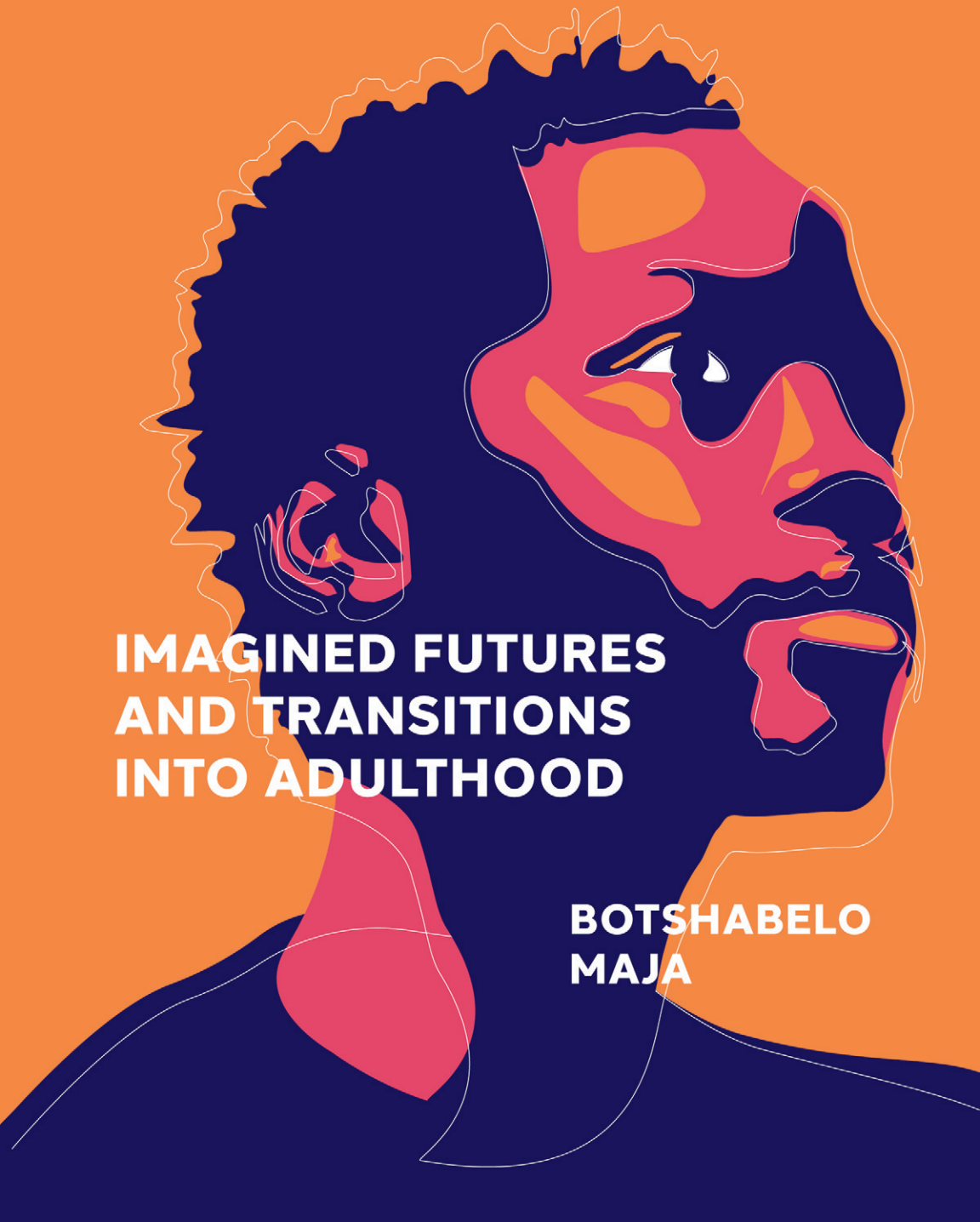
BLACK YOUTH ASPIRATIONS



IMAGINED FUTURES AND TRANSITIONS INTO ADULTHOOD

BOTSHABELO MAJA

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Black Youth Aspirations: Imagined Futures and Transitions into Adulthood

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To all youth whose fathers are ABSENT, even when they are present, I see you! I dedicate this book to my father, Moloto Harrison Maja, for being present. My mother, Thokozile Mathilda Maja, for always being there. My grandmother, Gogo Agnes Mncube, for raising me.

