption on the one hand, and a show of prudence and financial self-discipline through saving and educational investments on the other. In James' analysis, this uneasy combination of material display and moderation revolves around the attainment of respectability in the typical middle-class vocabulary of modern consumerism (cf. Posel 2010). This aspirational ethic of middleclassness is thus ambiguous in itself, but also regularly at odds with the felt obligations towards kin.

> On the one hand, young households are "middle-classing"—that is, trying to achieve a middle-class standard of living, with all the material and lifestyle choices that this implies. On the other, they are embedded in networks of solidarity that tie them into responsibilities to parents and siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins and distant family (Chipkin 2013, 243).

Using the term "middle-classing" to describe the lifeworlds of young professionals in South Africa, as Chipkin does (2012, 2013; see also James 2015), helps focus on what people *do* to make a good and respectable life. When trying to grasp the lived experience of the middle class, it is more helpful to focus on the practices and processes that make up aspirational pursuits than on people's supposed distance

to one or other arrival point. It is the constant striving for (or maintaining) upward mobility and respectability inherent in the aspirational ideal of middleclassness that I argue is central to the uptake of entrepreneurialism by the young professionals in this study.

The concept of middleclassness as an aspirational ideal offers a fruitful lens on the uptake of entrepreneurialism among young professionals as it sheds light on the way various moralities of success inform their life choices and experiences. It helps move the question of entrepreneurship's appeal and meaning beyond the undelivered promise of material rewards that is often foregrounded in analyses of entrepreneurial programs and the problems of development discourses. Seeing the uptake of entrepreneurialism as part of their middle-classing efforts, instead, invites a substantivist, moral economic approach that helps situate and make sense of their practices as part of their lifeworld. Moreover, "[t]hese performative terms make it possible to encompass in the discussion both those aspiring to climb the status ladder and those who are well on their way up it" (James 2017, 2). This is important given the way entrepreneurialism in South Africa draws in people from a wide array of backgrounds and circumstances, from second generation urban professionals with homes in leafy suburbs to un- or underemployed youth from township areas without access to financial capital—even if entrepreneurial programs are selective and the odds of becoming successful as an entrepreneur remain slim.

In all, looking at the uptake of entrepreneurship at the conceptual interface of the indeterminacy of life, desires and pressures for middleclassness, and various moralities of success, helps in seeing how it is a cultural practice of aspiration (Spronk 2014) shaped by local histories and global discourses. It shows how a globalized call to entrepreneurship coincides with an increased striving for middle-class lives as "a new promise of upward mobility and social esteem" (Freeman 2014, 34). Looking at the way this call to action for a good life speaks to people, and unpacking their responses, is a way to see how the promises, pressures and claims of middleclassness inform the lived experience of uncertainty and (its) potential. Noting how the uptake of entrepreneurship entails an active engagement with the insecurities, possibilities and moralities at play in their lifeworlds brings to light not only the tensions and struggles but also the meaningfulness and driving force it adds to the lives of young professionals. Putting their experiences and their ways of understanding these matters in the limelight reveals not just the pitfalls but also the potentialities of entrepreneurialism.

Grounded fieldwork? Notes on methods

The political economy of South Africa can be described as "a setting where state welfarism (owing much to South Africa's past) coexists with new, and more classically neo-liberal, ideas of enterprise, economic independence and privatization" (Hull and James 2012, 3; see also Ferguson 2015). A steady expansion of funds for social grants over the last two decades has been increasingly paired with government calls to entrepreneurship and affirmations of the power of private business to realize the longstanding promises of "economic transformation" and "inclusive growth." This makes for a peculiar combination of extensive welfare and pro-private business discourse and policies (a "redistributive neoliberalism" (James 2015, 8)). With a well-established corporate and financial infrastructure, South Africa has become one of the main centers of start-up hubs and business incubators on the African continent (World Bank 2016 map). The global trend of entrepreneurialism thus manifests itself in concentrated physical form in cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Figure 2 - A placard in one of Johannesburg's northern suburbs. Source: Lieve de Coninck

Through this study I aim to understand the uptake of entrepreneurship by young professionals in South Africa as they experience and understand it. To this end, I have developed an ethnographic case study of (ex-)participants in entrepreneurial programs in Johannesburg and Cape Town, based on a total of eleven months of fieldwork between 2015 and 2018. Ethnographic—that is, immersive, long-term—fieldwork uniquely makes possible and demands attention to the multiplicity of life. Its traditional methods of participant observations and building relations of trust in a setting that is unfamiliar inevitably produce a heightened awareness of the intersubjective nature of social reality and its variegated manifestations. Engaging with people in milieus other than one's own as an ethnographer for prolonged periods of time opens up possibilities for other ways of being, seeing and doing, not only in thought but as experience. The more such experiences one gathers, the clearer it becomes that other ways of being and doing are all equally *real*, if not all equally realized or valued. And with more experiences of different ways of living, the more other perspectives on life become familiar and sensible, and the harder it becomes to order them in a hierarchical manner. Instead,

it becomes pressing to find a frame of analysis that can acknowledge the realness of *all* these possible ways of being, seeing and doing, without losing sight of their unequal realization and valuation. This is why ethnographers often write equivocally and indeterminately (Jackson 2011, 187–192). For this quality of engaging with multiplicity, ethnography offers a way to research not the technicalities of entrepreneurship, but the way it is lived.

In the introduction to his Harlem-based ethnography, John Jackson (2001) suggests that urban fieldwork on themes that run through most every aspect of life runs the risk of never really finding its object of analysis, of remaining elusive (14). He argues for grounding ethnographic studies in urban settings in a specific place: a store, a diner, a movie theatre. Aiming to do so, I selected three particular entrepreneurial programs and their premises as the central starting points for making observations and connections, Eshisha Hub, Phendula Enterprises, and the JBO Foundation, which mainly attracted young professionals and tertiary students.

The enterprise development sector that has emerged in South Africa over the last decade has been characterized by an abundance and a variety of organizations and programs such as start-up or innovation hubs, business incubators and accelerators. In 2017, there were 340 organizations providing "support in the entrepreneurial ecosystem" across South Africa, according to the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs South Africa, and in the province of Gauteng alone in 2018, 265 organizations ran a total of 318 programs (ANDE 2017, 2018). These "ecosystem players," as the various actors in the enterprise development sector are commonly called, varied greatly in terms of their models, their partnerships, and their activities: from public, non-profit programs aimed at the emancipation of the un- or underemployed, to commercial undertakings that finance new businesses as a form of venture capitalism, or that help to organize supply chains of black-owned small businesses to provide tax advantages for established corporations; from fully online or tucked away in a backstreet, to a brand new 40,000 square meter brick campus; and from mere access to a database or event, to long-term personal coaching.[13] While initially funded mostly by transnational and national public funds (Masutha and Rogerson 2014), universities and commercial corporations have increasingly contributed (ANDE 2017).[14] However, the majority

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[13] See, for example, the Red Bull Amaphiko program (https://www.redbull.com/int-en/events/red-bull-amaphiko-connect-jhb-applications-open (accessed 15 September 2021); the for-profit Raizcorp program (https://www.raizcorp.com/about/ (accessed 15 September 2021); or the programs at the University of Johannesburg (https://www.uj.ac.za/faculties/cbe/Centre-for-Small-Business-Development/Pages/Programmes.aspx; (accessed 15 September 2021).

[14] In Johannesburg, for example, South African national corporations such as supermarket chain PicknPay and academic institutions such as the University of Johannesburg—but

of programs provided non-financial support directly to aspiring entrepreneurs with a focus on youth, women and social enterprises, were sector-agnostic in their support, and were located in Johannesburg's suburbs (ANDE 2018). The three programs I eventually selected and was granted access to share these characteristics, but sport important differences between them, too. I will discuss these programs and locations in more detail in chapter 3.

After a one-month pilot study in 2015 in Cape Town and Johannesburg, I moved to Johannesburg for five months in 2017, and again in 2018, where I made observations at three different entrepreneurial organizations, which I will call Eshisha Hub, Phendula Enterprises, and JBO Foundation. I have chosen to use pseudonyms for the programs and persons participating in my research in order to honor my promise of confidentiality to both staff and participants as much as possible. In total, I observed and participated in over fifty entrepreneurial program sessions, public start-up events and small business expos, where I met a large number of aspiring young professionals. Those I consider active participants in this study consist of a selection of people who were involved in one or multiple entrepreneurial program(s) in Johannesburg as participants or staff (thirty-six), and several persons who had started their own businesses independently (four). Within this group around 40 percent were women and 60 percent men. Their ages ranged between twenty-two and forty-five, with more than 80 percent under the age of thirty. With a selection of this group, I conducted recorded interviews with an average length of one hour and forty minutes (twenty-one in total). In addition, I conducted innumerable informal interviews and conversations, both one-on-one and in groups. A core group of around ten people within this batch proactively kept me in the loop of events in their (business) lives, and we socialized outside of the entrepreneurial programs on a weekly basis in semi-public places such as malls, parks, cafés, cinemas and churches, and sometimes at home. As such, I got to know some of their family and friends as well. Additionally, of course, there were many more daily encounters with people whom I did not get to know well, yet who provided invaluable information and insights into life in South Africa.

Despite significant variation in the phases of entrepreneurship and in the backgrounds and lifestyles of the participants in this study, more than 90% had

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also multinationals like Red Bull, Google, and business tycoon Richard Branson—sponsor entrepreneurial programs and the development of new start-up campuses (for example, https://www.bransoncentre.co.za/about-us, accessed 15 September 2021). During my fieldwork, 22 on Sloane was opened, a new, physical entrepreneurship hub in an upmarket area of Johannesburg, the partners and sponsors of which form a typical collection of international and national private and public money that funds the enterprise development sector widely (See https://www.22onsloane.co/partners/ (accessed 15 September 2021).

attended or finished tertiary education, either in universities or professional colleges, and a similar percentage had formal work experience or established careers in sectors such as accounting, sales, marketing, film, photography, web design, IT, architecture or PR. At the time of fieldwork, the majority of participants found themselves in the first five years of their post-education, working lives. Based on these characteristics, I refer to them collectively as young professionals. While the organizations formally accepted members without educational credentials or formal work experience, such people formed a minority and did not feature in my study. Still, the variation in levels of income security, living arrangements, and care and support for and from family among this batch of young professionals was significant. What they shared were their entrepreneurial aspirations: their hope and actions to become a successful entrepreneur and/or to become successful in entrepreneurial ways. For some this meant a clearly upward move, while for others this represented rather "sideways mobility" (Freeman 2014, 47–8, 55; Freeman 2012, 93)

All participants in this study were or had been engaged in running a business (or multiple businesses), or stated the wish to do so, with the exception of two persons who were averse to the financial risks, and some of the program staff who were (tentatively) happily employed. The nature of their enterprises differed greatly, from construction, biochemical engineering, digital PR, beauty and wellness, interior design, pest control, web security, software development, digital education, film content production, saving schemes for youth, accounting, branding, toys production, livestock raising, financial services and motivational speaking, to enterprise development itself. Many people ran more than one trade at the same time, often in divergent industries, although the entrepreneurial programs usually advised against or even forbade this. In short, the selection of participant entrepreneurs in this study was sector-agnostic, as a consequence of the various programs' sector-agnosticism. On a related note, whether or not people were successful in terms of revenue, profits, or the number of salaried jobs created (common criteria for entrepreneurial programs in South Africa) was not a factor in selection. While rates of profit or loss surely impact the lived experience of entrepreneurship, my interest was in the process of becoming entrepreneurial, regardless of eventual success or failure in business. Besides, for those with businesses in the start-up phase, it was not a straightforward matter to assess whether they were doing well or not. Apart from a general obscurity about financial details maintained carefully by individual participants as well as organizations, the state of most of the young professionals' businesses was very changeable: whether they had or did not have employees, an office space, or a functioning line of production, paying customers often differed by the week, as did their sense of direction and emotional state.

As educated professionals and mostly young adults, the participants in this study occupied a particular historical position in South Africa. Those aged roughly between twenty and thirty years old in South Africa are referred to as the *born frees* (e.g., Mpongo 2016). As the first generation raised in democracy, they are given special salience in statistics[15] are the subject of art projects,[16] and are frequently referred to in public discussions on the state of the nation.[17] Like other postcolonial generations in Africa, they were "expected … to inaugurate a new beginning for their countries … as the harbingers of development" (Engeler and Steuer 2017, 10); the hopes for freedom, equality and economic transformation of post-transition society have been projected onto the born frees (cf. Oyedemi 2018). But while they may not face the formal limitations to upward mobility of their parents' and grand-parents' generations, many remain financially excluded from higher education, and the obvious availability and prestige of a career in civil or corporate employment for those with an education has much decreased. The so-called born frees, and particularly those in higher education, are thus faced with an increasingly shaky set of conditions to realize historically laden dreams of transformation and success. I will come back to this in chapter 1. As such, their experiences and considerations of career paths can provide important insights into historical shifts in African trajectories of social mobility and in intergenerational reciprocity (see Whyte, Alber, and Van der Geest 2008).

The ethnographic material in this dissertation consists to a significant extent of narratives, as produced in both staged performances and formal interviews, and in informal conversations. This is in part due to the reality of young professionals' busy working lives, often with young families, in which efficiency was of the essence. This meant that, notwithstanding their willingness to participate in the research, my interlocutors wanted to know beforehand how long I needed and what would come of it—both typically undetermined aspects of ethnographic fieldwork—and an hour out of their working day was a lot. So, initially, formal interviews in formally scheduled meetings at one of the hubs or a nearby café for a set amount of time fitted the logistics and the transactional frame of reference that dominated their daily lives, while hanging out or spending time in other ways did not. In these initial interviews, I set out to get a sense of their life trajectories by asking them to tell me how they got to this point in their lives, as well as how they came to join an

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[15] See, for example, http://www.statssa.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Fieldworker-Low-Res-April-2014.pdf (accessed 22 June 2017).

[16] See, for example, https://nataal.com/born-free, or www.bornfreegeneration.com (accessed 18 January 2022).

[17] See, for example, http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/born-frees-struggle-to-find-jobs-1852503, and https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/born-free-in-south-africa/ (accessed 22 June 2017).

entrepreneurial program or (the ambition to) start a business. Usually, the conversation flowed from there, with my occasional introduction of a new theme such as parents' reactions to career choices, what "black tax"[18] meant to them, or questions to clarify chronology, and with participants, of course, asking questions in return, producing a "conversational hybrid" of life stories (Kratz 2001, 136). Despite the casual character of these interviews, it is important to acknowledge the solicited performances they were.

Most participants in entrepreneurial programs were practiced narrators of their "entrepreneurial journey," as it was called, as a consequence of their performances in selection procedures and pitching competitions—another reason for the overrepresentation of narrative material in this study: much entrepreneurial practice consisted of performing stories. However, the research setup of the interview with a particular audience-of-one (me) and little material interests at play generated other tales. This impact seemed most pronounced in the way I encouraged interviewees to place their entrepreneurship in a biographical framework, with attention to anthropological themes such as family structure, upbringing and education, social relations, and beliefs, feelings and imaginations. The resultant biographical narratives thus reflect the intersubjective, situated moment of the interview and cannot be read as factual records of the genesis of the young professional's entrepreneurship. But neither are they merely idiosyncratic, detached from wider social realities. I follow Miescher (2001) in his middle-ground assertion that life histories "are affected by the situation of the narration," yet still "provide insights into historical processes and cultural practices" (163). So, the biographical stories of the young professionals I present in the following chapters are accounts of the way they interpret their careers and understand themselves in relation to the wider social context of life in South Africa, as elicited and recontextualized by me.

It is common social science knowledge that social environments impact the way people understand and experience themselves. In turn, how people self-understand also plays a crucial role in the way they experience and assess their social location and their options for particular courses of action in it (Spronk 2014; Lentz 2015). The young professionals who participated in my research were reflective and articulate: they often provided explicit analyses of their own situation and of society at large, reflecting these dialectics clearly. The ways in which their narrative reflexivity held value as a skill in the entrepreneurial programs, moreover, illustrates middleclassness as a cultural practice.

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[18] "Black tax" refers to kinship norms for redistribution that (are considered to) prevail in non-white communities. I return to this theme in chapter 2.

Narratives give insight into these experiences and evaluations, as they reveal something of the work of making sense of and managing the world around us—in action, as we speak. Telling a story about your life, putting into words the way you see yourself and others, is a constituting practice. Requiring reflexivity, it brings into being a sense of self, and in interaction with others it establishes (projected) relationships (Linde 1993; Kratz 2001, 128; Miescher 2001). Moreover, as people "conceptualize the unfolding of their life trajectories," they reflexively create links "between what has been and what could be" (Di Nunzio 2015a, 159). Narratives about oneself and one's life thus both reflect the reality of a particular social world as lived, and its active (re)interpretation, a "configuring of perspective in action" (Kratz 2001, 142). Whether or not self-narrating constitutes *agency* is a matter of debate, but, in any case, it is an interactive doing that presents the social world of the speaker and how they understand their being in it. It is the reflexivity inherent in a narrative presentation of oneself (Linde 1993) that contains and shows this interaction. Scrutinizing the kinds of self-perceptions, relations and connective threads between past, present and future that people formulate and the way in which they do so "allow us [researchers] to historicize … subjectivity" (Miescher 2001, 187); that is, to understand the way personal experiences and the unfolding of history are tied up with each other. Looking at the way the young professionals in Johannesburg formulated and interpreted their entrepreneurship thus gives insight into some of the possibilities and limitations of being (considered) young and promising in post-transition South Africa.

Understanding people's experience of reality and of their particular lifeworlds through biographical narratives importantly complements structural analyses of economic and political positions in which subjectivity and agency can appear as mere effects or are ignored. However, it runs the risk of missing the broader context of non-narrative practices that produce people as persons and that constitute their social relations and senses of self, such as those of place and the body (Giles-Vernick 2001). While my inferences in the following chapters are based *also* on a myriad of observations of and participation in entrepreneurial programs, family meetings, social get-togethers, and a daily working life as a young professional in Johannesburg, I foreground an analysis that leans on narratives. I do so to be accountable to my interlocutors and their contributions to the analytical work; in other words, in an effort to present them as participants in, rather than objects of analysis. This dissertation thus presents a partial understanding of the way young professionals take up, renegotiate and interpret entrepreneurial discourses and practices discursively, that may be complemented by further studies based on other forms of human expression and analysis.

Collecting the narratives and observations that comprised my snapshot of entrepreneurial life involved not only carving out time, but also linking spaces

across a geographically extensive field. The entrepreneurial programs and events took place in various suburbs, the inner city, and sometimes in Soweto, the West Rand, or a township on the eastern edges of the metropolitan area. The locations of the malls, bars and parks at which the young professionals often preferred to meet, and their houses, apartments and rooms, were even more spread out. This meant driving around (or being stuck in traffic) for hours every day, making my way to a workshop, event, or interview, and giving people lifts. On several occasions, my rental car was the gatekeeper to multi-day trips to relatives outside of Johannesburg, which allowed for lengthy conversations. The many hours on the road also provided an opportunity to listen to the radio—an important public medium in South Africa —and get a sense of the public discourse on politics, the economy and life issues, and on entrepreneurship more particularly. Given the compartmentalization of Johannesburg's neighborhoods along racialized and classed lines (e.g., Crankshaw 2008; Krige 2011; Modisha 2008), I physically and socially crossed many boundaries on a daily basis.

Although my interlocutors regularly crossed these boundaries too, the scope of their movements in daily life was usually smaller, reflecting the continued segregation of lifeworlds. The complexity of this segregation, however, was brought home to me by the wide array of amazement, appalment, admiration and condemnation that my stories of visits to particular townships, suburbs or rural areas, and of evenings at book clubs, wine tastings and posh hotel lobbies evoked in like measure. When I dropped off a Pretoria-based acquaintance at the train station on the edge of Alexandra township and mentioned I had visited friends there the day before, she indignantly exclaimed, "What do you mean? Nobody has friends in Alex!"thereby revealing the prevailing racial and class norms of her lifeworld. Likewise, I was scolded by strangers and acquaintances alike for my risk-taking behavior in public spaces, such as walking alone on certain streets or driving with the window down an inch. Apparently, I (naively? arrogantly?) violated the norms of conduct for, I assume, white females vis-à-vis the generalized unsafety that marks life in Johannesburg. While my research-led social boundary-crossing endeavors may have been particular, the need to play *very* different roles in different places, and the racialized nature of these performative requirements, were familiar facts of life for all. At a house party in Soweto, Themba, the night receptionist at Eshisha Hub, complained about the energy it took him to move around the various areas of the township—from poor and non-working communities to the houses of well-to-do local politicians—as well as the academic and professional setting of Eshisha, and be seen as a respectable black man everywhere. But where he and I agreed extensive code-switching was tiresome, others shrugged their shoulders and considered me "too sensitive" or simply unpracticed at being racialized.

The persistent relevance of racial appearance and racial categories as primary identity markers in post-transition South Africa reflects a far-reaching historical inheritance of language, policies, and social practices of racialization (e.g., Nattrass and Seekings 2001, 2005). At the same time, in the post-transition era, racial classifications have come to intersect more complexly with other axes of difference such as geographical location, gender, language, ethnic affiliation, professional status, level of education, etc., and they are made relevant in new ways (e.g., McKinney 2007; Canham and Williams 2017; Bock and Stroud 2019; Southall 2019; cf. Iqani 2017). These new complexities change the lived experience of "race" (Khunou and Krige 2013), and stir ample public debate (de Coninck 2018), but they seem not to diminish the dominance of the labels "white," "black," "colored" and "Indian" in public discourse, nor their power to place other aspects of a person and the relationality of identification in the background in social interactions (e.g., Vincent 2008). In this dissertation, I discuss the lives and words of people mostly self-classifying as "black," and use this term thus descriptively.[19] In part, this reflects the current demographic situation in Johannesburg (population statistics), in another part the marketing and selection practices of the programs and hubs that formed the main settings in which I met and interacted with research participants.

Whiteness, as well as non-South Africanness, were especially prominent in the way my social interactions and relations unfolded. Phenotypically white and female, and speaking no other local language than English, the options for other ways of being identified in first encounters proved limited. This both hindered and helped the research process: it conjured suspicions and assumptions of my being racist, classist or unable to understand non-white experiences, which drew barriers to communication; however, it also conjured expectations of my expertise and ability to provide access to resources that resulted in eager invitations. Where one young woman told me she did not think it possible for me to ever understand the aspirations of black people in South Africa, another was delighted to experience such an unexpectedly non-racist exchange and friendship. Some of the young professionals told me I was the first white person they ever had an extensive conversation with, even though they had been in racially mixed schools. My not

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[19] While their usage of racial terminology is worthy of further scrutiny, I have not pursued this here. Recognizing the politics of racial categorization in South African everyday life, but not taking them as object of explicit analysis in this dissertation, I have used lowercase throughout. At times, this may have left some nuances convoluted. Yet, it reflects the dominant prevalence of the meaning "non-white." For a short reflection on South African racial terminology, see Barchiesi (2011, xxi). For an introduction to the history of racial classification in South Africa and the dominant but opposing approaches of "color-blindness" and essentialism, see Erasmus (2008). For a more philosophical treatment and a comparative ethnography of racial classification that presents a crucial alternative to the essentialism of "black" and "white," see Guadeloupe (2022).

being South African was, I think, one of the reasons why they engaged in it in the first place. But where in the context of the entrepreneurial programs my being assumed a member of staff, an invited speaker, or an expert provided access to boardrooms and staff meetings, it also regularly kept me at a distance from the participants, who were overwhelmingly "black." This was most obvious at Phendula Enterprises, where only "100% black-owned businesses'" were admitted to the program, and where I was not permitted to hang around outside formal workshop hours. While this prominence of racial classifications in my interactions provided insight into their social power, it is also clear that I have been unable to grasp hardly any of the nuances of ethnicity that pervade lives in South Africa, too. A shortcoming.

A similar note needs to be made on the relevance of gender, both for the lives of the young professionals and for the process of fieldwork. Norms and expectations for women's and men's respective careers and their roles in the reproduction of households and in family structures (James 2015, 2017) impact the way young professionals might understand and experience entrepreneurial life. In addition, there are explicit affirmative action policies aimed at improving the economic standing of women in particular, both as students, workers, professionals and business owners that affect the way women engage in entrepreneurship in South Africa (e.g. Women Empowerment and Gender Equality legislation and various amendments and additions to the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act). Various research participants' indeed shared stories of having been asked or manipulated to "front" an actually (white) male-led business. Furthermore, sexual harassment incidents preoccupied the staff and participants of some of the programs over the course of fieldwork, mildly mirroring the national concern with sexual violence and the problems of patriarchy. Overall, my identification as female had the common effect of easing confidential interactions with other women during fieldwork. It limited interactions with men insofar as social norms prevented one-on-one meetings with married men, strategic distancing was sometimes required in contact with unmarried men, and to the extent that I was excluded from all-male group interactions, but given the mixed nature of public space and of the ecosystem, and the counter-norms of gender equality that pervaded the lifeworlds of most young professionals, this effect appeared mild. Furthermore, I noted that in both formal and informal interviews, men put emphasis on their successes and personal qualities, staying close to the dominant entrepreneurial discourse, whereas women's stories slid more quickly into the minutiae of their emotional lives, including sorrows and uncertainties. While noting such aspects of gender, and while acknowledging their social relevance, I leave their analysis and that of aspects of racialization to other, more equipped scholars.

Instead, in this dissertation, I focus on the uptake of entrepreneurialism by young professionals in South Africa as it represents an intersection of middleclassness,

neoliberalism and moral economy. In the following chapter, I will first historically situate post-transition entrepreneurialism as it resounds in the public arena and in "the ecosystem" of Johannesburg's start-up events and entrepreneurial programs by outlining the legacies of South Africa's twentieth century as they pertain to black success in business. Consequently, in chapter two, I will discuss the emergence of entrepreneurial aspirations in the lives of young professionals as they tell it, on the basis of their biographical narratives, which reveal how intergenerational aspirational legacies impact personal life trajectories and self-perceptions. In chapter three, I address the role of the ecosystem in the shaping of entrepreneurial trajectories. Acknowledging young professionals' critical capacities to assess the gap between the promise and the reality of the ecosystem, this chapter discusses what it brings them and how to look at this question beyond ultimate outcomes. Chapter four unravels young professionals' continued engagement in and endorsement of entrepreneurship in the face of the hardship and insecurity it produces. In conclusion, I will reflect on this case study's contributions to our understanding of the uptake of arguably neoliberal discourses and practices and the need to assess this not with a focus on outcome but on the experience of change.

CHAPTER 1

**BLACK SUCCESS IN BUSINESS BEFORE
AND AFTER DEMOCRACY**

T wo seeming contradictions mark the field of enterprise development in South Africa today. First: Both government and large corporations emphasize the need for small business development and entrepreneurship to transform the economy, and accordingly they promote and invest in all kinds of support structures. Yet, the top two complaints of new entrepreneurs concern the problems of "red tape" and "access to market" (i.e., the bureaucratic obstacles to registering and funding a business), and the lack of opportunities to start trading with established corporations. Second: In popular media, entrepreneurs and start-ups are celebrated as courageous wealth- and changemakers, and as the embodiment of new possibilities when successful. But success in business is simultaneously associated with corruption, self-interest and dubious collaboration with mostly white capitalists. In other words, entrepreneurship and business success in South Africa are both encouraged and constrained, revered and mistrusted. To understand the way such ambiguities affect young professionals today, it is important to understand something of their history. In this chapter, I discuss some of the continuities and changes in the opportunities for and public perceptions of entrepreneurial success throughout the twentieth century and into the post-transition era. This provides not only gradation to a historical narrative in which the suffering of black laborers is central, but also helps to see more clearly the aspirational predicament of a current generation of young professionals.

Twentieth century upward mobilities: opportunities and perceptions

South Africa's recent history is dominated by the realities and stories of racialized oppression and the struggles against it (e.g., Coombes 2003). In broad strokes, since the dawn of colonization on the Cape coast, white foreigners have made increasingly systematic, violent efforts to exploit and subjugate native black people, culminating in the apartheid regime of the second half of the twentieth century. Those thus subjugated have suffered and struggled to liberate themselves in parallel fashion, culminating in the overthrow of apartheid and a transition into democratic rule in the 1990s. In the dominant popular discourse about this history, white and black are ultimate social categories firmly rooted at opposite ends of an abusive relationship.[20]

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[20] The positions of those defined by the other formalized racial categories of "colored" and "Asian" or "Indian" have been notoriously awkward: in many popular histories they are simply left out, or set apart as insignificant minorities, in spite of much advocacy on the part of self-identifying "colored" and "Indian" South Africans. As one Johannesburg-based interlocutor put it, "Coloreds don't have much of a presence here [in Gauteng province], they only came this side recently, maybe there in Cape Town they are more." See, for example, Erasmus (2001), Adikhari (2006) for discussions of the status and identity practices of "Coloredness."

Moreover, the default perspective from which this story is told is that of labor: the labor needed and exploited by the white oppressors, and the labor provided and suffered by the oppressed black workers. At the same time, contemporary South Africa can be described as a "context in which millions have inherited structural unemployment from their parents" (Ferguson 2015, 19). Currently, the formal unemployment rate stands at 32,9%.[21] This development of structural unemployment as it stands today started as far back as the 1970s, when population growth started to rapidly exceed the growth in non-agricultural jobs, and the limitations of the migrant labor system in which workers were taken from the provinces and housed in townships in urban areas (under severe economic and political controls) started to be felt (Ferguson 2015, 4; Schierup 2016). The quest to generate jobs and supply job seekers with the right skills has been a constant theme in South African governance in the twentieth century (Barchiesi 2011, Southall 2016). Wage-labor has been central to the economy of South Africa for the main part of the twentieth century and post-apartheid, notwithstanding high unemployment rates (Barchiesi 2011, Hull and James 2012):

> The (former) ubiquity of, and reliance on, paid work, has left in place an assumption that the main route to both a livelihood and citizenship is through employment (Barchiesi 2011). This remains the case, despite high levels of unemployment, which stood around 25 percent in 2012, and despite a strong policy emphasis in recent years on small-scale enterprise as a means to solve problems of unemployment. (James 2015, 24)

Productive employment has served as the foundation for notions and practices of social inclusion, citizenship and dignity throughout the twentieth century, notwithstanding the discrepancies with the realities of the lives of those in employment (Barchiesi 2008, 2012, 2016; see also Hull 2017). The Marxian leanings of the ANC and the prominent role of the labor unions in the liberation movement have played an important role in this (Marais 2011; Southall 2016). In short, the economic lives of non-white South Africans have long been and continue to be understood mainly in relation to the oppression, exploitation and liberation of black laborers.

The extent of racialized suffering under colonization and apartheid has left intra-racial stratification and upward mobilities of black people under apartheid relatively under-researched (cf. Kuper 1965; Sizwe 1979; Southall 1980; Cobley 1990; Nzimande 1991; Maseko 2000; Mabandla 2013). In Southall's (2016) words, "the lot of the middle class is often deemed in 'struggle history' to have

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[21] https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=737andid=1 (accessed 8 December 2022).

been unheroic" (23). As a result, middle-class lifestyles under apartheid remain publicly contentious (Iqani 2015) and hard to acknowledge even as first-hand experiences (Khunou 2015). In this sense, career trajectories, class positions and experiences other than those of exploited, revolutionary black workers have remained both obscured and dubious. Yet, a growing body of literature points out how the "new" black middle classes that have emerged in the public eye since the turn of the century are not all new. Instead, the opportunities, lifestyles and status of the professionals, business people, politicians and students of today often rest on the upward mobility of their parents or of their parents' parents—however restricted these were—as much as on the possibilities of the post-transition era (Mabandla 2013; Southall 2016; Krige 2015; Hull and James 2012; James 2015; Hull 2017; see also Musyoka 2016, 2018). What part has entrepreneurship played in the trajectories of this minority?

It is clear that the hierarchical, racial categorization of people as "white," "Asian/Indian," "colored," and "African/black" deeply skewed the distribution of opportunities in South Africa's recent history in favor of those classified as whites[22]. Still, selected forms of social mobility occurred within other categories, too. In upward trajectories of non-whites, land ownership that enabled independent trading or entrepreneurship and access to quality (higher) education and formal employment were key catalysts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Christian mission stations were important (and singular) points of entry to these assets. A mission education enabled some black people to find employment in towns and developing urban areas, e.g., as clerks or supervisors in the mining industry or in local government, which granted them something of a middle class lifestyle and, in the Cape province, a *civilized* status (Etherington, Harries and Mbenga 2010, 375). Also, for a brief period, some mission stations offered land for sale to Africans (Houle 2001; Southall 2016, 25–6), which made commercial farming possible again after colonial taxes and ecological setbacks had "squeezed" black African commercial farmers "out of existence" in the late eighteenth century (Maseko 2000, 71–2).

The cumulative and reciprocal value of education, access to land, and forms of entrepreneurship for social advancement in the early years of the twentieth century is well illustrated by the case of the *amakholwa*, early Zulu Christians in Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal province), who lived at the mission station. "Many of the station residents worked as transport-riders, often as owner-operators of their own wagon and oxen and participating in the trade that boomed as the peoples of south-eastern Africa increasingly engaged with the colonial market economy" (Houle 2001, n.p.). Some amakholwa accumulated some wealth and

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[22] For a discussion of the history of this classification, see Khalfani and Zuberi (2001).

prestige this way, and they became part of an educated elite that brought forth black leaders such as John Dube, the first president of what was to become the African National Congress (ANC)). Comparably, Mabandla (2013) shows how running a transportation business was a way to accumulate wealth with which farming land could be bought or hired in the Transkei region (46). Building on work by Colin Bundy, his study points out how land ownership and forms of enterprise played a role next to education in the formation of a "first generation" of propertied black middle class in the Eastern Cape province in the late nineteenth century, in contrast to the employment-based upward mobilities in towns.

These early black middle classes, or elites,[23] occupied a frustrated social position under colonial rule. Their status and self-perception were tied up with a governing system that denied and suppressed the advancement of black people per definition, which thus curtailed their aspirations and economic opportunities, and left them misrecognized and disrespected by those in power. In his testimony to a government commission on "native" affairs, John Makue, a butcher, argued in 1904 that the wages for "decent" black men were too low:

> There is no decent black man that can manage to exist on eight pounds a month, pay all the taxes, and the upkeep of his house in the proper manner – I mean a civilized native. I do not mean the raw man who comes from the kraals [rural homesteads] … now we are all blacks and measured with the same measure … I am measured with the same measure as the man who cannot look after himself and who is not in the same position as I am. (as quoted in Maseko 2000, 74; see also Masina 2002, 39)

Or as Mr. Msimang, a mine clerk, put it to members of parliament in 1918,

> Many Europeans do not understand these people. They do not understand that he lives a fairly high standard of living. (…) Most Europeans seem to think that these people are content with porridge, but you will find that they have quite a representative table: meat, tea, and so on. (Maseko 2000, 74-5)

Vis-à-vis the remainder of the black community, however, especially considering their very limited access to education, they enjoyed relative power and privilege and asserted themselves as leaders and spokespersons (Southall 2016, 27–29, 33). The small group of educated and/or professional blacks of the early

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[23] For a discussion of the varied use of these terms and their nuances in studies of African societies, see Lentz 2015.

twentieth century was thus also at the forefront of early political representation and advocacy.

However, a steady trend of restricting ownership and opportunities for black Africans got underway when the colonial administration imposed the Natives Land Act in 1913. This law relegated black people to so-called reserves (later called "*bantustans*" or "homelands"): rural areas designated for black African populations to reside and develop themselves "freely," which were consequently neglected by the government (Sizwe 1979; Southall 1980; Marais 2011). Under the banner of "re-tribalization," from 1927 the South African government aimed to structure and manage the reserves via chiefs and headmen, whose customary judicial powers and authority over land were formalized and fortified. Additionally, a small stratum of professionals in public service, mostly nurses, teachers and law enforcers, developed via the missionary institutions and infrastructure of the first half of the century. But while their training and employment set them apart from the majority of the rural population in standing and lifestyle, their careers and remuneration remained limited also (Maseko 2000, 72–5; cf. Hull 2017).[24] Thus restraining access to land, capital and opportunity in general for the majority of the blacks, the reserves ensured a steady supply of cheap black labor for the mining industries in the first half of the twentieth century. In this migrant labor system, the black workers were forced to reside in the homelands and their stay in the urban areas was formally temporary. But as a result of ongoing industrialization, many of them became more or less permanent city residents.

