

22nd of May 2024

IFAS Research – Research Workshop coordinated by Jeanne Bouyat and Line Relisieux

Policing Appearances, Reclaiming Aesthetics.
Perspectives from South African schools and from gang-present communities on the Cape Flats.

This research workshop explores how power relationships based on race, gender, class, age and other criteria operate through the policing of appearances, and how aesthetic practices contribute to the renegotiation of such power relationships in two South African contexts, namely: the schooling system and gang-present communities. The workshop is organised into two sessions focused on two ongoing research projects conducted by Jeanne Bouyat – on South African schools – and by Line Relisieux – on maternal figures around street gangs.

2pm-3.30pm: Session 1

Jeanne Bouyat

Policing Appearances in South African Schools: *Contested democratisations, power relationships, and institutional change since the 1990s.*

Policing learners' appearances, including through imposing formal rules on uniforms and hairstyles, is a key component of institutional norms in schooling systems across the world. Such practices are officially justified for a range of presumably laudable purposes including supporting a school's "authority system", diminishing class-based competition and social exclusion, or preventing youth gang-related violence provoked by visual markers. Yet, they have also been shown to reinforce age-, race-, gender-, and religious-based systemic oppressions through the schooling institution, and have increasingly become sites of contestation and subversion by learners, parents and external actors in many countries including South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

This presentation draws on in-depth interviews with former students and educators who attended and worked in various urban schools in South Africa since the 1990s (i.e., government and independent schools, no-fees township schools and ex-model C schools, English and Afrikaans medium, located in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, Port Elisabeth) focused on their experiences of being policed and of policing appearances at school. It is also based on an ethnographic fieldwork documenting a girl-led protest against restrictions on hairstyles in a school in Soweto that transpired in 2017. The presentation analyses how the evolutions of practices of policing of appearances of both learners and school staff reveal differentiated patterns of (re)production of systemic oppressions as well as various mechanisms of (resistance to) institutional change across the schooling system in the past 30 years. It suggests that authoritarian and intrusive practices of policing appearances remain widespread in South African schools, particularly in low-income and in elitist schools, in spite of their growing politicisation.

This presentation discusses preliminary findings of an ongoing collective comparative research project on the policing of appearances at school in South Africa, France and Ivory Coast jointly conducted by Jeanne Bouyat, Francine Nyambek Mebenga and Adjoua Pamela Nguessan.

Jeanne Bouyat is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Education, Rights and Transformation (CERT) and the NRF-SARChI Chair in Community, Adult and Worker Education of the University of Johannesburg, as well as a research associate at the Centre de Recherches Internationales (CERI) of Sciences Po Paris.

3.45pm-5.15pm - Session 2

Line Relisieux

The Gendered Power of Appearances on the Cape Flats: *A clash of aesthetics between mothers and gangsters.*

This session delves into the intricate dynamics of gang-present communities on the Cape Flats, highlighting the pivotal roles of mothers and gangsters, while exploring the influence of aesthetics and appearances on their everyday lives.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted with mothers residing in a gang-affected community of the Cape Flats, the methodology is inspired by Elaine Salo's seminal work, 'Respectable Mothers, Tough Men and Good Daughters: Producing Persons in Manenberg Township, South Africa'

The research reveals that the gendered aesthetics prevalent on the Cape Flats are deeply rooted in the moral landscape shaped by apartheid-induced forced displacements, and serve as a platform for individuals to assert their personhood with dignity and respect. Notably, the construction of identity is heavily gendered, delineating societal expectations not only in terms of gender but also class, age, and spatial dimensions, *inter alia*.

Through an exploration of the significant spaces of everyday life, the study unveils the nuanced power dynamics associated with the appearances of mothers and those of gangsters, both within the community and from external perspectives. It sheds light on the multiple alliances between mothers and gangsters to rule communities, but also shows the clashes emerging from opposed and sometimes competing aesthetics norms expected from these two central actors of gang-present communities. Moreover, it underscores the stringent policing of these aesthetic boundaries within and around gang-present communities, while documenting emerging trends of resistance among younger generations against imposed norms of appearances.

This research offers an examination of the multifaceted intersections between aesthetics, power dynamics, and resistance within gang-present communities of the Cape Flats, presenting insights for both scholarly discourse and practical interventions.

Line Relisieux is a doctoral candidate at the London School of Economics' Geography Department. She holds a double Masters of Political Science from Sciences Po Lille and the WWU Muenster, and a Masters of International Affairs from Johns Hopkin's SAIS. Her research focuses on maternal experiences on the Cape Flats, connecting feminist geopolitics and everyday geographies to unveil daily encounters in gang-present communities.