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Of cause as the saying goes, I take and remain solely responsible for the contents of this publication

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Chapter 1

Introduction

South Africa as a young democracy has come of age. The born-frees qualified to vote for the first time in the national and provincial elections in 2014. They were then considered adult enough to contribute to the direction the country is taking by voting for their own political party, president, and provincial premiers. They voted for the first time in the year 2016 at municipal and local government level. Like South Africa, they also turned 25 years old in 2019.

South Africa's population stands among the youngest in the world at an average age of 24.9 years. According to Statistics South Africa (2019), South African citizens under the age of 35 years constitute 77.6% of the total population, with

> …youth aged 15–24 years the most vulnerable in the South African labour market as the unemployment rate among this age group was 55.2% in the 1st quarter of 2019.

Similarly, according to Unicef's 'Generation 2030 Africa' report, out of South Africa's projected population of 53 million people, 18 million of those would be under the age of 18 by 2015 (2014). Globally, 'already, nearly half the world's population is under twenty-five years old. That represents about three billion people' (Elmore, 2010). The numbers and consequent importance of this young generation cannot be ignored, and today's youth are key to the future of the world.

Knowing and understanding this generation are therefore critical to understanding society today, and the future it holds. At the core of this research is therefore an attempt to answer the key question – how are young South Africans, particularly young black urban South Africans, imagining themselves into the future? This will be done by looking at one group of South African youth – black urban youth, and one variable of this black urban South African youth – their capacity to aspire.

Understanding the Capacity to Aspire

The theoretical framework shaping this theory is informed by Arjun Appadurai's notion of the 'capacity to aspire' (2004). It is a notion that talks to more than just the concept of aspiration as commonly utilized in our everyday conversations,

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i.e. the what and how of aspiration, but more to the enablers and constrainers of aspiration.

The capacity to aspire is defined by Appadurai as a 'future-oriented cultural capacity', and not – as is commonly understood – an individual motivational trait (2004). It is about aspirations, however, not looked at narrowly from an individual perspective, but understood in its broader socio-economic context – the political economy of aspiration. Thus, according to Appadurai, an individual's capacity to aspire is shaped more by the socio-economic context within which they find themselves, rather than an individual's inborn trait. It has two dimensions built into it.

Firstly, it is future oriented and thus constitutes 'a map of a journey into the future' (2004). All youth have the map 'into the future' equally distributed amongst them. For young people to grow into productive citizens of the world, they need maps early in life to give them a glimpse of possibilities for the future. These maps consequently inform pictures they gradually form of themselves as adults of the future. Therefore, all youth have maps of the future with them.

However, two key points arise with regards to these maps, which separate the working class from the middle class. First, they do not all look the same; some maps are less helpful and others are more helpful for the future. Secondly, some come with navigational information and others do not. Thus 'the availability of navigational information, is not equally distributed' (Bok, 2010). A map with no navigational information is equivalent to no map and this tends to be the reality for the less affluent and members of society (Fataar, 2010; Ramphele, 2002).

The concept has been used explicitly and implicitly by two South African authors. The youth studied by both Fataar and Ramphele came from less affluent backgrounds, and either had unhelpful maps or had maps with no navigational information. Navigational information in a map provides the traveller with key information on the journey to be undertaken, enabling better estimation of travel time and overall requirements of the journey. The typology that Appadurai utilizes, of maps and navigational information, is critical. Whilst in modern times such maps and navigational information come through one mobile device loaded with all these geographic positioning systems, this has not been traditionally the case. Before the advent of today's modern technologies one needed a map, a compass and a sextant – particularly when sailing from one point to another. The compass and the sextant were key to navigating from one point to another, whilst the map only showed you the departure and arrival points without any assistance in between. This is the key difference pointed out by Appadurai with regards to maps with navigational tools, and maps without navigational tools – let alone the complete absence of maps in some cases.