Aiming to curb black urbanization, subsequent governments increasingly restricted economic activities for blacks in urban areas. Through landmark segregationist legislation in 1923 and 1945,[25] black African residence, property ownership and business activities in the urban areas were allowed only where it served the needs of black workers. "As a result…the black entrepreneurial class [in the urban areas—LdC] was, for the most part, limited to artisans, taxi owners, retailers, eating house or kiosk owners, barbers, carpenters, dressmakers, butchers, fruit and vegetable hawkers, woodsellers and coal merchants, and in 1936 they numbered some 1636 traders," Maseko (2000, 81-2) writes (see also Hart 1972). In other words, black urban entrepreneurship remained mostly constricted to petty trading, with large-scale business development preserved forwhites. From 1948, when the National Party came to power, formal apartheid developed. More repressive applications of the

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[24] See Hull (2017) for an ethnographic case study of rural nurses' professional lives and aspirations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

[25] Resp. the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act and the 1945 Native Urban Areas Consolidation Act.

infamous pass laws that illegalized the movement of blacks beyond designated times and purposes, and of the "colour bars" that foreclosed their advancement in skilled occupations followed (Sizwe 1979; Marais 2011). In 1958, a resolution was passed that "oppos[ed] outright the granting of trading licenses to blacks in townships [black urban areas]" (Maseko 2000, 82). In addition, in line with the increasingly pronounced, racist ideology of "separate development," the government rolled out a separate educational curriculum for black Africans called "Bantu education" in the homelands from 1954. A few years later, tertiary institutions also became formally segregated, with black students no longer allowed at white universities, and "tribal colleges" were set up for black university students instead. Both Bantu schools and the black colleges were notoriously under-resourced.[26] These cumulative exclusions from quality educational facilities, professional careers and profitable trade in the urban hubs of the economy thus severely restricted the possibilities for meaningful career development and business success for most non-white South Africans (Southall 1980, 2016; Marais 2011).

At the same time as it clamped down on business development in urban areas, however, the government came to formally encourage some professionalization and entrepreneurship in the homelands. As part of attempts to persuade black entrepreneurs to relocate to the homelands, funds from the existing national Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), as well as targeted new funding agencies, were able to provide impetus to black business and industry in and around the homelands, away from the established, following a commission's advice to the government to "[foster] the growth of a black business class" to counter the negligence of the rural economies in previous decades (Maseko 2000, 83). This corporation "gave black business people advice and training, and provided loans … enabling them to start new businesses or to improve existing ones" (83). Other development corporations followed in the 1960s and 1970s (Southall 1980, 2016, 36; see also Hart 1972).

In their missions and layout, these homeland investment corporations under apartheid strangely resembled present-day business incubators operating under

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[26] See https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/bantu-education-and-racist-compartmentalizing-education (accessed 2 July 2021). Cf. Southall (2016, 109), referring to the last decades of apartheid: "[An educational] market was not entirely absent under apartheid. Black parents who could afford to do so might send their children to schools outside the country … or, ironically, to the bantustans, … where, despite the severe damage done by Bantu Education, a network of elite, former mission schools continued to enjoy relative prestige and function reasonably well at a time when many township schools had descended into chaos."

Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)[27] policies: They were aimed at developing enterprises through training and loans, and "could also purchase existing white- or Asian-owned undertakings and transfer them to black dealers" (Maseko 2000, 83–4). By 1975, the Xhosa Development Corporation (XDC), for example,

> had transferred 562 out of 653 formerly white-owned trading stations in the Transkei to Blacks. For example, by the late 1970s, out of the 50 hotels operating in the Transkei 29 were under Black management; out of 32 garages and filling stations 18 had been transferred to Blacks, and 5 were under Black management. (Mabandla 2013, 34)

However, most homeland development corporations were led by white directors, provided loans meagerly and under strict conditions only, and eventually held a large number of enterprises in trust, instead of allowing black ownership. As such, they were assessed critically even by the traditional leaders who had vested interests in them (Maseko 2000, 86–7; Southall 1980). Mabandla (2013) elucidates: "Hart (1972) argues that recipients of XDC loans were carefully screened. Apart from their high educational credentials, they had to have clean police records. This ruled out many political opponents of the ruling class. Socio-economic success thus required political collaboration or, at least, acceptance" (34). Thus, only a select group of homelands managers and entrepreneurs benefited from these policies and institutions, and they overlapped in part with existing leadership.

As the opposition to apartheid grew, suspicions among the black population at large of the intertwinement of black business success and government did too. Over time, the practice of indirect rule via traditional leaders had been further entrenched and traditional leaders had become increasingly incorporated into apartheid rule, notwithstanding the notable exceptions of resistant chiefs. "[W]hile [the chiefs] could hope to bring benefits to their peoples by cooperating with government, they were simultaneously elevated in stature and as a class and co-opted as agents of state control" (Southall and Kropiwnicki 2003, 53). Meanwhile, the majority of the rural populations were deprived of resources and opportunities for advancement. As a result, the chiefs' positions were contentious, and when the resistance against apartheid gained momentum, they were increasingly seen as collaborators and sell-outs (53, cf. Beall and Ngonyama 2009). Similarly, those few black businessmen who were successful were increasingly regarded as disloyal to the liberation movement

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[27] Black Economic Empowerment, or BEE, is a policy framework of affirmative action aimed at redressing structural historical economic inequalities in South Africa, first launched in 2003. In 2007, an amended version called Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment, or BBBEE, followed. Following vernacular, I use the acronym BEE to refer to the entire body of legislation and subsequent amendments of BEE and BBBEE.

and condemned by activists as participants in apartheid structures (Maseko 2000, 137–8).

Still, it was also the case that representatives of black business had long been at the forefront of political pressure against the racialized economic restrictions. They had lobbied for change from the beginning of the twentieth century. The early political organization of blacks had arisen largely in response to the needs and desires to improve economic conditions and opportunities to earn a better living. So, too, argues Maseko, was the rise of the ANC constituted by a concern for black business development. Initially representing a small black intellectual and business elite, soon the ANC worked to "conceive a more broad-based programme for the economic advancement of black people," with their 1927 program emphasizing better conditions and more freedom in commercial trade and industry for blacks (Maseko 2000, 98–100). Many an ANC leader took part in the formation of "black entrepreneurial organizations" in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Black Traders' Association (1925, from 1931 called Orange Free State Traders' Association), the Bantu Business League (1932) and the African Business League (1938), and many of them were business owners themselves (Maseko 2000, 97–109). In this sense, black business interests and a vision of free black enterprise had been part and parcel of the struggle against apartheid from the 1920s onwards.

This double-edged position of black business and its dubious public image under segregationist governance are illustrated clearly by the history of the African Chamber of Commerce, later the National African Federation Chamber of Commerce (NAFCOC). In the context of growing black consciousness in the middle of the century, a number of Johannesburg based traders' associations formed the African Chamber of Commerce in 1955, which turned into NAFCOC in the 1960s and became the "*de facto…* spokesman of African business" vis-à-vis the government (Southall 1980, 49; Maseko 2000, 117–43). Initially, Nafcoc organized bulk-buying schemes for black traders, but later it focused on the removal of restrictions for African enterprise, mobilization of financial resources "for the advancement of African entrepreneurs," and on getting concessions from the government (48, 49). The initiatives they launched from an ideology of self-upliftment—a.o. the African Bank of South Africa, an insurance scheme, a construction company and a supermarket group called "Black Chain" (55)—awkwardly played into the government's separate development policies. With the intensification of both organized resistance against apartheid and its repression into the 1970s, NAFCOC increasingly walked a tightrope, visible particularly in their responses to proposals for white-black partnerships. In short,

> African traders ha[d] fought an incessant rearguard action against the steady elimination of their rights in the townships of 'white' South Africa, and [...] sought to induce the lifting of the restrictions imposed upon them either by appeal to the spirit of 'free enterprise' or – paradoxically – by reference to the 'morality' of Separate Development whereby they should be offered protection against the incursions of white commerce to black areas. (Southall 1980, 48; see also Maseko 2000, 96)

In the case of NAFCOC, while they were successful in bettering conditions and opening up some real opportunities for black business, they too became widely condemned as collaborating with apartheid structures, to the point of violent, physical attacks on members' homes and bodies (137).

But in response to an increasing need for skilled laborers and managers as well as mounting political resistance, from the middle of the 1970s the government started to reform apartheid. Slowly but surely, some of the restrictions on economic participation for non-whites were loosened, and opportunities for higher education, professional training and skilled employment for black South Africans increased somewhat. As a consequence, the number of black children in school increased dramatically, and access to (white) higher education improved also. And, "[a]lthough still concentrated in the law, medicine, teaching and nursing, the African middle class increasingly began to penetrate the corporate sector as managers" (Southall 2014, 302). With the relaxation of influx control on urban areas from the end of the 1970s, black graduates and professionals were allowed to find employment in (white) urban areas, too, in addition to the homelands. This made possible some level of corporate career for a still limited group of educated blacks, while the barriers to ownership and finance that remained in place continued to restrain private enterprises. The increase in upwardly mobile black South Africans before the end of formal apartheid was, to a large extent, rooted in interlinked educational and employment trajectories. This reality continues to be reflected in common perceptions about higher education as the sine qua non of upward mobility in South Africa (Southall 2016, 97, 105; Telzak 2014, 17, 26).

With regard to black entrepreneurship, the reforms represented both progress and stagnation. From 1976, in direct response to meetings with NAFCOC, and with the Soweto uprising[28] as a catalyst, the government increasingly granted

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[28] The Soweto uprising was "a series of demonstrations and protests led by black school children in South Africa under apartheid that began on the morning of 16 June 1976" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soweto_uprising, accessed 28 June 2021). For a discussion of the way it has become an iconic historical moment for South Africans, see Baines (2007).

black businesses more legislative leniency, opportunities to trade in urban areas, and access to government contracts (Maseko 2000, 163–7, 174). In the wake of the reforms, there was a rise in formal recognition and assistance of black business. Both black and white business leaders showed pragmatism in their efforts to get better access to each other's areas (and thus markets), and they regularly worked together (Southall 1980, 2004, 2014; Maseko 2000, 155–193). In 1980, the Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) was launched by government and a majority of white shareholders with the overt aim of furthering a black business class through the provision of loans, infrastructure and training to black entrepreneurs in urban areas, although its track record of actual assistance to black-owned businesses remained unimpressive, much like the former homeland development corporations (Maseko 2000, 203–6). Also, various university-based as well as private sector initiatives were launched to address the historical backlog in the knowledge and skills of business and management among black entrepreneurs (200),[29] and magazines started publishing lists of "blacks business achievers" (207). But despite these new forms of recognition and (supposed) opportunities for black entrepreneurs, legal limits to acquisition and the kind of scaling that would enable serious competition with white-owned business remained in place (Randall 1996; Southall 2004, cf. Kekana 1990).[30]

Despite the continued structural disadvantages, in the last decades of apartheid the political position and public profile of the black business elite strengthened. Tightening its relationship with the ANC and becoming more outspoken against apartheid, NAFCOC redeemed itself somewhat as a representative of black economic interests. Fabcos and the Black Management Forum (BMF), respectively an alternative black business organization and a representative body of black higher professionals, successfully introduced an ideology of "black economic empowerment" to the political arena (Maseko 2000, 230). Aligned with the liberation movement on the one hand, but also increasingly backed by white capital on the other, the black business leaders of late apartheid were wedged in between the main power brokers of the 1990s and 2000s and thus able to leave their mark on the politics and policies in the transition. Interestingly, several entrepreneurs who managed to build up successful

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[29] Both the SBDC and several of these training initiatives still exist today and occupy important positions in the current entrepreneurial "ecosystem" in Johannesburg.

[30] Maseko (2000) contends that this led to a pattern among black entrepreneurs of horizontal growth, i.e., the establishment of multiple businesses in various sectors and industries. This diversification approach to risk and opportunity continues today. It is common for young entrepreneurs to have multiple businesses running alongside each other in highly varying sectors—a topic of contention in present-day business incubators that mostly teach and demand a full focus on one business.

businesses in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Richard Maponya (also a NAFCOC member),[31] gained not only more wealth but also national fame in the following decades (Southall 2016, 68–70). So, both collectively and individually, representatives of black business came closer to the center of public power.

In sum, although obviously and intentionally thwarted, entrepreneurship was part of black upward mobility throughout the twentieth century in South Africa, and business success was possible for a select group of people. A small but powerful group of black businesspeople operated with success in the second half of the twentieth century, and, from the late 1970s, with increasing leeway. Paradoxically, the very policies and support structures intended to curtail the economic development and enfranchisement of black people under apartheid produced opportunities for some to become successful businessmen. Indeed, black entrepreneurship has long been in the making, ironically both as part of an oppressive regime and as part of emancipatory efforts. The "investment corporations" of the time are awkward examples of the way black business was promoted in racist policies. Throughout this history, the social position and perception of black elite and middle-income groups generally, and businesspeople in particular, was ambivalent: they were both forerunners in the representation of black interests and beneficiaries or even aides of repressive regimes. The longstanding intertwinement of a black business elite with the establishment has also long aroused both distrust and admiration regarding black entrepreneurial success.

Business in transition: from entrepreneurship to entrepreneurialism

"I was in business before it was called entrepreneurship," said Mansa—a participant in one of Johannesburg's start-up hubs. We were discussing the very apparent recent rise in the popularity of entrepreneurship in South Africa, which he considered a hype: "When I was growing up everybody wanted to be a rapper. Now they want to be an entrepreneur." Seemingly, over the last decades something changed with regard to the perception of entrepreneurship as a career in South Africa.

South Africa's transition to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s took place in a global context in which private enterprise became widely regarded as the driver of economic growth and was advocated as such by global institutions. In dire need of foreign investments and reintegration into the world economy after a period of anti-apartheid sanctions, the leaders of the transition in South

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[31] Born and raised in South Africa's most well-known black urban township, Soweto, Maponya's rise to business power and fame reached a symbolic apex with the opening of his long-dreamt Maponya Mall in Soweto in 2007, the first large, modern shopping mall in the area (see https://maponyamall.co.za (accessed 7 July 2023).

Africa abided by this doctrine and set out to liberalize the economy. However, as the previous section has shown, black business and entrepreneurial training and support have a longer and more complex history in South Africa than an analysis based on the proliferation of global neoliberalism may suggest. Both building on this history and aided by the spirit of the time, existing business interests and the idea of enterprise as a basis for economic development have been more impactful in South Africa's transition era (and beyond) than accounts of the rise of the labor unions may imply.

When the ANC formally took over power, one of the major questions was how to redesign the economy to redress racialized inequalities. A small number of large, white-owned, corporate conglomerates controlled the majority of the economy, as the main capital holders in the country had both merged and diversified their business activities in the years prior to the transition. The ANC wanted racial barriers to economic opportunities lifted and wealth redistributed, but there was also a need and ample internal pressure to keep big business on board. Together with the pressures from global institutions such as the IMF to liberalize the economy, the ANC adopted "market-friendly policies" that gave existing corporations and capital much scope (Southall 2016, 85–87). At the same time, private business was increasingly promoted by subsequent democratic governments as the basis for growth, thus aligning South Africa's transformation policies with globally dominant neoliberal discourse and policy trends. In 1993, a World Bank survey report was optimistic about the potential of small black-owned businesses in South Africa, and suggested their deregulation as the way to restore the economy and achieve maximum potential. It identified a lack of both skills and access to capital, a highly competitive market, and an unstable business environment as the main constraints to be addressed (Riley 1993). From the mid-1990s, enterprise development was an explicit policy objective (Masutha 2013; Masutha and Rogerson 2014a and b). Under the overall strategy of the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP), in 1995, the newly democratic South African government published a white paper entitled "National Strategy for the Development and Promotion of Small Business in South Africa," which presented the private sector as "the real engine of sustainable and equitable growth in this country" (dti 1995). In particular, it defined small business as "an important vehicle to address the challenges of job creation, economic growth and equity." In 1996, the Growth, Employment And Redistribution strategy, or GEAR, was attuned even more explicitly to corporate interests and revealed marked similarities to the "Growth for All" document produced by a conglomerate of South Africa's largest companies at the time (Ponte, Roberts, and Van Sittert 2007, 6). Consequently, under the trope of an "African renaissance," Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor as president, linked growth

through business to an ideology of pan-Africanism (e.g. Ahluwalia 2002). Overall, throughout the transition into the early 2000s, there was a strong government-led promotion of the principle of market rule and the power of private business (Ngcamu 2002, 2–3). And so, in the first years of democracy, both the interests of South Africa's large, established corporations and the notion of development through enterprise had a strong presence in policy-making.

From the start of democratic rule, "business incubation" was considered a tool for economic growth and against unemployment. Already in the 1995 white paper, incubation was given its own paragraph, with incubators or "hives" defined as "industrial start-up premises" at affordable rents. The paper suggested setting up public and private support programs for their growth, as well as increasing the impact of existing initiatives such as those of the Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) (dti 1995, par. 4.6.2). In the same year, the SBDC initiated the "hives of industry," which provided physical spaces and entrepreneurial infrastructure such as bookkeeping for new businesses in townships (Masutha and Rogerson 2014a, 144; Buys and Mbewana 2007). In 2000, a new phase was ushered in by the Godisa Trust program, a large enterprise development program carried by NGOs, private corporations and government alike, and funded through a partnership of several South African ministries and the European Union. Bringing together these various stakeholders, it marked a "phase in which South Africa began to consolidate its business incubation efforts" (Masutha and Rogerson 2014a, 145). With the establishment of the national Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) in 2004 and the increasing provision of special funds to assist starting entrepreneurs, South Africa appeared to be making continuous efforts to enable more entrepreneurship.

In the meantime, to tackle the skewed racial distribution of capital and opportunities, deals were made between public and private parties, that ensured that "state institutions such as the IDC [Industrial Development Corporation], private banks and the financial wings of the [white-owned business] conglomerates transferred assets … to carefully selected blacks and appointed them to boards" (Southall 2016, 87). These practices of transferring assets to black owners and appointing black directors and board members became known and institutionalized as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy. From the start, the execution of BEE deals depended on ANC initiative and on individuals, which invoked widespread criticism of BEE as a form of cronyism, and as effecting a black corporate elite rather than broadly shared empowerment (Southall 2016; see also Marais 2011, 140–44). To leverage these critiques, the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (BBBEE) of 2003 introduced the obligation for corporations to record their contribution to

various elements of economic transformation and corresponding tax requirements (Patel and Graham 2012). Eligibility for dealing with government or parastatals is now based on a corporation's BBBEE rating via a government issued "scorecard." Still, "resistance by large corporations [and] a lack of access to capital among would-be black purchasers" (Southall 2016, 89) have remained, along with public and scholarly skepticism about the shared impact of these policies (90; Southall 2004; Ponte, Roberts, and Van Sittert 2007; Patel and Graham 2012; Tangri and Southall 2008; Sartorius and Botha 2008). In fact, Southall (2016) notes, the entanglement of the ANC-led state and the corporate world is such that "[i]t has become commonplace for ANC deployees to leave the public service or parastatals either to enter existing businesses, or to start up on their own, secure in the knowledge that their contacts in the state will bring appropriate reward in the name of empowerment" (93). Those securing government concessions through playing the field of political-economic linkages are known—and dismissed—as "tenderpreneurs" (Southall 2016, 131; see also Scharrer, O'Kane, and Kroeker 2018, 14–15)). In addition, when white-owned corporations appoint black executives without actually handing over access to power or capital to optimize their BBBEE score, it is known as "fronting" (see also Maseko 2000, 226). The increase in corruption scandals under Mbeki's successor Zuma from 2009 onwards have revealed the ongoing entanglement of corporate and state interests. These apparent displays of self-centeredness and disloyalty to the ideals of "the struggle" and of transformation have further damaged the image of black business.

However, over the last decade, the idea of small business and entrepreneurship as the foundation for development and transformation has gained public prominence and popularity, complementing and contrasting with the continued suspicion of success in business. In government policies and rhetoric, enterprise development is increasingly presented as the driver of job creation, and the spirit of entrepreneurship as the key to new economic energy and emancipation. In 2012, the National Development Plan 2030 stated that 90% of jobs created in South Africa between 1998 and 2005 were in new small businesses, and that further and better state efforts to stimulate enterprise development were needed, especially skills training in schools and special colleges (140–44). Since 2014, South Africa has a Department of Small Business Development, with a vision for "[a] radically transformed economy through integrated and effective enterprise development and entrepreneurship promotion."[32] In addition, new funds for entrepreneurs have been established,

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[32] http://www.dsbd.gov.za/ (accessed 14 July 2021).

often in collaboration with private corporations or parastatals.[33] In 2014, Minister of Small Business Lindiwe Zulu announced that South Africa should become a "nation of entrepreneurs," that entrepreneurship should be a "viable career path," and that those who seize on business opportunities "create a better life for themselves and their fellow citizens" (Zulu 2014). In 2018, Cyril Ramaphosa, a former anti-apartheid activist and labor union leader who became a wealthy businessman under early BEE, succeeded Jacob Zuma as president of the ANC and the country. During his tenure he has been outspoken about the benefits of business and has repeatedly urged South Africans to take up entrepreneurship, calling small business owners "warriors."[34] In popular media, entrepreneurship is discussed on a daily basis, in radio and TV shows devoted to business opportunities and entrepreneurial success stories, e.g., "Cape Talk"[35] "My Money and Me," "KayaBizz"[36] or "Entrepreneurship Friday."[37] Not only targeted magazines such as *Entrepreneur South Africa* and *Kickstart* but also reports and interviews in more generic glossies such as *Destiny* and *Blaque* give further presence and cultural legitimacy to entrepreneurship as a career[38] Thus, alongside the widespread public suspicions of business successes under BEE, a celebratory current that affirms the power of entrepreneurship to change the economy as well as personal lives has arisen. Moreover, an entire industry has developed around entrepreneurial training and support.

The emergence of this encouraging discourse and the visible boom of hubs and incubators in South Africa reflects, in part, a global trend in which both funds and formats for entrepreneurial support are finding their way across the globe. For example, over the last twenty years, World Bank programs such as InfoDev, several United Nations programs, and the European Commission have helped to set up entrepreneurial networks, business incubators and support centers for business incubators. These parties have also collected and redistributed knowledge on effective incubation in the forms of handbooks, toolkits,

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[33] See, for example, https://www.enca.com/south-africa/development-fund-benefit-black-entrepreneurs (accessed 14 July 2021).

[34] See https://www.enca.com/business/ramaphosa-talks-entrepreneurship-saic2019 (accessed 17 June 2023).

[35] See, for example, http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/14525/how-to-make-south-africa-a-thriving-space-for-entrepreneurs (accessed 17 June 2023).

[36] See http://themediaonline.co.za/2015/03/radio-station-campaigns-to-encourage-entrepreneurship/ (accessed 17 June 2023).

[37] See for example https://www.enca.com/videos/enca-entrepreneurship-friday-28-may-2021 (accessed 17 June 2023).

[38] See for example www.entrepreneurmag.co.za and www.destinyconnect.com/category/entrepreneur/ (accessed 17 June 2023).

benchmark studies and evaluation reports,[39] which consistently frame incubators as important and impactful:

Although [failure] rates remain controversial it's broadly accepted that incubation programmes can increase survival rates dramatically when programmes are well-run and start-ups pay for services: "Our experience has shown a success rate of 75-81 percent for companies participating in our incubation programmes," says Jill Sawyers, of The Innovation Hub in South Africa. Similar results are found at the Bandwidth Barn in Cape Town (started in 2000) with a tenant success rate of 65%: "In the past five years, of the 142 businesses that have passed through our doors, 111 of them are still in operation. This overall success rate is astonishing considering that most companies come to the Barn with little more than a laptop and a dream." (Odette Potter, general manager of the UUNET Bandwidth Barn) (Davies 2009, 6).

Scholarly literature on the question of the effectiveness of business incubation has been limited, yet the World Bank, OECD, national governments, and incubators themselves tend to agree that it works (Masutha and Rogerson 2014a and b; Friederici 2018). The tenacious optimism that surrounds incubators in particular and entrepreneurialism in general is striking in light of the widely acknowledged high rates of failure. Although most start-ups fail, starting up remains highly recommended by authoritative institutions from transnational to local levels. In the 2014 South Africa Business Incubator Establishment Handbook, for example, the Department of Trade and Industry writes:

> Several studies in South Africa have shown a high mortality rate among SMEs in their first two to five years of trading, ranging from 62% to 80%. Government has designed programmes and policies to mitigate this mortality …. One such programme is business incubation, of which the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] was happy to become a partner. The programme is designed to help develop entrepreneurial skills and create new businesses. The first step of this collaboration was the development of business incubator guidelines on how to establish and manage an incubator to assist in reducing the early stage failure

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[39] See: the 1999 OECD report "Business Incubation—International Case Studies"; The World Bank's recently published "Business Incubation Toolkit"; The European Commission's report on the "Benchmarking of Business Incubators"; The World Bank's 2002 incubators report; The World Bank's 2005 Global Network of Business Incubators report, and the *info*Dev "Mixed-Use Incubator Handbook." (Davies 2009). See also online magazine *The Business Incubator* at https://issuu.com/incubationww (accessed 17 June 2023) for several global case studies.

rate associated with SMEs and increase the probability of their survival in the market (dti 2014, 6).

Incubators, in the handbook, are described as "vital to the health of the SME sector" in South Africa, "particularly since they focus on the root causes of early-stage business failure: poor business strategy and lack of access to finance. Still, there are not enough incubators in South Africa. (…) The country needs more incubators in more areas if the SME sector is going to reach its potential in driving job creation and economic growth. (dti 2014, 9). Both global and South African policymakers strongly affirm the ability of entrepreneurship to drive an economy, and the ability of incubators to drive entrepreneurship.

This staunch optimism with regard to entrepreneurship and the importance of incubators (and start-up hubs) has gained particular force on and for the African continent, as reflected in international development discourse and funding practices. Since the early 2000s, the trend of business incubation in Africa has been powered by varying assemblages of (trans)national and local governments, non-profit organizations and private business (Friederici 2016). For instance, the first government-initiated technology incubator in South Africa in the early 2000s, called SoftStart Technology Incubator, was sponsored by the European Union,[40] and between 2009 and 2010 the SoftStart Business and Technology Incubator was an official World Bank project for the African region.[41] In addition, various national governments began supporting entrepreneurial development as part of their foreign policies, as exemplified in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored program of "The Next Economy,"[42] the Dutch embassy's own "Orange Corners" incubation program, or the Swiss government funding of the international Seedstar pitching competition. In addition, corporations such as Microsoft, Google and IBM have started sponsoring African hubs and run their own entrepreneurial programs, using them also to test and push their products and recruit talented developers. Moreover, over the last ten years, the rise in incubation programs has been joined by a boom in start-up or innovation hubs.[43] Global hub brands such as Impact Hub, Global Entrepreneurship Network, Branson Center for Entrepreneurship, Meltwater Entrepreneurial School of Technology (MEST) and Fablab have set up hubs with co-working spaces that also run or host entrepreneurial programs in various African countries in the last decades, based on mission statements that foreground the development of the continent. Impact Hub, for example, explicitly aligns itself with UN development

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[40] Several incubators under the same name ran in Sweden from 1994 (Hyde 2008).

[41] See http://projects.World Bank.org/P112132/softstart-business-technology-incubator-sbti?lang=en (accessed 19 June 2018)

[42] See https://next-economy.com/en/pages/about (accessed 15 July 2021).

[43] For a discussion of what a hub is, see Toivonen and Friederici (2015).

policies,[44] and African hubs network organization AfriLabs is not only involved in the World Bank InfoDev Virtual Incubation project but also partners with Dutch development NGO Hivos, Microsoft4Africa, and the Rockefeller Foundation.[45] The recent proliferation of start-up hubs and business incubators in African contexts is thus spurred on by a variegated spectrum of actors in the field of (international) development.[46]

Perhaps partly due to the dominance of World Bank funds and discourse in international development, the set-up, the pedagogies and techniques deployed, and the underlying moralities of entrepreneurial programs reveal striking similarities across the globe. In spite of the variety of local contexts in which they operate and the variation in their target groups (youth, women, students, low-income households, technological innovators, creatives, etc.), hubs and incubators teach entrepreneurship as a way of being, over and above a way to generate an income. Their framing of entrepreneurship as a way to think, feel and do, and as a manifestation of an authentic self, both signals and reproduces a globalized culture of entrepreneurialism (Freeman 2014). Many entrepreneurial programs use selection mechanisms and a format of cumulative training modules from which participants can graduate. This school-like set-up echoes a new emphasis in international development on the teachability of (economic) success (Dolan and Rajak 2016). Associated, a notably moral discourse in which people are responsible not just to realize their own potential through entrepreneurship but (thereby) also the economic development of society dominates hubs, incubators and other entrepreneurial programs throughout the world (Dolan and Rajak 2016; McGee 2019; Steiner 2019; Di Giminiani 2016; DeHart 2010). As such, the proliferation of entrepreneurial programs aimed at cultivating entrepreneurial ways of being across the African

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[44] See https://impacthub.net/ (accessed 19 June 2018).

[45] See http://www.afrilabs.com/about-us/ (accessed 19 June 2018).

[46] The African hub and incubator trend is furthermore characterized by an emphasis on technological innovation. "Tech" entrepreneurship is receiving particular attention from international funders, both public and private, and both transnational and national governments. As Friederici (2018) writes, "High hopes have been invested in the continent's home-grown digital economy, envisioned to become an engine of rapid socioeconomic development and transformation" (193). For a more elaborate discussion of tech entrepreneurship and innovation hubs in African contexts, see also Atiase, Kolade, and Liedong (2020); Kelly and Firestone (2016); as well as http://blogs.World Bank.org/ic4d/importance-mapping-tech-hubs-africa-and-beyond and http://disrupt-africa.com/2016/03/niche-tech-hubs-to-boom-across-africa-in-2016/ (accessed 19 June 2018).

continent, and the concomitant expectations for their effect on economic development, clearly reflects international trends.

But as much as business incubation and innovation hubs are currently hyped and driven by a globalized, entrepreneurialist ideology, entrepreneurship training has been around for a while. Apart from the meager, apartheid-driven efforts of the homeland development corporations, Fabcos started training and counseling black entrepreneurs in South Africa in the 1970s. The reforms brought a new impetus to universities, banks, and non-governmental entities such as the Get Ahead Foundation to offer business training and advice in the 1980s (Maseko 2000, 155–200). In short, the recent boom of business incubators and other enterprise development work in South Africa connects a longer history of business development under apartheid and in the transition to democracy to a recent trend of globalized entrepreneurialism.

Post-transition expectations and realities

The post-transition era has been marked by an iterative mix of high hopes for economic transformation and their frustrations. In the first few years of democratic rule, the government's strategy of economic liberalization resulted in capital flight through the large corporate conglomerates that were eager to globalize after years of sanctions. This forestalled investments in domestic industries and the economic growth that was needed to realize more equitable employment and redistribution. In Marais' (2011) words, "[a]s government eased the sluice gates open, vast wealth was transferred out of the country. Much of it had been amassed with the labour of South African workers and by extracting mineral resources from the country's soil" (125). Meanwhile, the promises of grand-scale improvements of the lives of those very workers and the unemployed through the provision of better housing, sanitation and other infrastructure were only half-realized. The felt injustices of persistent inequalities sparked waves of so-called service delivery protests, mainly in poorer areas and by unemployed youth (e.g., Alexander 2010), as well as strikes by workers and professionals in various sectors ranging from construction to teaching, that continue today.

But in the early 2000s, the economy started to grow. However, it was a relatively jobless growth, based mainly on an expansion of the finance sector in the wake of global financialization and on credit-based consumption at the expense of manufacturing and production (Marais 2011; Hull and James 2012; Makhulu 2012b). With the broadening of eligibility for social grants in this same period, the number of welfare dependents started growing rapidly (Marais 2011, 238–9; see also Ferguson 2015) At the same time, access to credit and new career opportunities, mostly in public service, led to increasingly visible consumerist

lifestyles ("unabashed buoyancy on display" (Marais 2011, 123)) and a growth in the number of black, urban professionals with high and middle incomes. In both South African and global reports, these two trends became conflated, so the initial celebration of the rise of a "new" black middle class was soon overshadowed by public contention about debt-based consumerism and the lack of redistribution of the new wealth. In short, "[t]he accession of Black South Africans to th[e South African middle-class] dream was at once celebrated and contested" (Iqani 2017, 8). Echoing the suspicions of old, the loyalty of newly upward black people to the liberation struggle was doubted in critiques of their arguably "Western" lifestyle and consumerism. "Some extremely vicious attacks on the 'new values' of the Black middle class came from Black commentators, who rooted their critiques in a charge of having 'sold out' on the liberation struggle" (10–13; see also de Coninck 2018). These public discussions of the "new" black middle class ran parallel to critical appraisals of the limited effects of BEE policies, and reports of government corruption. The apparent emergence of a small group of newly wealthy thus added to the mounting frustrations with the slow pace of the promised change for the majority of South Africans. Those with (perceived) access to new opportunities and means have thus been regarded ambivalently as embodying the possibility of its realization but also as beneficiaries of the corruption and the reproduction of apartheid structures that stand in its way.

The economic growth of the early 2000s slackened dramatically in the following years, resulting in a formal recession in 2008/9 (and again in 2018, and in 2019), with the gap between rich and poor worsening rather than improving. Unemployment figures also slowly but steadily continued to rise. As much as formal employment in official rhetoric remained a "blessed world" (Marais 2011, 183–84), it did not necessarily deliver the emancipation, social security or rise in living standard it promised (Barchiesi 2008, see also 2009, 2011; Nattrass and Seekings 2013; Makhulu 2016). The global flexibilization of labor and the volatility of the South African economy have meant that even for those with jobs and in middle-income professions, economic instability has dominated (Southall 2016; Makhulu 2012b; also Krige 2015). In addition, black professionals have continued to experience alienation based on racialized exclusions in the workplace, for example, with regard not only to remuneration (Krige 2015, 112–13) but also to "influence and genuine intermingling in the workplace" (Modisha 2008, 121; see also Southall 2016, 132–36; Dunne and Bosch 2015). Giving more complexity, Elizabeth Hull's ethnographic analyses of nursing professionals in a former homeland area (2017, 2020) show how the relation between professionals and the public or semi-public institutions that employ them in South Africa have historically been ambiguous, both in terms of loyalties and material security. In brief,

> [d]uring apartheid, the professionalization of Africans took place in the homelands, where racist restrictions on their employment were removed. Critics often dismissed them as the beneficiaries of the corrupt project of separate development. Today, public administrations are entangled with those of clientelism inherited from this earlier period of homeland politics (Chipkin and Meny-Gibert 2012). (Hull 2020, 549)

Now exacerbated by fiscal austerity, she emphasizes "the growing precarity faced by [the middle classes] and the feelings of ambivalence that pervade many aspects of life, from professional commitments to political allegiance" (562). Both as a source of positive identification and income, professional careers are thus commonly unstable, and most professionals historically have diversified sources of income, too.

Most obviously under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki from 1999, stimulating the growth of the black middle class has been a formal government focus (e.g., Southall 2016, 2019; Iqani 2017). As a result of new policies, opportunities for careers and lifestyles opened up to many people formerly denied them. As Deborah James accordingly (2015) points out, "the state helped to forge the 'new middle class' by employing its members in the public service and through affirmative action policies, [and] it also encouraged its rise by liberalizing credit" (15). In public discussions, the new social mobility this made possible was on the one hand identified as a sign of positive change, with members of the new black middle class considered the harbingers of further change. But soon enough, the distribution of the economic opportunities across the population and the sustainability of lifestyles based on new access to credit were questioned by scholars and other public commentators. In particular, the conspicuous consumption displayed by some (but also their labeling as "black diamonds" by marketeers), and apparently meteoric careers in business on the basis of government tenders, stirred considerable public contempt (Iqani 2017; Chevalier 2010; James 2015; Southall 2016). In tense public debates, the racial loyalties of newly privileged non-white South Africans were (and are) held up to the light (Rudwick 2010; Canham and Williams 2017; de Coninck 2018). Both as a political-economic category and as a source of subjective identification, "middle class" in South Africa is fraught with contestation.

The way trajectories towards a good life have changed in South Africa shows marked parallels to the way Jocelyn Lim Chua (2014) describes changes in Kerala, India. There, as in other postcolonial contexts, "access to education as the path to social mobility and progress has long defined ideas of the good life," yet "[d]evelopmentalist promises that education leads to social mobility no longer hold in any easy way" (16). In India, says Chua, the previous generations' pathways to social mobility and esteem, via higher education and government-

service, are increasingly becoming obsolete. Instead, the "[i]deas and practices of middleclassness are broadening," a process that "has offered critical opportunities for individuals and communities earlier underrepresented to forge claims for status, citizenship, and social power. This means that what defines middleclassness and who can rightfully claim it has also become a stridently contested field" (Chua 2014, 16–17). Both such widening claims and contestations are present in the South African context, too, with education one of the main arenas in which they play out.

Although access to higher education is still a main aspiration and means of distinction (Telzak 2014; Southall) on the one hand, on the other hand it has partly become exposed as a false emancipation. The infamous student protest movements of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall from 2015 have publicly problematized the notion of (higher) education as a roadmap for "success" in post-transition South Africa. This series of public protests and the ideological stances that emerged in its wake, known as "Fallism," revealed that even for those *with* access, higher education does not necessarily provide emancipation or freedom from racialized exclusion (see Badat 2015; Booysen 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Petzelberger 2018). This further unveiled the tenacious reproduction of apartheid structures and discourse also in places of their assumed transcendence, such as academia. With the increase of non-white students in reputable schools in the last two decades, the more subtle forms of discrimination that are part of the education system in South Africa have become more broadly felt, less accepted, and, thus, actively protested In their critique of the way "liberation through education" is widely believed to work (e.g., Disemelo 2015).[47] The Fallists also critiqued the ideal of the "rainbow nation"[48] that undergirded the political transition to democracy. They called into question the depth and the impact of the previous generation's efforts in the struggle for liberation, thus constituting something of a re-radicalization. In BBC news reports, it was called "a new black consciousness movement."[49] Playing into existing public contentions surrounding the lack of economic transformation, e.g., on the role of "white monopoly capital,"[50] these protests

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[47] See https://mg.co.za/article/2015-10-29-student-protests-are-about-much-more-than-just-feesmustfall/ by Katlego Disemelo, (accessed 10 February 2020).

