



Millennial bashing needs to stop

By Wandia Njoya



For the last few months, students at the university where I teach have been pitted in a standoff against we the faculty and administration. From the drama so far, my greatest impression has been that I do not recognize my generation.

I do not recognize us because we knew there was a problem long before. Our problems began with the marketization of the academy, something that researchers – including Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani – have been talking about for at least two decades. But we still followed the idol of marketization, despite the fact that academics are terrible at business.

Academia, by its very nature, is a profession of idealism – we don't do the reality of business very well. But Kenyan universities persisted in the business logic of turning universities into profit institutions because we thought that we could do business better than business people (academics find it very difficult to admit that there are skills that they are not good at). And the business logic failed.

We refused to acknowledge the glaring symptoms of that failure that we had already been warned about: increase in student cynicism, obsession with exams and increase in cheating, deterioration of support services, and a rise in corruption as the inevitable result of outsourced services. We blindfolded ourselves to the problems with strategic plans and performance management.

Now the students are raising the same issues scholars like Noam Chomsky and Henry Giroux

identified as happening to higher education. And true to script, we their elders are exhibiting the behaviour of management that they warned us about.

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First, we treat the students as children who don't understand. Then we doubt their intellectual competence and maturity. When they are persistent, we offer explanations that suggest that the problem is with them: maybe are drunk, incited by politicians, or anxious about exams. Other times we say they are inconsistent.

We also moralise. We say that the students have lost traditional respect for elders. We criticize them for choosing bad methods for voicing discontent, even though the channels for voicing that discontent fail, or do not exist. We say that we have let them take over control, which we must get back. I didn't even know that academia was about control.

We essentially forget that we are with dealing adults, who are voters and have ID cards. Adults who happen to be the age of our children. Adults who are saying what some of us, their parents, have said before. And in fact, the greatest disappointment of the students has not been our failure to deal with the issues; it's been our persistent denial of those issues. The young people can see the elephant in the room, and they know we can see it too because we walk around it. But our response is to deal not with the elephant, but with the students pointing out the elephant. And these same actions appear in [Mary Serumaga's](#) rebuttal to the articles in the millennial series [in *The Elephant*](#).

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[The Elephant](#) has made the ground breaking move of hosting the conversations by [millennials](#) and border-millennials. The conversations perform two broad functions. One, they narrate the experiences of living in the contradiction of being an adult who is socially prevented from achieving adult milestones. Two, they use that experience to theorize what is happening in the world. In [their view](#), their elders are blind, by choice, to the contradictions between social expectations and the lack of social structures needed to meet those expectations, and that blindness is generational.

The goal of the conversations is not only to define their experience, but also to add to our global understanding of reality in this neoliberal age, and appeal to our sense of human empathy across generations. If we understand what younger people are dealing with, we would stop making unrealistic social demands of them, or better still, we would fight for the social structures they need for those expectations to be achievable.

The most obvious tactic of undermining the voice of the youth is to question the authority by which the youth speak. [Serumaga](#) does this in two main ways. One is the use of colourful adjectives like "verbal deluge," "musings of the youth" (as if elders don't muse), "pouting," being "glib," and "childish." In other words, [Serumaga](#) is saying that the pieces are not written by whole human beings with legitimate experiences, but by a segment of their being, that is their youthfulness. And since youth is temporary, so are the ideas that they are articulating here, and so we cannot take the ideas seriously.

The irony of this dismissal was that some of the people [Serumaga](#) cites as authoritative, such as Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon, were the same age as the "millennial" writers, if not younger. Biko was about 24 years old when he wrote the column "Frank Talk," which would produce his publication *I write what I like*. Fanon was around 27 years old when his book *Black skin, white masks* was published.

But the greater irony is beyond these men's age. They actually wrote from their experience, their

observations about the oppression around them and the failure of academics to actually study that reality. One obscene contradiction between academic study and reality cited by Fanon, is when psychiatrists studying the dreams of those traumatized by colonialism say that the gun is a “phallic symbol,” when in fact, it is a reference to the AK47 carried by colonial soldiers to terrorize and kill the colonized. Fanon even has a section in his book entitled “the lived experience of the black person,” asserting the authority of the lived experience in academic study.

And as Lewis Gordon, the Fanonian expert and existentialist philosopher says in several of his works, asserting the authority of the lived experience is important for black people, because racism denies the complexity of our lives. This denial makes the black biography, the lived black experience, central for black people in theorizing, for how can one express one’s humanity with tools of institutions that deny one’s humanity? One has to then appeal to lived experience, which is what the “millennial writers” have done. The writers literally have nothing to use but their experience, because we, their elders, who should be doing a better job of dissecting the neoliberal age and its impact on the youth, have denied them access to the spaces where they can institutionally articulate what they are dealing with.

And the dismissal of experience becomes more disturbing when one looks at the special attention that [Serumaga](#) pays to [Kingwa Kamencu](#). Kingwa’s piece captures how racism and neoliberalism interact with the female African body. Kingwa mentions the millennials as being more comfortable than their forebears with wearing natural hair and modern fashion with African inspiration. [Serumaga](#) refers to these unique gestures as making claims to “a new form of decolonization,” and then refers to the afro and cornrows of the 60s as evidence that there is nothing new about the millennials’ fashion sense.

The dissonance here is the skipping of whole decades in this rebuttal. [Kingwa](#) is talking about a generation who lived 60 years after the Civil Rights movement. The parents of her generation are not the people of the Civil Rights movement, but their children, who had a totally different experience. If I would cite my own experience, I would confirm that what Kingwa is saying about the shame of the black female body is true.