Therefore, those with no navigational information are less able to know what the journey will require from them and thus might not be able to arrive at the intended destination. Consequently, their capacity to aspire becomes limited, the choices they have of their futures become limited, the risks they should take in building their futures become limited, and ultimately their life-prospects are limited. Navigational information on the map of a journey into the future provides options of routes to take, it points to risks along the route, it points to

resources and time required to arrive into the future per route chosen. It even points to safety nets available alongside the routes chosen – for emergencies and available refreshments. However, the more affluent (who are provided with the required navigational information for the good map into the future) must still be able to read the map and adhere to the navigational instructions provided. This brings us to the second aspect of the capacity to aspire.

The capacity to aspire is a 'cultural capacity' and not an 'individual motivational trait', and it is consequently shaped by knowledge and experience (Appadurai, 2004). Youth gain knowledge and experience from their immediate environment which mainly constitutes the family, the school and the community. The family, the school and the community in turn are shaped within the context of politics, class, economy, race and gender amongst others. Thus, for young people to develop their capacity to aspire, their families, other people within their local communities and those they encounter in their daily lives must have the experience of navigating particular fields and pathways (Bok, 2010). In less affluent communities, such people tend to be missing; leading to what Ramphele refers to as the absence of 'valuable regenerative resources'. These are resources the more affluent are able to tap into for knowledge and experience – educated parents, cousins and sisters studying further at a higher education institution, uncles and aunts owning and managing successful businesses as well as friends whose members of families occupy leadership positions in the country. Equally important in South Africa's case, parents who are present and employed.

Key amongst the youth studied by Ramphele was the absence of positive male role models, which raised the question: 'how this affects young men growing up without positive male role models' (2002). These are all what Ramphele calls 'valuable regenerative resources' that are available to affluent youth but are absent for marginalized youth. Thus, people who live in poverty have available to them a much smaller number of aspirational nodes and thinner pathways by which to enact their desires for mobility (Fataar, 2010). According to Appadurai, equally providing the map into the future to all, equally distributing the navigational information for the map and expanding the scope of knowledge and experience for marginalized youth may 'allow the poor to contest and alter the conditions of their poverty' (2004).

The segment of youth focused on are young people roughly at the end of schooling, 16–18 years of age. Given that aspiration is understood as 'future oriented', youth younger than 16 years old is regarded as largely in its infancy in terms of aspiration. Fifteen-year-olds and below are generally still grappling with the challenges of the immediate, navigating through the schooling system, and only entering the high school phase of their education. Youth older than 18 on the other hand are completing or have completed schooling and have begun entering into spaces of realism that tend to constrain aspirational capacity. Ordinarily, by the time youth leave the schooling system they should be on their way to realizing their aspirations, and not still be developing their capacities to aspire. Even though the 16–18 age group is targeted, it is acknowledged that the literature on youth in South Africa tends to generally deal with persons between the ages of 14 and 35 years as per South Africa's national definition of youth.

Beyond the age categorization of what constitutes youth which lends itself easily to statistical manipulation, youth in this case is further understood as a 'transient social cohort' which is permanently flexible, dynamic and on the move (Van Zyl Slabbert, Malan, Marais, Olivier, & Riordan, 1994). Youth are not simply passive victims of society's crises; and cannot be understood simply in terms of the impact politics and education has on them. They respond to the environment in which they find themselves, for better or worse.

There is a need to understand South African black township youth aspirations and the implications it carries for South Africa as a nation. This is so because black people constitute the majority of the South African population, currently at 80.9% of the total population, with youth constituting 77.6% of the total population (Stats, 2018). The South African population is also more urban inclined than rural, with 64.3% of the population based in urban environments (Stats, 2011). Whilst Ramphele's work in this area was conducted in the formative years of South Africa's impending birth as a democracy (1992–1993), Aslam Fataar represents a very small group of South African scholars who have done work recently in this area.