[48] Coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and used by Nelson Mandela, the term "Rainbow Nation" has meanwhile been discredited in public discussions as denying ongoing racialized oppression; see, for example, https://theconversation.com/south-africas-rainbow-nation-is-a-myth-that-students-need-to-unlearn-66872, (accessed 8 December 2022).

[49] See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34570761, (accessed 30 June 2021).

[50] Discussion around this concept flared up under the Zuma government, while current president Cyril Ramaphosa in turn has tried to defuse it through an entrepreneurialist

further laid bare the incongruencies between post-apartheid expectations and realities: higher education and professional environments remain places of racialized exclusion, rather than beacons of progress.

These public protests and debates also point to other problems of middle-class(ing) life in post-transition South Africa beyond those of inequity of access to opportunities. They reveal that there is great uneasiness in being (perceived as) middle-class in post-transition South Africa. Public controversies over "black diamonds," "tenderpreneurs," or "coconuts"[51] have centrally questioned the ethics of these new middle-class members, their solidarity with workers and unemployed others, and their racial loyalties *tout court* (Chevalier 2015; Iqani 2017; de Coninck 2009). Khunou and Krige (2013) list several reasons for this, two of which I think are important here: One, there is a powerful apartheid legacy of underplaying class (and gender) differences "to create a united front against apartheid's racial oppression" (no page number) and two, positioning oneself as middle-class entails a balancing act between the stigmas of poverty and wealth (see also Khunou 2015; Modisha 2007). Canham and Williams (2017), in turn, note how upwardly mobile black South Africans are subject to a critical "'black' gaze" (alongside a '"white" one) that "seeks black uniformity and loyalty to black disadvantage or a black working-class identity" (,29). As I have described in some detail elsewhere (de Coninck 2018), public contentions over middle-class identities in the post-transition era have shifted from a focus on responsible economic behavior to the racial loyalty of those with access to spaces of privilege, reflecting the increased prominence of this "black gaze." The young Fallists' emphasis on the unfinished business of the struggle against apartheid, and their efforts to inscribe their lives into this history, indicate the continued relevance of the oppression and struggle narrative, and the normative power of the idea of racial unity, as well as of black elite suspicions (see Tafira 2016).

This reflects not only the lingering import of apartheid categories for self-understanding, but also of "the thorny and irresolvable question of increasing

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frame, see https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/watch-ramaphosa-disses-the-term-white-monopoly-capital-20181027 (accessed 1 April 2020). For a useful discussion of the politics and changes in the economic realities of "white monopoly capital" in South Africa, see Southall, 2017. "White Monopoly Capital: Good politics, Bad Sociology, Worse Economics." *The Conversation*, via http://theconversation.com/white-monopoly-capital-good-politics-bad-sociology-worse-economics-77338 (accessed 2 April 2020).

[51] "Coconuts" here refers to black South Africans who are deemed to act in arguably white ways. A much-discussed example of this is the use of a specific kind of English accent associated with private education. Coconuts is a derogatory term. See Rudwick (2010), De Coninck (2018), cf. Ngcobo (2008).

inequality" that young professionals in South Africa contend with (James 2019, 46). Deborah James further notes how the neo-charismatic churches offer young professionals "a new language" to express and deal with the problem of how to "square their success with the failure of so many" (43). Krige (2015) in turn analyses the need for upwardly mobile black South Africans to "respond to growing criticisms of anti-social behaviour among the urban middle classes," but also to the responsibilities and obligations towards kin (105). His observations on the usage of particularly *spatial* metaphors in the way a Sowetan man legitimizes his social mobility points to the ways in which racial inequality in South Africa is tied up with a spatial ordering (e.g., township versus suburb), and how crossing class boundaries can be an "unsettling" experience both literally and figuratively (113). Geoffrey Modisha (2008) describes how black managers who moved to the cities and suburbs felt that in their rural or township home communities now "everyone seem[s] to look upon them as community leaders because they have resources," or "that they are regarded as wanting to be white" (136). Moreover, much effort goes into the management of kinship relationships across lifeworlds, both when "moving up" in the world, and when the material underpinnings of newfound middleclassness fall away again (Modisha 2006, 2008; see also Chipkin 2012; James 2015, 2019). Young professionals' and students' efforts to position and legitimize themselves thus reflect and respond to a situation of increased opportunities for prosperity and intra-racial stratification alongside increasing precariousness, poverty and dependency.

For various reasons, professional careers in formal employment do not sufficiently resolve the tensions of the predicament that this Janus-faced situation presents young South Africans with. Firstly, they often do not provide sufficient material security. Since the end of formal apartheid unemployment has risen and employment security has eroded steadily as a consequence of a mix of apartheid legacies, post-transition economic policies of liberalization, and global trends of labor flexibilization. Even though unemployment and job precarity has hit un- and low-skilled workers hardest, their effects are not limited to lower class milieus. Flexibilization of employment policies and automation have also made the positions of those with formal qualifications and access to opportunities for so-called "white-collar" and professional work less secure and more competitive (Southall 2016, 155–57). Employment in government service or in one of the labor unions tends to provide more security and better pay, and government has historically been the main route for black upward mobility. However, with increasing joblessness, salaries are ever further stretched among ever more dependents. As Elizabeth Hull (2017) shows, one nurse's salary maintaining an entire extended family is not uncommon (74). Thus, the material benefits of professional careers are very relative.

Secondly, professional employment is increasingly associated with both corruption and the reproduction of apartheid legacies. The close intertwinement of the ANC and the state has created what Southall calls a "party-state bourgeoisie," whose positions and careers are deeply dependent on political alliances (2016, 159–60) and who are thus associated with various forms of corruption (e.g., Bähre 2005). This has tainted the reputation of public service sector careers. With the 2015 protest movement as a catalyst, over the last decade it has thus become more recognized that trajectories of higher education and professional employment do not necessarily deliver emancipation, enfranchisement or a sense of belonging. As such it seems certain trajectories have become less attractive and less accepted for younger generations. As Mokgheti, a client of one of the incubators, told me about his previous career in sales, "At one point, a client asked me why I was still in the company, making those white guys rich." In line with the recurring public vitriol against "white monopoly capital" (e.g. Southall 2019, 203) such statements suggest that the trodden paths to a good life of a decent income and prestige via white-collar employment in government or the corporate sector are perceived by many to be spoiled.[52]

Thirdly, the historically established routes to middle-class status and privilege, like nursing and teaching, are increasingly characterized by "professional insecurity" (Hull 2020). Professional employment no longer delivers the status and prestige it once did and new ways of making money (more quickly), such as winning tenders or pyramid schemes have captured the public imagination. Moreover, professionals are subject to suspicions of anti-social accumulation in addition to the expectations and claims of kin and others who suspect their

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[52] The 2022 dispute between the Sekunjalo business empire and the banking industry, and the way it snowballed into a racism controversy illustrates this also. When investment corporation Sekunjalo Investments was accused of corruption, its financial service providers (several banks) cancelled their contracts. In defence, Sekunjalo referred to the systemic racism within the banking sector. This evolved into a larger protest movement under the banners of "Racist Banks Must Fall," - a reference to the 2015 student protest movements of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall - and "#BlackBusinessMatters," a reference to the global anti-black racism movement. Eventually, there have been reports of the ironic mobilization of "entrepreneurial youth" to protest "racist banks" on behalf of Sekunjalo. See https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/systemic-racism-iqbal-surve-and-sekunjalos-equality-court-interdict-addresses-bankings-double-standards-e27ac4de-d94e-4a11-b052-101ebc294884, and https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-03-11-jobless-youth-heading-to-parliament-unknowingly-join-sekunjalos-racistbanksmustfall-march/ (accessed 14 June 2023).

wealth (Hull 2017, 73-86; Krige 2012, James 2015). So, the problems of upward trajectories through professional employment—beyond limited access to these positions in the first place—include not being granted the former respectability, and an increase in claims on and suspicions of wealth.

Together, the tried and tested routes to middleclassness via higher education and professional employment no longer have a commonsensical allure. And even if they are still the *main* roads, they are no longer the only roads.

Conclusion

Both the concrete opportunities for and the ambivalent public discourse about the entrepreneurship of today—celebratory on the one hand, suspicious on the other—build on a long history of black entrepreneurship and its political relevance in South Africa. Contrary to a dominant historical narrative of black oppressed labor, upward mobility was possible—including through enterprise––for a small but significant minority, even under colonial and apartheid rule. However, given the racialized constraints to ownership and to access to capital and trading areas under apartheid, opportunities for the accumulation of wealth and status in business for black people were largely dependent on government assistance or white-owned capital. Therefore, business success has also long been dubious.

At the same time, corporate interests and a vision of (black) enterprise as an economic pillar have played decisive roles in the development of black political representation, notions of emancipation, and post-apartheid policies. From the onset of democracy in the middle of the 1990s, entrepreneurship training has been given new impetus in the name of economic development and historical redress. Aligning the story and interests of rebuilding a new South Africa to a global wave of faith in and funds for entrepreneurship-based development, over the last two decades, entrepreneurialism as a basis for transformation has taken hold in South African policies and public discourse. A proliferation of entrepreneurial development programs and material infrastructure now constitute a full-blown enterprise development sector.

With the transition to democracy also came new expectations and new possibilities for achievement, resulting in an increase in the number of non-white people in tertiary education and in well-paid careers. But the persistence of racialized inequality means the beneficiaries of these opportunities are also continually subject to contention. Beyond structural inequalities, public protests and debates over the realities of higher education and the responsibilities of those with new wealth have revealed some of the problems of achieving and maintaining a middle-class status. Young professionals are caught between

social pressures and personal desires for success, and declining options for legitimate ways to achieve it as professional employment is not only increasingly scarce and precarious, but also increasingly dubious. middleclassness is thus a fraught way of being.

The vanguard of emancipation on the one hand, the representation of corruptibility on the other. Throughout South Africa's recent history the perception of black people with access to education, professional careers and/or business deals has been ambivalent. Moreover, in post-transition South Africa, the trodden paths towards the good life, real and imagined, of higher education and formal employment, have lost their appeal. Young professionals are looking for ways to position and assert themselves. This provides the ground to understand the way young professionals today work to incorporate entrepreneurialism in their biographies (chapter 2), the emergence and relevance of the enterprise development sector in this process (chapter 3), and the quandaries of carving out an entrepreneurial life for oneself in contemporary South Africa (chapter 4).

CHAPTER

2

HANDLING ASPIRATIONAL LEGACIES: NARRATING ENTREPRENEURIAL LIVES

When I met Lesedi, she was in her early thirties, single, and lived in a cottage in the garden of a detached house with a pool in one of Johannesburg's northern suburbs. She was the middle child of a retired driver and a domestic worker and lived in a village a few hours from Johannesburg, along with her grandmother and several uncles, aunts and cousins. Although her parents' income had never been high, from the late 1970s they had been able to build their own house, had owned a car (and a motorcycle now and then), and had put their three children through high school. After high school, Lesedi had taken tertiary courses in IT and graphic design, and eventually found a job in theater production in Johannesburg. In four years, she had worked herself up to the position of head of design. Well-networked and known as the life of the party, she could have continued along this path. But a "depression" as a reaction to years of working hard, and, as she told me later, her calling as a *sangoma*,[53] took her back to her parents' and grandparents' village for several years. During that time, for a while she had considered "doing the village thing, being a village girl." But instead, she had returned to the city to pursue a career once more, an aspiration that developed into a decision to launch her own brand. As she explained it, "I am reinventing myself with this business thing. Because, after my daughter was stillborn, after that time I felt like, if in the future I will have children, I want to be able to say to my child: 'You can do it, because I did it!'" The weight of the historical promise of the transition to democracy and the persistence of high, racialized inequalities are two important ordering principles of life in South Africa. Together, they have produced longstanding expectations of a good life, the observable possibility of which widely inspires urges for upward mobility. For previous generations in South Africa, as in other colonial African societies, upward mobility and prestige was commonly achieved via education and careers as nurses, teachers and lower-level managers in government service (Southall 2016; Hull 2017).

As noted in the previous chapter, the so-called new black middle classes of the post-transition era are not wholly new. But the career outlooks and self-perceptions of today's young professionals are different from those of their parents and grandparents, whether or not they were educated professionals themselves. The prestige and material reward of such professions as nursing, teaching and clerking has strongly declined (Hull 2017), while the well-paying jobs in higher management suffer from a reputation of corruption (in government) or racism (the corporate sector) (Southall 2016), as noted in the previous chapter. Meanwhile, entrepreneurship is gaining a public profile both as a career path and as an idiom for self-understanding and -positioning.

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[53] Spiritual medium. For a better understanding of the work of sangomas and their social relevance, see, for example, Ashforth (2001, 2005); Nattrass (2005).

Aspirational statements of wanting to be one's "own boss" are common, even if they are not necessarily followed-up in practice.[54] In this chapter, I aim to investigate this new appeal of an entrepreneurial way of being in South Africa by unpacking young professionals' biographical narratives.

What people strive for in life reflects collective notions of what makes a good life and people's relative abilities to imagine and pursue it. In other words, to aspire is a cultural capacity (Appadurai 2004, 2013; see also Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2017). Such notions of a good life and of what makes success are part of intergenerational transfers as much as financial capital or access to social networks are. Young people inherit from previous generations expectations for achievements and imagined horizons of (im)possibility in addition to material resources (or lack thereof) such as funds for schooling, access to transport, or social connections. As Ratsebo, a graduate of the JBO program and one of the interviewees, put it, "there were already hopes for my life I knew nothing about. And it's about inheriting that." These aspirational inheritances reflect complex social histories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Chua 2014, 15; also Appadurai 2004, 2013). As part of these ongoing histories, notions and expectations of success and of the possibilities for its realization are constantly shifting and actively redefined with each generation, as various analyses of career trajectories in African contexts have shown (Behrends and Lentz 2012; Spronk 2021; James 2015, 2019; Steuer, Engeler and Macamo 2017; Kroeker 2018). As Whyte, Alber and

Figure 3 - A list of biographical details that one of the participants put together for me. Source: Lieve de Coninck

van der Geest (2008) remind us, "relationships [and] social forms and historical forces are prior to persons," while at the same time, "[m]embers of a generation are not surrendered to their cultural and societal position, but are able to use that position to bring about new ideas and practices and pursue their own interests within the historical circumstances in which they live" (3). In line with

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[54] The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor notes the reputation of entrepreneurship in SA is strong (Herrington, Kew, and Mwanga 2017).

the aforementioned studies, the stories of the young professionals in this chapter reveal how entrepreneurialism has become not only a meaningful, alternative career path but also a way to define oneself as part of a wider generational shift of aspirational horizons in post-transition South Africa.

Analyzing the appeal of entrepreneurialism in terms of aspirational histories and futures rather than through the conceptual lens of neoliberal subjectification helps better see this historical and cultural situatedness and changeability. Where Appadurai (2004, 2013) discusses aspirations as a matter of capacity relative to the variable access to resources for imagining and realizing particular versions of success, Gilbertson (2017) adds that the way people aspire, and to what, should also be thought of in terms of how they are *compelled* to aspire, and the consequences of their doing so. The young professionals I interviewed in Johannesburg placed a sense of aspirational compulsion at the heart of their life stories that was strikingly similar even if their starting locations in life had been different. In part, this echoed an entrepreurialist discourse of achievement: urgent statements of wanting to "add value" and to make "impact" with one's undertakings in life. But their narratives discussed equally extensively the power of intergenerational expectations of upward mobility, of kinship-based reciprocity and of apartheid legacies of racialized inequalities to urge them to achieve in particular ways. Zooming in on the way these intertwined aspects of the moral economy of their lifeworlds shaped their aspirations helps to illuminate how entrepreneurialism could become meaningful to them.

Their stories make clear that entrepreneurial aspirations do not develop in a straightforward or continuous manner, but emerge as a result of ample contention and active redefinitions of their lives. As noted, new achievers in South Africa have to position themselves in "a realm of social solidarity" (James 2015, 228) in which they are pulled in different directions. James (2015) describes how new entrants into professional careers wrestle with the tension between "acknowledging the need to reciprocate to relatives for the sacrifices they have made to enable [a] position of privilege in the first place" (231) and "new bids to acquire freedom and independence" (41)[55]. Chipkin (2012) understands this tension as one between the morality of kinship and "an ideology of *self-realisation*" (63). Providing some depth to black professionals' alleged and much critiqued "consumerism," he views their lifestyle choices as ways of "becoming free" and "becoming themselves" in the new dispensation of post-transition South Africa: "Moving out of the township, living in a cluster development or a mansion, for that matter, going to a multiracial school, driving

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[55] See also https://www.news24.com/News24/Change-of-fortune-Frugal-or-fragile-20150430 (accessed 21 February 2022).

an expensive car, going on holiday overseas or to Cape Town … are now new measures of blackness" (68). He thus understands such life choices as a function of a "moral economy of black freedom" (69) after apartheid. Building on these analyses, I want to expand our understanding of the way this moral economy of solidarity and freedom informs the lives of middle-classing South Africans. In addition to the way it impacts financial arrangements (James 2015; Bähre 2011), marriage (James 2017; see also Bähre 2020), housing choices (Chipkin 2012; Krige 2012; Heer 2018) or car ownership (Jeske 2017), I aim to show how it affects young professionals' aspirations and self-perceptions. These take shape as they reflexively grapple with the tensions inherent in this moral economy.

Below I present excerpts from the biographical narratives of a selection of participants in entrepreneurial programs with whom I conducted interviews about their career trajectories. These interviews were solicited performances of a particular kind: interviewees often told me they had never thought of their life trajectories or their entrepreneurship in this way before. So, as they teleologically told their life stories as leading to their entrepreneurship, or vice versa, as they traced their entrepreneurialism back to their upbringing, education, family structure or other biographical aspects, this did not reflect a factual unfolding of their lives, nor their usual thinking about entrepreneurship. Neither, however, did it merely echo a hegemonic neoliberal discourse, or reflect only the situation of the interview. Telling a story about oneself and one's life is necessarily a reflective act as it separates the narrator from the protagonist (Linde 1993, 120). As such, it inevitably entails an evaluation of that protagonist and the social world it inhabits and acts in: the way in which the narrator presents and frames the characters, including herself, and provides logic to their actions, reflects the norms and cultural logics of her lifeworld, as well as her relation to them (120–26). By telling me stories

Figure 4 - Participants in one of the programs reflect on "the journey". Source: Lieve de Coninck.

about themselves and their "entrepreneurial journeys,"[56] the young professionals thus revealed some of the parameters and incentives for a good life in contemporary South Africa, but also actively positioned themselves in relation to them. Their narratives, therefore, provide not only insight into the content of the moral economy in which they live, but also demonstrate its renegotiation.

The stories I present in this chapter come from interviews with four persons: Mansa, Tumelo, Bheki and Ratsebo. As a selection of first, second and third generation educated professionals from both rural and urban backgrounds, they represent some of the "variations in the forms of capital and networks" that result from the way "different sections of the middle-class may have had very different histories" (Donner 2017). Bheki and Mansa were born and raised in rural townships as the sons of low-skilled manual laborers, and were both the first in their family to go to university. Tumelo and Ratsebo grew up in rural and suburban areas, respectively as the daughter of an educated provincial government employee, and as the daughter of a neurologist and academic lecturer and granddaughter of former homeland teachers. Although gender is an obvious further social difference, it was striking that the biographical stories of the participants hardly reflected this. In the way in which young professionals told the history of their entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial self-understanding, aspects of gender remained implicit, while the lexicon of personality, ambition and responsibility dominated. I have chosen to use extensive quotes from their narratives not only as an attempt to share authorship with the people whose life experiences and cultural environment are the object of analysis but also because their reflexivity and insights illustrate the creative work of taking up entrepreneurialism.

In the following sections I present three recurrent elements in the interviewees' narratives: the expectations of achievement that critically defined their upbringing, the tensions and conflicts these caused for them, and the entrepreneurialist perspective they wrought on themselves and their lifeworld in relation to these expectations and tensions. As such, the stories below provide a window onto some of the quandaries of being young and aspirational in post-transition South Africa and how entrepreneurialism speaks to these.

Expectations

The young professionals I interviewed gave the expectations of (grand)parents for their success an explicit and central role in their stories. In South Africa, over the last few years, such expectations of and associated claims on those upwardly

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[56] For a discussion of metaphors of mobility as expressive of the experience of transformation in South Africa, see Lee (2009) and Krige (2015).

mobile have been publicly discussed in various media under the rubric of "black tax," a term that references the kind of kinship-based norms for redistribution that prevail in black communities and the realities of racialized poverty, which both concern white professionals arguably less (Krige 2015, 113; Magubane 2017; Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley 2019; Metelerkamp, Drimie, and Biggs 2019; Mhlongo 2019; cf. Seekings 2019). Signifying a range of practices, from full financial support to occasional assistance, these discussions of "black tax" make clear that it widely generates tensions between family members as well as inner conflicts (Mhlongo 2019, cf. Kroeker 2018).[57] Likewise, the young professionals placed the expectations of kin and community for their success and the tensions these sparked at the heart of their life stories. But unlike the terminology of "tax" suggests, their stories show how a complex historical legacy impacts self-perceptions, career decisions and kin relations beyond material claims and well before any material success.

Mansa, a friendly-looking young man with glasses, and the owner of an apparently successful business in cyber security, told me, "I am the person who is responsible for solving a specific x in the family". Born in the mid-1990s in a township in Mpumalanga province, he was the third of four children. His mother took care of the house and the children, and for some time ran a day care, while his father worked as a day laborer in the mines. With his older brother unemployed for the last ten years despite a degree in hospitality, his older sister a mother at a young age, and his youngest sister still in primary school, his parents had specific expectations for Mansa's life course: "I am more of…their hope. Hoping that you'll work out, because we've sent you, you studied, and you're doing good, and you're moving up, so you will just bring light to everyone …. So with me, they were hoping that it will be just a small trajectory, and then you'll work and then you'll be able to…hook up your brother and sister, and make the family a better environment, you will take it forward." Instead, by dropping out of university and into entrepreneurship Mansa had taken an unexpected route.

When I asked Mansa about his parents' thoughts on his career, Mansa said, "I think what they were hoping for, what they were hoping I'd become, I didn't become what they were hoping I'd become. They were hoping that they were going to burn their money at varsity and that I was going to work at this big corporation, and they'd live happily ever after. But there were turn [sic] of events. I was not happy." From the outset Mansa had felt that the university curriculum of his computer science degree did not relate to what was happening

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[57] Moreover, the origins of the realities it signifies and the term itself is contested: some see it as a problematic outgrowth of apartheid, others as a fundamental and positive element of (South) African culture and way of life (see Mhlongo 2019).

in "the industry" at all. An internship at a tech company had strengthened this feeling, as he saw that the programs and techniques that he was taught in university were very outdated. "So I got angry then, I got pissed, and I just saw so many mistakes that are happening, and they are far left behind and tech is moving at a rapid pace. And they're not even interested in catching up!" In his second year he registered his own business, and by the time it started "gaining traction," he decided to drop out of university, a moment he narrated in entrepreneurialist terms of finding his "why"[58]: "I was like you know what, flip, I can do this. I can do this! Oh flip, I have to go back to school again next year. Why should I go back to school? That was the question I asked, why should I do it. And, I didn't find my why to go back to school. I did find a why to continue pursuing business (…) So I had to write a letter."

Mansa wrote a letter to his parents, explaining his decision, making sure to mention the big names of some of his clients, and promising his parents to pay his own rent in a bid to reassure them. "In my letter I was like, this is what I'm doing guys, this is what I'm doing. And I had to disclose my finances as well, so that they can understand I'm making money, this is how much I'm making, and I'm hoping to do one two three, here's my vision, I want to build a business, I'm an entrepreneur, and all of that." Upon reading the letter, his father said: "As long as it's legal," voicing his concern about corruption. His mother came into his bedroom, knelt down and said, "Let's pray." Mansa thought perhaps she understood the difficulty of running a business from her own experience with the day care, and worried about the amount of money needed to sustain himself in Johannesburg. His brother told him he was crazy, that he should finish school. That his deviation from his parents' expectations for his role in the family's trajectory of upward mobility required a formal letter with a financial statement—in the story of another young professional it was a PowerPoint presentation—indicates the weight of these expectations, the social responsibilities ingrained in them, and the intensity of the decision to diverge.

Ratsebo's story provides further historical depth to the way these expectations arise and spill over into the lives of new generations. Showing acute awareness of the various legacies that pervaded her personal history, Ratsebo incorporated the story of her parents' upward mobility in her exposition of her career trajectory, making it worth noting at more length. A well-spoken and elegantly groomed graduate of the JBO program—one of the three entrepreneurial

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[58] The "why" refers to the globally popular concept of the "golden circle" of why, how and what as a basis to formulate a company's or a personal mission, as designed by entrepreneurial author and speaker Simon Sinek. Sinek studied cultural anthropology and law, and worked in advertising before starting his own business https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Sinek (accessed 10 April 2020.

programs that together comprised my main fieldwork site—Ratsebo (27) was in the process of starting her own organizational consultancy to help companies with their diversity policies and their internal "transformation." Growing up, she had felt her family's expectations for her success in life strongly, but not for material reasons. When Ratsebo's mother had fallen pregnant with her in the late 1980ss, at age 19, she had just started as a first-year student at Rhodes University. Ratsebo's grandparents were both teachers with some land in one of the northern homelands, and their eldest daughter's enrollment in a "white," English-speaking university[59] meant that "there were so many hopes attached to her life," Ratsebo said. As such, the pregnancy was a source of stress: "[My mother] was feeling like, 'Have I disappointed my parents, have I disgruntled the community?'"

While her mother went on to finish her studies and develop a successful career as a medical doctor in spite of ample experiences of racism, Ratsebo stayed with her grandparents for a number of years. She said that she had always felt "called" to great things: How did I know, or what made this feeling [of a calling], is that everyone has this belief that it has to be worth something that my mom got pregnant. So I had to almost be a redemption." When I asked how she came to this understanding, Ratsebo said, "Hearing my gran say to my mom, "You're the eldest of the daughters and if these girls get pregnant it's because you showed them." And obviously I know that I'm the product of that pregnancy. And just like, how they celebrated, what they celebrated. Imagine this, like, staging of a little performance, when it's your friends that have come to visit you, but I am now an exhibition like: "Oh how clever is she, she's ahead of her years!" And also my mom is the oldest, and I'm the eldest of the grandchildren. So I also inherited a responsibility in terms of the path I set for them, I suppose. And to take care of them and teach them to be good, whatever that means. So even then at a young age you're told that, look, they're gonna learn from you so you better not mess it up. The inheritance of others lies on your shoulders, basically." So, in addition to a sense of pressure to redeem her mother's moral digression, Ratsebo noted the pressure of the role of eldest grandchild: "People make a joke of it, that being the eldest in a black household should be considered leadership experience, because there's just so much responsibility. You're like a deputy parent" (see also Mhlongo 2019).

The family package of hopes and dreams for Ratsebo's life developed against a background of increasing possibilities for social mobility. When her mother finished her undergraduate degree, she went on to become a medical specialist, while her father was employed as an academic lecturer. As such, her parents

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[59] For more insight into the realities of racial segregation in South African universities and particularly on Rhodes University see Satchwell (2005).

were upwardly mobile in terms of education and profession—not unique, but still difficult and uncommon for non-white South Africans in the early 1990s— but they had not arrived materially or socially speaking. "We didn't have a car. When it was time for me to start grade one, my dad would carry me on his back and walk quite a distance to the [public] taxis and he'd ride the taxi with me to school, walk me to class, and come back, and take another taxi to work. It's a vivid memory for me. It envisions so much of the sacrifice. Looking back now they couldn't afford that school. It was a private Christian school, quite prestigious.… So they had dreams for me already that were bigger than their current circumstances.… So my parents didn't have a car and now I'm at school with kids whose parents drop them off from a car. I remember just feeling like, again, it was a feeling, but because I didn't really have things, what I had was my performance. How well-mannered I was, how neat I was. And I worked very hard to be best in class as much as I could. I guess now, looking back, to make it worthwhile for my parents." So, ironically, her parents' desire for a better life for her placed Ratsebo in an environment that emphasized her disadvantage, a confrontation she mitigated through her "performance": "It was my currency," she reflected.

When I asked her if and how black tax played a role in her life, Ratsebo further unpacked this compulsion for achievement for her parents' and her own generation: "I don't have to pay black tax in the traditional way, financial. My husband and I send money to his family but I don't have to do it with mine. And it shows itself in other ways.… 'Cause there's a range. Not everyone is in that survivalist space. For some people it's about progress, and being able to show progress, and feeling like the sacrifices were worth it because now they're paying dividends. And my parents I think [are] feeling that.… So I strongly believe that the black people coming of age in this time have done so much later than we needed to. There's so much we need to remove from what people have attached to us. On all kinds of societal levels we are living a reactive life. Only at certain crossroads do you then actually get to breathe and then start to build your identity. For some people that's like, now I'm gonna buy my house or buy a nice car for myself,

Figure 5 - A well-known entrepreneur comments on family members' expectations on Facebook. Source: Lieve de Coninck

but even just in terms of identity… I believe my parents have, they get a kind of reward from having a daughter that is successful, that was easy to show when I was a child, because it was a report card that I brought home and it was easy to show when my life stages could reflect well on them, right. Like, my daughter just got married, oh no she's in London, thinking about visiting her for Christmas, you know. And bless their hearts, I don't think there's any–, it's all good intentions. But I really believe their identity is strongly linked [to success], with my mom in particular, and we've had this conversation, because she was such a young mother, she spent so much of her life trying to amass achievements to find some kind of peace with her parents. Even to this day. She specialized as a neurologist, then she specialized in memory disorders, then she super-specialized, so she's had like five graduations. My father has a PhD, now he's thinking of becoming a professor. They both had to do that stuff. And I think I've had that same process, but just in a shorter amount of time. In that, jah, it's really only three or four years where I'm like, actually I'm done with bringing home these shiny coins to show you. And I hope you'll be OK, because I know it matters to you, but I'm OK. That's part of the black tax." Thus, Ratsebo analyzed the power of kinship reciprocity as historically dynamic, both spurred on and changed by processes of stratification. In the same breath she presented her personal struggle with the compulsion to reward her parents and her desire for autonomy as an emancipatory one. Lamenting the "reactive life" of "black people coming of age in this time" who can only "start to build their identity" once they "remove" the historical attachments of others, Ratsebo perceived "black tax" as an obstacle to overcome in the ultimate quest for self-realization, and saw emancipation from its grip as a form of historical progress.

Rather than in thrall to kinship reciprocity, Tumelo understood the "identity" of achievement that she had taken on as a child in relation to the competitive structure of the educational system and the way this system continued to intersect with a racialized hierarchy. She grew up in a rural town in the Free State province, where she alternated between her grandmother's and her single mother's household. Her mother worked as an education professional for the provincial government, but she passed away when Tumelo was in high school. After high school, Tumelo moved to Johannesburg for her tertiary education, and at the time of our first interview, she had just started her articles (compulsory long-term internship) at an audit firm, the last step towards becoming a registered accountant. She described herself as "flippin' naughty," and as "an emotionally troubled child" who was not doing well in her first few years at the boarding school she was sent to from the age of seven. In her reports, she received "just above 'not achieved' for everything." When she was eight, however, her mother got ill and her grandmother came to care for her. "That stability made a difference." With her grandmother more involved in her

school life, Tumelo became more motivated to get "gold stars"——star-shaped stickers given to pupils who performed well——to show at home. "Come third grade I was the star child." In fourth grade, at ten years old, she became conscious of the competition of the more than two hundred learners per grade. Pupils' results and ranking were publicly announced and there was an annual prize-giving ceremony to conclude the year in which the best learners were lauded in front of the others, the teachers and the parents. "So that's when I became ambitious," she said, and that year she ended up in the top ten. A hierarchical peer-disciplining structure paralleled this academic performance structure. Above "head boys/girls" for each class, there were "prefects," whose duties included "making sure everyone is outside in a queue on time, maintaining order, making sure that everyone looks clean, that there's no littering. And you're in charge of the image of the school. You're running the morale of the school, basically," Tumelo explained. After having been head girl of her class for a while, she became head prefect, overseeing the other prefects——"something you'd put on your CV"——only the second non-white girl to do so in the history of the school.

Formally a mixed school, in practice however, the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking classes were run separately, which effectively upheld a racialized segregation: "You never got to mix with the white kids [in class]. And we couldn't mingle in the playground, because they spoke Afrikaans.… And also that barrier of, they come from somewhere else, they're taught not to mingle with us, [and] we also have an inferiority complex, so you won't just go to a white person. I know if you're a black girl and you were friends with white people, already you were naturally superior [to those without white acquaintances]." But academic performance was a route across these racialized divides, and Tumelo looked up to one other well-performing non-white girl in the school. "She was so excellent she trumped these barriers of race." After primary school, Tumelo applied to and was accepted at one of the Christian high schools in her area with a good reputation, where she continued her efforts to achieve. She had her eyes on the "school colors," the special uniform for acknowledged achievers in sports or arts, but she was "bad at hockey, bad at chess, bad at netball, extremely bad at netball," and she couldn't sing. "It was so defeating. At that point you're aware: I'm probably not gonna get school colors.… But once again, there was Kefilwe, there was always someone before me that paved the way. So Kefilwe was really great at debating. She debated nationally, internationally. You couldn't just deny her the blazer because she did so well! Even if it wasn't traditionally.… And I knew that public speaking and debating, I could do that. So I went for it.… So this was my do-or-die, this is where I'm gonna reign, where I can get those colours." And she did, winning debating contests and regional science competitions, which in turn allowed her

to participate in a model UN session in New York. "So my high school was basically all about achieving. All the way. Achieving, achieving, achieving. All the way, all the way, all the way. I can't even remember a time when it wasn't about that." When I asked what kept her motivated through high school, she replied, "I guess achievement becomes your identity. So how do you break away from that? Like, you can't," revealing the impact her performance in school and its recognition had on the way she had come to understand herself.

Bheki (24), too, narrated his career as a conscious effort to achieve; however, at the time of my fieldwork, he was doubtful about his direction. When we met at Eshisha hub, he was enrolled in a private school for coders that guaranteed a good job as an international software developer, but he also wanted to start his own business in IT, and to join a friend's NGO to help township youth. Which path to pursue? "I wanna add value, I wanna add value.… I'm battling with it," he said. Bheki was the eldest of three boys born in a township in Mpumalanga. His mother worked as a domestic worker and his father as a petrol attendant. His parents regularly struggled to make ends meet, especially since Bheki's father had been fired a few years previously. Still, they had supported him in attending university as the first in his family, and Bheki understood himself as deeply motivated to help his family overcome poverty, and like Ratsebo, to validate their sacrifice.

He, too, described himself as an eager learner, who remained focused on academic achievement, even when this was challenged in his immediate environment: "I was a school junkie. Me and my friends made sure we tried to motivate each other. I think I'm lucky in the sense that my friends were guys that … tried to push boundaries and excel in school. We were the top ten guys.… The other time there was sort of a strike in my township because of a lack of services and stuff. And they were closing schools, saying no kids must go to school, the kids must join us in striking. They succeeded in closing down the school, but me and my friends, we decided to go to the library and continue with our work and try to go on with our work and help each other instead of joining the protest. That was one of the crazy moments growing up. It was crazy because … these guys were becoming violent and they were threatening us. Regardless of what they were doing we persisted in what we wanted to achieve, which was making sure our grades were proper by the end of the year." The strikers' contestation of Bheki's focus on learning instead of protesting mirrors ongoing social antagonisms in South Africa between those benefiting from education and other government services and those who do not, as well as differences in perspective on how to battle social injustices and inequalities.

At the same time, Bheki's portrayal of himself as perseverant in his academic focus indicates the strength of the idea of education as a way up (see also Telzak

2012; Southall 2016). When I asked him why he remained focused on learning, he said, "I guess I wanted to make sure that I educate myself as much as possible so I can try and alleviate the poverty in my family, I guess. What drove me the most was seeing my dad waking up and going to work and, you know, trying to fight for us and my mom as well. So I wanted to try to help them out, in a sense. Try and make sure I study, get good grades, go to university, get a good job and start a proper business. Try and support the family. They've been the main reason I think for the decisions I've made in life. And for the fun of it. I don't really like to go out, I stay indoors. I would just watch documentaries. Sometimes play chess. Just code. That has been me ever since. Then I was very much into chess. And singing. I was part of the choir in high school. Just to keep myself busy." Combining an allusion to a classic recipe for middle-classing with a statement of personal character, Bheki explains his disposition towards learning as motivated by a sense of responsibility towards his family as well as the kind of "me" he "has been ever since." With his parents' support and some student funding, he eventually enrolled in university.

