

***What Middle Class? The Shifting and Dynamic Nature of Social Life: Life Histories of two Black Women from Gauteng.***

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**Abstract**

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**Introduction**

Most recently South Africa has seen a growth in studies trying to understand and theorise on the black middle class. These have been varied in their approach and intentions. There have been those that are more populist in their approach and geared towards the retail industry and thus reductionist and problematic in their conclusions. These have reduced the experience of the black middle class to an undifferentiated mass of ‘conspicuous consumers’, foregrounding the tradition of conceptualising class and general life experiences of black people as homogenous and fixed. Other studies have been more theoretically grounded and progressive in their contribution to knowledge production and societal illuminations of experiences of class, meanings of class and the complexities of the language used to denote individual social class positioning (Phadi & Ceruti, 2011; Phadi & Manda 2010; Krige 2011).

The growing interest in understanding the black middle class in post-apartheid South Africa is a result of the socio-economic and political changes that resulted from the end of apartheid and the enactment of legislations to address past inequalities like affirmative action, and Black Economic Empowerment. With these changes South Africa saw for the first time an

exponential growth in the black middle class. Although this change has been recorded as positive by many it has nevertheless been accompanied by growing inequalities with South Africa's gini-coefficient, "increasing from 0.64 in 1995 to 0.72 in 2005" (Bhorat 2009). These increasing levels of inequality have been more intra-racial and they illustrate a shift from the historical inter-racial inequalities known for apartheid SA (Seekings & Natrass 2002; Leibbrant et.al 2010). This should not however be read to mean racial inequality has been completely eroded (Keswell 2004; Gumede 2010; Leibbrant 2011), but that growing numbers of black people are in the middle class with a few more in the upper class (Leibbrant et.al 201; Natrass & Seekings 2002

This article is based on life history interviews of two women who reluctantly self identify as middle class. Given the relatively high educational attainment<sup>1</sup> of both participants their understanding of class was an invocation of both theoretical understandings of the concept as alluded to in Phadi et.al (2011), and lived experiences of racial segregation, and renegotiation of social positioning. Thus their general conception of their social position as middle class was critically derived from their shifting experiences based on where they are and who was present (Lacy 2007). Being black in apartheid South Africa meant their being middle class came with constant complex negotiations of boundaries with community members that were not middle class and spaces that were middle class but white, thus raising racial dynamics not experienced at 'home'. Therefore their experiences were marred by constant shifts and everyday negotiations. These complexities arouse from the socio-economic and political impermanence of this social class position, resulting from a constantly shifting membership to this class.

This article provides a detailed discussion of how these two women experienced class and how the flux nature of the position provides significant pointers for a critical re-examining of how the black middle class is lived and experienced from a subjective point of view. The next section provides the theoretical discussion of the concept class and middle class. Then the discussion that follows presents a brief explanation of the methodology, this is followed by a detailed discussion of the findings from the two life histories with women. Finally the article will present a brief conclusion that provides a summary of the arguments made in the article.

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<sup>1</sup> One had completed a PhD in the social sciences and another was writing a PhD at the time of the interviews.

### **Class some theoretical discussions**

Black middle class and the notion of conspicuous consumption erroneously suggest that blacks are members of this class consume for the sake of consumption. Conspicuous consumption has been defined as purchasing a product not for its utility but for displaying wealth and purchasing power, where the, “price becomes the only factor of any significance to him or her” (Mason, 2007: 26). Krige’s (forthcoming) reading of Soweto suggests that something else is at play here. He illustrates that on, “a closer look at the longer histories of social mobility, social distinction and consumption provides us with a more complex and nuanced reading of the possible meanings of consumption” (Krige 2012). Therefore his analysis of consumption linked to house building and renovation in Soweto suggests that this was more a practice to signify their presence as residence of the city and for me of their heterogeneity to their broader community. He accurately concludes that the one dimensional emphasis of the conspicuous element of consumption among the black middle class is a result of racialisation of the meaning of middle ‘classness’ (Krige 2012).