Internationally, Appadurai points out that the capacity to aspire, understood as a cultural capacity, is a weak feature of most approaches to cultural processes and frequently remains obscure (2004). This is because culture tends to be understood mainly as being about the past and to some extent about the present – never about the future. The futuristic aspect of understanding culture is Appadurai's main contribution to the field. Fataar takes this futuristic outlook on culture and utilizes it within the 'school (*as*) the crucial site for understanding the composition of these newer youth subjectivities' (2010). I believe understanding the youth's capacity to aspire as futuristic and more holistically shall require a focus both in and out of school.

The main body of academic work on the youth challenge facing South Africa has correctly confined the casual nature of unemployment and poverty to the issue of culture, as highlighted in the literature review section below. However, such literature has tended to understand culture in its narrow traditional sense as mainly being about the past and the present – and nothing about the future. This has explained the absence of literature that understands culture utilizing Appadurai's lens – as futuristic (also being about the future) and core to development, i.e. closing the poverty gap and creating jobs. This is the new dimension that Appadurai brings into the literature, which has thus far been missing – that of understanding the 'capacity to aspire' as a cultural conception, and consequently related to the future.

In conceptualizing the capacity to aspire as one key dimension of the understanding and conceptualization of culture, Appadurai allows the space to grapple with the central worry and ultimately its significance – understanding and dealing with unemployment and poverty as it affects the primary members of society – mainly the black youth. He does so because such a conceptualization makes 'real progress on the relationship between culture, poverty and development' (Appadurai, 2004). Thus, the capacity to aspire, understood as cultural and futuristic, does not become an end in itself. It is central to the envisioning of a future with

minimal poverty and marginalization of specific sectors of the community, as is the case with South Africa's black urban youth.

Appadurai's conceptualization of culture as futuristic and aspirational is fairly new and thus rarely featured in most academic work on culture and youth culture in particular. Pre-2004, scholarly work on culture never had the advantage of Appadurai's conceptualization of culture. Literature pre-2004 on culture and youth culture in particular, simply defined culture in relation to its link to the past and the present. Similarly, South African studies on culture tended, and largely continued to refer to culture in relation to only the past and the present. This is the first gap that this research fills – that of adding a reference to culture as inclusive of the future as much as it is about the past and present.

At the core of this body of work are two key concepts – youth and culture. These concepts are linked to the central conceptual framework informing this research, that of Appadurai's 'capacity to aspire'.

South Africa's definition of youth includes all people between the ages of 16 and 35 and thus official statistics categorize them as such (Stats, 2012). The focus here is only on the component of youth between the ages of 16 and 18, i.e. at the crossroads of completing schooling and entering into the world of employment and/or higher or further education.

The extended focus is on culture (norms, beliefs, values etc.) – but understood broadly as not only being about the past and present, but more importantly about the future. It will therefore only focus on one dimension of this futuristic conceptualization of culture, only that which relates to the capacity to aspire. The literature on this broader conceptualization of culture, and specifically on the aspect of the capacity to aspire, is however limited. Most literature on culture however, and specifically youth culture, can be categorized into two categories as detailed in part two of the literature review, i.e. youth culture pre-democracy and youth culture post-democracy, under the section youth culture past and present.

The conceptualization of culture as inclusive of capacity to aspire and thus futuristic has opened new doors to research on youth. Internationally, there is an increasing number of scholars using this conceptualization to study youth, communities and societies. Appadurai himself has used this conceptualization to study slum communities in India (Mumbai) and how, by enabling their capacities to aspire through providing them with maps and rich navigational tools, they could reclaim their citizenship and extricate themselves from poverty and deprivation (Appadurai, 2004). In Australia, this conceptualization is being used to study learners from low socio-economic status with the aim of enriching their aspirational maps to participate and succeed in higher education, which has subsequently been adopted into government policy (Bok, 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Prodonovich, Perry, & Taggart, 2014).