In short, from these narratives it becomes clear how complex intergenerational transfers impact young professionals in South Africa far beyond claims on their income and "financial transfers" (Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley 2019). The dialectics between national and family histories, socioeconomic positions and educational structures prompt expectations for success that bear strongly on their self-perceptions as achievers and their notions of worthy and pursuable lives. Where in Ghana and Kenya, for example, such expectations are grounded in post-colonial economic modernization and urbanization, and questions of ethnic affiliation or "Africanness" (Behrends and Lentz 2012, Spronk 2014), for the professionals in Johannesburg, they are defined by the remnants of apartheid and the possibilities and promises of the transition, and what these look like in their communities and families. So, more than norms for kinship-reciprocity, these expectations derive from and contain previous generations' stunted aspirations, the educational system, and experiences of racialized exclusion and inequality. This historical package deal has produced a compulsive striving for upward mobility, a compulsive middle-classing, aimed not just at material improvement and redistribution (see Krige 2015, 113) but also at respectability and recognition: the young professionals' educational and professional successes are intended to make up for a parent's moral failing or their material sacrifices, and to "trump" barriers of race. This layered legacy of expectations has compelled young professionals to achieve on behalf of various ranges of others, and has powerfully marked their outlook on the lives they should live.

Struggles

Coming of age under the pressures of these legacies was not easy, my interviewees made a point of relating. In addition to ceaseless efforts to access the concrete opportunities of schools, jobs and funds, they struggled to manage their own and others' expectations for their success, their relationships with kin and peers, to retain their motivation and to find direction in life. In this section I zoom in on moments in the young professionals' stories that reveal these struggles and how they present an existential burden, i.e., a burden of interpreting and realizing one's possibilities for a good life (Chua 2014) over and above a material one.

As much as Tumelo's focus on achievement had sustained her "identity" in school, in the transition into tertiary education and professional life it became a source of contention. She had initially decided to apply for medicine at the University of Witwatersrand, a choice of careers in line with a wider social hierarchy of success: "For someone that's doing well, I mean, that's the most superior thing you can do." But she disliked it to the point that her lust for life dwindled. "I hadn't yet touched base with the idea of passion, of doing what you really like. Until my life was so miserable. I told a friend: 'I hate my life so much that every time a car comes close to hitting me, actually I don't run anymore.' So I knew that had to change." When she started meeting students who changed their courses—something that initially shocked her—her idea of a set path towards success started to crumble. "Dropping out of courses, that was taboo! You don't do that! But you start meeting people who actually dropped out of things, and dropping into things they love. You start reading about people who you've hailed all your life, and realize: Actually, it's not so linear, girl." Trying to redirect herself, she started looking for "people-related studies… but also because they're not paid so well, and they don't come with so much prestige, I wouldn't allow myself to do it." Yet, after another month of studying medicine, she decided "I can't live like this," and dropped out.

Instead, she registered for Politics and Philosophy, but as much as she enjoyed those courses, they did not resolve her existential crisis. Self-conscious about "blowing up" her mother's inheritance on food and rent without a clear idea of what she was working towards, she felt she "needed to get serious." "That's when I started applying for Accounting, [alongside] Politics and Philosophy, and see, what am I going to do next year.…) [Accounting] was the next best thing after medicine. In SA medicine is the one, then being a chartered accountant, then being an engineer, engineer slash lawyer. So those are three, if you want people to be like ahmm. But even law is not actually that amazing. Even architecture… maybe. Jah, so that's the order of things." She dreaded the reputation of humanities degrees: "Those BA [Bachelor of Arts] kids, they always

have time, always chilling on the lawn, they're not serious about life, they have time to play, is what people say….) My ego just wasn't letting me. So I chose Accounting." In addition, the options for student funding were much more numerous for students in Accounting than for those in Humanities. Throughout her degree and into her first job as a junior accountant in a multinational firm, her internal struggle had remained. Getting ready for work these days, she was often disheartened: "Every morning, I play Beyoncé, very loud, or some hip hop, in my car, before I go in [to the office]. And I tell myself: Just show some love today, make someone smile, just to find the courage to go in." Thus, Tumelo's understanding of a worthy life course was informed by a cultural hierarchy of what counts as "serious" as reflected both in actually existing opportunities for accessing capital, and in her inability to "allow herself" to diverge. She thus followed the cultural hierarchy of occupational prestige to the detriment of her personal joy, demonstrating its potential to override her desires for other ways of being and doing.

Where Tumelo struggled to diverge from the trodden path, Bheki struggled to stay on it. In his first year at university, he felt very guilty for taking up resources, and for burdening his parents instead of easing their load. Witnessing other students with more financial support taking their access to funds for granted, even squandering them, proved trying. A particular friend who was "obviously well-off," and "blowing money" by partying with friends, forsaking his studies, and eventually dropping out triggered Bheki particularly. "There's this saying in Zulu that sometimes opportunities or resources are given to those who don't really deserve it. So here I am struggling, going to classes every day and here is this guy who has all the resources that he can ask for and he's not… I'm like… [sighs]. It felt to me like, ah, all this is just, I'm sorry, it's just fucked up. It was frustrating, it was frustrating….) But for me, to me, it was confusing as well. The fact that this guy has literally everything he could ask for, everything he could ask for. And he's not making the most of it!"

Despite his confusion, Bheki finished his first year. When I asked what made him stay, he said, "Being pissed about that situation. Still thinking about my family, still thinking about them. Wherever I go, thinking, if I quit now, like, my brothers who are coming after me, they need a sense of inspiration, they need to see, they need to be like, mentally empowered. Like, our brother is doing well, he is doing this, we can do it too. They need to be motivated somehow. My community, my location, there aren't really a lot of people who made it. So I took that responsibility to myself, like, let me carry this. That responsibility to make sure that these guys, that at least they see….) I think I took that responsibility to make sure they… they see, I think, a better future. A better life for themselves. Jah. I wanted that for my brothers. I still want that for my brothers, even today." Bheki thus took on the responsibility to contribute to a

better perspective not just for his brothers but for his "community" in the township. Coming to see not everyone equally affected by this pressure shook him, but he also presented it as strengthening his moral commitment to being an inspiring example for others.

His frustrations about inequality as he experienced it in university over time developed into more consequential conflicts. In his second year at university, he started to "lash out": he became "rebellious", "disobedient" and "political." He joined an activist student organization, and he took part in the #Feesmustfall protest movement. He was in continuous conflict with the residence manager of his student accommodation, and he started "partying" and "messing with girls." Looking back on this time, he saw it as an aberration: "I was starting to... I don't know, derail from the initial plan....) I was trying to rebel and I lost track. And my studies, I did... The [social] company at that time, at that point was, wasn't conducive for my initial plan. Like going partying and all that stuff. I was now being exposed to that life. So initially, from my friends, there was that thing of wanting that, wanting to feel how that was. And deserving it, I also felt like....) I stopped to sort of care for my parents. I would ask my parents for money I was gonna use for buying alcohol. Making sure everything is *ngca*[60] when I'm around my friends. So I started to deviate. And it went pfffsh. I think it went down." Thus, Bheki placed the lure of his social environment and a sense of deservingness in opposition to his responsibility to care for his parents.

His "derailment" into protest and partying had dire consequences: that year Bheki failed his major; he was cut off from government funding, and eventually expelled from his accommodation. He went home for the December holidays with a heavy heart. "So now it's back to the beginning. I have to try and beg my parents to support me again." In spite of being "frustrated," Bheki's parents agreed to continue to support his academic career. Juggling the felt responsibilities for alleviating his family's material burden and for obtaining a degree, Bheki started generating his own income through a sweets trade alongside his studies. But this combination proved hard and again he started failing classes. When on top of this his father lost his job, the pressure became excruciating: "It was one of the most terrible experiences ever, my dad losing his job. 'Cause now that means at home the struggle that is already there is gonna get worse. Extremely worse. Extremely worse. Extremely worse. Like, worse. So now maybe struggling to pay for electricity. That worse. This is too much, for one person, especially for a young person to, who is still trying to find his way, still trying to find his feet. It's too much." Bheki said he felt depressed, even suicidal, and out of his depth. His parents' and siblings' material sacrifices and their attendant expectations for his success produced a near-unbearable

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[60] Nice, fine.

burden of responsibility. Bheki's story relays how the felt obligation to repay family for the opportunities they helped make possible can become particularly heavy when the material foundation for these opportunities is thin, and the difference between the life they make possible and the lives that make them possible is great.

The discomfort of being the aspirational focus of one's family became clear when I asked Bheki to elaborate on his parents' reaction to the news of his initial failure at university: "At that time they were extremely frustrated. They were. But they were like, we know you're a good boy. We know that when you set your mind to something you will push. And if we don't give you the support you need now, how will your brothers learn, who will they look up to. They need that. Maybe they saw what I was seeing. That this is beyond me going to school and getting a degree. This is about me trying to motivate the other guys who are coming after me." However, "my brothers started to resent me in a sense. Even though they never said it explicitly… I could tell these guys are blaming me for everything that happened. Because my parents were giving me all the attention and effort to get a qualification. And my brothers are at home having to deal with the pain of eating only maybe like pap [a basic staple food] and water for example. They had to live with that. I was at school. Getting, doing whatever. But they had to be there and experience that. So I think in a sense they resented me. And that hurt me a lot.… And they are not wrong. For them to feel like that. Maybe that's one of the reasons why I was like: Let me just continue with the business so I can try and alleviate that. So it wasn't only about making money, it was also about alleviating the stress, the burden that they were doing [sic]." His brothers' resentment thus produced a feeling of undeservingness that haunted Bheki. At the same time, in his story, his failure and the pains it caused did not lessen but rather reinforced the expectations for his success, and he continued to invoke his sense of responsibility towards these as a crucial motivation. In this way, he defined his life as quintessentially informed by his generational responsibilities.

Ratsebo's family's economic position was better than Bheki's, but she too felt the brunt of her family's expectation. Towards the end of high school, she decided to leave the household: "At some point I [moved] into the boarding house [of my school], in my final year. Just to be able to focus. My mom and dad are intense.… The intensity of their, like, hopes and dreams for me.… It would manifest like, if you're watching TV and they walk in, it's like, how do you have time to be watching TV when this and this and that! Relaxation was a vice. In our household, if you're relaxing, you're lazy.… I was like, I need my sanity if I wanna do well in my final year.… [My parents] had gotten me extra tutors for all these things, making sure I was going to extra lessons with the history teacher, the only subject that wasn't an A. It was a lot. And we had at that point two

cousins and my mom's younger sister living with us. So I moved into the boarding house. That was great for me, be by myself, learn about myself." Moving out thus provided Ratsebo with space to develop a sense of self at some distance from the pressure of her parents' work ethic and the bustle of the household

She recognized how growing up with her parents' need for achievement had impacted her self-perception and the way she had imagined her future: "Look, I get it in terms of how our parents were not around in terms of working, trying to build a better life, so they need someone responsible to make sure things go right. That homework is done, the uniform is washed. They needed us to be self-sufficient. That's part of the feeling. First it's more of a responsibility, later this idea that you could be special, you know. Whatever special means. And obviously I've matured and the language I use now is one of service, but at the time it was: I wanna be a president, president of the World Bank, work for the UN. Whatever seemed far away and a big accomplishment. I remember specifically the World Bank and the UN was like: I can build a totally new life based on my own wants and needs, where I don't have to be responsible for other people, basically. But still have influence, so that I can still be celebrated back home, you know." The pressure of high expectations had thus produced an understanding of herself as "special," as someone who could be a president; but it had also produced a burden from which she wanted relief. The career she consequently imagined for herself reveals a double bind between the desire for release from the pressures of her parents' expectations, and the urge to fulfill them: to be free from responsibilities for others but "still be celebrated back home."

In addition to the pressure of affirming the dreams and sacrifices of those who went before, Ratsebo explained, achievement in the unequal context of South Africa also complicated kinship relations in the here and now. Continuing her analysis of the complications of "black tax," she said, "And then [there is] also the guilt, of how other people in the family are just not getting their breakthrough." For example, her aunt, whose career "just hasn't taken off the way she'd liked it to," asked Ratsebo for advice on how to present herself in the labor market. Likewise, her uncle, who had been unemployed for two years, asked her to redraft his CV for him. Turning a hierarchy of seniority upside down, such requests were "very confusing. Because then there's a moment where it's like, oh no no, I'm your uncle, no I'm your aunt. Then we just don't know how to proceed. Then it becomes a conflict. So with the CV example, he was applying for a job.... What I said was, you should make a draft, try and shorten it and then I can look at that. But he kept pulling this deadline, there was an application closing on Monday. And I was busy with my own business, my own house, my own problems, but I said: Look, OK, I will do it. And he was like, I'm not gonna

beg you, blah blah blah, don't even worry about it, it's taken care of. You understand? So it's like… I don't have a response to that, you know? It's hard enough. I get that it's hard for you to need my help. So it's that guilt." So, the discrepancy between Ratsebo's trajectory and that of her elders meant a painful inversion of kinship hierarchy. Being successful gave Ratsebo a positive sense of self and her parents a sense of affirmations but at the same time it burdened her emotionally and strained her relationships with less successful elders.

Beyond tensions with kin, Mansa grappled with his relationship with the "mentality" of the rural township community he grew up in, to which he remained attached, albeit ambivalently. He was considering investing in real estate and a retail franchise in his home area, but he knew this would not necessarily be well received. He told me he was writing a book that addressed the kind of "mindset" he was confronted with whenever he returned to his township: "[In the book] I first tackle the issue of being black. Because I can talk about black people anyhow because I am black. I also tackle it that it has become more of a mindset than of your skin color, being black. Because there are different things that we associate with being black.…) If I were to start my business where I'm from they would call me *umlungu*, that's a white person. They would call me *umlungu* because I'm in charge.…) They'll call me that, in Komati, where I'm from. When you employ, once you start employing people.…) So we blacks are already saying we can't lead.… Because for decades, white people have been in charge. And black people in Komati don't see themselves as people who can be in charge. And when you try to better yourself, the thinking is very hurting. When you try to better yourself, they're like: No man, *jy* [you] a snob, fuck it you're just black like me man, come on." I said: "They hold it against you?", and Mansa replied: "They hold it against you. So the entire mindset is the mindset that says 'I can't.'" Mansa thus pointed out how the historical racialization of unequal power relations and lowly self-perceptions continued to reproduce each other in his hometown, and the way this dialectic could backfire against those who "bettered" themselves. In this logic, being "black" and being "in charge" were incompatible, to the point that racial loyalty was called into question.[61] So, over and above painfully judgmental, Mansa saw the dominant "mindset" of his hometown as being an obstacle to economic and personal development.

These narratives of the difficulties of living aspirational lives lay bare the tensions within and between the felt responsibilities towards kin and community and urges for relief from them. They show how young professionals' lifeworlds are occupied by racialized moralities of kinship, as well as discourses

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[61] For further analysis of the complex attitudes towards those who climb the social ladder, see Krige 2011 (280–92) and James 2015, 44–48).

of achievement and self-realization, and how these compete with each other. Beyond the practical problems of accessing and maintaining proper careers, the narratives show how young professionals grapple with other people's perceptions of and dependencies on their success, their "moral and emotional predicaments" (Behrends and Lentz 2012, 137). But where scholars often present the problem as one of opposition between kinship norms and self-realization (James 2015; Chipkin 2012) or between community solidarity and individualism (Jeske 2016), here the troubles seem to derive rather from overcommitment to kin and community and from desires for abidance to social norms. Rather than being torn between feelings of solidarity and desires "to place themselves beyond [social] claims" of family (James 2015, 59), these self-narratives reveal the power of desires to do justice to, and to remain *within* the reach of kin and community.

Revisions

In spite of whether they were active or successful as entrepreneurs or not, the young professionals all laced their stories with entrepreneurialist discourse of self-realization and "adding value" to society. Zooming in on the role, and the way they accorded entrepreneurial ways of doing and being in their lives and in society, it becomes clear how their uptake of entrepreneurialism—as a practice, a discourse, or both—entailed an aspirational reorientation and a revision of their self-perception. As a discourse of empowerment and self-improvement, entrepreneurialism may be likened to the way other "transformative discourses," such as in neo-charismatic churches and self-help literature, offer professionals in South Africa "a new language [to] articulate the aim for and the experience of success… and cope with difficulties in achieving it" (James 2015, 224). How did the young professionals deploy it?

When Bheki went back to university after his first failed attempt, he ran into an old childhood friend who inspired him to do better academically, as well as to start the sweets business, an episode Bheki described as a turning point. "We would go to the Indian shop, get a packet of sweets, and then sell those sweets in schools. I'd go to campus and sell my sweets there. We'd come back, buy our own groceries, and depend less on our families. And I'm like, I'm in. And from that point things started to look good. We were making a lot of money.… At that time I was seeing the prospects of becoming a businessperson. I started imagining myself like, OK, I can do this now. There's nothing that will stop me. I can do this. I went and registered a business." So, Bheki understood his trade to have provided a practical solution to his financial troubles, and to the conundrum of dependency on his family, but also the seeds of a new self-perception. But after his father lost his job, Bheki struggled to keep himself afloat, both materially and mentally. For a time, he embraced Christianity—

"trying this church thing," as he put it, and was doubtful on whether to continue with the business. He appealed to his university to give him another chance. But then he heard about a program for professional coders in Johannesburg. Apparently, the program provided financial support, helped with housing, and also helped place graduates in jobs with multinationals such as Google. Bheki became excited: "I went to my parents and told them, here is this opportunity, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It's promising all these great things and I wanna try it out. I wanna go there. I believe this can be the key to all our troubles." This time his parents were skeptical: they had heard him make plans for his career before, how did he know this would work? Bheki said: "So it was a risk I had to take. 'Cause I didn't know anyone in Jo'burg. So I was like, OK if I die, I die. If I die, I die. Let me go for this." The way he phrased it, it was a matter of life and death, of taking an ultimate gamble on his life, a "risk" he took entirely all by himself, albeit with the aim of solving his family's troubles.

Accepted into the program, Bheki left the trodden path of upward mobility via academic achievement and immersed himself in the entrepreneurial environment of the coding school. But the entrepreneurial teachings of the program added to Bheki's confusion about his future. He now felt there were three serious options: to take a corporate job with help from the program, make good money and support his family; to join a non-profit organization that supports township youth; or to develop his own business as an app developer. The way he narrated this confusion was rife with entrepreneurialist discourse: "I wanna add value. I wanna add value.… I'm battling with it. Like you've been wanting these things. How are you making it work, how will you monetize? I'm still looking for an answer." His quandary reflected the contradictory pulls of the post-transition moral economy: "My friends are saying you already have an offer [for a job, via the coding school]. These guys want you. They're gonna pay you a shitload of money. Money you never held with your hands. You can try and save that money, send it home, support your brothers financially. The other group is saying: you've been through the struggles, you know the struggles, if you don't do your part in solving the struggles there's gonna be another you and that other you might commit suicide or go through even worse situations than you've been through. Then another side is saying you've always been a risk taker. Take the risk [with your own business]. When it pays off you can solve both these situations. You can be your own boss, and you can help with the non-profit." Bheki's question of how to add value was thus a moral life question of how to live right and do good, and for whom.

When I asked what his parents say, he said "Conversations with my parents is that, I think they're old school. I don't think they've seen any black guy make it in business. So they believe in the fact that you need to get a *ngca* job. Of which I believe that is what universities teach. More than anything they really promote

that you get a job. Get a *ngca* job. Get this degree and get a *ngca* job. Completely different to the space that I am at now, which is the [coding] program. These guys are promoting all the different disruptive things you can come up with. It's a different space where I'm at. They're promoting leadership skills, entrepreneurial skills, all these things. In the space of tech. You can be, you guys are capable of starting Silicon Valley in SA! With my parents, I think they're old school. I told them you don't see what I see. You guys don't see what I see. It's difficult." Bheki laid out how the program had opened up his aspirational perspective and moved it further away from that of his parents at the same time. While the entrepreneurialism of the coding school provided new inspiration, it had thus also complicated things, and while it had appealed to Bheki as a solution to his family's troubles, it had widened the gap between them.

But when I shared with Mansa my impression that the alternative career path entrepreneurship offered was a way to extricate oneself from parental expectations, he disagreed: "For me, it's a way to be me." As a child, Mansa told me, he had had a keen interest in astronomy and had founded an astronomy club with a few of his peers. Over time the club started providing extra-curricular teaching at primary schools, and Mansa developed big plans to eventually build a regional astronomy center, with a lab (because on National Geographic "they were constantly going to labs"), an academy, and even a space satellite. As a teenager he tried to register the club as a non-profit organization and he applied for funding, but he got rejected. "Because I was young", he thought. Eventually, he registered a commercial business in business cards and wedding invitations design in order to fund the club himself. "And I remember at this barber shop I used to hang out, I was at the barber shop saying, 'I have this astronomy club.' And the guy was like, 'How are you going to make money?' And I was like, 'Eh, actually, we're teaching, we're actually not making money.' And he was like, 'Ag, tsk, you're wasting time.' That was his response, and the reaction of anyone else. So I knew I was on my own. And that if I wanted to make it a success, I will [sic] need to do it by myself.… So it informed, it invoked the entrepreneur in me. And from that point onwards, ever since I knew how I can make money for myself I'm not turning back [chuckles]." Mansa thus traced the spark of his entrepreneurship back to this scene at the barber shop, where he came to understand that his drive to pursue an interest rather than income ran against the dominant mode of thinking. More than the need for funds, then, it was his maverick pursuit of a vision against the grain of his social environment, that Mansa presented as his entrepreneurial inception.

In line with this, he understood entrepreneurship as a "mindset" that contrasted with what he called the "thinking patterns" in his hometown. He elaborated, "When I go back to where I stay the thinking is different. I think different areas have different ways of thinking. But the problem is, where I'm coming from,

especially, is a township. It doesn't only mean [that] there's a bottle store in every street, but it also means that the thinking patterns is [sic] different. When you're there you don't think of the next greatest big invention. You don't think of *you*, you don't think you have a purpose in life. So many people run away from purpose by having children....) So in the book I'm becoming a mindset coach. You need to change your mind to fulfill your purpose, or to lead [a] fulfilling life, rather.... If you have money, if you are moneyed, it becomes glorified. But it becomes a problem also. Because when I grew up, I grew up amongst, there were tenderpreneurs, there were people with tenders and all of that. [Indignant:] Come on! And their reaction to money is different. It's more of a lifestyle. Get a million in a tender, I will buy fancy clothes and all of that. I know of one person I will not disclose, buying all of that. So they are comfortable with being rich, and being rich alone. It's never about giving back to the community. The mindset says: I am better off than you. And the mindset says: If I am better off, I can go there on Saturdays just to brag, then come back and make more money, never to impart it on other kids. I've never seen one of them paying someone's school fees, feeding hungry families. It's all about lifestyle, drinking, cars and all of that. Which I think is more of a mindset. Because the very same kind of a person, when he is in a different environment and informed differently, acts differently. For instance, he would rather have, instead of having two luxury cars it can be a house and a car. Where are you going to sleep if it's a half a million car and you still live with your mom? So the thinking is wrong. The reaction to money is wrong, and it's informed by how we think. So I devote the book and myself, for now, to changing people's mindset of what they can be. That would be my module. Entrepreneurship is more of a mindset than what you do [for income]." The "thinking" against which Mansa positioned an entrepreneurial mindset, thus, involved deprecatory as well as inflated self-understandings and the avoidance of responsibilities, both in terms of making meaningful contributions to society and in terms of redistributing gains to one's community. Instead, Mansa suggested, an entrepreneurial "mindset" provided a better notion of a meaningful life and a better concept of social responsibility for those with money. As such, to Mansa, entrepreneurship was an alternative morality of success, through which he tackled the common criticism and suspicions of the conspicuous consumption of South Africa's "new black middle classes" (Chevalier 2015; Posel 2010, Iqani 2017). He thus both set himself apart and maintained the moral relationship with his community through the stories of his entrepreneurship.

Through his understanding of entrepreneurship as a maverick mindset, Mansa also made sense of his frustrations with his university degree and its lack of connection to current, real-world needs: "Even with my beef with school, it's also there. Because school says, it's more of what you must think like, do this,

Lethabo Mokoena
17 September 2013 at 14:33 · 👥   •••

Call me Lova!
This is my face after submitting an assignment on shit
that will never matter in my life. I am not going to miss
UJ when I finally leave, they are not teaching me how
to pay rent or get my friends off the streets.

Figure 6 - A well-known entrepreneur shares his perspective on a university education on Facebook [UJ stands for University of Johannesburg]. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

do this. I never questioned why I must learn this; I never used the mathematics I learned in the past twenty-four hours. But I stumbled upon this quote by Rockefeller. It's like: We have enough writers, enough preachers, poets, we have ample of them. So the point in the creation of the education system, in 1903, was not to create thinking men, poets, and all of that. So it's not creativity. The entire notion was to create obedient citizens. And I digged in [sic] much further. When Africa was colonized, they wanted them to pay tax. And they said, 'No, we've been staying here, how can we pay tax if we've been staying here.' They didn't understand. Then they took young men to school to make them obedient to the system. That's how it came about. As an entrepreneur there are a lot of things you have to unlearn, in a way." Entrepreneurship to Mansa had not just been an alternative to upward mobility through tertiary education, but was also a protest against a colonial schooling system. In this frame, to opt for entrepreneurship was a way to stand up against the remnants of apartheid structures of racialized oppression. In sum, then, more than a better way to access material opportunities, entrepreneurship provided Mansa with an alternative morality of success through which he could respond to societal suspicions of those upward, and contribute to the struggles against racial oppression and for freedom.

Ratsebo, too, presented her educational career as well as her move towards entrepreneurship as ultimately informed by the legacies of apartheid, but in notably proactive and forward-looking terms: "I'm glad you bring up prestige, 'cause I was very deliberate about it," she had said right at the start of our interview. "When they talk about social capital, I'm not even friends with any of the girls I went to high school with, but just saying I went to St Mary's opened doors and still does. And so I've been very deliberate about those little coins, I literally see it as one of those computer games where you jump and get the coins. Very deliberate, because those are the things that get you in the room." She thus presented her deliberate attainment of prestige through educational

success as an instrument to mitigate the social legacies of exclusion. But after working at a management consultancy for some time after university, she decided to opt for a master's degree in Development at the London School of Economics [LSE] instead of the usual Master of Business Administration. This is where she understood herself to have started to veer towards entrepreneurship: "I knew I didn't want to do an MBA. If I go back to school it has to be in Development, broadly. Having that pressure of like, this one is writing GMAT [Graduate Management Admission Test], this one is going to Stanford, this one has come back from Harvard, literally they are sitting at the desks across you. Like, my immediate supervisor is from MIT, my boss from Harvard. That was the world. I knew that if I wanted to do something alternative, I'd have to do it at an institution that has the same currency. If I want to live an unconventional life, I have to buy friends with credibility."

When I asked why she wanted an unconventional life, Ratsebo laid out her entrepreneurial vision for herself: "I have a strong compulsion that I need to be of service to humanity, to my country, to my people, my family, my community, whatever, be of service. I don't think that's congruent with living and working at a corporate from eight to five. Not that they don't contribute. But I just had a feeling I wanted to do something different. And so I need the credibility to do something different. The vision I have is walking into a room full of executives and having a hard conversation with them. A hard, hard conversation with them. Just because, I have so much conviction about what has been left unhealed in this country and what we don't talk about. And how it shows up in everyday conflict and how it's bubbling up. So literally I have this vision of me saying all these hard things to these old, white men. And the thing that gets their attention is how I was introduced, you know, so…." I asked: "How did you get to this vision?" Ratsebo continued, "The vision has two components. One is being of service and having influence, and the other component is about the very particular SA [South Africa] story. This idea of a calling has probably been there my whole life. [When I was nine or ten] I was watching Matilda [a film about a girl with special powers after a famous children's novel by Roald Dahl], that was my favorite movie. I read the book over and over. Feeling like, I think I'm Matilda, I might not be able to lift this laptop with my eyes, but there was something. And there must be a reason that I have this combination of traits that I have. My parents were the first generation able to get advanced degrees. So there's so much I don't have to worry about, that my quest is purpose." In short, Ratsebo's understanding of herself as destined to do great things had developed into a desire "to be of service" with her growing awareness of the need for change in South Africa, and of her historical privilege of growing up with educated parents in relative material comfort. To realize this "purpose," she felt she needed to deviate from the usual corporate career trajectory, but,

given her understanding of the structural, racialized inequalities of post-transition South Africa, she needed also to remain recognized as an achiever in order to make an impact. In this framework, the pursuit of prestige comes to stand in the service of societal transformation, rather than upward mobility, and Ratsebo knew this reflected a generational shift.

While her parents struggled to understand it, Ratsebo embraced entrepreneurship as a liberation from the burden of compulsive middle-classing: "It's fun. I'm enjoying being funemployed, in my parents' eyes," she said. I asked: "Is that what they call it? Funemployed?" "Yes. Unemployed but having fun, maybe freelancing." "They don't call you an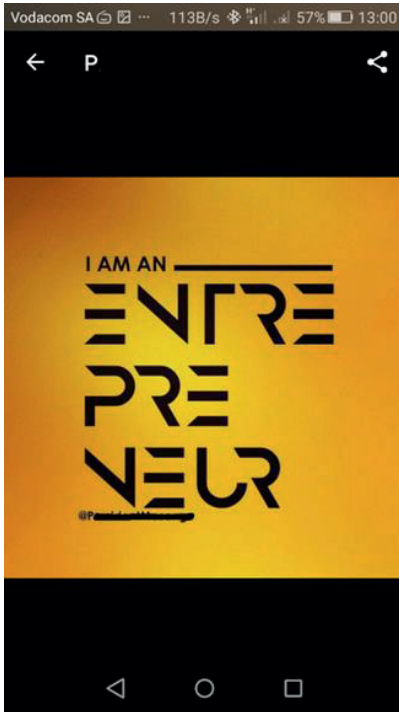 entrepreneur?" "Not yet. And you know, OK look, it's not like I'm being paid for my work yet, it's not like I've arrived. But it is taking [sic] other people noticing... Actually, my dad, he's part of the leadership of the National Research Foundation and his HR peer gets this newsletter in his inbox. And they post article by article. He reads it, he goes back and sees the surname, and calls my dad and he's like hey is this [your daughter]? Now my dad is happy because there's this celebration... It's fine. At least it's not in me, I don't have to come and say look, are you proud. It's freeing.… Actually my mom finds it really hard.… They're like, but that social capital, we have to spend it, and we get a reward from spending it. So if we can't… Even now, my sister is going to study medicine. And my mom is going to change her surname. The first time in twenty-seven years. Because she feels she'll be able to benefit from being Dr Peter Mathole. 'Cause she has her own maiden's name. She's going to add a dash, add our surname. She's well known in that world. So now [my sister] will benefit from that name. Even [my sister] considering studying medicine, my mother has been on that." So, by taking a different career route through entrepreneurship Ratsebo felt she was "freeing" herself from the compulsion to serve her parents' aspirational legacy, while her parents held on to a need to accumulate and pass on social capital. Feeling like she had paid her dues of "shiny coins" in honor of her parents, venturing onto the path of entrepreneurship was a way to emancipate herself from the historical pressures

Figure 7 - One of the young professionals' WhatsApp profile pictures. Source: Lieve de Coninck

for upward mobility while still contributing to transformation in South Africa. In the language of self-realization and with great reflective understanding of the historical legacies that compelled her, Ratsebo thus reformulated her "purpose" and a sense of direction through entrepreneurialism. Taking up entrepreneurship as a way to change society, she reworked the double bind of the felt responsibilities for others: as a conscious deviation from set ways to succeed, it discharged the pressure to keep fulfilling expectations while maintaining the pursuit of a life of "influence" that could be "celebrated back home."

Unlike the others, Tumelo did not aspire to start or be successful in her own business; from a personality test she had learned that she was actually "very risk-averse." In fact, her relation to entrepreneurialism was highly ambivalent. When the JBO Foundation had come to her campus to recruit students for their entrepreneurial grant program, Tumelo had loved their discourse: "Their presentation is amazing 'cause it's about entrepreneurship. Like, 'We're helping you to become a well-rounded individual, high impact.' And you're like, 'Yes, that's me! High impact, achieving, yes, that's me!' Courageous commitment, they threw these words on, yes, that's definitely me." In need of funding for her Accounting degree and recognizing herself in the language, Tumelo applied and eventually was accepted onto the program. Initially, she eagerly participated in the compulsory workshops and assignments on entrepreneurial and leadership skills, alongside her regular coursework: "And it was interesting because now you have people who encourage you to think about your vision and mission statement. And those other things that before I never turned my limelight to, because before it was just all about achieving achieving achieving. So they bring in all these soft skills and stuff." So, the entrepreneurialist discourse in the program provided Tumelo with a new understanding of herself and of the meaning of her achievements. It made her "touch base with the idea of passion, of doing what you really like." As such, it validated her dissatisfaction with her degree, but as her participation in the program (and the funding) was contingent upon her academic performance in that same degree, it also made it worse. So, while the program provided Tumelo with a language and a logic through which to understand herself and the goal of her life beyond the structures of achievement she felt bound by, it simultaneously kept her tied to them.

By the time she got to her fourth year in Accounting, Tumelo was really unhappy, not just with her degree, but increasingly also with the program itself. "I was like, 'I hate this. I don't wanna do this, I don't wanna be a CA [chartered accountant], this sucks!' And then you resent JBO, because you're not meeting their marks because you're not motivated, and so you're studying wrong. 'Cause this thing is just not making sense to you anymore. So you start hating the people who always ask you for your marks. Joh, that was terrible. But then you

also start becoming conscious of yourself, again. You'll reach another level of consciousness, of eeeeeeh do I really—this is what they determined, but is this what it really means to me? This is what they say success is, but is this what success is to me? You know. So then you start resenting their models, their views, you start resenting people who come to speak, their style, because they represent the same ideas, like propaganda. This is propaganda! [chuckles] I don't want this!" And so, ironically, the reflexivity the program taught had enabled Tumelo's suspicion and rebellion against it. In all, for Tumelo, the uptake of an entrepreneurialist discourse and perspective ambivalently facilitated a new take on herself and her life *and* aggravated a sense of stuckness. While refusing entrepreneurship as a career path, she embraced the discourse of entrepreneurialist self-realization. Thus, far from resolving her problems of where to take her career, the entrepreneurial program had still given Tumelo a new perspective and language through which to formulate her aspirations.

Together, rather than "modern consumerist aspirations" or a concern with "traditional roots" (James 2015, 58), these narratives foreground young professionals' aspirations to self-realize through making a societal contribution. Their understanding of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ways of being as means for doing both at the same time illustrates and furthers a generational shift in notions of success and how to realize it as a member of a family, community and society. Keen to both honor intergenerational expectations *and* offload their burden, these young professionals redefined their relationships with kin and community as they articulated and evaluated themselves in their biographical narratives. Replacing the increasingly suspicious and limiting pathways of tertiary education and a "ngca job" with entrepreneurship, they changed their relationship to their duties of accumulation and redistribution— but not so much the importance they accord them as the way they can and want to perform them. So, while the economic moralities of middle-classing South Africans are often analyzed through their efforts to avoid obligations to community and shield new wealth (James 2015; Jeske 2017), these entrepreneurialist narratives display vigorous attempts to remain a part of and connected to family and community, and to self-understand as a member of society. Instead of "a strategy for discursively legitimizing upward mobility" (Krige 2015, 107), I propose to read these narratives as statements that relay an approach to life as possibility.

Even if coming to understand and present oneself and one's life in entrepreneurialist terms does not resolve a sense of alienation from "home" nor nagging existential questions, the young professionals here report the process as a liberating and reinvigorating one. In this sense, it is similar to the way James (2015) sees the popularity among new achievers of the neo-charismatic

churches and their and the self-help sector's "transformative discourses" (224) as "enabl[ing] a reconfiguration, or shift, into a zone of experience more attuned to their new material and moral world of experience" (210). But more than the language of "shifting into a zone" suggests, these narratives show that such reconfigurations of oneself and one's take on life are active, creative and ongoing processes that entail work. Moreover, they make clear that taking up an entrepreneurial life and self-understanding can provide a sense of freedom and of self on one hand, but creates new dilemmas and troubles on the other.

Conclusion

So, how to understand the appeal of entrepreneurialism? The biographical narratives of these young professionals make clear that it speaks to a legacy of compulsive middle-classing from a poignant history of stunted aspirations and built-up expectations for better lives. Their stories illustrate how intergenerational legacies of kinship norms, urges for upward mobility, and remnants of apartheid's racialized segregation produce powerful aspirational compulsions: whether through norms for respectability, through educational structures, or through material scarcity, the lives of the young professionals are strongly defined by expectations for their success. These both guide and hinder them. The narratives, furthermore, show how young professionals struggle to honor and handle these legacies. As such, they show how intergenerational conflicts emerge and are managed not only on the level of lifestyle and material resources, but also in the more intangible work of determining a direction in life, conjuring a sense of self, and crafting a life story.