In his further engagement with the concept of social class and mobility in Soweto, Krige critically engages with the works of Brandel-Syrier who writes about social class in Reeftown. Krige (2012) illustrates that Brandel-Syrier narrowly argues that, “the term ‘African middle class’ can have no meaning in terms of association and social interaction with the European middle class”. Krige takes Brandel-Syrier to task by critically illustrating that the flaws in her argument are homogenising and fixing the experiences or being of the people of Reeftown to their rural past and not to their varied and complex experiences of residing in Reeftown. Brandel Syrier’s refusal to see the Reef-town middle class as heterogeneous is problematic. In his engagement with the black middle class in America Lacy (2007) rightly maintains that to have a better and unbiased understanding of this group there is a need to make a distinction among the black middle class by looking at their income, wealth, housing, level of education and lifestyle. This will reduce unfounded generalisations and the potential perpetuation of historically racial stereotypes, “middle class blacks at the top of the black class structure do not experience a middle class lifestyle in the same way that those at the bottom do” (Lacy, 2007: 3). This will also allow for an understanding of the ‘complex ways in which the middle class manage their lives’ when they live among different classes of black and in middle class spaces that are white.

## **Methodology**

This article is a result of a collaborative project on the black middle class. The broader project was titled: *Towards a more inclusive, cohesive and dynamic society: understanding the significance of the emerging black middle class*. Although most of the collaborators examined the questions from purely a quantitative point of view, the need for a more qualitative undertaken on the question of the South African middle was identified. As a result money and time was set aside for the qualitative investigation into the life histories of two black men and women who self- identifies as middle class. However this article focuses only on the experiences of the women.

In an attempt to make sense of the concept of the black middle class this particular part of the study employed the qualitative approach. The central assumption made is that the black middle class has been existent in South Africa before 1994 although in varied and shifting forms. This was because race and class played an important role in the conception and upkeep of class during apartheid and thus it has shaped the nature of class in post-apartheid South Africa. This assumption is attested to by the data gathered from the two life histories of women interviewed for this study.

To comprehend the ‘unfolding histories (Hubbard, 2000) of the women I employed in- depth life history interviews with them. The life history approach was able to provide the researcher with the ‘patterns of the participants’ social relations and processes that shaped them (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984: 215). The data can thus be looked at from two perspectives; the ‘lived life’ which presents the time line that the women shared as they narrated their ‘factual’ life histories, these factual data is accompanied by the subjective accounts of their lives (Wengraft, 2005). These accounts are understood to be located in time and space, thus weaving the story teller’s experiences to the broader socio-economic and political context (Hubbard, 2000). Given that the sampling of these participants was purposive the findings are not representative of any larger population group but are a subjective representation of the larger social, historical and economic process that impact the black middle class, this will be made possible because, “life histories may focus on individual experiences, but that focus does not preclude an examination of social structure” (Hurbbard, 2000: 4).

The intention of the interviews were to get a sense of how these women recount how they got to be where they are – social positioning, how their broader family backgrounds influenced that and how the changes in their life's, have influenced who they are now. The aim was to

get accurate descriptions of the women's life trajectories so as to uncover the patterns of social relations, meaning making and the varied processes that influenced them. Such an understanding will provide a much deeper explanation of the complexities involved in meaning making around the concept of "black middle class".

The women were in their fifties at the time of the interview and of African descent. Their selection as participants was made on an assumption that they were middle class – this was mainly borne from the fact that they were highly educated, one was in the progress of writing a PhD and the other had just been granted her PhD. They had both lived in the suburbs for over five years and were emphasising education as central to the lives of their children. Although their lives progressed fairly differently, their age suggested some convergence with regards to social context linked to some of their life experiences.

The interviews were conducted between Johannesburg and Pretoria respectively depending on the availability of the two participants. They were conducted between February 2012 and April 2012. Three interviews were conducted with each participant – each interview lasted for one hour to one hour thirty minutes. All the interviews were tape recorded and permission<sup>2</sup> to do so was sort and given prior to the interviews. The life history interviews provided Aganang and Mosa<sup>3</sup> with an opportunity to share their stories. Who are these women, Aganang answered this question thus:

“I am the fourth child, second daughter in a family of six children; I was born in a small village in the North West Province outside Rustenburg. When I say small village I really mean a small village, because everybody knew everybody else. Everyone knew everyone else – when a child was born everybody knew about it, when somebody died everyone knew about it. My father is a teacher, a retired teacher since 1987, my mother was a stay at home mom who started off working part time as a nurse or nursing assistant; part time as a teacher or teaching assistant and she did some domestic work as well and she worked as a shop assistant but when we were born my father decided that his wife is not going to work for anybody but stay home and take care of his children. Although my father was a teacher he also did some farming a little bit of cultivation and little bit of stock farming, so much so that when we went to school we all went to boarding school he would sell some of his life stock to pay our school fees” (*Interview by author, March 2012*).

Mosa answered in the following ways:

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<sup>2</sup> The participants signed a consent form indicating their formal agreement to participant in the study and another one to formalize their agreement to the use of the tape recorder for the interviews.