I grew up being told to either perm or braid my hair. When I converted to dreadlocks in 2000, and later when I started sporting natural hair, I was asked if I’m Rastafari or when I’m going to comb my hair. I am currently a member of a facebook group of African women, with tens of thousands of followers, who are finding solidarity in resisting the pressure to straighten our hair with blowdrying or to cover natural hair with weaves. From *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie, one of the most celebrated writers of this era, we know that the struggles around black hair are far from over.

In fact, the issue here is not that elders were part of the black pride movement of the 60s; rather, the question is: how did the children of the 80s and 90s become ashamed of their hair, so that they now deride their children for going back to the sixties? I think [Silas Nyanchwani](#) explains the reason why. My generation, born to parents of independence, grew up during the cold war, and were alienated from the people who raised their voices for an African independence that meant more than a black president, a national flag and anthem, because those people, like Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara, Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Thiongo, were killed or exiled by dictators.

And there is a gender dimension in the attention to [Kingwa’s article](#) - Kingwa’s is one of the two woman contributors and one that mentions the woman’s personal space. But Serumaga considers the article the least authoritative of all, faulting Kingwa for mentioning the broad social phenomena like structural adjustment programs at the end, unlike the articles of [Kobuthi](#) and [Okolla](#) which are more “factual.” Yet the other writers also do evoke their personal experience. They talk about their parents and their families. Nyanchwani even gives a deeply emotional account of the birth of his

daughter. So why does Kingwa get so much flack for personal narratives?

And yet, we see this in the academy all the time. We repeatedly alienate the lived experience from what we study. And that's what the millennials are calling us out on.

Generalization

The other rebuttal of Serumaga is one that we've seen before: that the writers are using generalizations about age and history. Serumaga cites several exceptions to the judgements that the writers make of their parents' generation, such as Biko and Fanon. This is the familiar and very odd post-modern refutation of arguments solely on the grounds of generalization.

Pointing to the "generalization" in another's position usually does not refute that position. We see this, for example, in the response to Trump's shithole comment, when some Africans offered beautiful pictures of Africa to prove that not all of Africa was as bad as Trump said. Pointing to generalization did not counter the deeply racist and immoral premise of Trump's comment.

The generalization retort also misrepresents generalizations as rigid formulas, which they are not. If I say, for example, that the long rains fall in Kenya in the months of March to May, I am not saying that the rains fall at absolutely the same time every year. I am referring to a pattern observed over a period of time, not an absolute formula. There will always be exceptions, and those exceptions do not necessarily refute the rule. And sometimes exceptions confirm the rule, and that is how we start to ask whether the change in rainfall patterns could be a sign of global warming or environmental degradation.

In other words, the purpose of pointing at exceptions should not be to just do so but to refute the general principle and offer another one. Biko was not, as Serumaga implies, an exception that proves the rule that the writers were wrong about their parents' freedom struggle credentials. And the point of black consciousness is not that Biko's predictions about an exploitative black ruling class were proved right. The point is that we must translate the political struggle for independence into concrete social-economic gains, which is precisely what the millennial writers are calling for.

And so citing instances in which Africans fought against colonial rule misses the point. The millennial writers were not assigning personal responsibility to each and every individual member of a whole generation; they were referring to general trends that they have observed about the current decisions made by people who seem united by their age.

We talk about general trends because if we don't, we can't find commonality, and we can't make decisions. Without generalizations, we can't theorize, because theory, by its very nature, is a generalization. So by condemning generalizations, we are denying the millennials the space to theorize what is happening to them. And that is dangerous because if our youth cannot theorize their condition, the only option we leave them is to change things through irrational violence.

And the writers are not the ones who began theorizing the millennial challenge as a generational problem. It is we, their parents, Gen-X or whatever one wants to call us, who first used the generational framework when we said that their behaviour and attitudes were unique to their age. We chose to explain the contradictions which our youth face, many of which we created or at least know about, as a problem with them. We said that our kids can't get jobs because they want unrealistically high salaries and do not want to soil their hands with work. That our children are not getting married because they're selfish and care only for instant gratitude. That our children are not working hard in school because they're spoiled. The writers are simply responding to the generation framework.

But the millennials are also pointing out that we, their parents, are the [proverbial emperor](#) who is naked. The jobs we're telling the youth to get are not there for us either. My parents' generation and my colleagues have been retrenched and given golden handshakes over the last 20 years, since the structural adjustment programs began. So we know that good jobs do not exist, and yet we're telling the youth to get them. Our youth know that we witnessed the undermining of social services like transport, education and healthcare, but we accepted the propaganda of private solutions to public problems, and being told that we cannot complain if we do not offer a solution. Our youth have seen through the lies in this neoliberal reasoning, and they are not willing to use this reasoning any more.

Serumaga's article essentially refuses to engage the millennial writers as thinkers in their own right. She diminishes the authority of their voice because they have not conformed to her rules, and therefore she doesn't engage the arguments that the writers are actually making. She invites them to "come together to heal, for each generation to show empathy for the others," when she has shown little empathy for them.

And in fact, this is the contradiction that my students and the millennial writers are talking about. We, their parents, do not take them seriously. And after indirectly showing them that we have no respect for their opinion, we patronizingly invite them to dialogue. Our children can see through us. We're contradicting ourselves. We're preaching water and drinking wine.

It's time for our generation to actually treat our young adults like the adults that they are. We have to end this gate-keeping where we dictate the rules of engagement with our younger adults and allow them no space to manoeuvre. After all, the younger adults are not speaking an entirely new truth; they are speaking a truth inspired by reality, and by what we, their elders, have taught them.

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