Entrepreneurialism, as a way of being and doing over and above a way to make money, meaningfully speaks to these struggles. As an alternative career path, entrepreneurship provides a way to redirect frustrated educational or professional careers. As such, it is a way to deviate from trodden paths with the chance of "being celebrated back home." It offers a new understanding of oneself and of one's mission in life that may turn a feeling of stuckness into a new sense of moving forward. Moreover, the discourse of self-upliftment helps formulate an answer to the suspicions of racial disloyalty those deemed successful may face. In this way, entrepreneurialism allows young professionals to renegotiate their guiding but burdensome aspirational legacies. At the same time, it is clear that venturing onto the path of entrepreneurship or coming to understand oneself in entrepreneurial terms does not simply solve the problems of racialized inequalities, lift the burden of the felt responsibilities for others, or eliminate the power of expectations and judgment of upward mobility.

The way these young professionals narrated their life course shows how entrepreneurial discourse spoke to their aspirational quandaries, much like James (2015) describes the neo-charismatic churches helping new achievers

"brea[k] away from family expectations, themselves implanted in middle-class ideals, but those of a previous generation" (212; also 2019). Where pastors' guidance and church discourse "enable [them] to counter these pressures, by emphasising the importance of finding [their] own route, realising [their] own talents and building upon these rather than following an established path laid out by others" (212), so entrepreneurialism provides resources to form new self-perceptions and new aspirational trajectories in response to the burden of aspirational legacies—what Freeman (2014) calls "entrepreneurial self making" (209). However, rather than the separation implied in analyses that emphasize "processes of individualisation" (Chipkin 2012, 63) or "moralities of status, wealth and individualism" (Jeske 2017, 491) in the lives of middle-classing South Africans, these entrepreneurial self-narratives convey an opposite movement. Rather than a shielding from communal claims and obligations or a legitimization of success in the face of inequality, I suggest they point out a desire for community and for staying inside a communal story, in spite of the terminology.

Furthermore, in understanding entrepreneurialism as a "transformative discourse" that offers "a new language" for the experience and difficulties of achieving success (James 2015, 46), it is important to see that this hinges on active appropriation. More than a tool for understanding and interpreting, entrepreneurialism offers an idiom through which to create a new sense of self and a new orientation to life. Rather than laying out a ready-made new aspirational horizon, it provides a way of making one. More than illustrations, then, the narratives above are a *practice*, an active reframing of life's quandaries, of shedding new light and reorienting lives. Therefore, these narratives should be read as aspirational practices, descriptive *and* constructive, of new middle-class lifeworlds and self-perceptions.

Still, of course, the uptake of entrepreneurialism occurs not only in interviews and through narratives. In fact, an entire industry of enterprise development programs and events has arisen in South Africa in recent decades. It is the role of this entrepreneurial "ecosystem" in the uptake of entrepreneurialism that I will turn to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

3

INSIDE INCUBATORS:
THE MAKING OF MIDDLECLASSNESS

At the birthday party of a public-sector employed friend in a Johannesburg suburb at the end of 2017, I explained my research focus to one of the other guests, a medical doctor in her thirties, using the phrase "entrepreneurial culture." She raised her eyebrows in apparent surprise: "Do we have an entrepreneurial culture in South Africa? I thought we were especially lacking in that department." In a way she was right: the statistics for registered entrepreneurs and their economic impact are considered low in comparison to other African countries (Herrington, Kew and Mwanga 2017, TIPS 2017), [62] and a historically entrenched focus on salaried labor as a source of inclusion and recognition retains a strong presence in public rhetoric and popular imagination (Barchiesi 2008, 2016b; Lawhon et al. 2018; Dawson and Fouksman 2020). Yet, a celebratory public discourse around entrepreneurship and start-up culture was undeniably taking hold: apart from political speeches affirming the transformative potential of entrepreneurship for the South African economy, stories of rising entrepreneurs and the benefits of entrepreneurial programs featured widely in various media.

A few days before the party, for example, I had tuned into Metro FM, one of South Africa's urban radio stations, as a designer was interviewed about her rise as an entrepreneur in fashion. After discussing her "passion" for fabric, the interviewee said she had studied accounting. Host: "Why? If you were always into fashion?" Interviewee: "I guess it's parents, you know, they want you to have a career." Then the host asked: "Were you incubated?" The interviewee said she was, sang a few words of praise for the program in question, and then the conversation moved elsewhere. Over and above a generational difference in perspective on what constitutes a "career," this interaction made clear that "incubation" had become a known and expected feature of entrepreneurial trajectories. Minutes later, an announcement about the application deadline for The Awethu Project business incubator was aired in the commercial break, and when traffic started moving again, I passed a gigantic billboard promoting a small business expo, including a pitching challenge in one of Johannesburg's conference centers the next Sunday. So, although the dominance of this new entrepreneurial culture should not be overstated, the lure of entrepreneurship did not just exist in the odd biographical narrative but was also publicly fostered.

Generally speaking, programs aimed at economic development through business are not a new phenomenon. As noted in chapter one, South Africa has a longer history of entrepreneurship and business support, also under

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[62] The 2017 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report, moreover, states that in South Africa the status of entrepreneurship as a career choice is high, but the level of "entrepreneurial intention" is relatively low (Herrington, Kew, and Mwanga 2017, 6, 22).

apartheid. But the current rise of an enterprise development industry reflects a recent international trend in which the promotion of entrepreneurship as a tool for economic development is accompanied by entrepreneurialist discourses of personal empowerment, or a "self-help ethos" (DeHart 2010). Indeed, start-up hubs and business incubators in Johannesburg appealed to desires and the need for change in personal lives as well as in society at large in their advertisements: "Follow your dream," "Take care of your family," "Create jobs," "Develop our nation," "Transform the economy," "Release your potential," "Be part of a solution"—were but a few of the slogans they used.[63] This combination of a call to partake in economic transformation with appeals to self-realization was common in the enterprise development sector, which thereby presented itself as the facilitator of both personal *and* societal improvement. In the previous chapter, I discussed young professionals' entrepreneurialism in relation to layered aspirational legacies, and the way they heeded and renegotiated these. In this chapter, I look at the role played by the start-up hubs, events, and entrepreneurial programs in the formation of entrepreneurial aspirations and trajectories in Johannesburg. What did "the ecosystem," as the entirety of entrepreneurship infrastructure in a given setting is called in globalized vernacular,[64] have to offer young professionals?

The emergence of entrepreneurial programs around the world over the last decades has received ample attention. On one hand, social science scholars have brought into focus how the contemporary globalized promotion of entrepreneurship as a tool for development makes individuals or marginalized groups responsible for their own emancipation. Dolan and Rajak (2016), for one, note how a Nairobi-based entrepreneurial program is aimed at the moral "conversion" of poor and unemployed people to becoming self-reliant and self-helping, as a symptom of the "new economy of development" (515). Likewise, McGee (2019) sees how an entrepreneurialist football academy in Ghana aims to re-socialize talented children from across the continent into self-disciplined national leaders. His understanding of the academy's "strict moralism and transformative ethos" as "designed to fabricate a holistic overhaul of the African self" (8) conjures the dark shadow of neocolonialism. In turn, Tadesse (2017) shows how the Ethiopian government tries to "manag[e] an educated mass of unemployed youth" (149) through entrepreneurship programs and discourse. He concludes that this turns the "structural problem of unemployment" into one

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[63] See, for example, www.awethuproject.co.za, www.blackumbrellas.org, or www.raizcorp.com (accessed 9 November 2021).

[64] For example, development organizations aim to strengthen the African and/or the South African ecosystem and the municipality works to establish the ecosystem in Johannesburg; the entrepreneurs, meanwhile, complained among themselves about the lack of an ecosystem in the townships.

of "individual mentality," and "shifts the moral responsibility for economic insecurity away from the state and onto young graduates" (169). Whether focused on national or international relations, these studies highlight the role of entrepreneurial(ist) programs in problematic processes of subjectification. On the other hand, there are studies of new entrepreneurship that put forward its potential to contribute to economic and other forms of social growth, especially with regard to African contexts (e.g., McDade and Spring 2005; Ndabeni 2008; Kupolokun 2015; Mpeqa and Kuckertz 2015; cf. Tavoletti 2013). The notion of "Africapitalism" has sparked discussions about the ability and responsibility of the private sector to further development in African societies, and about the "African" forms of knowledge and management that may drive this (Amaeshi and Idemudia 2015; Akinyoade, Uche, and Dietz 2017). The celebratory tone of some such studies suggests a tendency to assume rather than scrutinize entrepreneurialist logics of development (see also Dey and Steyaert 2010). Yet other scholars see the entrepreneurialist trend in development thinking and funding, as exemplified in start-up hubs, as generative of new forms of community, while noting also how in such hubs the "Africa rising" discourse is reproduced without necessarily really helping those they target (e.g., Toivonen and Friederici 2015; Friederici 2018). Whether accusatory or hope-filled, in most studies of entrepreneurialism the central question is one of outcome on a structural level: their assessments hinge on the (assumed) emancipatory or derogatory effects on participants' economic positions and/or the wider economies they claim to serve.

Figure 8 - A conference about funding for small businesses in Johannesburg – Source: Lieve de Coninck.

The continued need for critical analyses of the ways in which development programs and ideologies do and do not contribute to emancipation, and for whom, is clear. However, to understand the social significance of entrepreneurialist programs and discourses more fully, it is important to bring into view how they may have impact and/or value beyond structural definitions of development and of assumed results. It is furthermore necessary to look at what entrepreneurialist programs may enable as much as foreclose. DeHart (2010) has shown how the emergence of the figure of the "ethnic entrepreneur" as the quintessential agent of development in Latin America over the last decades has entailed a shift

in responsibility and visibility away from the state. But she also underlines the need to consider how such "development practice offered the opportunity for new kinds of authority, participation, and recognition for previously marginalized actors even as it potentially reinforced certain forms of inequality and produced new dilemmas" (12–13). In that vein, Di Giminiani's (2018) study of Mapuche rural residents' engagement with state-supported micro-entrepreneurship in Chile makes clear that it produced new dependencies for local residents on state and market actors, but also critical knowledge about these relationships. Similarly, Steiner (2019) notes the "unintended distributive effects" of state-driven entrepreneurial programs in Oman, as they stimulate and enable Omanis to earn a living and social support by acting in line with state discourse of development. Di Nunzio (2015), too, draws attention to the ways in which poor Addis Ababans' engagement with state-driven entrepreneurial programs—which largely fail to generate sustainable businesses or major changes in participants' economic position—conjures new expectations for and critiques of government support and economic opportunities. In short, "the formation of entrepreneurial subjects can hardly be defined as a process with an ineluctable result" (Di Giminiani 2018, 261). These studies thus direct attention to the ambivalence and multiplicity of the effects of entrepreneurial programs.

Departing from this inherent ambivalence, I take up the question of entrepreneurial programs' appeal to young professionals in Johannesburg as one of understanding what meaning- and value-making it allowed them to do. Analyzing participation in a *stokvel* savings scheme in an informal settlement near Cape Town, Makhulu (2012a) shows how this presented a downward spiral of indebtedness for some members, but at the same time allowed them to perform the affective and redistributive work that was crucial to the survival of their households. The way Makhulu understands participation in such schemes as one of various "awkward economic strategies that, on one hand, make visible the economic instabilities of the broader society and, on the other hand, offer concrete modes of overcoming and redirecting value" (139) is helpful here, as it centralizes the moral economic logic of people's lifeworlds and how this informs their purposeful actions. Although entrepreneurial programs are different from stokvels in many respects, I suggest that their meaning for young professionals must likewise be sought in the "concrete modes" of being and doing that they offer. Instead of measuring the ecosystem against promises of structural change, I thus focus on its relevance for participants compelled to middle-class; that is, to strive for upward mobility and recognition in light of national and personal aspirational legacies (see previous chapter). How did the ecosystem allow young professionals to make good lives?

In this chapter, I zoom in on three aspects of Johannesburg's ecosystem: the selection procedures of entrepreneurial programs, the lifestyle and career opportunities on offer, and the widespread staged performances of entrepreneurial success and suitability. Below, I first discuss how an aspirational ideal of middleclassness undergirds the selection procedures of the three programs from which my main observations were drawn. Next, I show how young professionals were able to carve out a career for themselves in and through the enterprise development sector. And lastly, I zoom in on the way in which the performance of entrepreneurial success like in pitching competitions could garner access to workspaces and networks, as well as public recognition. I thus aim to show how the ecosystem of start-up hubs, business incubators and small business events fostered the cultural practice of striving that is at the heart of middleclassness.

Becoming incubated

There were several ways to enter entrepreneurial programs, but it was not necessarily easy: continuous investments of time and money and particular displays of skill and strength were required to get in and to stay in. How precisely did the organizations select their participants? Comparing the various approaches to selection at Phendula Enterprises, JBO Foundation and Eshisha Hub shows the standards of suitability by which aspiring participants were assessed.

Phendula Enterprises

Phendula Enterprises was started about a decade ago, and it had become a national incubation organization with locations in eight cities and towns. In Johannesburg, their office was located in an upmarket office park in the northern suburbs, where they hosted an exclusive three-year incubation program. This included workshops, mentoring, working space, and administrative services to two cohorts of four to eight selected start-ups per year, provided for a monthly fee. The program was sponsored by several corporate social responsibility funds, with the main one being linked to a well-known politician. The central reception area of the building in which Phendula Enterprises occupied a medium-sized office space was furnished with a long wooden counter, adorned with a vase with fresh flowers, that faced a leather couch and several comfortable seats. The floors were cast in off-white and grey natural stone. Neat signage on the wall showed the way to the various businesses located in the corridors, which stretched out from the reception hall in two directions. The silence, calm and order of the space provided a stark contrast to the bustle of traffic just outside the gated parking lot before the entrance, and with the state of vigilance that unavoidably arose when moving

through Johannesburg public space. At the end of the north corridor, a lift and open staircase lead to the Phendula office on the first floor. Staff and program members could enter Phendula's own reception area with fingerprint identification, while visitors had to wait in front of the glass door until they were noticed by the receptionist to be buzzed in. These aesthetics and material barriers to access were indicative of the segregation and concomitant securitization that marks Johannesburg's geography (e.g., Crankshaw 2008; Landman 2009), and as such also of the classed thresholds to participation in Phendula's program.[65]

Phendula's selection procedure lasted three months, and consisted of an intensive, compulsory training program which had its own preliminary selection procedure. To enter the selection program in the first place required attending a two-hour information session at the office (an attendance sheet had to be signed), filling out a twelve-page questionnaire, and submitting one's CV as well as proof of having formally registered a business, tax clearance, and the CV of all staff and co-directors in the business. A personal interview with the managers of the incubator about one's background, motivation and business plans concluded the selection for the selection program. Based on the questionnaire, the documents and the interview, the managers assessed applicants' eligibility and decided who to invite to join the pre-selection program. The program thereafter consisted of compulsory half-day workshops twice a week, one-on-one meetings with a senior business mentor from Phendula's network of corporate partners, weekly homework assignments, and one-on-one sessions with the incubator's management to monitor progress. At the end of the three months, candidates for "full incubation" were required to submit an elaborate, strictly formatted business plan, and to perform a pitch—as rehearsed in several mandatory practice sessions—before a panel of external business consultants. They then advised the Phendula management on the quality of the candidate and their plans, before the managers finally decided who would be accepted into the rest of the three-year incubation program.

Phendula Enterprises clearly worked with a clearly defined profile in their search for and cultivation of suitably entrepreneurial participants. The material, psychological and moral parameters for candidates' suitability protruded, for example, from the questionnaire, which among other things asked rhetorical questions such as "Are you married? If so, are you married in or out of community of property?" "Have you ever been blacklisted by a credit rating agency?" "Do you have a criminal record?" "How long would you be able to

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[65] For a more thorough treatment of the manner in which "aesthetics of formality" may constitute middleclassness in particular with regard to real estate, see Gastrow (2020).

manage financially without any income coming in?" "Do you have strong self-discipline?" and "Do you have strong morals and a high ethical standard?" In the compulsory information session for aspiring candidates, the leading staff member described the criteria for official graduation from the program: "Can it create four permanent employees in three years? We also want you to set targets for your own salary, not just for your employees.… If you want to be professional, that's important.… We want businesses that create wealth, we don't want you to be a Mickey Mouse business, or a tenderpreneur." So, the selection procedure was expressly geared towards grooming a professional practitioner of proper entrepreneurship.

This definition of a proper entrepreneur as able to pay multiple salaries and as avoiding dependency on government tenders that Phendula put forward reflected, on the one hand, an entrepreneurialist development discourse of entrepreneurship as a solution to poverty and joblessness. The injunction to create employment for others, i.e., to become an employer, echoed a current global discourse that emphasizes the need to create jobs (Lawhon et al. 2018). Challenging employment and wage labor's central place in the promise of emancipation in South Africa throughout the twentieth century (Barchiesi 2008, 2016), the injunction to become an employer rather than employed provides an interesting twist to the "workerism" (e.g., Byrne and Ulrich 2016) historically dominant in South Africa. But on the other hand, the directive to not be "a Mickey Mouse business, or a tenderpreneur" reflected public debates on the social responsibilities and morality of those on the up in post-transition South Africa. The way Phendula thus phrased and framed proper entrepreneurship conveyed their reliance on a middle-class morality, and their expectations of candidates' ability to subscribe to it.

Moreover, the mandatory nature of the workshops and interviews in the pre-selection program meant that participants without access to private transport or who lived far from Phendula had to invest significant amounts of time and/or money to get there on a regular basis. One candidate drove more than 70 kilometers one way from her home to the office, incurring serious petrol and toll costs, in addition to spending two and a half hours in traffic each time. Additionally, candidates had to pay a one-off fee of just over R2000 for the selection program, and participation in the rest of the three-year program cost roughly the same amount monthly. So, before being considered for incubation at Phendula, aspiring candidates needed to become recognized as suitably entrepreneurial by demonstrating an ability to navigate South African bureaucracy, professionalism, adherence to a particular morality of success, and financial capacity. Phendula's ideal participant, then, was typically middle class.

For the candidates in the pre-selection program, these material and performative thresholds did not function as a deterrent, but rather contributed to Phendula's attraction. When one of the staff at the information session asked those present about their reasons for signing up specifically with Phendula, one candidate said, "Seeing that it's one of the most reputable incubating programs it would be opportune for us to be associated with you, who are also in the business of uplifting young people." His exaggeratedly formal choice of words sparked laughter around the boardroom table, but his remark nevertheless conveyed Phendula's reputation as providing access to opportunities and status, and the value accorded the notion of "upliftment" of self and others through entrepreneurship. I suggest this candidate's understanding of the power of association indicates the manner in which a "reputable" entrepreneurial program could be a form of credentialing.

JBO Foundation

The JBO Foundation was founded around the same time as Phendula by a large South African finance corporation as a form of corporate social responsibility. Receiving structural funding from this corporation, it had grown rapidly and operated nationwide. Instead of a paid membership model, it had at its core a scholarship program that covered tuition and provided a stipend for promising high school learners and tertiary students in fifty institutions around the country. Recipients of this grant (about 150 total at the time of fieldwork) were obliged to participate in an extra-curricular entrepreneurial leadership program. For graduates of the program that wanted to start businesses, JBO furthermore ran their own incubation and acceleration programs. The latter offered start-up capital in addition to mentoring, a relatively unique combination in the wider ecosystem. In contrast to Phendula, JBO used their office in another of Johannesburg's northern suburbs more as a back-office than a front stage for their activities. These instead mostly took place either on university campuses or in hired venues around town, at other start-up hubs, or in conference facilities at hotels.

At JBO Foundation, the set-up of the selection procedure was notably different from Phendula but equally based on material, performative and moral benchmarks. Over the years, JBO's focus on the cultivation of "leadership" by facilitating access to tertiary education and high-profile careers had become phrased increasingly in entrepreneurial terms, but the foundation of academic performance remained. This was reflected in the recruitment practices: Promotional teams of graduates from the program held regular presentations in schools and universities nationwide, distributing application forms in matching outfits. For those eventually welcomed into "the family," as participants and staff called it, continued access to financial support was

premised on the upkeep of a 70% grade point average in their studies and satisfactory participation in the extracurricular entrepreneurialist program. This entailed participation in workshops, debates, mentoring sessions and homework assignments around topics such as product development, sales or community support, as well as the upkeep of a "personal leadership" portfolio, with the results of personality tests, reflections on their academic and personal development, and vision and mission statements for their lives. This interlinking of academic and entrepreneurial performance presented something of a paradox, in that it aimed to produce a new form of leadership ("entrepreneurial") by facilitating a traditional upward route, i.e., (higher) education. Where in the case of Phendula "being associated" with the program was a form of credentialing *outside of* higher education, in the case of JBO it was inextricably bound up with it.

Candidates' eligibility to apply in the first place was premised on proven lack of access to financial resources from close relatives, and on proof of their academic proficiency. Applicants were also required to write an extensive motivation statement, as well as their vision for South Africa. Based on these documents, a first selection of applicants from each national region, reflecting the region's "demographics," in terms of racial categorisation and gender was invited for an elaborate videotaped interview about their capacities and aspirations. From there, a second selection of applicants was invited to "camp": a three-day selection marathon at a conference center near Johannesburg, with over two hundred candidates from around the country. The program ran from 9 a.m. till 9 p.m., with several individual and group assessments each day. Its organization involved around sixty paid and volunteer staff, including audiovisual and communications officers, and a small army of specially trained "assessors." The latter's observations and the results of various tests formed the basis for the final selection of about half of the remaining applicants.

The importance JBO attached to the methodical assessment of candidates' potential through individual tests, group work and performances stood out clearly at camp. On the second day of the 2017 run, I observed a section of the applicants in matching JBO t-shirts as they were preparing to pitch "entrepreneurial solutions for social problems" to a staff jury and an audience of other candidates. They were seated around tables in groups of five while the assessors hovered around them, listened in on the discussion, and noted observations of their assigned candidate's performance on pre-formatted forms. Above the constant hum that arose from the room, one assessor told me, "We select for entrepreneurial potential. This here is the core business of the [JBO] foundation, what you're seeing here." Meanwhile, in the adjacent conference room, the rest of the candidates worked on individual computerized

psychometric tests. The observation forms and test results were scored and discussed by the assessors in the back office at the end of each day.

The rationale for the selection procedures at JBO Foundation was firmly rooted in psychological science with a central role for the concept of the "entrepreneurial mindset." In 2017, JBO published a research report on the concept of the entrepreneurial mindset and how to measure it, in collaboration with a global research organization. The report linked mindset—"a state of mind which orientates human conduct"—to business success, and noted it as playing "a key role in enabling people to notice and leverage entrepreneurial opportunities." Based on an extensive review of academic literature in personality- and cognitive psychology, the report listed eleven core characteristics of an entrepreneurial mindset[66] and a total of seventy-six "mindset dimensions." It also discussed effective ways to measure these with surveys. At camp, a recent graduate from the program told a cohort of aspiring candidates that "there is a place for you in the program if you're passionate about changing the world, either in that entrepreneurial space, by starting an actual business, or through having an entrepreneurial mindset." The entrepreneurial mindset was thus presented as an asset, and cultivating it as a goal in itself.

The staff at selection camp took their work of sussing out who owned or did not own this mindset very seriously. Over the warm buffet lunch served for all camp staff and participants, the JBO head of selection told me about a recent evaluation of the methods they had just finished: "It turned out the psychologist wasn't following best practices; the rubrics were all wrong and mixed up. And this has possibly impacted our selection, some people not getting in that deserved to be in. And that's important to get right, because we're changing the course of people's lives. Ultimately that's what we do." He thus emphasized the need for methodical rigor given the significance of JBO's mission and power to change lives. Those ultimately deemed deserving of such a life-changing opportunity at JBO were thus those with the right amount of measurable entrepreneurial mindset.

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[66] The mindset characteristics listed in the report are: "lifelong learning and openness to change"; "engagement in a complex and uncertain world"; "creative and innovative approaches to problem solving"; "belief and confidence in one's own capacity and competency to be entrepreneurial"; "desire, motivation and intention to practice entrepreneurship and behave entrepreneurially"; "taking initiative and personal responsibility for actions"; "a pursuit of goal attainment through personal mastery and value-creation"; "recognising opportunities"; "grit and perseverance in the face of challenges"; "taking risks that lead to learning, growth and value" and "a belief in one's ability to influence."

The extensive assessments of camp put candidates under pressure not only in measurable but also in unmeasurable ways. With many of them in a posh environment and far from home for the first time, another assessor told me that "for some candidates, like, they come from the rural areas and this is almost too much for them. It overwhelms them being here." She thus pointed out the impact of the social distance between some of the candidates' under-resourced backgrounds and the fancy environment and performative requirements of the selection procedure. To cope with the pressures of camp, "reflective time" was set aside for the candidates each day to write in the journals with which JBO provided them. In previous years, staff had collected the journals to read through them, in order to get a sense of the candidates' experiences, but now they just let them keep it. The concept of journaling as a way to reduce certain candidates' potential anxiety indicated the reflective and discursive self-understanding typical of middleclassness (see James 2015, 2019) that JBO expected the candidates to develop, and their psychologized approach towards entrepreneurial potential.

Relying on scientific methods to evaluate the quality of their candidates' mindsets and entrepreneurial potential, and urging candidates to reflect on their experiences and performances in journals, JBO's selection procedure projected a middle-class persona. So, JBO facilitated and encouraged not only professional trajectories but also a process of personal development that exemplifies middleclassness.

Eshisha Hub

The way Eshisha Hub managed the selection of their paying members was markedly relaxed in comparison to the other organizations. The hub had been launched only a few years previously by one of Johannesburg's universities, from which they received basic funding, while also maintaining sponsor relations with IBM, a national telecom provider, and several South African government agencies and embassies. Housed in a large premises in the inner city of Johannesburg, the hub facilitated several short- and long-term business incubation programs for various target groups, accelerators (follow-up programs), and entrepreneurial events by a plethora of partner organizations. They also offered co-working spaces, bookkeeping services and access to events for those who paid monthly membership fees.

Applicants signed up through a short online form that asked to provide a blurb about their business (idea) and some background information. Management then invited all those who submitted the form to an introductory information session on the Eshisha premises, which was informal in tone: The hub's community manager related the origin story of the hub—a Schumpeterian

entrepreneurial narrative (see Röschentaler and Schultz 2015) that reverberated widely in the ecosystem: one man (in this case a professor) had had a vision for a project that would improve many lives, nobody believed it was possible, but he persevered and realized his vision (in this case the hub) nonetheless. She then outlined the membership scheme and the various partner programs run at Eshisha, and asked each applicant how they saw themselves contributing to "the community." After that, it was a matter of providing details for the monthly payment of membership fees, and registering for fingerprint access, and access to the hub was established. A staff member allegedly reviewed the application forms before inviting aspiring members, but other than a preferred link to "tech" (technological innovation), there seemed to be no official metrics in place to predetermine the suitability of potential members.

Rather, Eshisha Hub staff continuously emphasized the need to grow the community, both as a social ideal and in terms of the economic reality of the organization itself. Paid membership schemes ranged from R120 a day for drop-in access to R1500 per month per person for full access to the office facilities and partner events. However, as a staff member acknowledged, "The bulk of people here are sponsored [by a partner organization]. Co-working is a hard sell, people can't afford the fees." This meant that the hub financially relied on hiring out its office and event spaces to partner organizations, in addition to cash injections from the founding university. In turn, however, these partnerships relied on the presence of a "community" of entrepreneurs. Eshisha's reliance on partner organizations and venue hire by external parties on the one hand, and on the presence of a community of member entrepreneurs on the other meant that there were many ways to gain access to the hub with little risk of being excluded. So, when staff formally requested long-time member Mokgheti to leave the hub for defaulting on fee payments in a rare moment of administrative disciplinary action, he simply continued to show up, now using only the sponsored desk spaces outside the member areas. When I asked him if he wasn't upset about being sent away, he smiled and shrugged: "Ag, they did it before. They can't keep me from coming here." Indeed, a few months later he managed to organize a new, personal sponsorship, from the founder of the hub himself, and regained his full entry. Eshisha was thus marked by both a density of programs and events, and a porousness of its intended community.

Nevertheless, Eshisha was also concerned with putting forward standards of orderliness and sociality on the premises. Among staff, there was continuous deliberation of how to establish and maintain norms and inculcate a proper entrepreneurial culture among their members. They organized community assemblies where members could raise concerns and provide input for the hub's policies, and communal breakfasts "to boost morale." They regularly complained about the lack of "community-minded" members, and praised

those who had shown commitment to the hub itself or a partner organization, like the young man who volunteered yoga lessons for fellow members in the morning; the person who had tidied the board room of his own accord; and Simon, a longstanding member like Mokgheti. As a participant in the IBM incubation program that the hub hosted, he always showed up on time with homework done, and accepted the feedback offered him by the trainers. He was also the winner of the pitching challenge that concluded the program. After a rant about the lack of discipline he had observed in many of the other participants, one of the hub's managers sighed, "Why can't everybody be like Simon?" In turn, members often complained about the way the hub expected their attendance at events and meetings, but did not provide enough in return.

The gap between the hub's standards and expectations, and the lifeworlds of Eshisha members was revealed notably in several particular moments of friction around food that occurred during my fieldwork. For one, next to the reception area, Eshisha housed a small coffee shop that also served breakfasts and lunch dishes. However, these were generally considered too pricey and fancy by most community members, who usually walked out for a *kota*[67] or a burger. But there were also members who often could not afford to buy any kind of lunch at all and went entire working days without eating. As a result, the coffee shop was mostly frequented by staff or visiting consultants. One early evening, just before the coffee shop's closing time, however, two members walked into the main co-working space with French fries and ketchup in a pyro foam container. Another member spotted them and shouted from across the room, "Oooh, where did you get that?!" "At the coffee shop at reception!" they replied. "Oh my word, I didn't know they did chips! Finally! I thought they only had that food for executives!"—commenting not just on the pricing, but also on the mismatch between the kind of food served and most members' social status. Interestingly, the fries were sold surreptitiously towards the end of the day only, when most staff had gone home, and they never appeared on the official menu.

But food contentions at Eshisha went beyond lunch expectations. At a community assembly, Eshisha staff announced that from now on, the communal kitchen would stock creamer instead of milk. Until then, fresh milk had been provided in the kitchen as a supplement to the instant coffee and rooibos tea available to members. But the milk consumption far exceeded what Eshisha's budget was able to provide. Apparently, some members had used the milk for meals, or had drunk entire glasses. Someone had brought a carton of cereal,

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[67] *Kota* is a quarter-bread filled, traditionally, with chips, cheese, sausage and achar, although there are many variations. It is known as "kasi" (township) food. Around the time of my fieldwork a basic kota cost around 20 rand. By comparison, the remainder of the coffee shop dishes cost more than 40 rand and were smaller in size.

from which he made himself breakfast with the milk. The fresh milk ban was met with much chagrin among the entrepreneurs present at the meeting, but not as much as the email from management to all members that followed a few weeks later. The email announced that from then on, the doors to the conference rooms would be locked during partner events because it had become so common for members to pop into events only to dish up from the warm buffets commonly served that it had caused undue stress to caterers and organizers, who had struggled to provide enough food to the *official* guests. Unless formally invited or registered as participants, members could no longer enter the conference rooms, and would have to take alternative routes to the bathrooms and reception area. In other words, the hub dealt with these unintended effects of the hub's set-up by restricting access to resources in a literal way.

Trivial as these food frictions may seem, they were indicative of classed inequalities among Eshisha members and of the incongruencies between members' lifestyles and the hub's ideal participant. They revealed pronounced material inequalities not only between aspiring entrepreneurs but also between their daily lives and the norms of the business world. The surreptitious fries and the physical blockade from buffets at events represented ways to manage this gap by members and staff, respectively. Over and above, these scenes reflect the middleclassness of Eshisha's target audience: a punctilious person who showed up on time with homework done, who consumed particular foods in particular manners, and did not (need to) take undue advantage of opportunities to eat. In other words: a good student who could afford a proper lunch.

Figure 9 - Coffee and lunch break at an entrepreneurship conference in one of the hubs. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

Overall, the programs I looked at in the Johannesburg ecosystem were largely aimed at high achievers such as tertiary students or young professionals, an important difference with the so-called "Bottom of the Pyramid" (BoP) entrepreneurial initiatives for the poor and unemployed (Dolan and Rajak 2016), or indigenous communities (Di Giminiani 2018). Phendula, JBO and Eshisha all had goals of social upliftment and correcting forms without certain levels of pre-existing economic, social or cultural capital. To participate, aspiring entrepreneurs had to meet a range of material and performative standards. Not only did they have to demonstrate that they had—or indeed did *not* have—the material resources to follow an upward trajectory as an entrepreneur on their own, and the ability to of disadvantage, but at the same time they were difficult

to access and thrive in for participants convincingly convey their plans in writing and speaking, but also a personal suitability. In addition to particular levels of income and education, the programs demanded a professional attitude, a particular mindset, a reflexive self-understanding, a sense of responsibility and community, and self-discipline. These requirements of the entrepreneurial programs, ironically, affirmed the importance of experience in higher education or a professional working environment. By facilitating upward trajectories, these programs formed an alternative to (or in the case of JBO, through) higher education, and thus to respectability. As such, they built on and reproduced an aspirational ideal of middleclassness. Moreover, presenting entrepreneurial suitability as a personal quality and providing opportunities to develop it, the programs offered a way to make the "moral and ethical claim to being a specific kind of person" that also makes up middleclassness (Srivastava 2012, 57). In all, the selection procedures of entrepreneurial programs credentialed entrepreneurship as a respectable upward trajectory and an entrepreneurial person as a worthy person. Once on board, the ecosystem at large offered ample opportunities to middle-class, some of which returned tangible results. It is to these opportunities that I now turn.

Making use of the ecosystem?

In my first few weeks at Eshisha Hub, I was struck by the amount of time and energy hub members spent on complaints about the Wi-Fi, which they invariably deemed too slow or unreliable. "Why do I even come here if there's no decent Wi-Fi?!" Mokgheti grumbled, clicking his tongue in emphasis. Others readily joined his chorus, and sang it themselves on other days. At first, I thought the entrepreneurs stressed themselves over an afterthought. But as I also came to rely on patchy and costly prepaid internet whenever I was not at the hub, I started understanding this preoccupation with the infrastructural qualities of the hub a little better.

For those able to jump the material and performative hurdles of access, the pursuit of entrepreneurial success enabled an aspirational urban lifestyle in very tangible manners. Joining a hub or an incubator offered a place to go, a space to be, and access to resources and infrastructure such as speedy Wi-Fi, desk space, printing and meeting rooms—all much-desired and relatively scarce elements of a middle-classing lifestyle in Johannesburg, even for tertiary students and young professionals—in addition to quiet, entertainment, and likeminded social company. At Eshisha, people used the hub to work and study in silence, to binge-watch online series, make friends, hang out, enjoy informal parties in the evenings, smoke weed, do yoga, eat their meals, and to sleep. In the short period when it had had around-the-clock opening hours, before my fieldwork, one person had apparently started living at the hub after he lost his rental

apartment. For those with crowded homes and/or substandard internet connections, for those without financial back-up from parents or spouses, and for those from rural areas with limited social networks in the city, joining a hub or incubation program offered ways to practice an aspirational city life.

Beyond opportunities to engage in these cultural practices of middleclassness, the expanding enterprise development sector offered ways to accrue material resources. Although Mokgheti often spoke about the stresses of "bootstrapping" his entrepreneurial life, and despite the fact that his financial situation was clearly unstable, he was nevertheless able to maintain himself as a starting entrepreneur by tapping into sponsorships and grants, and winning entrepreneurial competitions. And doing even better for himself in a kind of meta-entrepreneurship, Mokgheti's friend and foe Keletso made clever use of the opportunities to commodify entrepreneurial aspirations themselves. When he had moved from Cape Town to Johannesburg after some success with a PR business, he had placed his other enterprise—the platform for aspiring township entrepreneurs called Sethala—at the forefront of his public profile. Deploying his media savvy, he soon became honored in several high-profile public lists of promising young changemakers (e.g., in Forbes magazine), and a recipient of multiple grants and scholarships (e.g., from the University of Cape Town). Like Mokgheti, Keletso knew well how to generate a cumulative effect from such exposure, and soon enough he had created partnerships with local and national politicians, investors and corporates to produce his own pitching events, small business expos, mentorships and sponsorships for other entrepreneurs. He also lobbied for entrepreneurship with policymakers and research institutions. He thus raised recognition and funds as an entrepreneur in entrepreneurship.

