Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood is a major addition to the growing body of scholarly literature on African youth currently enjoying unprecedented boom since the ‘eruption’ of African youth into the public sphere since the early 1990s. An outcome of a conference in 2004 by young Nordic scholars (predominantly anthropologists), the book explores the myriad and often thorny experiences of young people in several African countries including; Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Lesotho, Uganda and Togo. This volume is significant in both its conceptual framework and empirical weight, evidenced by contributions that draw on ethnographic fieldwork. The book provides a detailed ethnographic account of the sites and locations or *youthscapes* occupied by young people ‘in their attempts to generate meaningful lives for themselves’ (9). It goes beyond the primary task of identifying young people’s spaces by exploring the diverse ways in which young people move and shape these spaces, reconfiguring the geographies of inclusion and exclusion. This entails a focus on the efforts young people invest in surviving, improving their lives, gaining symbolic and social capital and recognition of their social and cultural worth.

Most contemporary studies of youth acknowledge the claim that young people are not passive social actors but rather, are imbued with agency – not understood here simply as the capacity to act autonomously but the sort of agency contingent on different positionalities, spaces and time. This shift in theoretical focus has resulted in more nuanced interpretations of youth, variously, as makers and breakers (Honwana & de Boeck, 2005) or social shifters (Durham, 2000). This volume adds to our range of interpretations by emphasising the need to understand youth as ‘both social being and social becoming: as a position in movement’ (11). The notions of being and becoming acknowledge the primacy of process, the view that one’s position is not fixed but in a process of flux, hence the need to explore the ways and avenues in which young people position themselves and are positioned in society. In this regard, the authors argue, ethnographic descriptions of youth reveal how for some, youth is a social, perhaps, political position to be sought after while for others, it is ‘a period of life to be over and done with’ granting the social marginalisation experienced by many who fall under this category (13). It is against this background that young Africans are represented in this book as both social navigators and generators of their individual and collective futures.

The above theoretical insights are brought to bear in the various contributions. Divided into three broad sections, with sometimes overstretched labels, the book draws together a rich body of recent ethnographic studies of young people across the African continent. The first section labelled ‘Youth(es)capes’ for instance, contains three chapters that explore the diverse experiences of young people in Guinea Bissau, Cameroon and Burkina Faso. Henrik Vigh’s article examines the notion of social death in Bissau, where popular disillusionment seems to be the norm, both for urban youth and the general population. Social death refers to ‘the absence of the possibility of a worthy life.’ Vigh notes that people often remark that ‘Bissau has already died’, a grammar of death that echoes an almost irreparable sense of despair and disaffection with the postcolony. It is not obvious how the general population copes in such ‘apocalyptic’ conditions, but we certainly understand the responses of a few young men whose experiences Vigh uncovers in his chapter. These young men either
migrate abroad or seek to position themselves in what he refers to as the *economy of affection* or patrimonial networks through which they hope to escape ‘youth’ and be recognised as adults. The situation in Ngaoundéré in Cameroon is not as bleak as in Bissau - at least, from the perspective of Trond Waage. However, young people confront high degrees of insecurity and unpredictability in their everyday lives. It is through this profound sense of unpredictability that the slippery position of young people in urban Ngaoundere is made evident. In this multi-ethnic and fast growing city, young people’s lives are characterised by reversals of fortune, like a frozen computer that needs to be reset or rebooted time and again. Thus, ‘youth in Ngaoundere could be seen not only as a stage that one moves through in a single direction from childhood to adulthood, but also as one into which one can move back again – from adulthood back into youth’ (84). This predicament is often experienced by young people in their mid twenties and beyond, who otherwise should be recognised and treated as adults. In such contexts, youth then becomes a site of refuge from where new attempts at regaining social adulthood are planned and deployed. This, certainly, is not the experience of the teenagers examined by Doorte Thorsen in Burkina Faso. She is concerned with, on the contrary how young people between the ages of 14 and 19 use migration to renegotiate their social position and accelerate the transition from childhood to adulthood. Thorsen argues that focusing on the migration activities of adolescent children reveals in a profound way how young people in this age category exercise agency despite their comparative lack of social and economic power.

The second section, luxuriously and incoherently labelled ‘Gen(d)erating Adulthood’, contains three chapters that deal with Luo popular music, young women and marital strategy, and the relocation of children, respectively. However, the section’s title remains ambiguous because of its failure to connect the diverse themes under discussion, especially the out-of-place chapter on “child fosterage”. Ruth Prince’s chapter explores the moral dilemma young people face in the era of AIDS and economic decline and the role of music in articulating these experiences. The contemporary postcolonial condition in Western Kenya is conceptualised as a condition of social necrosis, occasioned by worsening economic decline and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Here, both young and old often remark that ‘the land is dying’, a discourse that emphasises the social and physical decay experienced by a growing multitude of rural dwellers and the urban poor. While this rather bleak portrait is not unfamiliar to many young Africans, Prince is interested in demonstrating the responses of Luo youth and specifically, the employment of music as a form of social commentary about their experiences. Hence, her analysis deals with issues such as gender relations, morality, memory and continuity – issues that have become particularly prominent in the contemporary era. The confluence between gender and youth is further amplified by Christian Boehm’s study of marital strategy among young women in Lesotho. Boehm maintains that in Lesotho, ‘marriage was, and still is, considered an essential precondition’ for recognition as a socially and morally accepted adult human being. However, due to difficult economic conditions, fewer young women are getting married which echoes an acute crisis of marriage. ‘Does this mean that the transitional phase of youth never ends for those Basotho who never marry?’ Boehm quizzes. Certainly not. In response to this predicament, we are told, young women, just like young men, are in search of ‘alternative adulthoods without marriage’ (179), a point driven home through Boehm’s analysis of individual experiences.
The last section deals with issues of inclusion and exclusion of youth in Uganda and Togo. Both chapters explore the discourses and political activism of young people, provoked by their exclusion and marginalization in contemporary politics. This section complements the other chapters in the volume by its focus on the ambiguous position of youth in politics, where in many African contexts, youth is often conceptualised as a position of ‘political minority’ (cf. Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2001).

This volume highlights the fact that youth is unquestionably interrelated with issues of power and authority, popular culture, social and political activism as well as gender. In fact, two of the chapters that explore the intersection of gender and youth respond to the crucial need for analysis that foreground what I refer to as the gender of youth, that is, the critical exploration of the ways in which young people, both male and female make use of their specific gendered identities to negotiate their positions in changing contexts. The book’s emphasis on ‘navigation’ and ‘becoming’ capture in quite imaginative ways, the differential and diverse experiences of young people in Africa. The image of youth as a position in movement is particularly apt when one recalls the experiences of young people in Ngaoundere who move back and forth as their fortunes change. Youth, therefore, is not a fixed phase in the human life cycle but a relational category to which some people are drawn and others repelled and from which they seek escape.

However, the book suffers from some editorial oversight, particularly with respect to the organisation and label of the sections. For instance, the chapters on children could make up a section distinct from those on young adults, instead of separating them across sections that have little or no thematic relevance to the issues under discussion. Despite this shortcoming, the book adds to our knowledge of young people’s predicament and the diverse ways in which they try to overcome these difficulties against a backdrop of socio-economic decline and marginalisation. Africanists and readers of Africa’s postcolonial conditions will benefit tremendously from this volume.

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References