<sup>3</sup> To protect the anonymity of the participants pseudonyms are used.

*Mosa:* I would define myself I would define myself as born and breed in Johannesburg in the township all my life...mmm that's what I would say am a city kid.

*Grace:* Where did you live?

*Mosa:* In Mofolo in Soweto all my life... all the schooling in the township.

*Grace:* And how many where you in your family?

*Mosa:* Am the eldest we were a family of three; I am the first born my mother says I was born at I forget the name of the hospital I think now it's called...

*Grace:* Coronation?

*Mosa:* The one on the road here from Mayfair it's now a private hospital it's now a private hospital it used to be called bridge man...

*Grace:* Bringe man?

*Mosa:* Bridge man but now it's a private hospital and it's in Mayfair area when you go via Brixton you know that. Garden City, do you know where Garden City is?

*Grace:* So it used to be a public hospital? And when was that?

*Mosa:* 1958! So am not sure if it is because my parents were both black say middle class or what? They were public servants my father was trained as a teacher but never worked as a teacher I think he worked for half a year or a year he worked for the city council of Johannesburg these places where we use to pay rent he was the seniors municipal officer and my mother was a nurse at a clinic in Soweto, they both worked in the township, my mother walked to work in Mofolo South clinic my father could walk, but he used to drive to work, he had a car. He worked at Number 1 office in white city it is a walking distance. (*Interview by author, February 2012*).

Already in Mosa's response to who she is there is already a tension seen in her hesitance to define her parents as middle class '*my parents were both say middle class or what?*'. This not fully identifying as middle class is a constant theme throughout the life histories of both women. The rest of the interviews focused on the following themes:

- The beginning (where they grew up, their parents, siblings),
- Their neighbourhoods,
- The socio-economic position of their family in relation to the broader community,
- School years (primary, secondary and university),
- Work experiences,

On further exploration of these general themes opportunities emerged for probing that provided insight into the particular experiences of class at particular life stages. The

interviews were illuminating in ways I did not anticipate, they revealed an interesting history of being black and middle class in apartheid South Africa.

### **Discussion of the two life histories**

Most research undertaken on the black middle class is either quantitative or general in that it does not use the life history approach to understand the phenomenon from the point of view of women. The only work that interrogates women's experiences and negotiations of class positions is the 2009 documentary emanating from the Classifying Soweto Study by Mosa Phadi and her follow up 2011 article. Although the analysis does not do a gendered analysis of the position of the women in her study it illustrates other useful aspects of identity and class. Therefore this analysis will illustrate the particularly gendered experiences of class that the two women experienced.

Both Mosa and Aganang came from middle class families. Although their self-identification as middle class was critically defined for Aganang because of its impermanence it was a defining factor in how she experienced her early life. The same is true for Mosa – she suggested that even though being middle class did not openly define how she interacted with communities, the social positioning of her parents facilitated how her life experiences panned out.

### **Am I middle class: a critical engagement with the conception of one as middle class?**

Research on class usually takes it for granted that the academic understand of the concept is similar to that held by the broader society. Again the characteristics used to denote membership into a particular class are also usually assumed to be uncomplicated, and unquestioningly accepted by those who are theorised about. Recent studies into the middle class have however begun to illustrate the intricacies involved in self identifying as middle class, the language used to refer to class and other factors that impact on belonging to and being able to identify with that class (Phadi et.al 2009; Phadi et.al 2011; Krige 2011). These complexities were clearly visible in how Aganang one of the women participants for this study responded to my request for her to participate in the study. Her response revealed a deep questioning of the usual blind characterisation of particular people as belonging to this class because they share similar features with other members of the class.

When she wrote back questioning whether she was middle class, and how are came to that conclusion I initially thought she was not interested in participating, however on close attention it became clear that this questioning was embedded in her history and the history of the social, economic and political context of her upbringing. Below is our email communication of my request for her to participate in the study:

*Grace:* Dumela, I have been meaning to ask you this for a few weeks now – I am involved in a study on the black middle class – I need to ask you to participate as an interviewee in the study (*Email communication with author, February*).

*Aganang:* I think we need to talk more before I say yea or nay. I am not sure that I understand the debates Am I middle class? What constitutes middle class? (*Email communication with author, February*).

*Grace:* Hi, I don't know if you are middle class – you tell me. I attach the project proposal for your perusal... From my conversations with you about how and where you grew and how you have been living suggests a particularly interesting take on these issues – these conversations and your political stance on a number of social issues that we have talked about are the reason why I thought you would be a suitable candidate for the study (*Email communication with author, February*).