South African literature has been slow to connect with this conceptualization, except for three authors who have grappled with this notion.

The first academic who grappled with the notion of capacity to aspire, even before Appadurai's formal conceptualization of it, is Mamphele Ramphele – back in 1991 (Ramphele, 2002). In her attempt to 'understand how post-apartheid South Africa was being experienced at the grassroots level by those growing up in

poverty', she selected a group of black urban youth in New Crossroads (a township in the Western Cape province of South Africa) with the aim of understanding 'their potential to succeed if given the opportunity to identify their talents and play their strengths'. She provided these youths with maps and navigational tools through constant workshops, tasks and weekend trails with a team of professional guides and leadership development experts, and also opened a world that was not ordinarily open to black township youth. In Appadurai's terms, Ramphele sought to provide these youths with maps and navigational tools so as to 'increase the ability of poor people to navigate the cultural map in which aspirations are located' (Appadurai, 2004). What comes out strongly however in Ramphele's work is the aspect of risk, which affects the poor most and their 'confidence to explore unmapped possibilities' (Bok, 2004). Of the 15 youths who formed part of the more in-depth intervention to provide maps and navigational tools, only two were a success. The narratives of other members of the group showed a mixture of success and failure as they too were steered by the stars into an uncertain future. Their personal resources were found wanting in many respects and they could not handle the pressures of their inadequate and unpredictable society (Ramphele, 2002). These 13 youths had maps, but lacked the navigational tools and the ability required to use them. They also did not have the required safety nets that would enable them to explore, experiment and take risks.

Lesley Powell is also among the few South African scholars who have begun engaging with the notion of capacity to aspire. She applies it to the field of vocational education and training (Powell, 2012). Importantly, in her research focusing on students in the vocational education and training field, she finds that not only does this new lens of studying vocational education and training students suggest a 'paradigmatic shift which results in different questions being asked', but equally that 'strengthening the capability to aspire is central to the role that education and training is to play in poverty alleviation' (Powell, 2012).

The most insightful academic work on the 'capacity to aspire' relevant to here is the work done by Aslaam Fataar – both in relation to its South African grounding and location in the schooling sector. It is a book attempting to 'open a window onto the lives of young persons' educational navigations in a democratic South Africa' (Fataar, 2010). Fataar's narrative analysis of (Fataar Aslam), a young boy's encounter with his schooling across the rural and urban landscape, relates that his 'life circumstances were incommensurate with his desire to become educated'. Fataar Aslam had to overcome difficult material circumstances and forced mobility to realize his capacity to aspire for better education (2010).

Both Ramphele and Fataar deal with the issue of the capacity to aspire, even though not pronounced as such by Ramphele. Whilst they both deal with 'how human beings engage their futures' (Appadurai, 2004), they however do so from two divergent angles.

Ramphele, through her intervention, attempts to create the maps for the youth and provide the navigational tools required. She seems to embrace Appadurai's notion that 'aspirations are never simply individual' and that they are 'formed in interaction and in the thick of social life' (Appadurai, 2004). This must have informed the workshops and group trails that she facilitated in an

attempt to create the different 'social life' that would provide the good maps and navigational tools.

Fataar on the other hand, seems to put more reliance on the realization of the capacity to aspire on the individual's 'active self-formation and disciplining' (Fataar, 2010). Fataar refers to Fuzile's case as that of being about 'desire to become educated'. Thus he uses desire, just like Aristotle (1949), and not aspire – as used by Appadurai.

Thus for Fataar, the individual comes first before the social. This means that whatever the social imposes on the individual, the individual remains capable to 'subvert(s) and invent(s) space, *and* how he moves to extend beyond its physical limits' (Fataar, 2010). Thus the role of agency, for Fataar, seems to be more pronounced than that which is seen by Appadurai as being about 'interaction in the thick of social life' (2004). The suggestion is rather the balancing of both the individual and the social that remains unresolved.

Inherent in Appadurai's conceptualization of the capacity to aspire are two key concepts – capacity and aspire. In further elaborating on this conceptualization Appadurai provides some deeper analysis of one concept and very little on the other.