Zooming in on a Sethala event, it becomes clear how this worked. Via a connection in the tourism office of the city of Johannesburg, Keletso had

Figure 10 - Call for entry for a pitching contest in Johannesburg for township-based businesses. Source: Lieve de Coninck

organized an international exchange for selected small businesses from Johannesburg with business students from a Los Angeles-based university. Set in the garden of a luxury estate in one of Johannesburg's leafy suburbs, he had put together a full day of presentations and an interactive workshop. The program started with ninety minutes of speeches by representatives of the university and by Keletso about the value of entrepreneurship. When I arrived a little late due to traffic, Keletso assured me that I hadn't missed anything important, "just those speeches that you know." Then, as the American students and the South African entrepreneurs were provided with a buffet lunch in the garden, Keletso and other representatives of the organizing parties held a networking session inside. After lunch, each local entrepreneur was coupled with three L.A. students, who were to provide the former with business advice for two hours. The final part of the day brought everyone together in one of the estate's buildings for the sharing of "takeaways," the giving of gifts from the students to the entrepreneurs (leather luggage tags with the university emblem), and a formal photo session on the lawn outside against a Sethala banner. In the session I observed, Sethala member Magda spilled her guts about many issues in her life, but spoke little about her business. Thus far she had not made a sale, although she was enrolled in three different entrepreneurial programs. The students politely kept steering her towards business issues with questions such as "Ok, but what is your profit margin?"—yet Magda kept returning to her account of the hardships of starting up, the breakup of her marriage, and her struggles for the custody of her children since. Afterwards, I asked one of the students what she thought of Magda's story. "Well, she seems very lonely," the student opined, "but also, my gosh, how can you be on so many programs without even one client?!" When I asked Magda if she had found the event useful, she said it had cost her a lot of time, but at least there was free lunch. She added, "I'm part of the Sethala platform, Keletso is giving me opportunities, so if he asks me to show up, I show up." Instead, for Sethala and the co-organizing enterprise development agencies, the event had generated material transactions over and above symbolic ones: the L.A. institution paid fees which the agencies redistributed to service partners such as Sethala.

This tautological entrepreneurialism—entrepreneurial success based on trade in the aspiration and techniques for entrepreneurial success—was a tenet of the Johannesburg ecosystem that conjured prospects and critique alike. Mansa, for example, considered incubators to provide "feel-good sessions": "You know, they're making you feel good about being an entrepreneur. At [my first incubator], when we were doing vision, mission, value proposition sessions, you feel like you're really working on something that will work. That now I will be a millionaire. But then at the end of the day after that workshop, you have a good feeling but no money in the bank. It's not actual business in itself!" At the same

time, Mansa was building his reputation as a public speaker at start-up events and his church about the way the "entrepreneurial mindset" works, encouraging and affirming his audiences' entrepreneurial aspirations. Displaying similar ambivalence, Ndzulukani did not want to be called an entrepreneur herself and went to great lengths to present her multiple business ownership as coincidental; yet, she started an entrepreneurship academy to teach kids how to live entrepreneurial lives.

Ambivalent combinations of idealism and pragmatism were common in the way users and members of hubs such as Eshisha positioned themselves. Watching a pitching competition from the back of the room, Eshisha member Tumi commented on the way the ecosystem functioned as a marketplace: "Think about why these competitions happen [at] this time of the year, Lieve. Why? It's the end of the tax season. You know, real entrepreneurs don't win competitions. It's not part of the game. Entrepreneurs create products that people buy." I asked, "But isn't the market a kind of competition also?" "No, because in creating products that people buy, there is not one party with all the money, that hands out the prize," Tumi said. Seeing such events serve the interests of organizers more than those of participants through the tax breaks they provided corporate sponsors, Tumi lamented the way the ecosystem sold out on the ideal of entrepreneurship as a foundation for a more

Figure 11 - A typical advertisement for a business seminar. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

equal economy. At the same time, he had been a hub-hopping member of the ecosystem for several years now, together with a small group of other young men that frequented Eshisha who had been disappointed by a lack of results and professional guidance in other hubs. Together, they were now scouring the city for the best coworking deals, pragmatically attending whichever entrepreneurial hub was most affordable and accessible for as long as it was so. As Mpendulo, one of Tumi's entrepreneurial friends, put it, "Now we just want a place to work on our business in peace." To understand this tense combination of critiquing and continuing to buy into the offerings of the ecosystem, Di Giminiani's (2018) analysis of small business projects in rural Chile provides a stepping stone: He notes how entrepreneurial discourse and programs grow and regenerate participants' hopes "of breaking free from the bonds of dependence

with powerful market actors and disempowering state assistance" by "elicit[ing] imaginaries of individual and collective autonomy," on one hand, "while effectively establishing new bonds of dependence with market actors and the state" on the other (261). Whether their hub-hopping actually made them more or less dependent, Tumi and Mpendulo showed critical understanding of these processes, and concerted efforts to straddle them to their advantage.

That this market of enterprise development contained a complex balance of power between singular entrepreneurs and other actors in it, such as investors, agencies, sponsors and hubs, became clear also in a conflict between JBO accelerator participant Michael and the program's staff. After graduating from university through JBO, Michael had worked as a chartered accountant for several years before starting a financial consultancy. In addition, he launched a business producing and selling dolls, as a result of his own frustrated search for a doll for his daughter that resembled her skin tone and hair. After several attempts, he was finally accepted onto the JBO accelerator program, which consisted of three months of compulsory workshops and long-term one-on-one mentoring sessions with various external consultancies. At the start, middle and end of the trajectory, if they had performed according to standard, each participant received a significant capital injection, a relatively unique deal in the ecosystem at large. Part of the requirements were monthly presentations of plans and progress in a board meeting with the program's director and staff plus the external consultants. Tensions between Michael and the board in one of these meetings, and his reflections on them afterwards, show not only how the relationship and interactions between programs and participants in the ecosystem echo wider societal contentions but also how young professionals consciously navigate these in their efforts to build a life for themselves.

Figure 12 - Another critical Facebook comment by a well-known entrepreneur. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

A few minutes into Michael's presentation, it became clear that he had used money he had previously agreed to spend on launching a website on the development of a new product instead—a surprise to the staff. Some back and forth about whether that was really the best strategy for the business followed,

and the staff expressed their irritation that Michael had not informed them about his rogue decision. Michael rebutted their claims, and the increasingly tense interaction came to a peak when one of the consultants said:

> "I don't think you trust us. You don't trust us with the intention of growing your business."
> Michael: "I don't trust the system."
> 2nd staff member: "But the system is people."

The staff was notably further irritated when Michael relayed to the board that he had engaged in talks with other capital providers for more funding. And so Michael's frankness paradoxically sparked a crisis of trust and communication. In the rest of the meeting, the staff repeated their concern about Michael's lack of transparency with them, and continued to encourage him to trust them. Michael defended himself by arguing that his actions were based on new insights and his personal development as a result of the program. Eventually, the discussion ended with mutual expressions of good intentions for the remainder of the program.

When afterwards I asked Michael why he didn't trust the program, he said, "Because we've butted heads before. There's a history. I tried to get on the program with the other business a few times, and they wouldn't have me. Even with the dolls, for the longest time they didn't believe it was going to work. I asked [staff member 2] to introduce me to some of the big retailers, as she has a background in it, and she kept saying, 'After the program, you're not ready.' And it took me only ONE meeting with [large retail chain] and I got the deal. Competition has been at it for years and I just get in like that. So they're just trying to stick to the method too tightly! They want me to conform to their structure, and that's not how it works. I have a business to run day-to-day. They want to go textbook on it. So like with the [new product], I had this funding money to spend, and I was thinking I could spend it on the website for online sales like the program suggests, but really, online in South Africa? It's only 15% of sales being made! So I could also make these [new products] and keep selling. [This program] is run by a couple of academics. They're not businesspeople. And [name of external consultancy], how can you say you're big on black empowerment and not have a single black staff [member]? And how as [JBO] do you accept that? But I was actually quite surprised with myself that I told them I don't trust them today.… But I don't think they'll actually listen. I still don't trust them, but I need the money. So I'll do what they need me to do to be able to use this money."

So, Michael felt the program tried to keep him small and denied him autonomy. Considering the staff's expertise removed from reality ("academic"), he did not subscribe to their authority, a perspective Mansa, Mokgheti and Tumi also

regularly expressed. In addition, his comment on the hypocrisy of promoting black empowerment without hiring black staff reflected prominent public debates on economic transformation and the seeming unwillingness of a white-dominated corporate world to cooperate. To Michael, the board thus appeared to personify and practice the known ways in which black South Africans remained disproportionally excluded from capital. His assertion that he would "do what they need me to do to be able to use this money" points to his dependency as much as his agency. Maneuvering in his communication with the board, he was trying to grab an opportunity to access resources.

In sum, entrepreneurial programs and hubs offered concrete ways to live aspirational urban lives with tangible benefits. Participants well recognized the ways in which the enterprise development sector reproduced inequalities in access to capital and other material resources for a good life, and the unequal odds in the way it operated; but they also noted and made use of its points of entry to upward trajectories and recognition. Paying attention to the complexity of interactions in the ecosystem and the benefits of engaging the process of entrepreneurial pursuit itself sheds new light on the question of entrepreneurial programs' ultimate emancipatory or exploitative effects.

Performing entrepreneurial success

While material gains understandably mattered a great deal to many of the participants in entrepreneurial programs—how and when to "hit big," achieving financial freedom, and retiring before forty were much discussed themes—it is crucial to see how the ecosystem offered ways to be and feel like an achiever well before and apart from any financial success. This became clear in the explicit performances of entrepreneurial success that formed a key component of many an event or program, whether in the form of role-play exercises, rehearsed presentations or staged pitching shows.

Pitching sessions were omnipresent in Johannesburg's enterprise development sector. The format of "the pitch" was used for training and selection purposes within various programs, an element of many large-scale start-up events, and for standalone business competitions. In brief, a typical pitching competition in Johannesburg comprised a series of scripted, onstage performances by aspiring entrepreneurs in front of a panel of judges made up of captains of industry: established entrepreneurs, investors, or CEOs of entrepreneurial funds and programs. Each pitch consisted of a short speech, accompanied by visuals and gestures, about the state of one's business and its projected growth, with the aim of convincing the judges that it was deserving of investment. Prizes varied from free marketing advice, to a coaching session or sponsored hub membership, or a laptop or cash. Sponsored and promoted by powerful actors such as Red Bull, IBM, the provincial government or a mining corporation,

pitching challenges imbued entrepreneurial performances with legitimacy and status. They were often promoted as unique and fun opportunities to tap into networks and other resources for aspiring participants, while allowing the organizing parties to promote their brand, to boost their corporate social responsibility profile, or, in the case of government or a non-profit, to promote entrepreneurship as development. In the way they combined a festive atmosphere with promotion, they sometimes reminded me of Tupperware parties, only much more public. Typically executed with much fanfare, professional photographers and videographers and a designated area for photo opportunities against a background of sponsor logos were standard elements of pitching challenges in Johannesburg.

The grand onstage pitching show JBO organized as part of their national annual gathering provided an impressive example. A professionally organized excitement-inducing show formed the pinnacle of a festive three-day assembly at an upmarket hotel for all members and staff in the program. In 2017, the first prize consisted of R25,000 in start-up capital and a "guided learning experience," as the program's CEO announced on day one. From the preliminary pitching rounds on day two to the grand finale on day three, the competition

Figure 13 A and B - Pitching contests in entrepreneurial hubs in Johannesburg. Source: Lieve de Coninck

was produced with attention to sensory effects. Set in the hotel's main conference hall, the contestants performed on a wide, brightly and colorfully lit stage, lined with two large adjacent screens for visuals, their voices amplified through a microphone. A stylized version of Johannesburg's night skyline served as the stage decor. Two hosts introduced the contestants one by one, and each time stirred the audience for a response after each pitch with dance moves, hand gestures and shout-outs, much like in boxing or darts tournaments. Hits by famous hip-hop artist Jay-Z blared through the speakers as each contestant entered the stage. A roaring audience of around two hundred fellow program participants from across the country cheered them on, some standing on their

chairs, or jumping up and down, while at the back of the hall staff operated the mixing panel, the stage lights, and the tripod camera recording the proceedings. As such large media productions, pitching challenges could provide an evocative collective and sensory experience (see also Mauksch 2017; Rudnyckyj 2009).

Whether large-scale productions such as this one, or more modest in tone and set-up, pitching competitions were popular among a wide audience of aspiring entrepreneurs, as they promised to facilitate the much-desired "access to market." At an average pitching event, participants had the opportunity to place themselves and their business plans in the limelight and make "connections" with the investors; established business owners or politicians were commonly invited as speakers, special guests and judges. Contestants and sometimes also the rest of the audience could speak and take photos with these representatives of opportunity before and after the pitching show itself. Being selected to participate in a pitching challenge was thus an affirmation of personal entrepreneurial capacities and an accolade that functioned as symbolic capital, and winning all the more so.

Solicited performances of entrepreneurial suitability could be formative of both trajectories and of self-perceptions, not least as they gave access to programs and prizes. When Tumelo told me about her experiences at the JBO selection camp, she talked about how the group dynamics changed when there was pressure to perform in front of the assessors: "Now the discussion doesn't sound the same! And I found that so weird, because yes I'm competitive, but I'm not competitive like I'd step on your toes to get noticed. I've just always known like, if you're excellent, that's enough to compete. Not like pulling stunts. But people were doing things like that and that was weird. So because of that I couldn't perform. Because I didn't know how to fight, so to say, in a crowd of competing energies. I would just be intimidated and shy away. And that came through in my feedback. 'We felt that you were not participating enough. You're not entrepreneurial enough. You're not participating in ideas enough, so your entrepreneurship is not coming through' [they said]."

Tumelo applied again the following year. "This time I was really prepared." She had asked friends who were studying psychology for advice about how to perform better, and they had suggested she should "be authentic." A year later, the group exercises went well: "I called people out on what they were doing now." So, Tumelo adjusted her self-presentation to come across more assertively—ironically in an effort to be "authentic"—in order to be recognized as eligible for a program aimed at developing entrepreneurial potential. This time, to her excitement, Tumelo got in. "I never screamed so loud in my life!" So here, the performance of an entrepreneurial persona—informed by the

psychological profile that JBO maintained—was rewarded with access to funding for a university degree and further entrepreneurial training. Entrepreneurial performances in pitching challenges or selection procedures thus offered opportunities to be recognized, to garner status and to access further material opportunities.

Figure 14 - An entrepreneurial program candidate's proud message of victory. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

The way some young professionals were able to leverage this effect was impressive. Mokgheti, for example, was a member of Eshisha hub, but also of at least three other hubs (thus fitting the bill as a "hub-hopper"). After a short, but, according to himself, impressively successful career as a sales agent in several software companies, he had felt compelled to try his luck as his own boss, rather than to continue "making those white guys rich," as one of his clients at the time had put it. Mokgheti's main business concerned an app that facilitated direct communication between local government officials and citizens, a project on the basis of which he had enrolled in several incubation programs already. During my fieldwork alone he furthermore graduated from two more exclusive entrepreneurial courses by international universities. Apart from the skills and knowledge he thereby acquired, he built a strong profile on social media with messages and images from these

memberships and participations. This filled his CV both in formal, written applications for seed money and grants, as well as in informal networking sessions through which he landed meetings with officials to pitch his product, sponsoring for another program, or a free ticket to a VIP seat at an entrepreneurial conference. Winning a pitching contest at the Township Entrepreneurs Alliance (TEA), for example, served as a reference that allowed him to occupy a stand at a big business expo sponsored by Sony Ericsson. The (social) media exposure he gained from participating in pitching challenges led to an interview in *Entrepreneur* magazine, which in turn linked him to a news reporter who interviewed him on national television at yet another start-up event. Mokgheti thus built a name for himself and acquired the appearance of

an established entrepreneur, without actually having launched his product yet. Growing his reputation, he kept himself afloat on sponsorships in a chain effect.

But as much as entrepreneurial shows and competitions could garner excitement and a leverageable aura of success, they came at a cost. At Eshisha, one participant in a pitching event started hyperventilating on stage, and he had to be coaxed into normal breathing by another contestant. He did not win. In addition to mental and bodily strains in the moment of performance, much time and energy were spent in preparation for pitches, as well as in processing feedback and rejections. Around the time she was leaving her day job to focus on launching her business full time, Lesedi spent days preparing a pitch for a government program for small business investments. She borrowed an outfit and money for transport and spent an entire work day getting there, waiting, performing the pitch, receiving feedback and driving back—major economic investments for many in Johannesburg—without concrete results: The panel had deemed her "not funding-ready." In this way, entrepreneurial competitions arguably generated more losing than winning.

To understand the widespread eagerness to participate in pitching competitions in spite of the odds, a comparison with Newell's (2009) analysis of the acts of conspicuous consumption of *les bluffeurs* in Abidjan is helpful. He sees in their theatrical overspending at bars and restaurants "not only a performance of success beyond the financial means of the actor in question, but also the display of the cultural knowledge and taste of the urbanized citizen" (385). Similarly, pitching was not only a performance of entrepreneurial prowess beyond actual profit but also a display of middle-class eligibility and morality. It showed participants as active pursuers of wealth as well as social change, as aspirers, and therefore, as respectable members of society, worthy of the bestowal of investment. Like the bluffeurs, whose "aim was not to fool others into thinking they were rich, but rather to convince them that they knew *how* to be rich, how to embody the identity and lifestyle of those they aspired to become" (Newell 2009, 386), participants in pitching challenges showed their knowledge of how to be entrepreneurial wealth- and changemakers. In the Ivorian bluff, "[s]uch performances can produce real social transformations, increasing hierarchical superiority through reputation" as well as "access to knowledge and material exchange" (385). Likewise, doing well in pitching challenges could provide reputational benefits as well as direct connections with investors or prominent businesspeople. Both Mokgheti's and Keletso's case—as well as the centrality of role-playing and pitching exercises in the JBO selection procedure—illustrate this point.

With staged presentations and pitching competitions everywhere, the performance of entrepreneurship was a notable characteristic of the

ecosystem in Johannesburg. Allowing organizing parties to promote themselves and the concept of entrepreneurship on one hand, and participants to showcase their fundability on the other, they illustrate the ecosystem as a market of aspiration with both tangible and intangible transformational effects: participants came to present and see themselves as plausible economic actors, and this plausibility in itself could provoke material returns.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurial development programs are often evaluated based on the extent to which they improve income security and living standards. Whether ultimately celebrated or espoused, they are understood through the material outcomes they do or do not produce. However, I argue that much of what goes on inside incubators thus goes unnoticed.

In contrast to bottom of the pyramid-focused development programs (e.g. Dolan and Rajak 2016), Phendula Enterprises, the JBO Foundation and Eshisha Hub were geared towards higher educated, middle-income participants, effectively favoring young professionals and university students. While this shows the exclusionary character of such programs, it is also the key to their appeal. The enterprise development sector accommodated an urban middle-class lifestyle and offered income and prestige via selective sponsorships and competitions, or through the commodification of entrepreneurship itself. As such, it provided an alternative path of career-building. The performances the programs demanded, notably in pitching challenges, in turn offered participants opportunities to show their aspirationality, with the chance of recognition and reward. In short, the ecosystem in Johannesburg provided a concrete infrastructure for (performative) middle-classing: it offered opportunities to pursue and act out middleclassness, and to be recognized and sometimes materially rewarded for it.

That the inequality between those with capital or status and those without that entrepreneurship was supposed to "disrupt" was also reproduced in the ecosystem in many ways was not lost on its participants and members. But this did not make its facilities of less use to them. The critical, sometimes nearly cynical perspectives of some of the young professionals quoted in this chapter show that it is important not to conflate participation with conformism or consent. Looking at the uptake of entrepreneurialism as a middle-classing practice aids in seeing and understanding the diverse and convoluted engagements with the ecosystem.

Letting our analyses of entrepreneurialist programs be more informed by the experiences of participants allows for a rethinking of them in terms of their significance in people's aspirational trajectories as part of a particular moral economy, rather than simply their effectiveness in terms of structural development or neoliberal subjectification. This helps to nuance the image of these institutions and associated discourses as the tentacles of a neoliberal monster and as a one-way exercise of power, and to see the particularities and variation in the way a presumably global entrepreneurialism pans out (Freeman 2014). Moreover, it illuminates the ambivalent ways in which people interact with such programs. Both exclusionary *and* enabling, these programs are clearly not straightforward vehicles for upward mobility for all—but neither are they simple serving-hatches of an exploitative neoliberalism. If anything, they are brokers and cultivators of middleclassness. As such, they illustrate well the multiplicity and ambivalence in the outcomes of entrepreneurial discourse and development programs (see DeHart 2010; Rudnyckyj 2009; Di Nunzio 2015). In the next chapter, I further explore the way participants grappled with the ambivalent effects of entrepreneurial programs, and how and why they remained committed to entrepreneurialism.

CHAPTER 4
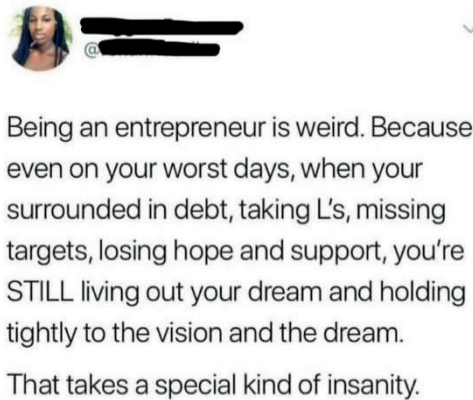
STRUGGLING ALONG, MAKING CHANGE

When Simon, Eshisha Hub's proverbial poster child, told me about his first panic attack, he smiled. The soft-spoken entrepreneur in his early twenties had developed a tutoring app for high school learners and students together with two friends. While it garnered much praise from entrepreneurial programs and funders such as IBM, they had struggled to get enough paying customers. Knowing that one of their staff had a baby to feed had stressed Simon out particularly. "I was thinking if I fail to pay these people, I'll be ruining their whole lives." And one afternoon, it got too much: "My heart rate was too high, like it was beating in my chest, and it happened for like three hours." The brown paper bag and the oxygen mask at a local clinic did not suffice, so eventually an ambulance took Simon to the hospital. After receiving medication and breathing exercises, he was released the same day. Finally, Simon's parents and sister had helped him pay his employees' salaries that month. He concluded: "It was a whole, it was a lesson...." "That is a serious lesson", I replied, "it took a toll on your health." Simon, smiling still, replied, "The whole entrepreneurial journey has taken a toll. I've lost a whole lot of weight. 'Cause sometimes at home I don't feel like eating, 'cause it's a whole lot of stress, thinking OK how am I going to do this?" While recognizing the "journey" of entrepreneurship as detrimental, Simon thus took his panic and stress as "lessons" about risk management.

As extreme as Simon's episode at the hospital sounded to me, material and emotional volatility characterized the daily lives of most entrepreneurs. Victor, another Eshisha member with less financial back-up, had been chasing his first paying client for more than a year, in which time he had quit payments for his daughter's school fees, sold his car as well as his plot of land, and, by now, regularly went the day without eating to make ends meet. Eshisha staff member Ayanda recognized a tendency to self-sacrifice among young entrepreneurs, and that the competitive set-up of entrepreneurial programs provoked this: "Some are just like, ok, I really need this [prize] money so I'll put myself through this, even if it's making me sick." She herself had started a business four years previously which had failed, and she had been forced to go back to employment in order to keep her family afloat: "It took a toll, on my children, my family, my marriage." What's more, the failed enterprise had left her blacklisted as a debtor, so she was barred from access to loans or other forms of finance. There were a multitude of stories in the enterprise development sector of bodily and mental suffering, strained marriages and extensive debts.

Yet, in full view of these negatives, most young professionals remained strikingly invested in the pursuit of entrepreneurship. One participant in a bicycle tour of small businesses in Vosloorus, a set of townships east of Johannesburg, told me about his failed enterprise: "I am still over 200k in debt, but it was the greatest

experience of my life." It had provided him invaluable life lessons, he said, though indeed, it would have been easier to get his children through school if he hadn't. And Victor said, "People ask me: 'Why don't you quit? Just find a job somewhere.' But I can't quit now! This Fourth Industrial Revolution wind that is now blowing in Africa, I'm part of that, I can't quit now!" Ayanda, too, was actively plotting her escape from the confines of employment once more: "My plan is by the time I am forty I should be running a company that is sustainable and that is all I do and I'm not employed elsewhere." And as much as Lesedi exclaimed, after being denied yet another grant for which she had pitched, that she was "not doing this emotional roller coaster anymore!"—a day later she was overflowing with enthusiasm for a new investment opportunity she had found out about. As one entrepreneur put it on social media:

Being an entrepreneur is weird. Because even on your worst days, when your surrounded in debt, taking L's, missing targets, losing hope and support, you're STILL living out your dream and holding tightly to the vision and the dream.

That takes a special kind of insanity.

Figure 15 - A Facebook comment reposted by a participant in an entrepreneurial program. Source: Lieve de Coninck

How should we understand this "special kind of insanity"? How can we frame the continued engagement in the pursuit of entrepreneurship in the face of the profound insecurities and struggles it generated? Lauren Berlant's (2011) analysis of the affective lives of people "on the bottom of the class structure" in a context of global migration (38, also 178) provides a stepping stone, even if the economic positions of young professionals in this study are more varied. Desires for normalcy, Berlant reasons, fuel the continued pursuit of a productive place in the labor market and reciprocal relations with caring others in a way that entrenches people in their present, bad, realities. In her assessment of attachment to suffering-inducing ideals, she understands this persistence by reference to the ability of these ideals to "drown out" and "sooth[e]" the dread of reality (180). However understandable these desires, Berlant ultimately sees them as sustaining an "unworkable fantasy" (188). Comparably, Sarah Bracke

(2016) argues that the ideal of resilience locks people into conditions of suffering, as it is predicated on the existence and expectation of crises. Consequently, people's "capacity to imagine and do otherwise" is stunted (63–65). Moreover, she points to the "comfort" of understanding oneself as being in the process of overcoming. It circumvents having to "face the situation that the much-needed shelter, job, or safety might simply not be likely or even possible in the way our current world is organized" (64–65). These analyses imply that attachments to such aspirations and self-understandings hinge on an avoidance of confrontation with the structural nature of one's (or other people's) direness.

From a focus on how likely it is that people's notions of success are fully actualised, the logic of hanging onto entrepreneurship in a pervasively insecure environment appears flawed. Considering "the fact that few businesses progress beyond the early stages into stages of growth where employment and stability increase" (Department of Small Business 2016, 33),[68] the odds of securing long-term financial success as a new entrepreneur are low. Also, much anecdotal and observational evidence of suffering and failure among starting entrepreneurs make clear that costs are high and success sporadic. Considering Victor's case a vicious cycle, one hub employee confided in me that she thought the entire start-up endeavor ludicrous. But such deductive logics, obvious and rational as they may seem, flatten the multi-faceted relationship of the young professionals in this study with the structural inequalities of their environment, and the ways in which they combined heartfelt (passionate?) faith in entrepreneurship as a way forward with critique. Well aware of the detriments of entrepreneurial life and of the way the enterprise development sector functioned, their adherence cannot be taken as a mere effect of hegemonic discourse, or a fata morgana. Consider the way Anne-Maria Makhulu (2012a) interprets the discrepancy between post-apartheid soap operas' depiction of the comfortable lives led by black professionals in a post-racial society, and the realities of apartheid legacies:

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[68] The Department of Small Business Development here paraphrases several reports by the Department of Trade and Industry since 2004. It furthermore discusses the "particularly high costs of doing business" in South Africa, and how these "contribute to the high level of business failure by reducing business profitability" (2016, 33–34). See also the 2016 Research Note on "The Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise Sector of South Africa" by the Bureau for Economic Research, which states that "[t]he DTI (2008) found that the majority of South Africa's SMMEs rarely survive beyond their nascent phases, lasting for an average of less than 3.5 years" (2016, 10). Both reports list the many and relatively higher intensity of obstacles starting businesses face in South Africa, and mention the relative lack of change in this outlook in the last decade.

> This [soap opera] vision of the possible stands quite apart from the obstacles to education and professionalization of Africans under apartheid, and yet in the very representation of the overcoming of recent history there is a keen recognition of both the travesties of the past and the ongoing challenges to Black success and upward mobility. In a sense, the post-apartheid moment has been thus far characterized by a continual renegotiation of possibility and powerlessness. (137)

As with soap operas' idealized portrayals of life, I suggest there is a keen recognition of racialized inequalities and economic insecurities, rather than a denial, in the seemingly utopian ideal image of entrepreneurial success. When I asked Othelia why she thought people hung onto "something so fickle" as entrepreneurship, she replied, "Because to them it isn't fickle," hinting at an altogether different perspective whereby it is actually something to rely on. So, what *is* entrepreneurship to those who so optimistically hold on to it in spite of low odds and much hardship? The question of how entrepreneurship could retain meaning and value for young professionals as they pursued a good life in post-transition Johannesburg deserves more consideration.

While there may be "comfort" in taking up an "optimistic" perspective on life and one's circumstances—such as through the ideal of resilience or entrepreneurialism—this does more than entrench people in inequalities, or self-deceive. Freeman (2020, 9; also 2014, 2007), for one, has shown how contemporary entrepreneurialism requires and engenders "new … emotional capacities" which make possible new ways of relating to others and oneself. This is the case even if the particular good life it promises is not or not fully realized. Critical of analyses in which "[h]ope and optimism are seductive but fundamentally illusory" (8), she proposes taking "optimism and desire … as meaningful sources of joy and pleasure whose transformative importance can be both profound and positive even when unfulfilled" (3). In turn, Bähre (2020) makes a case for the importance and productivity of people's desires to be in the process of changing, beyond utilitarian gains in terms of money or power. Building on the notion of "practical rationality" (Callard 2018), he shows how decisions in life can be attempts to "move oneself toward becoming a better, or at least different, person" (2), rather than to achieve circumscribed end goals. He thus centralizes the driving force of people's aspirations for self-realization and for change for its own sake. From such perspectives, it is the being and feeling of change/transformation inherent in the pursuit of entrepreneurship (also Freeman 2014, 181–84), rather than the probability of realizing financial or lifestyle goals, that gives it significance.

Still, of course, not all sorts of joy and change are equally imaginable or desirable—let alone pursuable—for everyone at all times: particular forms and directions of change take on relevance in particular historical and cultural situations. In other contexts, migration plays a similar role. For young people in Kerala, India, for example, Jocelyn Lim Chua (2014) has shown how "space was a key register" through which they understood and reworked the possibilities and impossibilities of their lives: "In particular, it was through migratory possibility that young people experienced their life chances and painful exclusions," she writes (135). Imagining and framing Kerala as a place of stagnation and "elsewhere" as possibility, the young people in Chua's study "located themselves socially, morally, and psychically in relation to their peers, families and communities and to a larger notion of global modernity" (134). Chua shows that this understanding of one's life chances in terms of migration is not only social boundary work, but also holds existential value as a meaningful way to live amidst stuckness. Similarly, Sasha Newell (2012) analyses the "symbolic migration process" among Ivoirians to see that "[t]he desire to emigrate was not one of permanent escape, but of personal transformation" (183), and that this transformation occurred even if the riches that the journey should yield were almost never realized. Migrations are "processes of cultural evolution" (192), he writes, in which the effort of trying to improve one's own and one's family's situation (by undertaking a journey to an urban, European, i.e., modern, life) itself improves one's social standing and concomitant self-perception. I suggest that the relevance of entrepreneurialism for young professionals in pervasively insecure and unequal South Africa should similarly be sought in the culturally specific "transformative journey" it provides.

In the previous chapter, I showed how the entrepreneurialism of the ecosystem offers opportunities for being recognized as aspirational that *can* be rewarding, and how this attracts a wide range of people who make use of the programs and hubs pragmatically, as a way to middle-class. In this chapter, I show how it also provides vital senses of possibility and potential, and how these may make the pursuit of entrepreneurship worthwhile. I argue that the entrepreneurial experiences of young professionals entail an existential response to a culturally specific environment and therefore cannot be reduced to moments of idiosyncratic happiness or positivity, nor to symptoms of undermining structures. So, in this chapter I consider how the continued pursuit of entrepreneurship may be fueled by diffuse yet powerful desires and cultural imperatives to be moving towards something "better, or at least different" (Bähre 2020, 2). In this way I try to understand how entrepreneurialism held value for young professionals in Johannesburg while its costs were obvious, without implications of illusion or unawareness. Sticking with entrepreneurship amidst or after serious hardship may make good sense after all.

Below, I first discuss what was made of the insecurities and struggles inherent in the entrepreneurial pursuit. If not a reason to quit, what did they mean? I then lay out how the ecosystem discourse of social change and self-making captivated its audience. Finally, I describe the kind of becoming that the pursuit of entrepreneurship entailed. Bringing to the fore the cultural underpinnings of young professionals' adherence to entrepreneurialism, I aim to provide additional insight into the ways in which young professionals in post-transition South Africa rework "possibility and powerlessness" (Makhulu 2012a, 137).

Struggling not to struggle

The difficulties of attaining and maintaining a middle-class(ing) lifestyle in the context of South Africa were manifold and widely felt. My steadily employed landlady in Johannesburg, who was also a single mother, said that before you can do anything in Johannesburg, you have to "wade through seven layers of shit," by which she meant such things as the general unsafety of public space, the dysfunctionality of local bureaucracy, and the dominance of patriarchal notions in daily interactions. For those without the material underpinnings of a decent salary, the difficulties also concerned paying the month's rent and groceries. When Lesedi left her job to focus on developing her business full-time, she exchanged the suburban cottage she had rented for the last three years for an apartment in another part of town. She felt the status of a flat with its own address and entrance, as well as a separate bedroom and kitchen, matched her new aspirations better than the one-room studio in the back of someone's garden, historically reserved for live-in staff. Short on money, however, her brother paid the deposit for the flat, and she did not add any furniture other than her old bed and a suitcase that doubled as a night stand. Her few belongings were organized along the living room wall, while two cushions served as makeshift chairs in the otherwise empty living room. One kitchen cupboard contained a single pack of rooibos tea and one cup. "Ag, I don't do breakfasts anyway," Lesedi said, rebuffing the concerned look I gave her.

The stories and performances of the ecosystem as presented in popular media portrayed failure and suffering as an inevitable part of entrepreneurship. For example, the globally popular adage "fail fast, fail often" was regularly hailed in workshops and speeches, and the well-attended monthly "Fuck Up Nights" at one of Johannesburg's hubs revolved around the celebration of failure in business entirely, with experienced entrepreneurs publicly sharing stories of their mistakes and struggles along the way. As hindsight stories, these "fuck up" narratives mainly affirmed the eventual or potential success of the particular entrepreneur and thus served a motivational purpose for an aspiring audience (notwithstanding the vulnerability the speakers displayed at times). For example, at the JBO annual festival, two newly successful entrepreneurs

emphasized the struggles behind the bluff through which they had secured big loans with several banks in their start-up years: "In total we went 1.1 million rand into debt, by the second year of university [audience roar]. We got lots of media coverage, it looked like we were doing great, but we were sleeping on the floor. We didn't have furniture for two years." They added that they ate "nothing but potatoes" for a while. Now established business men and invited speakers, these stories of hardship and sacrifice from the past were thus part of a performance of success. More than "to be expected," physical suffering was often presented as fundamental to the making of entrepreneurial success, like in "#teamnosleep" on Twitter. "You know, hashtag team no sleep? Like,
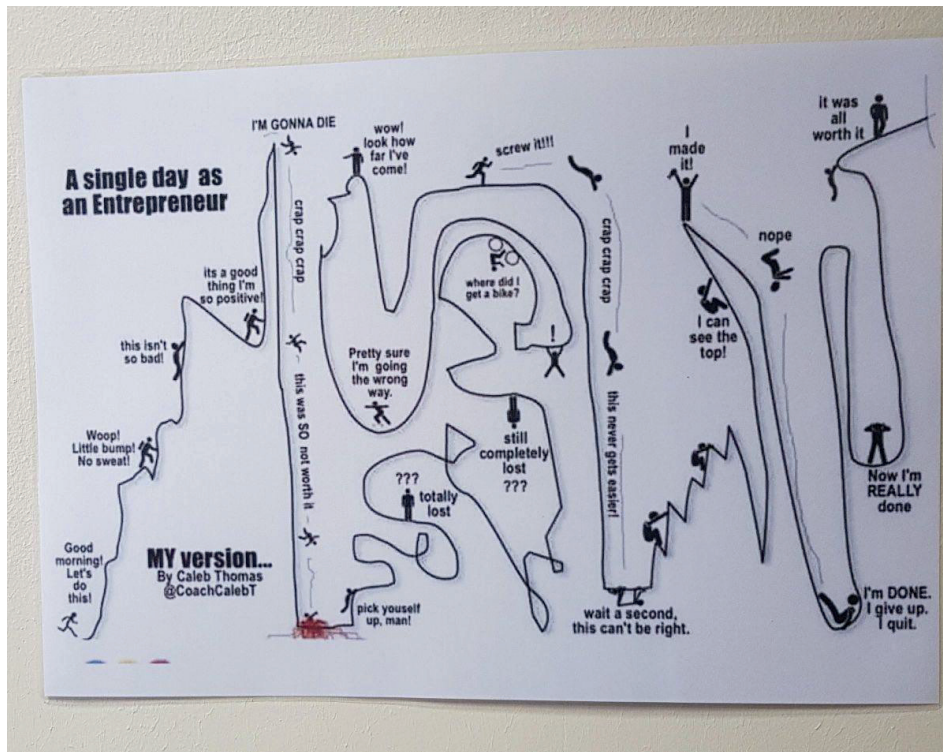
Figure 16 - An image shared in a hub members' WhatsApp group. Source: Lieve de Coninck

entrepreneurs don't sleep. You're supposed to be up in the wee hours of the morning cause if you're not, you're not really serious," Othelia explained to me. And when Mokgheti served as an expert in a public panel discussion on the state of the ecosystem, he told the audience, "As an entrepreneur, you become born again, you're not allowed to do certain things you were used to, in a traditional way. You don't sleep eight hours anymore; you sleep four now." He thus suggested that a lifestyle of overriding bodily needs was a requirement to rightfully adopt the epithet "entrepreneur." In the explicit discourse of the

ecosystem, the ability and willingness to forgo physical comfort was thus an indicator of entrepreneurial drive and prowess, as unavoidable as it was heroic. Financial precarity and bodily stresses were hence normalized and glorified as an integral part of entrepreneurial trajectories, to be showcased once overcome.