*Aganang:* Thanks for sharing. I just scanned through it (*the proposal*). I will read it more closely in the weekend if you don't mind. A few cursory comments though: I suspect that the approach tends to be part of what I think may be the meta-narrative in current class discourse and that is to treat black middle class as a post 94 phenomenon and therefore understandably they tend to link it to access to financially expensive spaces such as some former white suburbs including the gated communities of recent years, universities and schools including even the latest ridiculously expensive private schools exclusive motor car dealers etc. I would like to hear what the thinking is behind the apparently racialised middle class. Do we belong to a different middle class from other racial groups? If the class division is highly determined by finances, where does social/way of life fit into all this? I believe one needs to understand the culture of money rather than just to have money may be I'm wrong but I think old monies have a related culture. Before 1994 where would professionals who were traveling internationally fit think of bo DDT Jabavu, Dr Xuma Mr Pixley ka Seme and many other educated Africans from this time and earlier (I am not suggesting that these examples come from the same era).

What drives the classification of people as middle class? Is it resources, way of life, occupation? What about all the other kinds of wealth that is not classifiable in the western sense like bonds in the bank, lots of money that is traceable on article. Simply put where the western and non Western approach meets here. Do I make sense? Pardon the rambling, I do not know how we arrived here and where we came from. Analytically that is. So my issue is how do you pick up dissension in your project if at all and how do you sample across the middle class is it age (This will include both the age of the respondent and the age at which their family started out as middle class however you define it, here I am thinking of Ramphosa and Motsepe whose parents were I suppose middle class as opposed to the new 'tenderpreneurs' whose parents

were not), gender, amount of money etc, (*Email communication with author, February*).

Aganang's response above raise questions about the assumptions we make as academics when we classify those we study. A similar discussion in Phadi et.al (2011) is used to illustrate the significance of theorizing from below and the importance of the historical development of concepts - signifying their specific contexts. To illustrate the importance of theorizing from below Phadi et.al (2011: 84) contends that, "the usual strategy of segregation between academic-conceptual meanings of a word from its popular usage-based meanings is not viable in the case of class. This is because social experiences and the self conscious articulation of this experience form an important and indispensable aspect of the theoretical concept of class". They also suggest that, "academic social sciences cannot confine itself to its own technical-theoretical definitions of class, because the concept itself demands the inclusion of popular conceptions".

At the heart of Aganang's contention to her identification as middle class was her surprise at the public discourse that linked the black middle class to 'conspicuous consumption' and the limitation of the Black Diamonds label. Her critique of the term was equally questioned in 2005 when it was first put into circulation<sup>4</sup>. This label was not acceptable for her as it seemed to homogenous and suggests that the emergence of a black middle class was a wholly post-apartheid phenomenon – this is indicated by her reference to the Seme's and Motsepe's and to the question of whether for our understanding of social position does it count which social position your parents occupies – this is plays an important role in how she tells the story of who she is, and how she identifies or not identify as middle class. Aganang's response also illustrates her sharp reading of the flaws in contemporary public discourse on the black middle class and its unspoken assumptions that the history of the black middle class is non-existent, insignificant and not to be engaged with. Her contention for me is significant since it demands that we broadens our view of black society and thus the different ways of being that racialised access meant for the black middle class.

On further interrogation of the above exchange I had with Aganang, it became clear that the impermanence and convoluted nature of social class in South Africa created a cautious identification with this social, given the racialised nature of apartheid SA class was experienced as an uncomfortable and shifting identifier for both these women. The flux of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Krige 2011 for a detailed and illuminating examination of the various debates on the issue.

concept came up in two particularly revealing ways in the two life histories, this impermanence and complexity of class position like in Phadi et.al's (2011) study of class in Soweto was identified in comparison with others and to their past. In his theorising on boundaries and class among the black middle class in America, Lacy (2007) found something similar to what Phadi refers to above. He found that middle class blacks had to not only negotiate their racial identity but they had to manage how they interacted with members of lower classes in their own community, these interactions "shape middle class blacks conceptions of who they are" (Lacy 2007:9). The following subsection captures the two discussions that illustrate how these two women's conception of who they are was influenced by the individuals, spaces and principles they came into contact with in their everyday lives.