The concept that Appadurai defines a bit further is that of capacity. Appadurai uses what he refers to as a 'navigational metaphor' to further elucidate the concept of capacity. He sees the concept of capacity as entailing what he calls maps and navigational tools. According to Appadurai, the presence of maps and navigational tools – which are not equally distributed – is a form of capacity that is central to shaping aspirations. Appadurai's navigational metaphor helps in dealing with the notion of capacity at its basic level. We will know where to go and how to get there – as per the navigational metaphor Appadurai utilizes. For the youth under study here they will know what subjects to choose, for what career options, and what pass and entrance requirements are linked to their future trajectory.

If we continue with Appadurai's navigational metaphor, however, maps and navigational tools don't help us with higher order information. This includes information such as why we need the careers we have chosen (why we need to go there) and what likely impact they will have on our lives and those of others (what will happen once we get there). Appadurai only deals with tools as part of his navigational metaphor.

Appadurai further refers to the notion of 'hope to achieve' (Appadurai, 2015). What many people 'hope to achieve' is also not equally dispersed. In the economic field, it initially grappled with various economic systems such as Marxism and capitalism and their socio-political dimensions, inclusive of slavery and later colonialism. It has shaped academic debates from Max Weber on modernity and all its subsequent critiques – all about how to build a modern and equal society for all of humanity. Human existence is and will forever be intertwined with the quest to achieve sustainable livelihoods – no matter how elusive this quest has been thus far. This journey about 'hope to achieve' has traversed various scholarly debates. From liberal theory through Marxism and its attempt to understand how social class is reproduced to Bourdieu on how inequality is produced and later to

Nussbaum and Sen on what it means for freedom and well-being, and recently to Appadurai on 'changing the terms of recognition'.

Bourdieu, in his 1986 seminal writing on the forms of capital, argued that capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986). Such inter-disciplinary approaches have over time helped us grapple with our quest towards sustainable livelihoods by using the past (mainly data generated which tended to be quantitative), to help us understand the present in order to plan for the future. These approaches have further helped us understand how social class is reproduced, and how social advantage is created. 'How human beings engage their futures' is the question Appadurai has grappled with in the last decade, and it is a question herein grappled with (Appadurai, 2004). Appadurai, in grappling with how human beings engage their futures, builds on work previously done by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, based on their capabilities project (Nussbaum, 1997). Sen's capabilities approach, in an almost similar manner to Appadurai's, was born from a need to relate economics to development, and ultimately to freedom.

Thus, Appadurai's capacity to aspire, as is the case with Sen and Nussbaum, is central to our understanding of development and ultimately liberation and/or freedom. It connects with the sociological traditions of Bourdieu's cultural and social capital. Appadurai recognizes Bourdieu's social capital in defining what he calls 'social spaces' and the impact they consequently have in shaping one's capacity to aspire. These social spaces, as Appadurai puts it in recognizing Bourdieu's argument on the forms of capital, are not equally distributed and favour the middle class more than the working class. Appadurai further connects with Bourdieu in recognizing the importance of cultural capital, albeit 'as futuristic', and not just an inheritance from the past and present that talks only to practices and traditions. Appadurai asserts that this change requires us to place *futurity*, rather than *pastness*, at the heart of our thinking about culture (2013).

Appadurai, in his quest to 'change the terms of recognition' through inculcating capacity to aspire, not only connects to Sen on freedom and well-being, but also to Fraser on the aspect of justice. For freedom is about justice, and an adequate understanding of justice must (also) encompass at least two sets of concerns: those cast in the Fordist era as struggles over distribution and those often cast today as struggles for recognition (with a bias towards Nancy Fraser's 'perspectival dualist' analysis) (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The bias towards Fraser is important in the South African context. The political settlement of 1994 in South Africa was about recognition. To varying degrees, as argued by Honneth, it gave previously dispossessed South Africans – mainly black people – the 'normative monism' of recognition. These include the recognition of rights,