Off-stage, the young professionals regarded the relationship between entrepreneurship and material struggles more ambivalently. Income insecurity was their number one complaint about life as an entrepreneur, and they truly suffered from it at times. But it was also readily put in perspective. "A job is just as insecure; I can get fired at any moment. As an entrepreneur at least I spread my risks with several clients, so I have more than one boss," Mansa reasoned. To him, the insecurity of entrepreneurship was preferable to the insecurity of the labor market. Moreover, entrepreneurship was taken as more productive and more impactful than established career paths: "At least we're not wasting our time protesting," Mokgheti said, using the student protest movement as a point of comparison, while Ratsebo thought "working at a corporate from eight to five" was "not congruent" with her heartfelt need to "be of service to my country." When I asked Mpendulo, part of a small group of young men who worked and spent time at Eshisha, why they continued if the gains were so unstable, he shrugged and said, "What else can we do? What else is there?"— dismissing the plausibility, even sheer existence, of an alternative. So, in the context of the generalized insecurity of the South African economy (Makhulu 2012b; Barchiesi 2011; Hull 2017), and compared to the drawbacks of other options, the insecurity of entrepreneurship as a livelihood practice was considered of only relative import.

At the same time, material struggles and stresses mattered beyond their practical consequences, judging from the way many young professionals hid them from view. JBO participant Dimakatso, who was starting up a business in biotechnology using local microbes, canceled a coffee date with me at the last minute by text. A week later we did meet; we talked about her various degrees and her decision to start a business for several hours, when she suddenly said: "Ok, let me tell you the truth about last week, I don't want to lie to you." She confessed she had canceled because it had been month-end, she had not had money for transport into town let alone a drink, and she had been embarrassed about it. She knew she appeared well-off to people, as she stayed with her aunt who lived in a large house in a suburb and whose SUV she could sometimes borrow, but in fact she was struggling financially. Tired of defending her career choice on one end, and of keeping up appearances on the other, she had stopped answering daily phone calls from her entrepreneurship-sceptic mother and other relatives who wanted to know how her business was doing, pressing

her for success. Such social withdrawals in the face of material hardship—and the claims of relatives—formed a wider pattern: it was not uncommon for entrepreneurs to suddenly stay away from the programs or hubs, and to become unresponsive to messages and calls for days, weeks, or even months when they were in financial dire straits. Meanwhile, Othelia performed a speech at a large business expo in full, glamorous regalia, on staying true to your brand and the aims of your business—mere hours after letting go of her last employee and on the verge of giving up her office for a lack of paying clients. In light of the weighty aspirational legacies that informed young professionals' lives (see chapter 2), it is clear how setbacks on the road to entrepreneurial success could evoke embarrassment and stresses beyond immediate material concerns. And whether by withdrawing or hiding in plain sight, these were often carefully veiled.

However, the concealment and trivialization of the struggles and uncertainties of entrepreneurial life cannot be understood as young professionals' simple acceptance of the ecosystem discourse. Although a discourse of normalized suffering was regularly aired at events and workshops, it also raised counter voices. Othelia, for one, thought #teamnosleep was "ridiculous!" More explicit critiques of the normalization of stress and struggles in entrepreneurial life were raised on "Mental Health Night" in one of Johannesburg's hubs. This one-off event was organized by a reputable entrepreneurial network in response to the public mental breakdown of a high-profile young entrepreneur called Skinny Sbu.[69] The organizers, who included personal acquaintances of Sbu and several other known entrepreneurs, publicly relayed their own struggles with the pressures and expectations for success, and the insecurities of entrepreneurial life. This was followed by a public discussion about the mental stresses, anxieties and loneliness that accompanied the pursuit of a professional or entrepreneurial career, and the societal taboos that surrounded these. The host, speakers and audience voiced repeated calls for more solidarity among entrepreneurs as a way to counter the burdens of the pressure for achievement, of the competition for resources, and of the distrust that prevailed in society generally. Over the course of this night, it became clear that young entrepreneurs' ambivalent relationships to suffering and struggle was not so much determined by the entrepreneurialist discourse of the ecosystem, but much more by having grown

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[69] For a link to the 2018 national news item in which Sbu tells of his financial and mental struggles, see https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/what-the-skinny-sbu-socks-saga-teaches-us-about-small-business-sinesipho-maninjwa/. See also https://ewn.co.za/2018/10/18/i-need-r5m-skinny-sbu-socks-founder-on-his-business-s-challenges. For a brief retrospect, see https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/good-life/2019-09-20-skinny-sbu-socks-goes-sporty (accessed 9 December 2022).

up in the context of structural, racialized inequalities and attendant calls for change.

Rather than the power of an arguably neoliberal discourse, the ambiguous way the young professionals related to material and emotional hardship reflects the aspirational legacies and generalized insecurity of their environment and the historical moment. Lesedi relayed this well when she filled me in on her new life in Cape Town. In an application for start-up funding with the national Department of Trade and Industry (dti), she had proposed to use the money to produce her own accessories at a specific factory based in Cape Town that had offered her an internship. And so, only months after moving into her new apartment, Lesedi moved to Cape Town. When I visited her, she told me of conversations with some of her new acquaintances: a couple who ran a restaurant and a young woman named Kholo with her own start-up in furniture design. It is worth quoting her at length: "Lieve, I've never talked about black and white so much [as here]. [Design], it is a very white industry, and in Cape Town black and white are at war. When I hang out with Kholo, and with Marcus and Irene at their restaurant, the conversation is always about how amazed they are that these white people are giving me a chance and are helping me. And I keep telling them, there are opportunities in Cape Town, really, there are many, more than everyone thinks. But they are stuck in apartheid perceptions, and anger. And I feel pressure, because even Kholo, she gave me a place to stay, in her room, because she was like: 'You can't stop now, you have to see this through for all of us!' … I don't want to hustle like Marcus and them [sic] do. I see them doing a little project here, a little project there. When they get together at the restaurant, which Marcus says is not doing so well, they all keep brainstorming projects and inviting each other into business, but it's all short-term stuff. I even refused when they asked me. I was like: I am going into design, and I am going to hit hard. I have to get it right. I can't do small stuff anymore. I have learnt. In Joburg I was doing that. It just kept me on that level of surviving. I don't want to survive anymore. I don't want to struggle. Them, they make it so normal to be struggling. They assume that it's a necessary part of it. They are struggling and they hold on to that, going into all that black and white stuff. Me, I don't want to struggle anymore. It doesn't have to be hard! [The factory CEO] is also teaching me; it doesn't have to be hard. He doesn't stress, hey. And it's a mindset that comes from growing up privileged, finding it normal to have things, and for things to work out. And to not fear about trying new things. Me, I'm not afraid to try new things. I'm impulsive, yes. But I grew up with a father always fixing things. We got a car, then it's broken, and my dad is fixing it forever. And with my mom, everything she does is hard. Hard work. Everything that is about money also is hard work for them. So we don't grow up thinking money comes easy. So they all hustle, and they struggle, and they find it normal. But me, I'm

not doing that anymore. I want this life to be over. I want financial freedom. That concept just came to me the other day when I was sitting on the beach, writing in my journal. I was like, it's not about money. I mean I used to always make a list of what I want and money is always on top, but then I realized it's not about money, but about financial freedom. Me, next year this time I'm not going to be here anymore. I will have moved. But it's hard hey…because I'm on my brothers' money now. And especially my younger brother is like, "This thing better work. This better work. When are you breaking through?" My older brother is a believer, he says, "You sound different, I know it's gonna happen for you." He thinks something amazing is going to come from me being here in Cape Town. But you know, I am sleeping in [other] people's houses, and I am spending 40 rand a day on transport. I've been eating though! I realized I feel better when I eat.… But I can't lie, I hope that money comes."

So, as Lesedi knew, the normalness of "struggling" was historically entrenched: for those growing up in struggling families, it had become an expected part of daily life. More than that, to struggle economically was so deeply interwoven with the historical experience of racialized inequality that it had come to define blackness (see Erasmus 2008; Khunou 2015). It was precisely this aspect of normalcy, the expectedness of struggle, that Lesedi was determined to overcome by "hitting hard" as an entrepreneur. Her pursuit of entrepreneurial success was a way to refuse a normalized sense of struggle and the attendant framework of a lack of opportunities. Her narrative shows how the expectedness of struggle now existed alongside expectations for her "breakthrough": as much as her friends regarded Lesedi's venturing into "white" economic territory unusual, they urged her to continue on their and others' behalf. However ambivalent she may have been about the racialized worldview behind their call to black emancipation, for Lesedi, entrepreneurship was a bid to vanquish the normalcy of struggle and its racialized history. She thus illustrated how entrepreneurship could function as "the means by which neoliberal subjects try to transcend their existing frames of reference" (Makhulu 2012a, 144), and the value of the sense of possibility it offered.

However, financial worries unavoidably put pressure on this promise of possibility. They threatened the believability of entrepreneurship as a vehicle for transformation, for bringing an end to the sense of struggle. That this believability nevertheless remained intact—not just for Lesedi—attests not only to the imperatives for upward mobility amidst limited options, but also to the urgency for a sense of possibility in post-transition South Africa. "What else can we do? What else is there?" Mpendulo's dismissal of any other way of responding to the current situation was as much an analysis of his and his friend's position in the labor market as a statement about an existential

predicament of how to make a life (as much as a living) amidst seeming impossibilities and immoralities. Pursuing an entrepreneurial breakthrough (and, by proxy, "financial freedom") was an effort to move away from a history of struggling and unfreedom. As such, resurfacing from material or mental stresses with new entrepreneurial vigor, or presenting a story of entrepreneurial suffering as heroic were active (re)investments in an experience of change. Just as migration for Ivorians "provided the endless possibilities of economic success, adventure, prestige, and riches that only the unknown is capable of offering" (Newell 2012, 195), entrepreneurialism, in all its instability, offered a real sense that something else was possible.

Making change

An urgent call for social change was central in public entrepreneurialist discourse in Johannesburg. In ecosystem events, incubators and public media, a globalized neoliberal idiom of the need for "returns on investment," "innovation," and the "passion" to fuel it was embedded in compelling narratives about transforming and uplifting both personal lives and society, the African continent, and even the world at large. For instance, JBO's website and banners at events read thus:

> The world needs entrepreneurs. It needs people who take a wild idea, root it in strategy and grow it into a game changer. These people are potential personified; they're passionate problem-solvers and long-term visionaries. They exist to change the world and we exist to help them change it. We're about educating them, supporting them, connecting them, endorsing them, championing them and celebrating them. Future returns start today with the next generation of entrepreneurs. You know who you are. Keep your eyes on the future, because we've got our eyes on you. (JBO Foundation website, October 2018)

Aspiring candidates were told that "there is a place for you in the program if you're passionate about changing the world" (see also chapter 3). While the idea of entrepreneurship as changemaking remained abstract and uncontentious in some instances, in others it connoted defiance and revolution, for example, when entrepreneurship was tasked with "disrupting" the status quo. By unpacking some of these narratives in the ecosystem discourse, I aim to understand the kind of change that the pursuit of entrepreneurship was fashioned to represent and how this could so captivate young professionals. This helps move our understanding of the way aspirations emerge and act in people's lives beyond a concern with the likelihood of structural change/a particular material outcome/concrete outcomes.

Through ample references to "global citizenship" and "global players" such as Facebook, aspiring entrepreneurs at Eshisha hub were encouraged to "think global," both in terms of the scale of their success and of the opportunities for doing business. In an early press statement, the hub's founder stated that it was his "hope that transforming [Eshisha] into Africa's premier technology hub will inspire new talent, create jobs and lead to an economic renaissance." One of the main founding partners of the hub was quoted as saying that "[Eshisha] will provide an enabling space for our country's most creative young minds to develop new digital technologies that are crucial to South Africa's economic growth and international competitiveness." In this storyline, entrepreneurial creativity sparks national economic revival and improves South Africa's ranking in the global economy. This language gave entrepreneurship an air of urgent societal purpose *and* placed innovative entrepreneurs on a world stage. This storyline became truly heroic in the concept of "the digital revolution," or "the Fourth Industrial Revolution." At a workshop during Student Entrepreneurship Week 2018, the speaker emphasized the need to tap into Africa's "demographic dividend" (the economic potential of Africa's majority youth population), and that tech entrepreneurs were part of the "industrial revolution 4.0" that would change the job market for good. Conjuring images of adventurous strides into uncharted territories, in this narrative the figure of the (tech) entrepreneur stands at the apex of a global future-making movement. In the frame of an imminent global revolution, African tech entrepreneurs were thus regularly accorded an avant-gardist agency. The power of entrepreneurial changemaking potential was given further importance in the repeated emphasis on "innovation" and "disruption," which suggested entrepreneurship entailed the making of a new world.

In addition to driving a global revolution, entrepreneurship was also commonly viewed as a vehicle for black emancipation. Through its selection criteria of "100% black-owned" businesses, Phendula positioned itself squarely in line with Black Economic Empowerment policies and the political rhetoric of transformation via black ownership of economic assets. In the workshops of the preselection program, obstacles in starting up as an entrepreneur were commonly presented as a function of being black in South Africa, and the pursuit of business success as a way to emancipate oneself. In one of these sessions, workshop leader Aaron asked the participants to voice what they had learned from the previous class, in which they were sent out of the office to try and meet with potential clients in the city. Khanyi, a young woman who wanted to start a cleaning business, replied: "From yesterday's [assignment] I realized there's nothing that I'm bringing that is new. What can I bring to the table? What is going to separate me from all these people? I'm not trying to create a little spaza

shop[70] here that buys me groceries, I'm trying to create a business that can run itself. That is just that great that I can run it from my bedside. I'm not even sure who my customers are. But I think I could make a killing with my [cleaning business]. I think it's ridiculous for any enterprise to rely on tenders." To which Aaron said: "Yes, that's not what we're building here. You realize, what can I do that is new? So go to the First World to see what they're doing there. In the US, they're using those automatic hoovers. So rather be the first person to bring the technology here, rather than repeating. There's no space for small thinking here. If you're here for one million rand you're in the wrong place. We're talking employing a hundred people minimum. If I am a black lady and I want to do cleaning, and I start at spaza shops, how will I ever get to Bidvest[71] level? To get capital to buy in China, that's transformation. That's the level we're talking about here. If you have nothing to bring, that is different, you just want to clean because you're black. That's not transformation." Then he told the story of an entrepreneur who kept on selling eggs in the same way without scaling his business. Another participant replied: "That's our problem as black people, we're stuck down there, selling those crates of eggs forever," to which Aaron responded: "And you know, a white guy sees it and goes big with your idea. So it's about give me that teaching, and give me the money, and let me run it. So when are you going to service the municipalities, Khanyi? Of course starting small. You know, the white people are working from an investment account, or an inheritance. White friends are shocked that I am sending my parents money, they think your parents should send *you* money. I'm sorry Lieve, your colleagues [laughs], no, I'm joking."

By asserting her ambitions and declaring her opposition to a reliance on tenders, Khanyi referenced a public debate on the appropriate route to black emancipation, a frame that Aaron further laid out in his (paradoxical) advice to look to the "First World" as the first step towards "transformation" through black businesses that can "buy in China." By setting this image in opposition to the figure of the cleaning "black lady" ——an archetype in the history of black labor exploitation in South Africa (e.g., Jansen 2019) ——Aaron challenged the participants to position themselves in that same history: do you have "something to bring", or do you "just want to clean because you're black"? The story he thus nudged the participants towards was one of being black in a world in which immoral white capital has historically dominated, but in which aspirational entrepreneurship has transformative powers.

This simplified model of the racialized economy of South Africa, in which white people had access to resources and black people did not, was recurrent. In

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[70] Small corner stores for daily groceries, commonly located in townships.

[71] A large, established South African corporation.

another workshop, Aaron explained why the program wanted the participants to submit a full sixty-plus page business plan: "Starting a business without a business plan, you might get to your destination but it will take you more time. Us as black people we don't plan ahead. I don't see people planning five years ahead for our children's school fees. Hence, we have #Feesmustfall!" He then moved to the problematics of businesses relying on tenders and workers' dependency on the mines in Marikana,[72] before repeating the need for a business plan: "Today I'm going to give you a lesson for the year, the best lesson for the year and you'll thank me for that. One of the key, key, key things, as black people, as a black child: we lack planning. Even from the planning of the day. We don't plan those things. And there are principles that govern plannings [sic], that govern goal-setting!"

This turned into an hour-long exposé followed by an exercise in formulating objectives for the future according to the SMART format.[73] In short, Aaron conveyed aspirational instructions to think big in the service of black emancipation, and presented entrepreneurship as a method to achieve this. Yet, he also identified the key obstacle as a racial deficiency. So, in this circular logic, entrepreneurship was a method against racialized exclusion, but for it to work, ironically, black people needed to fix themselves by following the "principles" of proper entrepreneurial methods. This frame of entrepreneurship as black emancipation powerfully informed participants' self-understanding. Thuli, one of the participants in Phendula's pre-incubation cohort, for example, had found her first session with external business consultants very emotional. When they had told her that building on her parents' earlier business endeavors meant she was a "second-generation black business owner," and they had congratulated her on it, she had cried. She said the mentors had made her see herself in a new light: she had not yet thought of her entrepreneurial pursuit as part of a wider history, and she was impressed with this new perspective. In turn, during one of Aaron's workshops, fellow cohort member Vusi remarked, "I understand now what it means to be a black business person, that it means you are starting from zero." Note that Vusi grew up and continued to live in an expensive suburb as the child of successful business owners, and that he had recently finished his university degree. His remark thus conveyed the urgency of the narrative of black struggle in South Africa and how entrepreneurship offered a way of understanding oneself as a part of it, irrespective of material standing. But where it allowed Vusi to see himself in relation to historical oppression, it

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[72] Village in North West province, where in 2012 a large number of striking mine workers were killed by the police. See https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/marikana-massacre-16-august-2012 (accessed 12 May 2020).

[73] SMART is an acronym that stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound, which is widely used in (public) management. See Doran (1981).

allowed Khanyi to understand herself as liberated: "My in-laws don't understand what I am doing. They tell me to get a job. But they are still oppressed," she told me. In contrast, as an aspiring entrepreneur, Khanyi saw herself as free.

The idea of freeing oneself from the yoke of racial oppression was present and active beyond the Phendula program. Just as Mansa understood his entrepreneurship as a reaction to an educational system he considered "colonial," and as an antidote to apartheid mentality (see chapter 3), so Mokgheti presented his uptake of entrepreneurship as a response to the inequalities of employment in South Africa. In his own account of his career trajectory, the decision to start his own business despite his allegedly legendary rise as an IT sales agent came soon after one of his customers had alerted him to the fact that he was "making those white guys [the company owners] rich"––a comment that had encouraged him to go out on his own. Whether cause or effect of his entrepreneurship, Mokgheti's designation of this moment as pivotal shows that the idea of entrepreneurship as a way to turn the tables of ownership and the flows of profit was provocative. These narratives of entrepreneurship as a way to realize global inclusion and black emancipation reveal how the uptake of entrepreneurialism was couched in a morality of success hinged not only on family upliftment, but on making change for South Africans widely against the backdrop of history.

Being a contributor to such change was of social significance apart from material security and the pressures of family legacies. Since the student protest movements of 2015, South African public debates on economic exclusion and apartheid legacies have sharpened: the notion of the rainbow nation has been recast as a problematic illusion and the democratic transition as an unsatisfactory, collaborationist compromise (see also chapter 1). As a consequence, the struggle against apartheid is now considered unfinished business instead of a thing of the past, and activist discourse has invigorated racialized boundary work and explicit public stance-taking (e.g., Rudwick 2010; de Coninck 2018; cf. Bock 2017). This has given entrepreneurship social significance as a practice of changemaking beyond mere upward mobility. Being part of The Struggle or the Fourth Industrial Revolution trumps "making white guys rich," as Mokgheti put it. In the Indian context, Chua (2014) shows how young Keralans' embrace of uncertainty and their seeming collaboration in their own precarity as a result of their attachment to the promise of migration were ways of "enacting … desires – and deservedness – of something better," and as such contain moral and social critiques (143). So, the refusal to take what is considered a lesser job even if it would provide more income and stability, in other words "choosing" uncertainty, is not submissive self-exploitation but a reflection of a critical appraisal of the limits and politics of the environment. Similarly, I suggest, the uptake of entrepreneurship for young professionals in

South Africa is a story and a practice that conveys attempts to subvert apartheid legacies.

Perhaps even more important than the kind of change entrepreneurship could bring about, was the *doing* it entailed. The importance of this agentic aspect of entrepreneurial pursuits was well illustrated by the way Ndzulukani presented herself and her approach to business. "I never thought of myself as a businesswoman," she said. "I'm about change and impact, so [I'd] rather talk about that than introduce myself as an entrepreneur; people take that differently, you know," hinting at public discussions regarding the dubious opportunism of "tenderpreneurs" and "hustlers." She understood her entrepreneurship as a matter of proactively righting wrongs, as reflected in the start-up stories she told of the various businesses she was running, which all started with an encounter with a social injustice or a disturbing inefficiency, followed by the taking of bold action to turn things around. For example, after observing the inequalities in lunch money among her classmates in high school, she started preparing food for families who couldn't afford their children's lunches, together with her mother. "Wanting to make a proper difference," they soon added finance teaching for the parents, and over time their social enterprise evolved into a full-time organization, in which Ndzulukani now employed her mother as an operational manager. Or, when a friend got stuck in the Karoo[74] after their long-haul bus from Cape Town to Tshwane broke down, Ndzulukani called the bus company. Dissatisfied with the telephonist's generic replies, she pressed for details on the problem, ordered the particular engine part that needed replacement, and sent it to the location of the bus herself. Having given the impression that she was an established car parts dealer, the bus company gladly cooperated. One thing led to another, and before long she was in business as a go-between for Mercedes and Volkswagen automotive parts. That entrepreneurship offered a possibility for action-taking for anyone bold enough also featured centrally in Ndzulukani's speech at the 2018 JBO annual meeting. After telling some of the start-up stories of the five plus companies she was running by now, a young man in the audience asked what she thought of books that advised against starting multiple businesses at once, and to focus on one start-up instead. Ndzulukani replied that she did things her way and that the many projects at once approach had worked for her, before concluding "Look, you can read all the books you want, but guys, ultimately, you must just *do* something." Entrepreneurship thus offered Ndzulukani a way to act, present and self-understand as both an active undoer of inequality and a problem-solver, in opposition to self-interested opportunism and inertia. Her emphasis on action and problem-solving tellingly left the adversities of business

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[74] An extensive semi-desert region between Cape Town and Johannesburg.

ownership out of the frame, while these were also plenty: Ndzulukani was constantly pressed for time, physically tense and tired, and she regularly struggled with cash flow. Money had been stolen by a manager she had employed, she had gotten in over her head with several subcontractors in construction deals, and into conflicts with clients and investors over funds. Yet, for Ndzulukani, entrepreneurship was a "doing something" in the face of inequalities and practical problems; it was being proactive.

Figure 17 A and B - The library one entrepreneur has built in his rural home community using the revenues from his business in Johannesburg. Source: Lieve de Coninck.

This element of setting something in motion, of not being stifled but activated, was also put forward by Michael. In Michael's account of his journey into entrepreneurship, the spark was ignited when he saw how much money he could make selling small pieces of fireworks from a box of fifty his mother had given him as a present when he was seven: "I was like ok, this is interesting, so you can find something to sell to people and people will give you money. So it's always been like that ever since. Ehm, you know, then you start selling cookies in primary school, you start selling, literally you start selling anything. But I think

that the lesson you learn there is the fact that you not [sic] ehm, you're not a tree. You can DO stuff to make money [giggles], it's the thing that people really struggle with.… Yeah, because people are like, oh I was born like this. But you can change! You can do something! You know, like 'I don't have a job', you can, you have social media! You're spending your data looking at people's pictures, you can start a business online!" For Michael entrepreneurship represented both praxis and an attitude of action and mobility: making possibilities instead of complaining about their lack; making a move instead of acquiescing. Having grown up in a small, rural village where "there is no computers [sic], there is no…. We didn't even have a library, that's how backwards we are," he valued entrepreneurship as a way to escape a rural lifeworld defined by limitations, and therefore as a way to progress.

So, the relevance of entrepreneurship as a story of historical changemaking for young professionals concerned not only the change—an alternative to the reproduction of apartheid structures in government or white-owned capital—but also the making. By foregrounding a person's *ability* to make a difference, it offered a way to perceive and present oneself meaningfully in light of public debates on corruption, idleness and the way forward in the struggle against apartheid legacies. That entrepreneurship as a story of making change retained its appeal in the absence of ultimate change indicates the centrality of the unfulfilled promise of transformation in the "moral economy of black freedom" (Chipkin 2012, 69) and the "realm of social solidarity" (James 2015, 228) that middle-classing South Africans navigate. Relatedly, it indicates the provocative power of the appeal to young professionals to change things around. But this call for contributions to economic change amidst the profound limitations of the South African labor and capital markets was as burdensome as it was motivating. "I just keep pushing, just keep pushing," Mokgheti often said, now in dispirited, now in boisterous tones. Beyond a response to the demands of society, beyond a tool for social positioning and navigating, entrepreneurship also provided a way to *act* and to progress irrespective of the ever-elusive outcome. In short, over and above entrepreneurialism's offering of tools for class-race boundary work and moral assertion, it provided a sense of moving forward.

I am launching!

Alongside a vocabulary of social upliftment and of remaking society, entrepreneurialism was also expressed in terms of realizing and remaking selves. As Lesedi rationalized her pursuit of entrepreneurship after the years of refuge in her (grand)parents' village, "I am reinventing myself with this business thing." While Mansa dismissed my suggestion that the uptake of entrepreneurship was a way for young professionals to get out from under parental expectations in a related manner: "I wouldn't say it's *that*. For me, it's

a way to be me. It is just a way to be me." What did such making and being oneself mean? What did it do for people that was worth all the fuss? Instead of unpacking the entrepreneurial self as a neoliberal project of subjectivation (cf. Freeman 2014) I focus here on experiences of being and becoming someone that arise in the entrepreneurial pursuit and their driving force. A narrow focus on economic profit or structural change misses the ways in which this process may be empowering or effective in people's lives in other ways. As Newell (2012) notes about the pursuit of migration in Ivory Coast, "[e]ven though this story [of returning home rich] rarely came true for migrants in financial terms, they did undergo an important transformation" (184).

This sense of transformation was conveyed, for example, in the way in which Lesedi formulated taglines whenever she felt she entered a new phase in her entrepreneurial journey. Around the time when she left her job, moved into the flat without furniture, and started skipping meals, she kept saying "I am launching! I am telling you: I am launching!" Although episodes of deep insecurity, even despair, and reasonable doubt about her direction in life followed, her cheer and sense of progress inevitably returned time and again. Then, as she was taking business coaching online and from short-term mentors here and there for a few months, her catchphrase became "How much!"—applying the lessons she was learning about financial value and business transactions to her personal life. "From now on, when someone wants something from me, the question is how much, Lieve, how *much*!"—she summarized her new self-understanding. And after her move to Cape Town, and starting as an intern at the factory, she kept repeating, "I am becoming an adult!" I teased her about the way she repeated these lines, while she jokingly told me to use them as chapter titles. Jokes aside, these phrases importantly reflected the main tasks Lesedi was tackling in the process of learning entrepreneurship—moving up in the world, making money, and moving into maturity—while they also illustrate her sense of being in a process of self-development, an unfolding of her potential. This sense of progress repeatedly invigorated her to make life-changing moves—to quit her job, move into a flat, then move to Cape Town—thus bringing about very real, practical consequences, too.

The consequential power of an experience of entrepreneurial self-realization is further illustrated by Nombuso, a second-generation, higher-educated, forty-something professional who had chosen to become an entrepreneur at the cost of her marriage. In 2013, after a decade of climbing the corporate ladder, she left her job as a senior communications officer in the automotive industry and started her own beauty parlor. Having done well in her career, this meant she "probably left six million on the table" in company shares she had acquired over time, and her husband, who was an accountant and a successful business

executive, struggled to understand the financial logic. "Which it didn't have. It was all emotional." Concerned about keeping up their lifestyle and the support of several relatives, her husband "couldn't turn the corner" and their relationship "started having cracks," Nombuso said. "So I found myself having to choose between—it felt like I needed to choose between hearing what my husband was saying, aligning to what he was thinking, or committing to my passion." Nombuso chose to pursue her business. She invested a lot of time in the brand strategy, but less in "the commercial aspect of it." Instead, she "fell in love with the romance of the idea, which I passionately ploughed my sweat and blood into." She used most of the capital from her retrenchment package to decorate the store, and to provide her staff with salaries and training, and maintained an "expensive" lifestyle that was "incompatible" with starting up a business, and so her savings soon ran low. "And then emotionally, I felt unsupported at home, because leaving a successful corporate career was a source of conflict." Her long working days and the time she spent in traffic between her home and the salon did not help: "It meant very little contact with my husband and with the kids. So jah, I felt committed enough to my business that I was disappointed that my ex-husband couldn't turn the corner. And that's why we're divorced today." The tension between Nombuso's commitment to her "passion" and her husband's inability to see the value of it caused the marriage to break.

This was the prelude to other breakdowns in Nombuso's life. The following year, the financial pressure became such that she started consulting for corporate clients once again, and eventually she went back to a full-time corporate job. She found a business partner for the salon, removed herself as the sole owner and manager, and became a shareholder instead. That was a painful time, as she was also in the process of divorcing and moving into a smaller house, while her children had to change schools. "I felt that I was losing who I am and psychologically I was not in a good place to deal with all of these things.…) I actually physically couldn't carry it all. I had to lose one box. And I decided it was [the business]. It was becoming mentally and physically impossible."

This feeling of self-loss stands in sharp contrast to the positive sense of self-realization that starting a business had generated, but similarly indicates the power of Nombuso's entrepreneurial identification. "People [at the beauty salon] often say they can't believe I'm gone, because I was, I was [the salon].… I feel it's still part of me." When I asked what happened to "the passion" that had sparked her entrepreneurship, she said, "The passion hasn't died; the passion doesn't die!" And when I further asked her to help me understand what that passion *is*, she continued, "I think for me, it's different for different people, but I think I, the way I'm wired, I describe myself as entrepreneurial, in how I exist. I don't have to have a business, but I'm entrepreneurially minded … so I'm drawn

to situations where real work has to be done and opportunities to do things differently exist. And opportunities to solve problems exist. And that's my entrepreneurial nature.… My friends come in here [her new home] all the time to bounce ideas off me, I feel like I also run a consulting firm.… So I'm always surrounded by people who value my creativity. It really is an out; I was in business because I wanted to create. And I created. Successfully. Now I just need to create in a way that it's commercially viable. But creating I know that I can do successfully." I asked, "Would you do it again?" She replied, "I would. I would do it differently. But I would absolutely do it again." Salvaging the very entrepreneurialism that caused a massive breakdown in her life, here Nombuso laid out various layers of entrepreneurial self-perception and its appeal. She described it as a way to "exist": a way of being and acting, centered around the "real work" of doing things differently and solving problems; in other words, of becoming otherwise and realizing potential, both of the world and oneself. It had come at the great expense of her marriage and family life but had also provided the great benefit of a sense of personal transformation and creative power that remained of value.

I suggest Nombuso's story underwrites Bähre's (2020) plea to look at how "transformative potential and the aspiration to cultivate oneself" (2) informs the way people make complex life and money decisions and to avoid narrowly instrumentalist analyses centralizing power and prestige. It moreover complements the case of Bähre's less well-off interlocutor Sylvia's refusal of customary marriage in showing how open-ended aspirations for becoming otherwise—in this case, entrepreneurial—can fuel real pushback against gendered norms: in (re)defining herself as entrepreneurial, Nombuso also repositioned herself vis-à-vis cultural expectations of being a dutiful wife and redistributor of capital. As such, it is in line with the efforts of young professional women in South Africa to withstand financial claims from kin and safeguard personal freedom vis-à-vis traditional norms and the middle-classing expectations of a previous generation (James 2015; see also 2017). However, more functionalist analysis runs the risk of projecting an agenda onto these efforts and decisions that may not be there. So, with Bähre, I suggest that it is crucial to consider the non-instrumental driving forces of people's career and financial moves, as well as their lack of clearly delineated outcome projections. Instead, much like migration in other contexts, entrepreneurship represented a becoming. In Chua's (2014) words, some of the young Keralans focus on migration as "a desire that hinged on the necessity of departure" more than "a longing for a particular destination" (139). I recognize Lesedi's and Nombuso's ways of speaking about their entrepreneurial experiences in the way Chua foregrounds the importance of an experience of mobility per se, of being not stuck but moving towards something better, as what mattered and was sought

after. This is the key to understanding the continued appeal of entrepreneurialism across financial positions.

One morning at Eshisha hub, staff member Charissa introduced me to Victor, a lanky man in plaid shirt and business trousers, who seemed a generation or so older than most hub members. It turned out he had migrated to Johannesburg more than two decades ago from Mozambique as a single young man with little formal education, and initially had made his living as a street vendor. Eventually, he had secured technical and later office work with a large telecom provider, he had married and he had become the father of three daughters, who were now in their late teens. The family had moved from a rough area south of the city center, where they had seen the drug trade advance, to a small town a good 70 kilometers outside of Johannesburg some years ago, for their daughters' safety, but also, Victor said, because the quiet and respectability of the rural town community fit better with the kind of people that they imagined themselves to be. Clearly attuned upward, Victor had tried for years to move further up the ladder in the telecom company, but to his great frustration, to no avail—a treatment he considered to be a result of his migrant status. And so, he had decided to start his own business in call center software. But even though he had had a number of small assignments here and there, his expenses had been considerably higher than his income for a good year now. Even his access to Eshisha was insecure, as he had not paid membership fees in a while. Meanwhile, he had sold the small piece of land they had acquired when they moved, as well as the family car, his daughter had quit nursing school and his wife had taken a second administrative part-time job. They now also regularly took tea and bread donations from the church. As Charissa confided in me, she considered it "crazy" and "irresponsible" for Victor to keep trying as an entrepreneur. Victor, for his part, was sad and angry about the lack of opportunity he received "as a foreigner" who not only lacked the social and cultural capital of ethnic affiliation through which he saw others find market access, but who also drew the short straw in the competition for BEE points in which businesses own by black South Africans were given preference. Still, Victor also felt part of a promising, worthy cause that he could not leave behind: "This Fourth Industrial Revolution wind that is now blowing in Africa, I'm part of that, I can't quit now!".

How wise or unwise it was of Victor to continue his entrepreneurial pursuit, I cannot judge. The possibility of landing a major client soon, through which all the sacrifices could suddenly be financially worth it, remained, and its likelihood was impossible to gauge let alone how much time and effort it was worth. Moreover, rather than an ill-conceived whim, it was well in line with his efforts to move himself and his family up in lifestyle and status. In his aspirations for

professional development and recognition, and in his hard work and endurance to achieve it, he had been steady throughout his life in South Africa. So, rather than irrational or irresponsible, I interpret Victor's tenacity to hold onto the possibility of entrepreneurial success on the one hand as an indication of his aspirations for self-cultivation and on the other as an attempt to renegotiate his migrant status and his lack of professional recognition in a hostile environment. Like one of Chua's (2014) interlocutors "planned his progression" towards, in his case, the ideal of a married man through "migratory possibility" (141), so Victor was envisioning himself as a valued professional through entrepreneurial possibility.