*Managing Difference: negotiating inclusion in own community and the middle class position:*

Although it was confusing for Aganang when she was young to comprehend why her parents insisted that she was not any different from the other children, when she could clearly see that they were different. Although at the time of the confusion she did not link the differences to class it became apparent as she grew older that her father's education and wealth had a lot to do with the difference she felt when growing up. She said:

"the village where I grew up where we were born there was this thing were children grew up with their grandparents or sometimes they grew up without parents because their parents were in Johannesburg working but with us we had both parents and that forever had a sense of difference even though my parents especially my father used to hammer the fact that you are no different from these other children but it was funny because whilst he was saying we are no different you see difference every day you go home there is your mom you go home there is your dad the other kids don't have mom and dad they have but they are in Johannesburg working so how can we not be different and you go home there is a car the other parents don't have cars and father says you are not different you go home come month end your father and mother possibly you too get into this car you go to town buy groceries you do all these things that the other kids don't do but your father says you are not different but to me it was like what is it with this man who keeps on saying we are not different and yet every day you see difference but I think what he was instilling in us was humility - be humble don't think you are better off materially you are better off - don't think you are better off in any other way and that's the first lesson I think we learnt from our parents that of humility..." (Interview by author, March 2012).

The emphasis by Aganang's father to be humble was an interesting way of negotiating their middle class position in a community that was not middle class. This parental negotiation of class difference by instilling a certain kind of behaviour was similarly experienced by Mosa. Although like Aganang she was not very conscious of the differences she remembers a

moment when this reality of her being different happened during her school presentation.

She said:

*Mosa:* I remember once there is a story in the class room at standard 2 the teacher asked us to say to talk about something that we did at home and I said in my bedroom I don't know but I was saying something that I did in my bedroom and the whole class was wow you have your own bedroom it was strange that nobody had their own bedroom and I was like I thought this was what happens in other families and I was the only child with my mother and dad.

*Grace:* How did that influence you or shape how you thought about how others live did it?

*Mosa:* No funny enough I mean I was quite surprised what's wrong I mean I said it normally in my bedroom and the surprise that others got what are you talking about but it did not matter it was just one of those things it never occurred to me why they ask..

*Grace:* The shock...

*Mosa:* Or what you know as a child it's just and you forget about it, it's only now that when am talking to you I remember those kind of stories things that happen that made me different and never or could have made me different but it never did I was just one of those kids at school and I think I had a bit of a disadvantage in a sense of even though I was privilege I was small I mean at school you have to be big and strong so you knew that those were the ones that had it nicely instead of getting away from trouble all the time because you can't fight you have to be fit to survive. (Interview by author, February 20<sup>th</sup> 2012).

Again with Mosa's example it is clear a difference was experienced but for her the negotiation of everyday life had to do with being able to *survive/ to fit in* - because she could not fight, having a bedroom to herself was not seen as having it nicely. Even though the difference was somewhat downplayed even when it was clearly visible in everyday experiences and observation of others around them – it influenced who they became. Again this difference was observed in the food they had access to as compared to the other children in the village According to Phadi et.al (2011) community wide comparisons are significant in how class is defined and how one positions themselves in relation to others. This is apparent in how Aganang understood the social position of her family when she was young. Although the food they had access to was supposedly more nutritious it was different. Below Aganang shares a memory where she and her siblings questioned why their mother did not work in the

'kitchens' so that they could also eat '*dikokola*<sup>5</sup>', she said the following to illustrating this point:

*Aganang*: ...food when I grew up we use to have this *dikokola* dried bread parents who worked as domestic workers used to take bread I don't know no am going to guess because I wasn't exposed to that on first hand basis apparently when you are working and there is bread that's left over from the table you had free access to it so what they did they would put butter and jam red jam I don't know if it was red jam they dried it up until the time that they wanted to send it home they use to be kombis or trucks that would take parcels boxes of parcels back home so the mother or the father would send that big box which would have probably clothing which will have food so we had this dried bread which was called *dikokola* and remember in our village we didn't have a shop, shops were a few kilometers away so we did not have the luxury of having fresh bread so what I remember was that because my mother was not working as a domestic worker my father was not working as a domestic worker we were envious we wanted dried *cramps* we wanted *cramps* we wished we could have a...

*Grace*: You wanted *dikokola*?

*Aganang*: Yes we wished we could have a box arriving at our door step with *dikokola* because when my parents went to town they came with fresh bread and then my mother used to bake bread I don't know if you know the traditional bread that we baked so she would have used bread and what is it called the bread mill and then *metho* and then cook she would make dumpling's all those things all of them are fresh you don't want that...(Interview by author, March 01<sup>st</sup> 2012).

These two women we taught to not openly identify with the class position of their family, this was primarily a result of apartheid engineering. Blacks were restricted to townships and homelands whether they could afford to live elsewhere they were forced to reside with their own race even though they might have been different with regards to social class. The "Apartheid Group Areas Act forced the black middle class to live alongside workers" (Phadi et.al, 2011: 93). This is another reason why class was underplayed in black communities during those years and an inclusion that emphasized racial belonging was emphasized instead. This meant their experiences were unlike those of the black middle class in America who Lacy's (2007) suggests engaged in 'exclusionary boundary work' – to illustrate they were different to 'poor blacks'. In the case of Mosa and Aganang they were barred by racial laws that controlled their movement and integration to any other group – thus they engaged in a more integrationist's negotiation of their class position with that of the various positions of members of their communities. This underplaying of differences of class and gender were undertaken to focus energies on racial oppression (Ramphela, 2000; Krige 2012). Therefore

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<sup>5</sup> Old bread left over by the 'madam's' family for the domestic worker to take home month end. This bread would be oven toasted and come month end the women who worked in the kitchens would send it home to their children. Other families dried the bread in their own families as preservation – to avoid waste.

the experiences presented by Mosa and Aganang suggest that these supposedly homogenous communities were very different and complex in how they experienced class position.

Mayers (1977) quoted in Phadi et.al (2011: 86), “illustrates that class stratification manifests in an oppressed environment”. This stratification remains true whether it is acknowledged as present or not.

*Managing Difference: negotiating racial exclusion, being the ‘other’ middle class:*

The positions of these two women also illustrates the broader racialisation of relations and social position of the time, they could not openly be middle class in their communities of origin. This was also true when they were in historically ‘white’ spaces. Even though with regards to class positioning they were *similar* to most whites they still could not self-identify with the middle class position as occupied and lived by whites in similar ways. The privileging of white middle classes during apartheid meant for both Mosa and Aganang that in comparison the privilege and access they experienced in relation to their communities of origin was disadvantaged in comparison to the experiences of the white middle class, thus they were more similar to the black working classes than they could be to the white middle class. This meant they could not even begin to think of what Lacy (2007) refers to as, ‘inclusionary boundary work’ – which means that in America the, “middle class blacks engage in inclusionary-work to establish social unity – to show that middle class blacks are much like the white middle class” (Lacy 2007: 76).

This is contrary to the experiences of Aganang and Mosa when they went to Wits. For Mosa this happened at the height of the students’ revolts of the 1970’s which denotes an era where difference was signified as compared to social unity. Again the difference they experienced when they came to Wits attested yet again to the impermanence and complex class position they were meant to occupy. For Aganang who had undertaken her undergraduate degree at the then University of Turfloop<sup>6</sup> – coming ‘up’ to Wits for a post graduate degree opened her eyes to yet another shift in her ability to identify herself as middle class, she was not the same middle class as the white middle class. She shares her experiences thus:

“*Aganang*: the motivation of seeing the university that felt like a university and that inspired the universities that I didn’t have at my other university inspired me but then also because I was not a breadwinner in the sense of having to make sure that my

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<sup>6</sup> It is now known as the University of the North, Limpopo Campus.

siblings, whatever, whatever, I didn't have to, I didn't have to, I did, but I didn't have to, I helped but I did not have to, it wasn't like you can't go to school because really if you go to school your younger sister won't study no that was not a consideration, so it became easy for me to say what I'm applying' I'm going and I wanted to come and do my honours here and I was advised that my third year, my basic degree, my third year from the University of the North is an equivalent of second year here, so I was rejected for my honours..."...(*Interview by author, April' 2012*).

*Aganang*: ...not that I had a problem with English because when you were at the University of Limpopo - SOVENGA stand for Sotho, Tsonga, Venda, Sotho for Bapedi, Batswana, Southern Sotho, VE for the Venda, NGA for the Tsonga, so you walk in, on campus that day, you say to a person Dumela (greeting in Sotho and Tswana) maybe he is Tsonga and that meant apartheid made sure that if he is not from Soweto he's never heard a Sotho person speak before so we had to speak English, we necessarily had to speak English because we had friends across all these, but then also we had foreign nationals we had Namibians, we had Malawians, we had you know, so you first speak English before you establish that the person is Sotho, Mopedi, Sotho, South Sotho or from Soweto and therefore you speak that, but then I don't want to called it a culture shock but maybe it was, when you walk into campus and you see, see these white faces in an apartheid country and also in the faculty that's the Architecture faculty ...I think there were four, I don't think there were five Africans in all the...

*Grace*: students?