While Nombuso and Victor have very different levels of financial and social capital at their disposal, and lead very different lives, their entrepreneurial engagement is infused with desires for personal transformation in a comparable manner. Of course, life trajectories and aspirations emerge in classed ways: different histories, positions and access to resources differently shape the kind of "better" life that is envisioned and how (long) one can afford to pursue it, as Chua also points out (2014, 15–18). However, juxtaposing the ambitions of a higher educated person as geared towards "self-actualisation" (141) and those of a poorer interlocutor for marriage as "a practical strategy to maximize earning potential" (141) falsely suggests that aspirations for self-realization are exclusive to upper classes. Understanding a search for self-actualization and a strategy to maximize profit as somehow mutually and class exclusive is limiting. It masks the way in which people combine them. Moreover, it distracts from the way in which aspirations for becoming someone motivate people widely, as it does both in the case of entrepreneurialism in South Africa and migration in Kerala. As the examples in this paragraph show, the driving force of that sense of being underway towards something better and of becoming someone affects both highly educated, well-networked professionals with options in employment and those with much less social or financial backup. The point is not to say merely that everyone is aspirational—that is a moot point—but to show how entrepreneurial pursuits are fueled by desires not just for riches and status but for personal transformation, irrespective of financial needs. As such, the continued pursuit of entrepreneurship should not be seen as the chasing of a carrot on a stick, but as a practice of realizing transformative potential. That people choose the added uncertainty and risks and keep doing so attests not to their lack of insight into their situation but to the power of the experience of becoming it offers, and the urgency with which their cultural environment bestows that.

Analyses of neoliberal subject formation tend to foreground alienation, and leave undiscussed (or imply non-existent) the positive affect and the

"transformative potential" of new ways of feeling and being thus produced (Freeman 2020, 8). Moreover, more diffuse and non-instrumental aspirations for self-realization are often overlooked in the way people's economic decisions are understood (Bähre 2020). Instead, it may be less the need for a particular outcome than the being in motion towards something different, the changing in itself, that moves people along (Bähre 2020). "In the face of economic uncertainty, [dreams of migratory possibility] enable young people to envision a means for becoming through space, even if physical movement is elusive" (Chua 2014, 145). So, even if the actual migration is very difficult to realize, it offers a way to see possibilities for becoming something, someone else. While entrepreneurship may offer more of a continuous daily practice than migration, and therefore in some ways may be less elusive (though its *success* is not), it similarly offers young professionals in South Africa a mode of becoming someone, which is enabling as much as it is insecure.
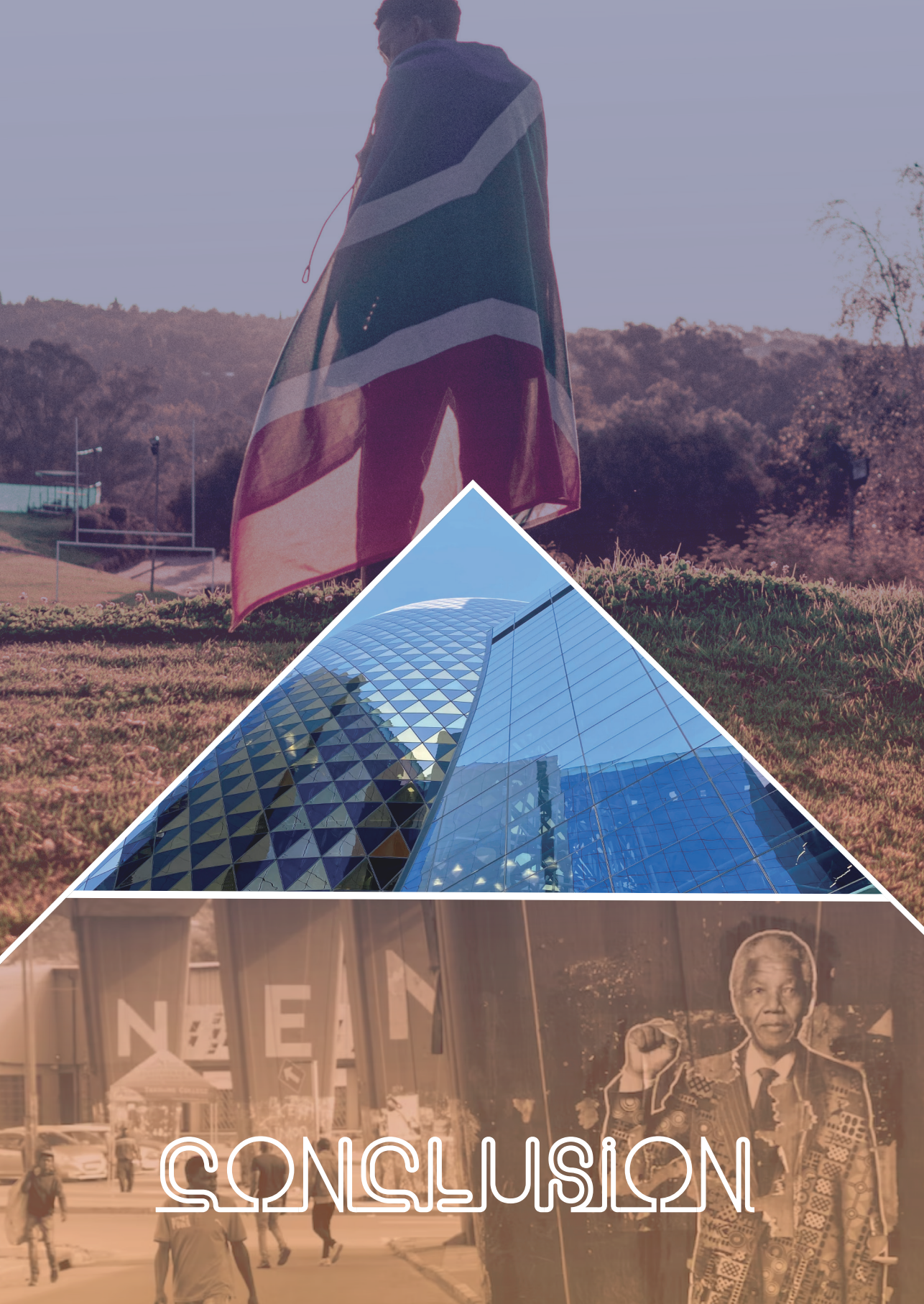
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how the pursuit of entrepreneurship could continue to hold water for young professionals at the intersection of imperatives and desires to transcend the normalcy of economic struggles, to contribute to South Africa's transformation, and to have a sense of progression. From the ways in which the young professionals understood and explained their entrepreneurship, it becomes clear that its enduring relevance and value lay not necessarily in the opportunities for material gains—which were tentative—but as much in the opportunity it offered to see and understand oneself as an active changemaker. The dogged pursuit of entrepreneurial success is part of the ongoing renegotiation of possibility and powerlessness in post-transition South Africa. Their endorsement of entrepreneurialism was emotionally rich and layered, and it invigorated as much as it drained, if not more so. Embracing the insecurity and costs of the continued pursuit of entrepreneurship produces not only alienation but also "feelings of possibility" (Freeman 2020), which are of equal realness and import to practical outcomes. Moreover, it is an active and creative response both to "the predicaments of uncertainty" (Chua 2014, 142) and the moralities of success at work in post-transition South Africa.

Like the soap opera version of a good post-apartheid life (Makhulu 2012a), the ideal of entrepreneurial success recognizes the suffering of the past and present, and makes an opening for a better future. The entrepreneurialist notion of enduring hardships as part of a journey towards success resonates both with experiences of historical oppression and continued exclusions, and with the attendant call for emancipation in South Africa, two themes that rang loud in the young professionals' lives. Insofar as entrepreneurship means toiling and laboring, it complies with the historically entrenched meaning of hard work as

the basis of dignity and belonging. At the same time, entrepreneurship challenges this axiom of toil by moving away from the relations of employment: it carves out a new route to financial freedom and respectability without "making white guys rich." The continued relevance of entrepreneurialism thus lies in the way it helps to make sense of and take a stance towards post-transition racialized struggling. It provides a way to turn personal struggles into the possibility of success and refuse their normalization. In this way, engaging in entrepreneurialism reworks the problem of struggling after The Struggle—the problem of the unfulfilled historical promises of freedom and equality—by offering a way of taking part in realizing its promises after all, for oneself and "for all of us."

More than a tool for social boundary work and the navigation of a moral economy, it brings about action and movement. Amidst post-transition debates and politics, the agency offered by entrepreneurialism in the way it centralizes people's ability to transform their environments as well as themselves is particularly poignant. The sustained appeal of entrepreneurialist transformative discourse lies in the way it encourages and enables proactive personal and societal transformation. It simultaneously appeals to desires for "becoming a better, or at least different, person," for transforming oneself and one's desires (Bähre 2020, 2), and to the cultural imperative for achievers to contribute to social change. More than a story or an ideal, it offers a practical mode of becoming, of realizing such changes. In this way, recourse to entrepreneurship as a matter of emancipation or global inclusion—even amidst or after suffering––is not just a "coping strateg[y]" (Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson 2010, 5). It offers a sense of personal creative power, and frames life as possibility. Rather than self-deception or an avoidance of reality, this is a way of "appreciating the potentialities of indeterminacy that makes uncertainty a productive condition" (Di Nunzio 2015a, 153). Rather than "soothing" reality (Berlant 2011, 82), it is a way to transform it.

CONCLUSION

I n the South African spring of 2018, mid-fieldwork, I met up with a sociology professor at one of Johannesburg's university campuses for an informal exchange about how my observations could link to the debates on middle class in South Africa. The kind professor had brought along a young researcher under his guidance who worked on a related topic, and the three of us exchanged thoughts. When I suggested that the young professionals' entrepreneurialism was a matter of aspirations, the fellow young researcher offered her perspective from her own experience of growing up and building a professional career in post-transition South Africa: "Yes. Nobody is where they want to be.… [The] work is to keep moving. You can't go back [home] without the story of your success. It's a thing, it's a cultural, personally felt thing, this aspiration, of having to keep making it. Everyone is working on their breakthrough." She urged me to stick with the focus on class and aspirationality. But she added, "You cannot *not* analyze it in relation to blackness. This is about blackness. Me, I am a black woman first, you know." And for this reason, she concluded, I, as a non-black outsider, would never be able to understand it: "You won't see it. You will miss it," before ominously adding, "And I'll come after you when you do." She thereby not only put forward the solidity and centrality of racialized differences in South Africa, but also the contemporary predominance of an activist discourse of emancipation and taking ownership in the same terms.

My colleague's negative assessment of the possibility of interhuman understanding across racialized fault-lines stayed with me for a while. Indeed, what people showed me of their busy entrepreneurial lives before and after that conversation formed a puzzling picture. And it was obvious that "blackness" and other racialized identity markers continued to be of utmost social significance in South Africa. In any social interaction—whether a fleeting moment between a car driver and a salesman at a busy intersection or an exchange of anecdotes between old friends sitting in a bar—the first thing that was noticed or mentioned was the racial status of everyone involved, which consequently largely set the script. And of course, the historical and contemporary experiences of people growing up in geographically separated or segregated lifeworlds are often wildly different and not easily matched. But eventually I could not fully concur. Not just because it implied this study (perhaps anthropological endeavor) was futile, or because it hurt my liberal sensibilities, but because it drew an incomplete picture of the processes, relationships and practices I had observed and participated in in fieldwork. It underestimated the willingness with which people shared something of themselves across racialized (and other kinds of) boundaries. It also underestimated the human capacity of imagining other lives. It is this capacity and the potential it can engender that I

conclude are key to understanding something of the uptake of entrepreneurialism in South Africa, too.

This uptake formed a riddle with various layers. With respect to the way young professionals self-perceived and explained their entrepreneurialism, there were ample contradictions. While some young professionals took on the label "entrepreneur" as an explicit identity-marker, others refused it as such. While they narrated entrepreneurship as an alternative career choice that took them away from family expectations and the environment of their upbringing, they equally saw it as a way to be true and loyal to kin, community and society at large. And while some were primarily concerned with overcoming financial struggles and achieving "financial freedom," others were adamant about entrepreneurship as a way to do good in the world. The leitmotifs of getting rich and giving back were continually paired and contested in personal stories and public discourse.

The part played by hubs, incubators and the entirety of the entrepreneurial infrastructure was no less ambiguous. Inviting everyone with what they considered to be the right mindset into entrepreneurship, they required resources and performances that made them exclusive. Formulating mission statements about economic empowerment and transformation, they set up barriers to upward mobility but also offered openings to it. Hundreds of bright young people cheered on and applauded sweeping statements about changing the world and the glory of risk-taking—sometimes moved to tears or hyperventilation—in the endless series of workshops and events produced in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, only to afterwards mutter grimly about unfair treatment and lack of redistribution by the same programs. They complained about the undue penalization of blacklisting and the debt burden of unsuccessful entrepreneurship, but were actively planning their next start-up and signing up for pitching contests at the same time. Many were skeptical of the way hubs and incubators served all kinds of interests before those of individual entrepreneurs, or found them failing to stay true to their idealist missions, yet people continued to make use of the facilities and the networking opportunities they provided: hanging out, enjoying themselves, making do.

But most puzzling was the question of results. It was hard to tell where the volatile "entrepreneurial journeys" of the young professionals were really going. Some people seemed to get by, some to suffer, and some to do well; but the tables turned often and quickly, and the overall picture never stayed stable for long. Some entrepreneurs, like Mokgheti, wore their wins on their sleeve, foregrounding their enjoyment of chasing opportunities, of building networks and of catching the limelight at events or in magazines. But they also confessed to being wary and lonely in the entire endeavor, and tired. People seemed to

thrive and wither at the same time. They themselves were often searching for a sense of direction, questioning the logic of their life choices, wondering whether they were crazy to continue. Even the seemingly inexhaustible Mokgheti, who so visibly enjoyed the pursuit of success and the attention of the media, sighed, one afternoon in a quiet corner of Eshisha hub, "Sometimes I don't know why I am doing this anymore." The answer to the question of whether the pursuit of entrepreneurship worked or not kept changing, both for an observer like me and for the young professionals themselves.

One way to grasp these ambiguities is to zoom out and consider the structural framework that envelopes such entrepreneurialism. From a concern with exploitative global capitalism, the pursuit of entrepreneurial success against the odds and its encouragement are a function of the (re)production of systemic inequalities. Such analyses have done and do the crucial work of revealing the structural—that is, beyond-individual and beyond-incidental—nature of economic inequalities, and their normalization. They also show how capitalism, as a system of such normalized inequalities, seeps into the capillaries of our daily lives, impacting our dispositions and self-perceptions, our affective states, our understandings of good lives and our felt abilities to achieve it. As a result, we can appreciate how today's entrepreneurialism, as a discourse, a development practice and as a way of being and doing, is tied up with a neoliberal, global economic system. From this perspective, it urges people to strive without necessarily truly emancipating themselves, structurally speaking. In short, it shows how through entrepreneurialism people become both ambitious *and* stuck, because the odds are against them.

This loop does not work out the same everywhere. Ethnographic studies such as Freeman's (2014) make clear that entrepreneurial pursuits appear and play out differently from time to time and from place to place: people's engagements with entrepreneurialism are situated cultural practices. Scrutinizing them as such can bring to light the variegated and possibly new ways of being and doing they give rise to. This helps avoid dichotomous assessments of people's projects and decisions as either winning or losing, rational or obfuscated, as well as the conflation of economic hardship with lives of despair (Gikandi 2010).

The nuances of a situated perspective come to the fore in this study. Looking at Victor, the foreign-born father-of-two who had exchanged a stagnating entry office career in telecom for the teeth-gritting strain of entrepreneurship several years previously, it becomes clear that he was neither a dupe nor breaking through. On the one hand, he had started accepting charity from his church to be able to feed his family; on the other hand, he continued to bring along his oldest daughter on weekly trips to prospective clients and persistently claimed that she would work in his business one day. And only minutes after spilling his

guts to me at Eshisha hub about the unfairness of this entrepreneurial life and the way he was discriminated against as a former migrant both formally in BEE policies and informally in interactions with South African business owners, he brought me a CD with sermons from his favorite prosperity preachers. Victor was suffering as well as inspired, and his inspiration was as consequential as his wants. To understand how such uncertainty could (continue to) engage people, it is therefore of limited use to focus on outcomes. A more fruitful line is to assess how it appealed to them—and continued to do so against the odds.

Although the level of sacrifice and persistence in Victor's case was exceptional, that entrepreneurialism provided young professionals with inspiration and motivation for good lives was not. To be able to see how this was possible, it is necessary to consider how their lives unfolded in a moral economy marked not just by kinship norms for redistribution and respect for previous generations, but also by the legacy of the liberation struggle and the hopes and disappointments of the post-transition era. This combination has generated a historically particular compulsive aspirationality: a widely discernible persistent striving for better and more that pervades public and personal discourse and the life choices of young professionals. Although an urge for material comfort was an important element in this striving, the whole picture was more layered. In magazines, on social media, at house parties, in entrepreneurial workshops, and in personal life stories, the (relative) need for material gain was intertwined with the morality of kinship reciprocity as well as of racial loyalty, i.e., to help emancipate blackness. Just as workshop leader Aaron challenged his cohort of incubatees to think big and aim high, not "just want[ing] to clean because you're black," Lesedi's friends in Cape Town urged her to break through as an entrepreneur "for all of us." Various young men showed me the houses they were building for their (grand)parents or laid out their plans to do so as an indispensable part of their life stories and purpose. The way young professionals narrated their lives shows that meeting these kin and community expectations and obligations for their success was a central concern.

This compulsion produced both stress and motivation. Amidst the obstacles to success of the post-transition economy, such as continued racialized exclusions from financial and social capital, un- and precarious employment, it was a difficult assignment. Since upward mobility and access to the trappings of middle-class lives have become formally possible for all in South Africa after the transition from apartheid to democracy, they have become widely expected. But their achievability is of course relative to the family history and the extent to which the consequences of previous generations' exclusions from schooling, professional careers and ownership continued to be felt. This pressured younger generations to compensate not just for the material insufficiencies but also for previous generations' stunted aspirations, and to acquire and redistribute the

recognition and respect long due. As Mansa, the varsity drop-out who ran a successful IT company and who was writing a book on overcoming apartheid mentality through entrepreneurial thinking, showed, the young professionals of today were to "solve a specific X" in the family, as the designated ones "who will bring light to the family." Their achievements were to redeem the struggles of the past. For the young professionals in this study, this both weighed on and activated them: it was a difficult assignment that they nevertheless held dear. In all, the compulsive aspirationality of kinship obligations, the unfinished liberation struggle and the unfulfilled promise of transformation generated both pressures to realize social mobility and personal desires to escape the yoke of normalized struggling.

Entrepreneurialism spoke to this conundrum of compulsive middle-classing. It offered a way to chart life anew and to find direction and a sense of self outside the trodden paths, with the chance of "still being celebrated back home," in the words of self-reflective, third-generation professional Ratsebo. Whether people were indeed varied greatly. Lesedi's mother, who still lived in the village in which Lesedi had grown up and had spent several years recovering from her burn-out before "reinventing herself" in business, had called her up after seeing Lesedi in a national TV item on upcoming designers. She told her she had gathered the entire village in her living room to watch together, crying tears of joy and pride. But others were considered crazy or irresponsible by their relatives, or seen as uppity in their communities, and most everyone felt people at home did not understand what they were doing in any case. As Ratsebo's analysis went, her parent's generation wanted their children to capitalize on their hard work and sacrifices in income- and status-secure jobs, while her own generation struggled with the pressure of "bringing home those shiny coins" amidst the everyday racism and racialized exclusions of the established corporate world. Entrepreneurship allowed her to break away from her ancestors and the history of the struggle while staying committed to her responsibilities towards them.

The language and practices of Johannesburg's entrepreneurial programs, likewise, proffered entrepreneurship as a way to realize family and community uplift and be respectable. Presenting entrepreneurship as a way to become someone and regenerate society at once, they wove together the neoliberal discourses of "adding value" and self-realization with the South African discourse on "transformation" in the idioms of emancipation, mindset and innovation (or, in a more revolutionary strand, disruption). Contrary to analyses that suggest neoliberal responsibilization of individuals is antithetic to solidarity, here it explicitly played into the importance of serving the community. In this dominant frame, whoever operated entrepreneurially was taking social responsibility, and mere self-serving entrepreneurship was contested. In this way, entrepreneurialism provided a claim to being a decent person on the one

hand while still pursuing success on the other. Moreover, through their selection procedures, credentialing function, and the centrality of live performances, incubators allowed participants to acquire status and confidence, and become recognized as meaningful economic actors. They also gave access to a lifestyle of office work, networking functions and exciting events, and, for a few, to flows of financial capital. In short, the entrepreneurial programs brokered aspirational middleclassness (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012), while neither clearly delivering on their promises of upliftment for most of their participants nor *not* doing so.

This point of unclear and unsure outcomes is important. From the premise that success through entrepreneurship is unlikely, the uptake and promotion of entrepreneurialism is problematic because it sells a mostly unrealistic dream, the pursuit of which worsens rather than improves people's insecurity (as they take on new debts, for example). This line of thought tends to foreground the way active engagement in neoliberal discourse and practices sets people up for disappointment and leaves them stuck. It shows how the odds are unfavorable. From there, the pursuit of entrepreneurship can easily become understood as the chasing of a carrot on a stick. But this would imply a certain foolishness or dupedness on the part of those pursuing these dreams that does not match the lives and critical capacities of, for one, the young professionals in Johannesburg. Also, it presents an external observer's perspective on people's predicaments as more authoritative than their own, which is unconvincing. Not incorporating the emic perspective seems to close the question where it should really open it up: How could entrepreneurship continue to engage young professionals in Johannesburg against odds that they were well aware of?

I argue that the appeal of entrepreneurship in the case of Johannesburg's young professionals made sense as a moral economic practice of middle-classing, of realizing the possibilities for success and the conditions of respectability in post-transition times. This was about more than making money: it allowed people to redeem past sacrifices by becoming successful amidst lingering oppression and to overcome the normalness of struggling for a living while staying true to The Struggle. In this sense, their entrepreneurialism was indeed more about emancipating blackness than about improving economic status. And so, they were not just chasing any old carrot on any old stick: their structural impetus entailed more than capitalist or neoliberal dynamics. It is not that material gains did not matter. On the contrary, they took center stage in the daily conversations and efforts of young professionals. But their embrace of instability and unpredictability amidst already high insecurity cannot be understood only in functionalist terms. While pursuing an entrepreneurial life in South Africa is a culturally sensible way of making change, it is also *to change*: to be in the process of becoming, with very little certainty about results.

Approaching life entrepreneurially is thus also a decision about how to exist amidst insecurity. It is deciding to foreground possibility and creative capacity square in the face of unforeseeable results. It is enacting the possible, rather than the likely.

Rather than on predictability, then, this project of becoming relies on the incompleteness of the world (Nyamnjoh 2017, 2021, 2022). This means that reality consists of infinite possibilities and that all beings, all groups and all categories can only exist in interdependence and—rather than bounded entities—are always and forever incomplete. In this line of thought, the world is not only fundamentally uncertain but equally potent, and people can at any time actively change who or what they are—to varying degrees, but still. Centralizing the incompleteness of life, it becomes possible to see how the "journey" of entrepreneurship, as the young professionals widely called it, is not about any finite outcome, if it may even ever have one. Rather, it provides people with a repertoire to make, unmake and remake themselves, and it offers this endlessly and tirelessly. Every up or down, every win or loss offers another opportunity to do so. From this perspective, the uptake of entrepreneurialism against the odds of particular material outcomes in fact helps grapple with the volatilities of life in South Africa rather than aggravate them.

The potential and possibility offered by entrepreneurialism are relevant and consequential whether they lead to actual financial freedom or not. Given the incompleteness of the world, there is no way of knowing whether it ever will in any case. The young professionals in Johannesburg both struggled with and embraced this in entrepreneurialism. Their pursuits of entrepreneurial success were not so much an act of optimism (whether warranted, naïve or cruel) but of making and remaking options, all equally real Not merely aggravating their insecurity, entrepreneurialism allowed them to appreciate the very potential of uncertainty (Di Nunzio 2015a). In sum, I propose that the uptake of entrepreneurialism revolves not so much about realizing a definite goal, but around living out possibility and the experience of moving towards something better and becoming worthy. As such, the uptake of entrepreneurship is not a finite trajectory in a sure direction, but part of the ongoing reimagination and reinvention of one's life and how it can be lived.

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Summary

Over the last few decades, the global middle classes appear to be on the rise: more and more people across the world either live or aspire to consumerist and professional lifestyles associated with middleclassness. At the same time, a framework promoting entrepreneurship has become mainstream in international development discourse and practices, while income security and financial stability have diminished for most people. These trends together present a complex historical situation for current generations trying to build their lives. In this study I am concerned with the ways in which pressures for middle-class ways of living, the proliferation of entrepreneurialism, and pervasive insecurity intertwine in South African lives and how people grapple with the tensions inherent in this confluence. To understand this, I have developed an ethnographic case study of the uptake of entrepreneurship among young professionals, based on eleven months of fieldwork in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Focusing on participants in entrepreneurial programs, hubs and events, I have investigated how they came to aspire to entrepreneurial lives, the role of the enterprise development sector in the cultivation of these aspirations, and how young professionals held onto entrepreneurialism in spite of uncertain results.

First, I describe how both the concrete opportunities for and the ambivalent public discourse about entrepreneurship in South Africa today build on a long history of black entrepreneurship and its political relevance throughout the twentieth century and the transition from apartheid to democracy. I then analyze how intergenerational legacies of kinship norms, urges for upward mobility, and remnants of apartheid produce powerful aspirational compulsions: whether through norms for respectability, educational structures, or material scarcity, the lives of these young professionals are strongly defined by expectations for their success. Their biographical narratives show how concomitant social tensions play out not only in lifestyle choices and the redistribution of material resources but also in the more intangible work of determining a direction in life, conjuring a sense of self, and crafting a life story. Entrepreneurialism meaningfully speaks to these tensions by offering a new understanding of oneself and of one's mission in life, and a related sense of moving forward. Consequently, I discuss the role of the rising enterprise development sector in Johannesburg in the uptake of entrepreneurialism. On

one hand, entrepreneurial programs are often exclusionary and reproduce dominant inequalities, favoring those who are already middle class in spite of inviting all. On the other hand, they accommodate an urban middle-class lifestyle and offer income and prestige via sponsorships, competitions, and through the commodification of entrepreneurship itself. As such, they provide an alternative path of career-building for some. The ways in which the young professionals understood and explained their entrepreneurship, as I lay out in the fourth chapter, point out that its enduring relevance and value lay not necessarily in the opportunities for material gains—which were highly variable––but as much in the opportunity it offered to see and understand oneself as an active changemaker. As such, entrepreneurialism speaks to the way the legacies of apartheid and of the struggle against it continue to call upon people in the post-transition era to materialize the promise of economic transformation, for themselves and for others.

I thus propose a moral economic approach to understanding the uptake of and continued engagement with entrepreneurialism. I argue that the enterprise development sector and the way of being and doing it promotes provide meaningful ways to practice and perform a widely expected middleclassness. Rather than a top-down effect of hegemonic neoliberalism, young professionals' engagement with entrepreneurship is a situated, cultural practice through which they renegotiate the aspirational legacies of apartheid and the promises of the transition amidst deepening inequalities. To understand how they can remain in thrall to entrepreneurialism even as it does not produce a secure livelihood, it is vital to see how it holds positive potential. Foregrounding this potential and the incompleteness of reality instead of assumed outcomes, I argue that it offers a practical mode of becoming, of realizing social changes and of changing in itself. In short, this dissertation shows how the appeal of entrepreneurship in the case of Johannesburg's young professionals makes sense as a way to realize the possibilities for success and the conditions of respectability in post-transition times.

Samenvatting

De afgelopen decennia lijken middenklassen over de hele wereld in opkomst te zijn: steeds meer mensen hebben of streven naar consumptieve en professionele manieren van leven geassocieerd met een middenklasse status. Tegelijkertijd is de bevordering van ondernemerschap mainstream geworden in internationale ontwikkelingsdiscours en -praktijken, maar zijn de inkomenszekerheid en financiële stabiliteit voor de meeste mensen afgenomen. Samen vormen deze trends een complexe historische situatie voor huidige generaties die proberen hun leven op te bouwen. In deze studie beschrijf en analyseer ik hoe de sociale druk om een middenklasse leven te leven, een geloof in ondernemerschap als bron van vooruitgang en alomtegenwoordige onzekerheid met elkaar verweven zijn in Zuid-Afrikaanse levens, en hoe mensen worstelen met de spanningen die deze combinatie oplevert. Ik heb daartoe een etnografische case study ontwikkeld van de hang naar ondernemerschap onder deelnemers in ondernemersprogramma's, startup hubs en small business evenementen, op basis van elf maanden veldwerk in Johannesburg en Kaapstad. Door te observeren en in gesprek te gaan met, heb ik onderzocht hoe jonge professionals ondernemerschapsaspiraties hebben ontwikkeld, de rol van de startup sector bij het cultiveren van die aspiraties, en hoe deze jonge professionals daar ondanks onzekere uitkomsten aan vasthielden.

Eerst beschrijf ik hoe zowel de kansen voor ondernemerschap als het ambivalente publieke discours erover in Zuid-Afrika vandaag de dag gestoeld zijn op een lange geschiedenis van zwart ondernemerschap in de twintigste eeuw en in de overgang van apartheid naar democratie. Vervolgens analyseer ik hoe een intergenerationele erfenis van verwantschapsnormen, de drang naar betere levens en de overblijfselen van de apartheid sterke sociale druk oplevert om ambitie te tonen en opwaartse mobiliteit te realiseren: De levens van de jonge professionals in deze studie worden sterk bepaald door verwachtingen ten aanzien van hun succes. Die worden op uiteenlopende manieren gevoed door het onderwijsstelsel, opgroeien te midden van materiële schaarste, en normen voor respectabiliteit. De biografische narratieven van de jonge professionals laten zien hoe de sociale spanningen die met zulke verwachtingen en omstandigheden gepaard gaan zich niet alleen uiten in de keuze voor een bepaalde levensstijl of in de herverdeling van maandelijks inkomen, maar ook in het minder tastbare werk van richting bepalen in het leven, een levensverhaal creëren en een gevoel van eigenwaarde onderhouden. Ondernemerschap spreekt tot deze opgaven doordat het een nieuw zelfbegrip en levensmissie biedt en een daarmee samenhangend gevoel van vooruitgang. Ik bespreek daarom ook de rol van de opkomende startup sector in Johannesburg in de popularisering van ondernemerschap.
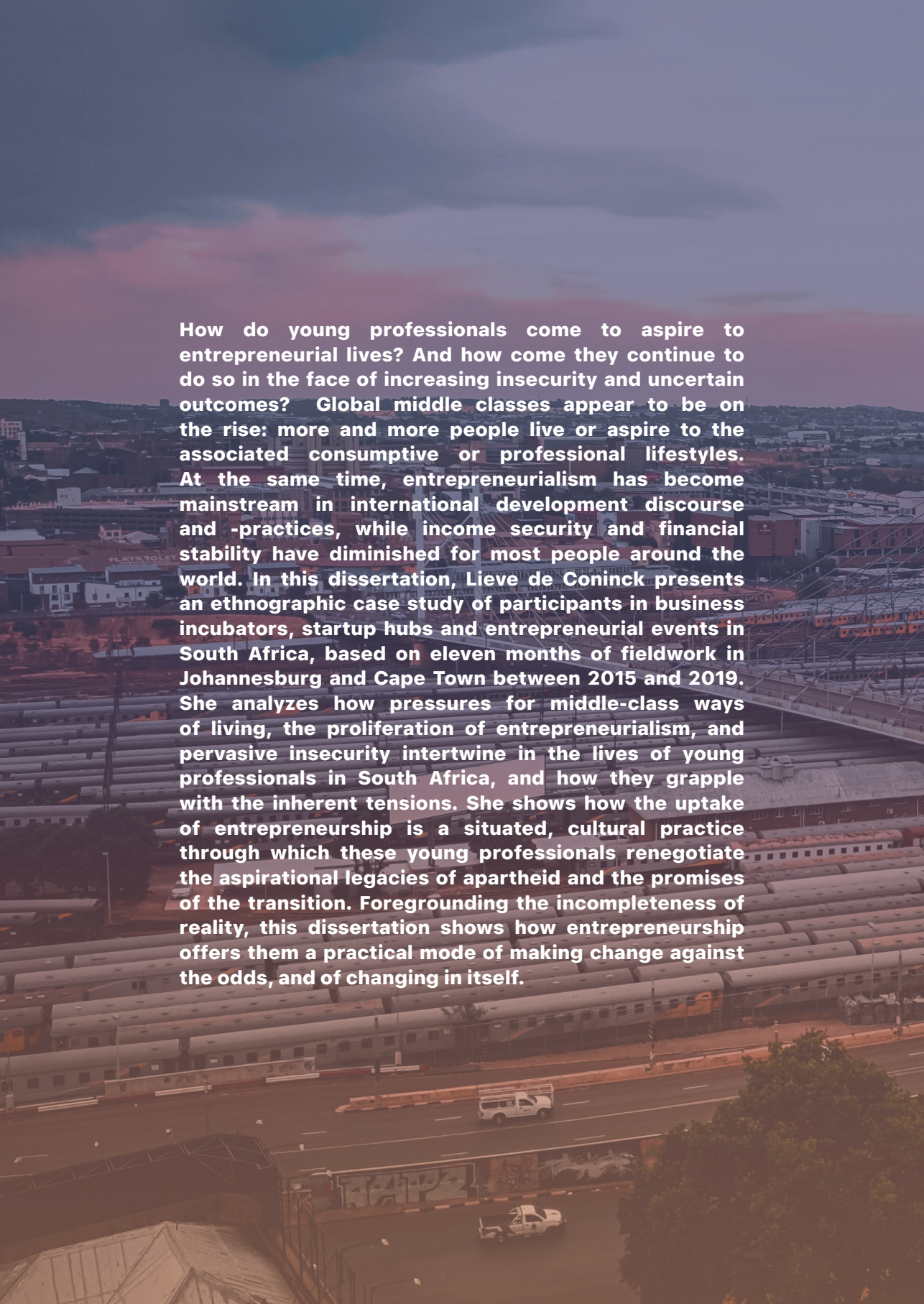
Aan de ene kant zijn ondernemersprogramma's in Johannesburg vaak exclusief en bevoordelen ze op onbedoelde wijze degenen die al tot de middenklasse behoren, waardoor ze bestaande ongelijkheden reproduceren. Aan de andere kant geven ze ruimte aan de levensstijl van de stedelijke middenklasse en kansen op inkomen en prestige via sponsoring, pitch wedstrijden en door de vermarkting van het ondernemerschap zelf. Zo bieden ze aan sommigen een alternatief carrièrepad. De manieren waarop de jonge professionals zelf hun ondernemerschap verwoordden wijzen erop dat de relevantie en waarde ervan niet noodzakelijkerwijs ligt in de kans op materiële winst – die zeer variabel is – maar evenzeer in de mogelijkheid die het mensen biedt om zichzelf te zien als een actieve changemaker. En dat is van sociaal belang gezien de manier waarop de erfenis van de apartheid en van de strijd ertegen mensen blijft oproepen om de belofte van economische transformatie waar te maken, voor zichzelf en voor anderen.

Ik stel daarom een moreel-economische benadering voor om de populariteit van en het voortdurende engagement met ondernemerschap te begrijpen. Ik betoog dat de startup sector en de manieren van zijn en doen die daarin worden gestimuleerd betekenisvolle kansen bieden om langverwachte middenklasse levens in de praktijk te brengen. De betrokkenheid van jonge professionals bij ondernemerschap is een gesitueerde, culturele praktijk waarmee zij de erfenis van de apartheid en de beloften van de transitie te midden van groeiende ongelijkheid heronderhandelen. Om te begrijpen hoe zij in de ban kunnen blijven van het ondernemerschap, ook wanneer het geen stabiel levensonderhoud oplevert, is het essentieel om te zien hoe het een positief potentieel in zich draagt. Dit potentieel en de fundamentele onvolledigheid van de werkelijkheid vooropstellend, betoog ik dat ondernemerschap deze jonge professionals een manier van worden biedt, een manier om sociale veranderingen te realiseren en een manier van veranderen an sich. Kortom, dit proefschrift laat zien hoe de aantrekkingskracht van ondernemerschap voor jonge professionals in Johannesburg betekenisvol is als manier om de mogelijkheden en de voorwaarden voor succes en respectabiliteit in post-transitietijden te realiseren.

How do young professionals come to aspire to entrepreneurial lives? And how come they continue to do so in the face of increasing insecurity and uncertain outcomes? Global middle classes appear to be on the rise: more and more people live or aspire to the associated consumptive or professional lifestyles. At the same time, entrepreneurialism has become mainstream in international development discourse and -practices, while income security and financial stability have diminished for most people around the world. In this dissertation, Lieve de Coninck presents an ethnographic case study of participants in business incubators, startup hubs and entrepreneurial events in South Africa, based on eleven months of fieldwork in Johannesburg and Cape Town between 2015 and 2019. She analyzes how pressures for middle-class ways of living, the proliferation of entrepreneurialism, and pervasive insecurity intertwine in the lives of young professionals in South Africa, and how they grapple with the inherent tensions. She shows how the uptake of entrepreneurship is a situated, cultural practice through which these young professionals renegotiate the aspirational legacies of apartheid and the promises of the transition. Foregrounding the incompleteness of reality, this dissertation shows how entrepreneurship offers them a practical mode of making change against the odds, and of changing in itself.