*Aganang*: yes African students in the faculty...

*Grace*: staff?

*Aganang*: staff, staff would be messengers, would be cleaners, would be...

*Grace*: the black?

*Aganang*: yah, there was only one guy who was a photographer in the architecture, so we were quite few, we were quite few and at the time I don't think most people knew that you could just apply and go to Wits because the extension of bantu education act of 1959 made sure that you can only go to a white university if you are doing a course that is not offered in the black university or if you can't go to a black university for health reasons...

*Grace*: extension of Bantu Education Act of

*Aganang*: 1959, I mean the Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953, now the extension of Bantu education Act meant that Bantu Education Act is extended to universities where I think people like Dr Motlana and his contemporaries studied here but then that privilege or right was taken and therefore we couldn't just come now I don't know if you know the story about my applying to come here I probably told you...

*Grace*: no, I don't know

*Aganang*: I told you

*Grace*: only when you, when that course you want is not offered err, err

*Aganang*: that was the thing but then I wanted to do, to do honors probably they wouldn't have agreed to take me, maybe the guy who said my third year is an equivalent of their second year did me a favor because probably they would say go to Turf and do your honors, so I, we needed a ministerial permit, I still have it somewhere I could give you a copy if I can find it, now the fascinating thing about the ministerial permit was I'm, I'm in Rustenburg but I need to go to the South African embassy in Mafikeng to go and get a permit to allow me as person from an independent country to (laughs) to study, well its funny no, actually there was a confusion, there was a policy confusion because if you are from an independent study we had honorary...

*Grace*: independent country

*Aganang*: the three, the two women, was it two three, the three women who were lecturing at the university of Bophuthatswana came here on that ticket, so they were, they were guests, they were guests of the South African Government...

*Grace*: so Bophuthatswana was really thought of as another country?

*Aganang*: of course, (Grace laughs) we were in another country so these people came from the university, came here, they lived in one of the residences, they were allowed privileges that your regular black Soweto person wouldn't be allowed because look this is a white country, so they got that honorary the same thing that was extended to other people from Botswana, Malawi or all that who could come here, but I was treated like your regular black because I needed a ministerial consent and a ministerial consent would have to state that the course that I want to do is not on offer in our universities so I had to travel from Rustenburg to the...

*Grace*: so you were a South African?

*Aganang*: no I wasn't, I don't know why I was treated like that's funny because there were policy confusion about these things, it was like we had a policy but the functionary who is applying that has to deal with it so I requested to have a ministerial consent and the ministerial consent meant, meant I needed to go to the South African embassy in Mafikeng to get a letter that says...

*Grace*: there was embassy in Mafikeng?

*Aganang*: of course, there was a South African embassy in Mafikeng, just as much as there was a Bophuthatswana embassy in South Africa, ...so I had to travel all the way to Mafikeng public transport was not easy neh, to Mafikeng to get a consent, a ministerial consent and that says I'm authorized to go and study at Wits university, at a white university and when I got here I saw those women and I wondered why was I discriminated against no because they are the same as me but you know I got the, that thing but then came accommodation as well, they lived at Res here but I lived at Glen Thomas in Baragwanath with your regular South African Bantus, so we used to come by bus to campus and got back like that, so I remember at some point when they were debates about having black students in residences, I remember the rector Professor Du Plessis said something like I think there was resistance from white students, and he

said if you could rub shoulders with them in your lecture halls I don't see why you can't rub shoulders with them in your whether it is in your showers, in your bathroom or, that's something like if you can sit next to them in class why can't you sit with them in dining halls like that and remember in the 70's

*Grace:* and how did you find it in terms of your ability to cope with the teaching?

*Aganang:* look the teaching them, the challenge was not only about the shock, the shock of being in a white, white, white liberal white institution, but it was moving from one discipline to the next as I said.....”(Interview by author, April 2012).

Her experiences illustrated the limits of class position when you are not permitted to be in similar ways as others occupying the same social position; this is those who belong to the white middle class. Phadi et.al (2011: 102) indicates that, middle class identity reflects “the material reach that social location confers, but also the width of the social view that different social locations permit” (Phadi et.al, 2011: 102).

Mosa's experiences illuminated the disparities between the races much earlier than it did for Aganang. She did her first degree at Wits, although her encounter with this University earlier illuminated her differences to the white middle class, it meant she was somewhat better able to deal with these differences when she became a student of the University. She said:

“*Mosa:* I applied at wits I was send the forms and forms included that you must also apply for ministerial concern permission from the minister of then I don't know they change the name I remember in my time when in 76 it was it now called Education and training or City Bantu educational I don't know but whoever it was the one was in charge of this you can't come to wits because of group areas act and cause it's a white university you had to get the permission from the minister who was in some Afrikaans guy I forgot the name what's that so I put in this application and I sent it to Pretoria and in the front they asked why I wanted to come to this university because this degree is not offered in any black universities that was my reason and the minister would consider you never certain about whether you will get it or not and then I mean wits was 99% white there is no black person I think maybe the top people were there I don't know I didn't know anybody then I knew because Mathabathe had told us he had empowered about wits that you don't have to go to a bush university why do you want to go to a bush university there is university in Johannesburg he had said he would say that snakes will even bite you when you go far to places like Pietersburg so go to the nearest one this is our city you can get education .

*Grace:* Before your meeting with him at the race relations did you think about those possibilities that Wits is a possibility?

*Mosa:* No, all my life I just thought that one day I would end up at Turfloop at least I knew that I would pass matric...

*Grace:* So you wanted to go to university?

*Mosa:* Yes...

*Grace:* But never thought of Wits as an option?

*Mosa:* No I didn't even know Wits I mean I was from a boarding in Philip City in QwaQwa I mean I never knew about this it's only in 76 when we were here in 77 to see that here is really a university I don't know in one of the meetings I don't know but I remember Mathabathe I will never forget his statement saying why should you go far when there universities nearer so I applied and the minister actually in my application one of the things that they wanted at wits was a testimonial I remember one of the testimonial that I need was to get from my then father in the Anglican church and he give me hassles he said what you want me to write you a testimonial for wits that is a white university they will never accept you and I struggled I would go to his office everyday he wouldn't be there he wouldn't do my letter and I remember I don't know one thing that he said I don't remember how he said but he gave me the indication that you not that class that goes to wits like there people who are from the rich or whatever the well-known people can get there the Mothlana s because I remember in our church we were in the same church with Dr Mothlana s family ...

*Grace:* At Anglican?

*Mosa:* Yes the one in cross-roads the round chapel in Ipelegeng! So the Pastor it was like a lot of black influential people were part of that church and he knew who would go to wits these not you I struggled one old lady who is a family friend a very sort of I think she was in the ANC women s league long time ago and her husband died in exile as well he was Mandela s peer and we were very close and she said you are not going to get that testimonial from that man I will get you a testimony lets go to the church where there is a pastor who will get you a testimony if that is what really is required so she took me to the cathedral because she knew that man would never do it...

*Grace:* Why... So he was known that he would not do it?

*Mosa:* He would not do it! I mean in the church he classed you, he was like a pastor who was friendly with those top people. So I went to the cathedral I didn't know at the cathedral I don't know who was the dean then I think I came there before Tutu was a dean at the cathedral in those but they were it's not a problem we will do it for you I mean I was not even a member of that church they said no we will do it for you and I took it to wits I got called I was accepted at wits I came for the interviews" (*Interview by author, February 2012*).

Mosa's encounter with Mathabatha, one of the individuals active in sensitizing black youth during the 1970's meant that her application to Wits was a radical questioning of exclusion, but not necessarily that of inclusionary work as referred to by Lacy. The work of challenging exclusion engaged in by the youth of 1976 was based on the idea of a unification of blacks as espoused in the black power movement. The various experiences linked to public encounters with whites, brought about a reevaluation of membership to the middle class, and somewhat

suggested that the idea of difference experienced earlier was not necessarily true or necessary.

## **Conclusion**

Through a detailed discussion of two life histories this article has illustrated that the social position of class and middle class in particular for the two black women was not experienced homogeneously throughout their lives. The apartheid racial politics, ideas about who you should be among your community and the negative public discourse on the black middle class as conspicuous consumer all impacts how they experienced and identified with the label. Like it was shown in Phadi et.al (2011) context shapes meanings of class and I would add experiences associated with a particular class position. These findings are significant for our general thinking of class position and the experiences of the black middle class during apartheid and in post apartheid South Africa.

The article discussed three significant themes that came up in the life histories with the two women. These ranged from how their history was influenced by the class and racial identity of their parents, which consequently influenced how they dealt with and conceived of themselves as belonging to a racialised and shifting class position. This was taken further by negotiations of difference when dealing with own communities and difference when in racialised public spaces. A discussion of these themes illustrates the complexity of being middle class and black in both apartheid and contemporary SA. Therefore we need to take into consideration that being middle class and black is heterogeneously experienced and thus should be understood as such.

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